



Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

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Mission Thinking and Formation Beyond 2018

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This reflection on the conference theme: “Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship” led me to ask the following pertinent questions a) What are the missiological implications of this theme in response to the world setting the agenda for the Church’s mission? b) What are the implications for equipping the people of God, laity and clergy leadership to embody transforming discipleship? The year 2018 resembles so far, much more like 2017 but on steroids, possessed by an unpredictable and disruptive spirit that is forcing this generation to learn how to live with uncertainty in all areas of life. The colossal shifts in the global political, economic and religious landscapes are fast-tracked by the 4th Industrial Revolution, and the emergence of identity politics advocated by leaders using the legitimate fears of people(s) as political tools to advance their narrow nationalistic policies to benefit their support. This has resulted in an environment of growing distrust and alienation of political leaders. The populist rhetoric of political and religious groups are also challenging acceptable standards of tolerance, political centrism, diversity and pluralism resulting in a coalescing of ideological forces of hatred, throwing overboard political correctness, values of decency, truth-telling, compassion and simply common sense to create a toxic brew of global instability.

It is within this precarious global environment of uncertainty and unpredictability that the church beyond 2018 must engage in ministry and mission that bears witness to: “*Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship*”. If *moving in the Spirit* conjures up notions of pilgrimage, of an on-going journey of all believers that is led and guided by the Holy Spirit, then the church’s public missional witness in this very difficult social, political, economic and religious global context requires transformative discipleship from all of its agents. This audacious theme postulates the missional mode or state of the church’s presence within any given context must be a movement controlled by God’s Spirit. It affirms that the church as a missional and praxeological community is called into a transforming lifestyle of discipleship that offers a continuous mode bearing witness in Christ’s way. This process of equipping disciples is therefore intended to facilitate a subversive pedagogy that transform people of God into a community of disciples.

According to David Watson, “Christians (especially) in the west have largely neglected what it means to be a disciple of Christ. The vast majority of Western Christians are church members, pew fillers, hymn singers, sermon tasters, Bible readers, even born again believers or spirit filled charismatics - but not true disciples of Jesus”.¹ I interpret the thrust of this theme to be a timely warning to all contemporary Christians that the church’s ministry and mission face a grave risk when our witness in this world is blinded by what Paul refers to as the “gods of this age” (2 Cor 4:4). These deceptive gods have lured us into putting our trust into false securities of life that replace and displace the sovereignty of the Triune God of life. The invitation to become transforming disciples is not a self-improvement project along the line of “7 habits for highly effective leaders” but rather a ‘present-continuous process of Spirit determined change that Paul describes as “are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18 NRSV)”. The transforming work of the Spirit is the process whereby disciples are empowered to “how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9).”

¹ Discipleship by David Watson, Hodder and Stoughton, 1981, ISBN 0340265728, page 16

This is a pilgrimage journey that is characterized by relationships of missional accompaniment in which the disciples engage in apocalyptic hope that constantly puts up resistance against the death bequeathing idols/powers of this age. The missional agenda of the transforming disciples hopes and works hard for a transformed world of justice and peace and a commitment to continuous renewal in Christ. The transforming process is empowered by the Holy Spirit that gives life and meaning to the teachings of Jesus in order that each believer may embody the gospel (gospel-shaped life) in words and action. Transforming discipleship therefore calls for full participation in the gospel through visible public actions that demonstrate allegiance to the sovereignty of God in all areas of our lives.

This missional understanding of transforming discipleship has major implications for the model of formation that it embraces to equip all of the people of God. The church with its non-conformist missional/theological heritage must embody the Gospel in its life and work in order to rediscover its Spirit empowered identity, vocation and witness. Every local church must therefore “be the gospel” by challenging the enslaving idolatries in every community and be counter-cultural disciples that *feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoners* (Matthew 25:36).

Missional formation that transforms disciples intentionally involves all of the people of God being equipped to discern and engage in God’s mission. It begins with equipping the local congregation in mission and extends into the specialized field of theological education for those who have recognized their sense of call and are further called to serve as the official servants of the church’s ministry and mission. Transforming discipleship is therefore a constitutive mark of being church. Congregational formation and ministerial theological education belong to the very essence of the Church. They are indispensable to renew and re-form the Church’s identity, vocation and ministry. The next phase of the church’s ministry and mission to respond to the contemporary changing global landscape necessitates relevant re-imaginings of discipleship formation that are contextually relevant. The early disciples of Jesus confirmed that following him has costly political consequences because, “*These people who have been turning the world upside down ... They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus*” (Acts 17:6b-7). Disciples who are transformed live out different scales of social, religious, economic and political values from those which our culture may celebrate and therefore it means that following Jesus in our age may involve treading a fine line between compromise and withdrawal from the different challenges of life.

The way forward for the global mission of the church necessitates that its model of transforming discipleship must *eschew its triumphalist domineering heritage* and be clothed with respect and humility but also with confidence, not being ashamed of the gospel of Christ in its interreligious dialogue for justice and peace. This model of discipleship formation must also be fully embodied and engendered in order to provide openness to the flourishing of all people, a participatory team of the community of women and men working together.

Deception is the biggest threat to the Christian discipleship in our era. Therefore formation that facilitates transforming disciples must embrace not only interdisciplinary pedagogy but gender justice in leadership formation. It is the responsibility of every follower of Jesus to ensure that they are biblically literate, politically conscious and economically wise and just in order to fulfill the charge that Jesus gave to all his followers that they must take responsibility and equip themselves so that: *See that no one deceives you (leads you astray)* Matt. 24:4. Formation pedagogy that embodies transformative discipleship in Christ’s way gives focused attention to:

1. Restoring divinity in humanity and reasserting what it means to be human.
2. Formation of many leaders to “become the gospel” and to live it out in ways that can facilitate good governance and socially responsible citizenship within the communities that they serve.
3. Restoration of justice, new hermeneutics of reading the Bible
4. Facilitating praxis of social justice and responsibility because it is only through risky participation in the struggles of people seeking justice and finding effective contemplative practices that will spiritually empower them to live positively in the fast changing postmodern culture.