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# The Local Congregation— The Hope of the World?

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**Abstract:** Are our mission problems “out there” or “in here”? Acts 13 records how the Antioch church approached it. Instead of focusing on the myriad of problems that were “out there,” they prayed, fasted, and trusted in the work of the Spirit in the life of the body of believers. It appears that they focused on what was going on “in here.” This focus led them to place their faith in the work of the Holy Spirit and His guidance. Today’s leaders are usually focused “out there” but need to focus more “in here.” A systemic approach, an awareness of underlying structures, and learning to live in creative tension can help local congregations avoid quick techno-fixes and grow in their reliance on the Spirit. There is a reason that Antioch succeeded, and there is a simple but hard way forward.

## Introduction

Practically every missiologist that I have read or spoken to over many years agrees that the church at Antioch enjoyed no antecedent advantages over any congregation today. But that’s not to say there is total agreement. Some hold that the cultural milieu at Antioch in the first century was just as *antagonistic* to the Christian religion as it has been at any other time in history.<sup>1</sup> Others argue that it was just as *receptive* as at any other time—perhaps even more.<sup>2</sup> In any case, the church at Antioch is often considered a shining example—a bright star in a dark sky. “Surely,” we wonder, “there must have been something that they had that we don’t.” In Acts 13, we learn that their elders were spiritually mature enough to fast and pray. We know they had Barnabas and Saul. We know they had the courage to send their best on a mission that held no promise that their friends would ever return. Because of what they did, it’s hard to let the story go. Or perhaps it is better to say that the story will not let go of us. As missionaries and missiologists, pastors and teachers, evangelists, deacons and deaconesses, we are still asking the question: Is there



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anything we can take away from the church at Antioch that can help us with our mission purposes today? It is a good question. Another helpful question is this: Is the local congregation unknowingly hindering its purposes for God's mission? In 2005 Jeanne Burger and I edited a book entitled, *The Local Congregation is the Hope of the World*.<sup>3</sup> In that book, pastors, missionaries, and laypeople contributed essays and case studies that gave evidence to the notion that local congregations are more likely to succeed in mission than are sodalities, districts, and synods.

Is there anything we can take away from the church at Antioch that can help us with our mission purposes today?

My thesis is this: We are facing a mission crisis in local congregations. South African missiologist Wim Dreyer has written that “the real crisis of the church is not to be found in institutional challenges, but in the inability of the church to be what it already is.”<sup>4</sup> Dreyer summarizes the categories of crisis as

- the effects of modernity and the Enlightenment leads to secularization
- loss of faith and skepticism
- declining church membership
- materialism and fraudulent ministry
- inability to witness to the world
- obsolete and irrelevant theology
- the perception that the church could be managed or organised into growth.<sup>5</sup>

Mark Green, of the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity, suggested that the division of secular and sacred is the still behind the mission crisis that we face.<sup>6</sup> Some missionaries and authors hold that the crisis lies more in discipleship.<sup>7</sup> A particularly insightful idea is that much of the conversation about mission is just that—a conversation—and nothing more. A lot of talk but no action. David Kludt has called this phenomenon the crisis of “information saturation.”<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, when this topic is discussed, the natural thing to do revolves around problem-solving, fixing, explaining, and taking sides with winners and losers. When I was a congregational mission consultant, I heard many stories from pastors who complained they didn't get cooperation from the people. Then I heard the same stories from people complaining the same thing about the pastor. This scenario played out in churches from San Francisco to New York. In some ways, I was unprepared to help those churches the way I wanted to. In retrospect, I wanted to show them how to get out of their comfort zones. I assumed their churches were a places of comfort. I found the opposite to be true. Those churches were providing

anything but comfort. They felt more like anxiety zones. And one thing I learned for sure: When people are not comfortable with one another, they will not reach out to anybody else. The anxiety and guilt in those churches effectively hindered their chance of participating in God’s mission. They often looked to me to give them a techno-fix (change the worship style, change the worship times, start a youth group, etc.) The more their dreams were not realized, the more they got into groups and pointed fingers. This led to a new game: get on the winning side of the problem. But this game is just another pain-avoidance strategy. After a number of these scenarios, I realized that my work was often more like that of a *seelsorger* (soul-healer) than a consultant. These people needed help on the inside—not the outside. But it was through them and the work we did together that I was forced to look not only to the Word of God (Phil 4:5–7; Mt 6:25–27), but to some social science tools. These tools help us to be more aware of the pernicious effect anxiety can have on our churches and His mission. With God’s help we can use a systemic approach, look for the underlying structures (both physical and emotional) that hinder the work and be willing to live in the creative tension of God’s mission.

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## **The Church as Adaptive System**

Robert Elkington has proposed a fourfold mission model for the North American church that moves from liminality, through *communitas* and emergence, to mission.<sup>9</sup> He writes that the church is a “complex, adaptive system”: complex because it has many diverse yet interconnected living elements (aka members); adaptive because there are both within the church and outside of the church many different agents acting and reacting (aka members and their friends and families and the wider community); and it is a system because it comprises many interdependent parts or members.<sup>10</sup> The church is made up of human beings who are always changing and making new connections. The systemic approach gives you a fighting chance of getting your mind around these dynamics and then putting them to use for mission. When things go wrong, it is easy to throw your hands up and lament. The Lord, however, wants you to make the most of every opportunity for mission (Eph 5:16). And opportunities often masquerade as crises. For example, let’s take the first step in the process: “liminality.” Victor Turner popularized the term, “liminality,” in his study of the rites of passage of the Ndembu tribe in Africa.<sup>11</sup> The term has been adopted by missiologists to describe the disorientation and confusion of many North American churches. Liminality can be described as

the conscious awareness that as a group (or individual) one's status-, role-, and sequence-sets in a society have been radically changed to the point where the group has now become largely invisible to the larger society in terms of these previously held sets.<sup>12</sup>

This liminal space in which today's church now lives was alluded to in the last issue of the *Lutheran Mission Matters*. Robert Newton wrote that

The mission field challenges that we face in our communities where the Church is no longer in charge have thrown us off balance, accentuating the need and desire to maintain (even double down on) the protective boundaries and ecclesiastical order that flourished in the days of Christendom.<sup>13</sup>

As people are thrown off balance, they feel disoriented, anxious, and angry. But even as all those negative feelings surface, the pastor and the people have two decisions to make: (1) will they deny the painful reality, or will they absorb it? (2) Will they quickly try to fix the situation, or will they delay taking action for the sake of coming together to help one another through a difficult and painful process? When a congregation delays taking action and the people take the necessary time to pray and to listen to one another, they participate in His mission. It is in these difficult situations that the Holy Spirit blesses and helps each part of the body do its work (Eph 4:16). Some LCMS churches and others have put their disorientation and anxiety to good use by imitating the church at Antioch and to pray and fast together (Acts 13:1).

As an example of how this fourfold process can work, some years ago I made the decision to lower church staff salaries—for all sixty of us—by ten percent. I thought for sure the staff would order my head on a platter. But the *liminal* space and disorientation created by that decision forced us to come together in a way that we had not done before. Morale actually improved. I believe the Lord took that situation and used it to help us get to the second step: *community*. After a while, *leaders emerged* in a natural and holistic way. Finally, those selfsame leaders became *missionaries* to our Gypsy mission in eastern Slovakia. Within a few years we experienced all of the fourfold process, and God's mission grew. Obviously, I had no idea beforehand that the Lord was working in this way. But I'm glad to share the story because it shows what can happen when we allow the staff and the congregation to learn the value of a liminal "wilderness experience."

## Underlying Structures

The systems approach helps one see not only what is happening but also what lies underneath. While there are many underlying structures that work against us, two are the most obvious: reactivity and scapegoating.

One of our best writers on the subject is a Lutheran pastor and congregational consultant, Pete Steinke. He warns that congregations who remain reactive and anxious can't create the stability needed to be a missional congregation. Making things worse is that reactivity in congregations is usually "automatic. No thought goes into our action. . . . Strange as it seems, some anxious congregations refuse to *see* their problems. . . . Still, the anxiety denied has a habit of staying around and festering."<sup>14</sup> As depth psychologist James Hollis has said: "There is no prison more constricting than the one of which we are unaware."<sup>15</sup>

Another underlying structure that goes unnoticed is the dynamic of congregational "scapegoating." When there is trouble, pastors and leaders are handy scapegoats. The temptation for the pastor is then to use techniques designed to manage the congregation—or at least that is what he thinks he is doing. One especially large church that I worked with had attacked their pastor repeatedly. His management strategy was to withdraw. By the time they called me to help, he didn't want to have any meetings or any real communication. He thought it was the right way to handle the situation. But it made things worse. His withdrawal injected his anxiety into the congregational system. He wasn't the only one. I met many pastors at other churches who were doing the same thing because they believed that the problem was "out there," with the congregation. Those men believed that if only the congregation would stop attacking, things would simmer down. But this assumption never leads to a healthy system. Instead, Steinke recommends a self-management approach. In fact, the pastor or leader who falls into these situations may find that it is his reactivity—"in here" that may be at the root of the problem. No matter what, you must "s[tay] connected to others despite it all, . . . maintaining a nonreactive presence with people who are reacting to you (by verbally attacking you, avoiding your presence, minimizing your viewpoint)."<sup>16</sup>

It is normal and natural to strike back or at least to disconnect and withdraw when being attacked. But because God's mission is at stake, we in the clergy are called upon to manage ourselves, define ourselves, and stay in touch. This way we have a fighting chance, with God's help, to turn the congregation around to a God-pleasing course of mission.

In the early 2000s, many congregations hired consultants (I was one of them). We were called upon to teach them how the systems approach could be applied to all sorts of congregational problems. But many congregational leaders didn't like what we found: that they were reactive, anxious, and afraid to change.

To be fair, asking people to focus on the underlying structures beneath their problems causes them a lot of discomfort. No one enjoys that. But by failing to focus on what lies beneath, congregations stay in a cycle of blame, powerlessness, and anxiety. Obviously, this situation has to be approached in the spirit of humility and

weakness. The good news is that is exactly where God's power is made more perfect (2 Cor 12:9).

## Living in Creative Tension

Do you know the difference between emotional tension and creative tension? If not, you could be hindering the work of the church. Failing to distinguish between creative and emotional tension, we might mistake one for the other. And it's easy to do. Organizational consultant Peter Senge says that the term creative tension is widely misunderstood. The biggest difference is that "creative tension doesn't feel any particular way. It is the force that comes into play at the moment when we acknowledge a vision that is at odds with current reality."<sup>17</sup> Emotional tension is the stress, anxiety, and worry we feel whenever there is a gap between what we want and what we have. For example, in *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge distinguishes between the two.

The gap between vision and current reality is also a source of energy. If there was no gap, there would be no need for any action to move toward the vision. Indeed, the gap is the source of energy. We call this gap creative tension.<sup>18</sup>

This creative tension serves to energize people. Stress and anxiety, on the other hand, is properly called "emotional tension." Even in the best situations, however, things don't go according to plan, and it's easy for the leaders and the people to become worried and even angry. This happens so often that most of us come to think that the creative process is all about being in a state of anxiety. When we distinguish between the two, we can help the congregation understand what is happening. Yes, discouraging feelings often come when we are trying to do something for the Lord; the devil is always at work. But by failing to distinguish the underlying structure of creative and emotional tension, you may have a strong urge to lighten the load of discouragement. "There is one immediate remedy: lower the vision!"<sup>19</sup> This happens more than we want to admit.

Or worse, we become cynical and lose the vision altogether. After all, nothing ventured, nothing failed. If you believe your job is to keep the people from failing or feeling uncomfortable, they will never know the joy of participating in God's mission. It takes time to grow a spiritually mature laity who can listen to a pastor when he says, "We won't solve the problem today or next year . . . or even in five years. But with God's help, we will go down this path together."

The main culprit that keeps us from participating in God's mission is our inability to live with the creative tension that is created whenever we obey the call to participate in God's mission.<sup>20</sup> We in the clergy must bear the responsibility for this. As leaders, our calling is to help our congregations bear up under the anxieties of

life, not to remove them. It is our calling to serve the people by demonstrating that God’s mission and vision are not causing the tension—we are. God Himself is not tense or worried about His mission. As clergy called to serve in God’s mission, we must beware because “the dynamics of relieving emotional tension are insidious . . . they can operate unnoticed.”<sup>21</sup>

In Antioch they knew very little about what they might face on the journey. Their only instructions were: “Set apart for me Saul and Barnabas for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2). Where? What kind of work? To whom? They didn’t have much to go on. And they made some mistakes along the way (Acts 16). But those mistakes happened within the context of a creative tension that allowed for changes in direction. They planned, but they knew God was guiding their steps (Prov 16:9).

### **Why Antioch Succeeded**

Many different factors can be pointed to as reasons that Antioch succeeded. But what distinguishes the Antioch congregation from us in our context is this: It appears that they did not participate in any campaign against the culture or against anything in society. They didn’t participate in sociopolitical causes or issues. But they did participate in God’s mission. The elders worshiped and fasted; they prayed for Barnabas and Saul and sent them off as an obedient response to the God who had saved them in His Son, Jesus.

[Christians at Antioch] didn’t care so much about the world’s sinful behavior because they were too busy trying to save the sinful people who belonged to it.

To be fair, the Christians at Antioch in the first century did not have the luxury of speaking out against the government, and that is an important point. They succeeded precisely where we fail. They weren’t allowed to jump into the sociopolitical fray; thus, they enjoyed a settled unity of purpose—to reach the lost and to care for the poor.

To say it more plainly: They didn’t care so much about the world’s sinful behavior because they were too busy trying to save the sinful people who belonged to it. They could do this because they knew they were only in the world and not of it. They were misfits in the world (Jn 17:14–16). “The world was not worthy of them” (Heb 11:38a). Their focus was eternal and soteriological.<sup>22</sup>

I am hopeful the next generation will keep their eyes on Jesus and His mission to the lost and not so much on nonessential issues.<sup>23</sup> These are a distraction at best



and, at the worst, could be an evil trick of Satan to keep us from our first love. Doubling down on nonessentials will only prolong the current crisis.

## The Way Forward

The best way forward is both simple and hard. Simple because you can begin with a simple prayer that takes only a few moments to pray, but hard because it takes courage—strength of the heart—for you to pray it: “Lord, what is going on ‘in here’—in our church? How is the congregation unknowingly hindering Your will? Is there anything going on inside me that is causing fear or anxiety in our church? How am I unknowingly hindering Your work? Amen.” After that prayer, you can rest assured that God will answer in the kindest way (Rom 2:4). That prayer can help you change your perspective from “out there” to “in here.”

“Lord, what is going on  
‘in here’—in our church?  
How is the congregation  
unknowingly hindering  
Your will?  
Is there anything going  
on inside me that is  
causing fear  
or anxiety in our church?  
How am I unknowingly  
hindering Your work?  
Amen.”

That change in perspective has proved to be personally powerful for me and for many of our members. In fact, at Holy Cross, Fort Wayne (from which I recently retired), it was those people who wrestled with their own spiritual lives, felt the disorientation, and emerged with God’s help as leaders in our church. Now they serve as lay missionaries and co-workers with me in our work among the Gypsies in southeast Europe.

## Conclusion

Mission work is much like getting older: There is no certainty about any of it. And yet the longer I live in it, the more I appreciate living in liminal space—not knowing what God will do next and trying (and failing and trying again) to love the mystery as much as I love God. Although there are many hindrances to our work, the good news is that the underlying structures are within reach of any pastor and people who want to work on them with God’s help. The local congregation can be the hope of the world. But the things that matter—prayer, fasting, growing in reliance on the Holy Spirit, and facing painful realities together—are harder to accomplish than looking for quick techno-fixes and wasting time on nonessentials. But with God’s help they can be done.

Lord God, You have called Your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown.

Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go but only that your hand is guiding us and your love supporting us.<sup>24</sup>

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> George Wood, “One Size Does Not Fit All,” *AG Enrichment Journal* (Fall 2008), accessed October 5, 2018, [http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200804/200804\\_017\\_OneSize.cfm](http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200804/200804_017_OneSize.cfm). Wood believes that “Antioch was not much different from popular American culture—pagan, multicultural, sports crazy, and obsessed with sex.”
- <sup>2</sup> Glanville Downey, *Ancient Antioch*, 120-121 as quoted in Douglas Rutt, “Antioch as Paradigmatic of the Urban Center of Mission,” *Missio Apostolica* 11, no. 1 (May 2003), 34–42.
- <sup>3</sup> Larry Merino and Jeanne Burger, ed., *The Local Congregation is the Hope of the World* (Indianapolis, IN: Precedent Press, 2005).
- <sup>4</sup> Wim Dreyer, “The real crisis of the church,” *HTS Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015), accessed October 5, 2018, <https://hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/2822>.
- <sup>5</sup> Dreyer, “The real crisis of the church.”
- <sup>6</sup> Mark Greene, “The Church’s Failure to Embrace the Workplace,” YouTube video, 11:41, Lausanne Movement, posted October 4, 2011, accessed October 7, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JErZzKBCf5M>.
- <sup>7</sup> Bob Robinson “A Crisis in Disciplemaking: Our Model for Church Mission,” *Reintegrate* (July 30, 2015), accessed October 5, 2018, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/reintegrate/2015/07/>.
- <sup>8</sup> David Kludt, quoted in Steven Knight, “Is There Really a ‘Missional Crisis’?” *The Progressive Christian* (July 10, 2012), accessed October 4, 2018, archived at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/missionalshift/2012/07/is-there-really-a-missional-crisis/>
- <sup>9</sup> See Robert Lionel Elkington, “A Missional Church Model,” (SAGE Open, First Published November 7, 2011), accessed July 23, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244011428086>.
- <sup>10</sup> Elkington, “A Missional Church Model,” 3.
- <sup>11</sup> See V. W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1967).
- <sup>12</sup> A. J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 24. Quoted in Elkington, 4.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Newton, “Recovering the Heart of Mission,” *Lutheran Mission Matters*, 26, no. 1 (May 2018): 25, [https://lsfm.global/uploads/files/LMM\\_05-18\\_NewtonandKempff.pdf](https://lsfm.global/uploads/files/LMM_05-18_NewtonandKempff.pdf).
- <sup>14</sup> Peter Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* (The Alban Institute, 2006), 45.
- <sup>15</sup> James Hollis, *The Eden Project: In Search of The Magical Other* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1997), 26.
- <sup>16</sup> Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, 45. See also “The Leader’s Notebook on Self-Management,” on pp. 44–45. There is plenty here to keep a leader focused on himself—not on the congregation.
- <sup>17</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 151.
- <sup>18</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 150.
- <sup>19</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 151.
- <sup>20</sup> See John Corrie, “Creative Tension in Mission,” *Missionalia* 44, 2 (2016): 192–204, accessed July 23, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7832/44-2-147>.
- <sup>21</sup> Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 151.

<sup>22</sup> See Samuel Nafzger et al., ed., *Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology, Vol. I* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2017), Kindle Loc. 1343-1483, for a discussion of the relationship of soteriology to a distinctive Lutheran missiology.

<sup>23</sup> The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, “We Are Free to Be Faithful,” accessed July 25, 2018, <https://www.lcms.org/social-issues/free-to-be-faithful>. This is a short list of the Featured Articles. They appear to be interesting reading, but nonessential to God’s mission.

-Synod joins court brief to protect pregnancy centers from mandated abortion advertising

-Supreme Court hears case of Colorado baker under fire for marriage view

-Synod joins amicus brief for Colorado baker under fire for marriage view

-‘Love Saves Lives’: Lutherans march for life in Chicago and D.C.

-Commentary: ‘Life and breath and everything’

Defense Secretary Mattis: DoD/DHS panel will review president’s transgender guidance

-Judge Neely asks U. S. Supreme Court to reverse Wyoming court censure

-Synod, other advocates speak for religious liberty in secularized military

-Judge Neely will remain on bench despite censure

-Missouri Synod Lutherans join St. Louis Archdiocese in opposing Board Bill 203

-LCMS awaits response from DoD in request to protect troops’ religious freedom

-Protecting troops’ religious freedom: LCMS calls for clear DoD guidance

-Synod joins amicus brief for florist sued twice over marriage view

-Synod joins court brief for judge under fire for marriage view

-Lutheran, Anglican leaders discuss religious freedom

<sup>24</sup> *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 311.