

Missional Leaders Needed for Today's Church

By Rev. Dr. Richard W. Rouse

Co-author of *A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation*

There is no question that the Christian church in North America is in trouble. Membership in most all denominations has been hemorrhaging over the past twenty years and average worship attendance is at an all time low. According to the recent findings of the American Religious Identification Survey, the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has grown to 15% or double from the last time the survey was taken in 1990. There are many reasons that could be cited for the current state of affairs in today's church. Some believe that a **growing secularization** such as has occurred in Europe is making the church irrelevant to many people. Marvin Jonasen, in his book *Why Have All the People Gone?* blames it on a **privatization of faith**, claiming that most American Christians believe that faith is a private matter and not something to be shared. While these may all be contributing factors, I believe that the primary reason is because most church leaders have opted for a chaplaincy role instead of being bold, visionary leaders in mission. They have chosen to become care-givers for a church in hospice, rather than equipping God's people to be front-line missionaries of the gospel to a hurting world.

What are the hallmarks of a missional leader?

1. **A missional leader is focused on God's mission.** Such leaders understand that the only mission that really counts is the "misseo dei" that the New Testament describes as Christ's mission of grace and redemption. They seek to partner with God in God's endeavor to redeem and transform all creation. They seek to be agents of healing and transformation in their communities. They take their marching orders from Jesus' words in the Great Commission: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*" (Matthew 28:19-20)
2. **A missional leader is focused outward not inward.** Such a leader pays attention to his or her own spiritual growth and encourages others to practice the spiritual disciplines including regular worship, prayer, Bible Study, sacrificial giving, and care for others. These practices are always seen not as an end in themselves, but as a means to an end: to build up oneself and the Body of Christ (the church) in order to be more effective ambassadors for Christ in daily life. The ultimate focus is *outside* of the church, as Christians seek to meet the needs of a hurting world and to make more disciples who will join them in this crusade of the healing of God's creation.
3. **A missional leader is able to address the adaptive challenges of today's church.** These leaders know the difference between technical problems and adaptive challenges. Most of us have learned to address life with technical solutions, like a dentist might fill a cavity in a tooth. However many of the issues facing the church in today's rapidly changing culture have many leaders perplexed and they find their technical solutions wanting. We need to be creative in looking at new ways of being the church and sharing the gospel in a way that makes sense in today's world. This often starts with understanding our missional context in which we do ministry. This includes everything from knowledge of the demographics of our neighborhood to finding ways to harness the world of information technology (e.g. the internet) for the gospel.

4. **A missional leader is collegial and practices collaborative leadership.** The day of the “lone ranger” is long over. Seminaries and congregations would do well to train leaders to be part of a supportive and functioning team. Some of the more vital, effective congregations are those where there is a healthy sense of teamwork among both staff and lay leaders. There is a common sense of purpose, where everyone feels like they are working together to accomplish the same missional objectives. Congregations should also seek to partner with other congregations and community agencies in their efforts to “serve the neighbor in need”.
5. **A missional leader seeks to be a transformative agent.** God’s Spirit is constantly at work to renew Christ’s church and invites leaders to join in this endeavor. Loren Meade, the author of *The Once and Future Church*, believes that the church as we know it is dying so that there can be a resurrection and the birth of a new church that will serve God’s mission. We are called then to be agents of change not of the status quo. We are called to lead our congregations on a journey of transformation from being inward focused to being outward focused, from a chaplaincy model to a missional model. We are called to help the church envision a new future: God’s preferred and promised future.

Resources on Missional Leadership:

A Field Guide to the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation

By Rick Rouse and Craig Van Gelder (Augsburg Fortress, 2008)

Beyond Maintenance to Mission: A Theology of the Congregation

By Craig L. Nesson (Augsburg Fortress, 1999; new, revised edition available in 2010)

Why Have All the People Gone: The State of the Christian Church in America

By Rev. Marvin R. Jonasen (Publish America, 2009)

A New and Right Spirit: Creating an Authentic Church in a Consumer Culture

By Rick Barger (The Alban Institute, 2005)

Extraordinary Leadership: Thinking Systems, Making a Difference

Roberta M Gilbert (Leading Systems Press, 2006)

Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading

By Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky (Harvard Business School Press, 2002)

Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission

By Norma Cook Everist and Craig L. Nesson (Augsburg Fortress, 2008)

Rev. Dr. Rick Rouse is a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America having served congregations in Arizona, California, Oregon, and Washington and also at Pacific Lutheran University as Executive Director for Church Relations and Theological Education. He now serves resource staff in the Grand Canyon Synod (ELCA) and as co-director of the synod’s Missional Leadership Academy. Rick is currently president of the North American Association for the Catechumenate, and works as a parish consultant across the church in the areas of strategic planning, leadership training, and stewardship development. As adjunct faculty at Lutheran Seminary, he has taught in the Doctor of Ministry program on missional leadership; and is co-author with Craig Van Gelder of the Augsburg Fortress best seller *A Field Guide to the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation*. **To contact Pastor Rouse**, you may email him at rwrouse@comcast.net and/or check out his website at www.gracetoforgive.org. You will find a summary and review of his book(s) on the website.