

Mission FUTURE: How To Be a Missional Church— Routes and Obstacles

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Abstract

This article puts the church on a counselor's couch in order to deal with five (de)pressing problems concerning the future of mission: 1. a growing secularity in our society, 2. a lack of passion among Christians concerning mission, 3. a decreasing attraction amongst young people and indifferent non-denominational people, 4. a loss of credibility, and 5. an insecurity about its calling. Trying out a new approach in counseling the church counselor poses the “miracle question” to empower her patient to shift from a problem-oriented towards a solution-oriented mindset. Without ignoring the fact that miracles cannot be “made,” she helps the church to imagine a world in which it has overcome its shyness towards mission. Church could be vivid, outgoing and evangelistic. This serves as a means to create a motivating vision for the future that already impacts present actions and decisions: If all it takes is a miracle, why not act as if that miracle had already taken place? Just for ten minutes a day...

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Mr. M. Has To Answer a Strange Question

Mr. M. does not feel good at all. Finally, he has mustered up the courage to go and see his counselor. “You know,” he says, “I’m suffering a lot because I am so shy. I would really like to be more outgoing and able just to approach people and talk to them. But every time I think about doing so, I’m asking myself ‘Am I interesting enough? And how will people react? Will they not reject me again?’”

In former times, the counselor would have made much effort to pin down the problem of Mr. M. He would have asked Mr. M to describe different situations in which he felt excluded because he was too shy to interact with other people. He probably would have also tried to come up with reasons why Mr. M. is being so shy. Maybe he had repeatedly been treated badly by his peers in his

childhood? Certainly, the counselor would have shown much compassion towards Mr. M.’s concern.

Today however, it could happen that Mr. M. would face another generation of counselors. The counselor Mr. M. were to see today would neither ask a lot about his childhood nor talk with him about the different situations where he was confronted with his own shyness. More likely, the so-called “miracle question” would be posed¹. “Imagine,” the counselor might ask, “you would go to sleep tonight and you would sleep very well, dream a little and you would wake up tomorrow, and ‘ta-da!’ – your problem would have vanished. It would be gone! The *world* would still be the same, not everyone would be kind at once, but *you* wouldn’t be the same anymore. How would you notice this change? What would you do differently if that happened? And how would people around you notice that you have changed? Who would be surprised the most?”

¹ Steve de Shazer and Yvonne Dolan, *Mehr als ein Wunder: Die Kunst der lösungsorientierten Kurzzeittherapie* (Heidelberg: Carl-Auer Verlag, 2015).

The idea of this “miracle question” originally comes from the model of solution-oriented short-term counseling.² This approach in counseling is not focused on problems, but on solutions. It is designed to avoid jumping on a carousel which spins around problems again and again. The model focuses on helping the clients to come up with ideas and solutions by themselves. It breaks the cycle of problems, leads to solutions and points out concrete actions. “Imagine ... what could be if ...? And couldn't you just for 10 minutes a day act pretending this miracle had already happened?”³

The Church has to Answer a Strange Question

Now imagine our church goes to see a counselor. The church would also like to be less shy or in churchy words: The church would like to be missional, would like to be open to outsiders, would like to invite them in, would like to witness what it believes, would like to grow because more and more people would feel at home in it. But, well, the church is too shy. Moreover, mission is too problematic. And haven't we tried so hard – without effect?

In former times, we as counselors of our church would have been concerned with its problems. It would have been a long list of sorrows. Let us, for example, take a look at a fresh German publication on the future of mission: *Mission Future*⁴. If I take only some of the keywords out of this wonderful book, I have enough material to fill quite a lot of counselling sessions. The book talks, for instance, about a “mildew” on our faith, about a “resignation in the very heart,” a “tiredness” and “hopelessness,”⁵ about “lethargy baffles,”⁶ the absence of “urgency”⁷ and also about the “praying grandma” becoming an obsolete model, about “timid Germans,” who do not like to talk about faith.⁸ The concerns are numerous: problem upon problem, wherever we look: inside, outside and even above!

Of course, I can describe all this in a more serious way than by randomly picking out keywords: Pars pro toto, I

refer to five obstacles the church is facing regarding its mission:

The church notices the growing secularity of people which isn't balanced by any arising spirituality. Charles Taylor made clear that our society develops from a society in which it was impossible not to meet God to a society in which believing in God is one option among many others and apparently not the most attractive or the most comfortable one.⁹ Many people don't consider the Christian faith because they do not even notice us.

The church registers a lack of passion among Christians concerning mission: It seems that mission is seldom an act of joy but rather one of plain obedience to the law. One does not disagree with the command, but, in our daily lives, we are rather shy. Even in a vibrant church of firm believers, where we hear about the importance of being a witness to our neighbors, there is a strange reluctance to be missional. And it gets even worse: Our dullness is paired with inability, leading to questions: “How can I be a witness of Christ in my daily life and how do I find a balance between being way too shy and reserved and being too aggressive?”

The church knows that it doesn't reach far enough. When it comes to the mission of the church, Friedrich Schleiermacher (who calls mission “ausbreitendes Handeln” or “spreading action”) distinguishes between the law of continuity and the law of choice by preference.¹⁰ The law of continuity works in places where faith is alive and keeps flourishing: in our families, in our neighborhood, at school or at church. In these areas faith grows naturally and reproduces itself freely. Where faith is not an integral part of the neighborhood anymore, the church cannot continue to rely on that law: It has to figure out another way to get the attention of the people it seeks to reach. That's where the “choice by preference” is supposed to take over. In those areas, the church hopes that people will believe because they find it attractive to do so. Choice by preference suggests that faith attracts people and that they will make a conscious decision for it. And exactly

² Timm Lohse, *Das Kurzgespräch in Seelsorge und Beratung: Eine methodische Anleitung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010).

³ Arist von Schlippe and Jochen Schweitzer, *Lehrbuch der systemischen Therapie und Beratung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 159.

⁴ Michael Diener and Ulrich Eggers, eds., *Mission Zukunft: Zeigen, was wir lieben: Impulse für eine Kirche mit Vision* (Holzgerlingen: SCM, 2019).

⁵ George Augustin in *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶ Ansgar Hörsting in *ibid.*, 53.

⁷ Thies Gundlach in *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸ Steffen Kern in *Ibid.*, 220

⁹ Charles Taylor, *Ein säkulares Zeitalter* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2010), 14.

¹⁰ Werner Raupp, *Mission in Quellentexten* (Erlangen: Verlag der Liebenzeller Mission, 1990), 387-393.

in this area, we see our biggest problems. People just do not seem to choose the Christian faith. It seems as if we are unable to attract the younger generation as well as indifferent non-denominational people, the “nones” and many other segments of society.

The church and its mission also suffer from the old problem of credibility. The “M”-word has its own story, and we cannot get rid of it, even if today’s mission practices have (in most cases) distanced themselves from their problematic past.¹¹

Finally, the church suffers from its tendency to unsettle itself. The fragility of faith is not only a problem outside but also inside our churches. And sometimes, this tendency leads to an alarming self-distancing from its message. On a larger scale, we can see this problem in several statements of German Churches (e.g. Rheinische¹² and Badische Landeskirche): They declare that it is no longer possible to encounter Muslims with the intention to invite them to accept Jesus as their saviour and thus no longer seek justification in the law.¹³

On a smaller scale, I experience this in conversations with future pastors who come to visit our institute and are more than sceptics about “mission.” A little while ago, I was asked the question, “Isn’t any missionary (M. Walser) evil and incompatible with late modern pluralism?” And, “Isn’t it possible for people to be very happy and saved without faith, Christ and the church?”

Secularity outside and reluctance inside, the missing scope and long-lasting burdens of history and the fatal tendency to self-secularization: the counseling-seeking church faces many issues. And in the past, the counselors would have listened to it on and on. With all their church-theories and missional education they would have listened. Fortunately, the new solution-oriented church counselor comes in today. And her main interest is to stop the church from staring at the big pile of problems and focus on what systematic counselors call “envisioning possibilities.”¹⁴ She could ask questions like: “Is it really always the same, always hard and never

fruitful?” She could ask lamenting mission-critics, “What does actually work and does not have to be improved?”¹⁵ And of course, she would ask the big miracle-question (hoping that church people – at least them! – would appreciate miracles because it is their area of expertise), “Dear Church, imagine, you would go to sleep, you would finally sleep without all your nightmares and sorrows and you would sing: ‘Up! up! to pain and anguish a long good night now say; Drive all that makes thee languish in grief and woe away. Thine ‘tis not to endeavour the ruler’s part to play; God sits as ruler ever, guides all things well each day ...’¹⁶ And imagine you sleep very well and you wake up – and your problem is gone! Vanished. It has disappeared. The world outside hasn’t changed, but YOU have changed over night. How would you notice this change? What would you do differently from now on? Who would be most surprised?”

The Church Dreams of the Miracle of Having Overcome its Shyness

“Well,” the church answers, a bit surprised because miracles are actually not really up-to-date nowadays, “if this happened (I’ll just play along here), I think I could come up with some ideas! Oh, and if I take a closer look, some things may have changed already here and there. I guess five miracles have to be enough for today”:

“I think I would be less ashamed and a lot more joyful. I think I could say with Paul, ‘We are proud to belong to Christ Jesus.’¹⁷ Not because we would deserve it, but because he has found us and made us his disciples. We follow the One who has defeated the most evil forces (sin, death and the devil). We have experienced that grace reigns over us and that nothing can separate us from the goodness of God. We can be sure that our ending will be good. Because God has said so. And until that day, we are part of his team. Doing what he wants us to do on earth and showing everyone who wants to hear it the way to this greatest joy. We are proud to

¹¹ George Augustin in *Mission Zukunft: Zeigen, was wir lieben: Impulse für eine Kirche mit Vision*, eds. Michael Diener and Ulrich Eggers (Holzgerlingen: SCM, 2019), 40.

¹² “Weggemeinschaft und Zeugnis im Dialog mit Muslimen,” accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.ekir.de/www/mobile/service/weggemeinschaft-zeugnis-19148.php>.

¹³ For a critical discussion on these statements especially on “Weggemeinschaft und Zeugnis,” see Henning Wrogemann, “Wie kann ein christliches Glaubenszeugnis gegenüber

Muslimen begründet werden? *Missio Amoris Dei und die Frage der Anerkennung*” *ThBeitr* 47 (2016): 247–259.

¹⁴ Schlippe, Schweitzer, *Lehrbuch der systemischen Therapie und Beratung*, 145.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁶ EG 361, “Befiehl du deine Wege,” 7th verse (P. Gerhardt 1653); Translation of “Befiehl du deine Wege” by John Kelley.

¹⁷ Phil 3:3, NIV.

belong to Jesus Christ. This pride would drive out our shyness. And sometimes, this is already happening!”

“I think I would not need a command for mission anymore. Christina Brudereck puts it this way: ‘Mission was the last will of Jesus of Nazareth. Maybe, we could say, “This last will is our command.” But it is not a kind of order or instruction a general would give.’”¹⁸ “Or take Lesslie Newbigin. He says: Mission is rooted in the great things God has done and in what we hope for. ‘Mission begins with a kind of explosion of joy. The news that the rejected and crucified Jesus is alive is something that cannot be suppressed. It must be told. Who could be silent about such a fact?’¹⁹ If that miracle would happen over night, our fatigue would be washed away. In his autobiography the German comedian Hape Kerkeling teaches us that sometimes the only thing you can do in a (seemingly) hopeless and depressed situation is: go outside. So we would know: The church has to go outside. And get some fresh air! And sometimes, this is already happening!”

“I think we would think long and hard about how we could be witnesses of Christ in a gracious way.²⁰ People whom we love and whom we therefore would love to introduce Christ would come to our mind. We would pray that their hearts would be opened for the gospel. We would walk their path with them and we would have nothing in mind but friendship. And we would wait and see if and when a door in their hearts would open up. Then, we would talk about the most precious thing in our lives. We would learn to talk about Jesus as vivid and mature Christians, passionately, wisely, persistently, invitingly and patiently. Finally, we would be proud to belong to Jesus and know that his message is still relevant today. We would tell our neighbor we are praying for him when he is having a hard time. We would invite him to the church services, to evangelistic events, or to the Alpha-Course. Now, we would do it and would not only *think* about that we should do it. We would stay down to earth and hopeful at the same time.

We would not promise people the moon, like that they will be healed from any disease and that they will have success in every area of their lives and that they will be able to hear God’s voice each and every hour. But that, despite God’s mystery and all our brokenness and despite all our ambivalence, we are confident to say, ‘Jesus carries us. Jesus helps. Jesus does not forsake us. Jesus leads us to a good place.’ To put it simply, we would put it like Calvin did: ‘He is our only comfort in life and in death.’ It would come over our lips totally naturally. And sometimes, this is already happening!”

“I think,” the church says, “we would become more confident in our services and evangelism events and start really to talk about our subject. Earlier and more clearly we would say what, no, *whom* we love. Maybe we would ask less desperately if people longed for the message of the gospel in their innermost heart. We would end our sermons less often with the ‘Jesus Curve’²¹ as the German theologian Alexander Deeg calls it. He is referring to a habit of preachers who start their sermons with a long analysis of human troubles and struggles only to come to a shortened answer in the end, ‘Jesus.’ Maybe we would proclaim more courageously and stop selling the gospel as a quick fix or a band-aid for everything. We would stop turning it into a message which fits neatly into everything we already know to be true. We would rather bet on supply than put our hopes in demand²². We would supply with, as Gerhard Wegner puts it wisely, ‘product-pride’²³. We would celebrate and preach and illustrate and make visible what we believe. See! Forgiveness, hope, love, charisma and eternity is here! We would really talk religiously because, as Niklas Luhmann said, in ‘modern societies there are no non-religious reasons...to be religious.’²⁴ Supply creates demand, not the other way around. Or as Andreas Boppard said, ‘We must put Jesus into the centre. Apple would not even think...of taking the iPhone out of their

¹⁸ Christina Brudereck in *Mission Zukunft: Zeigen, was wir lieben: Impulse für eine Kirche mit Vision*, eds. Michael Diener and Ulrich Eggers (Holzgerlingen: SCM, 2019), 104.

¹⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 116.

²⁰ This is what Thies Gundlach calls it on the basis of Albrecht Grözinger. See Thies Gundlach in *Mission Zukunft: Zeigen, was wir lieben: Impulse für eine Kirche mit Vision*, eds. Michael Diener and Ulrich Eggers (Holzgerlingen: SCM, 2019), 96f.

²¹ Kathrin Halfwassen, “Raus aus der Jesuskurve. Die Evangelische Kirche Deutschland will die evangelische Predigt fördern. Es gibt viel zu tun, meint Alexander Deeg.” *DIE ZEIT*, November 26, 2009.

²² Gerhard Wegner, *Religiöse Kommunikation und Kirchenbindung. Ende des liberalen Paradigmas?* (Leipzig: Evangel. Verl.-Anst., 2014), 17.

²³ Wegner, *Religiöse Kommunikation*, 18.

²⁴ Summarized in that way by Wegner, *Ibid.*, 19.

inventory or hyping it less.²⁵ So we would quit being shy and quiet. Anyone who sees and hears us would see and hear that, for us, everything is about Jesus. Everyone would see this, even the indifferent, the Muslim and the atheist. We would stop depreciating ourselves theologically. Gerhard Wegner says, ‘The people do not even know what they are missing!’²⁶ Wegner wants to break down indifference, captivate and simply inspire people.²⁷ We can be inspiring because we are inspired and people can feel that when they get to know us. And sometimes, this is already happening!”

“And if this nightly miracle really happened, we would be more relaxed to look to our left and to our right. The variety of missional approaches would not displease us too much anymore. Surprised, we would see that, overnight, something big had happened to others, as well. They are just as proud to belong to Jesus. Who would have thought?! Even those in the official church! And even the Charismatics! And the Roman-Catholics! Incredible!! And then, we would make surprising experiences: passionate worship of Jesus in a Catholic community which maintains an intensive eucharistic piety in their House of Prayer. I do not have to agree with everything but I have to admit that our family resemblance is surprising. This is so even realizing that with the Charismatic brother and the Catholic sister, of course, about some things, we’d probably still disagree a bit! But at the end of the day, we confess one Lord, one hope, one mission! And sometimes, this is already happening!”

In the End: It Isn't Just a Dream!

Now we know what the nightly miracle has made us into: Beautiful, isn't it? But now, something interferes. Eventually, the theological reflex raises its eyebrows and interposes: “All miracle questions aside, miracles are simply out of our control. We cannot make them. It's a nice picture that you drew there. But, unfortunately, it does not lie within our responsibility.” This is the theological reflex!

As a counselor, I always have to ask where a point that someone makes comes from or rather where it is aimed. Either the talk about the unavailability of miracles is a truism or a defensive argument. As a truism, we surely agree: If God's Holy Spirit does not move our frozen hearts, the winter will last in our churches. But an argument of unavailability can also be a couch-potato-argument, preventing us from getting up and doing what we have to do.

The solution-oriented church counselor does not let us off the hook. She says, “Hold on a second. If all that happened just because the problem of your shyness towards missions vanished overnight, why don't you, just for 10 minutes a day, act as if it really had vanished? Couldn't you just take some steps in this direction? Couldn't you do a bit more of what you have already experienced from time to time? Just risk it again – and then couldn't you experience how courage and joy are growing just by doing it? Come on, you need to get some fresh air!”

We have an ancient knowledge about the paths we need to take to open ourselves: Clear entrances, remove barriers and tell God, “We are ready.” “Make a path for the Lord.” Martin Nicol talks about “the God-given ability to draw near to him as a church and as human beings which happens in historic events and through human decisions.”²⁸ We know what connects “the believers in the land”: prayer, Jesus-centered meditation, repentance and refocusing on Jesus. That is what it is about. And then we can go to sleep knowing “One day there will be a miracle.”²⁹ Overnight. Who knows?! And then, the shy church will speak freely, joyfully, faithfully and charismatically about the best news of them all.

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²⁶ Wegner, *Religiöse Kommunikation*, 34f.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁸ Martin Nicol, *Weg im Geheimnis. Plädoyer für den evangelischen Gottesdienst* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 36.

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