

Why should we Christians care about the Millennium Development Goals?

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Too often we Christians working to help achieve the Millennium Development Goals hide our light under a bushel. We neglect to name our motivation in the MDG's as an outworking of our faith in Jesus Christ and God's saving work in the world. What is needed is a clear apologetic as to why we, specifically because of our Christian faith, should care about the MDG's.

Now, as a student of and activist for Christian mission, I cannot answer the question "Why should we as Christians care about the MDG's?" separate from an understanding of Christian mission, or more specifically: separate from a consideration of the role of Christians in God's mission? Answering the question: "What is mission?" is the first step in claiming a new Christian apologetic for the MDG's.

What is Mission?

Mission in 19th and first half of the 20th centuries made sense. Mission during this period was something that Western Christians did "over there to other people."

Conversion of "the heathen" through the spread of churches and the advance of Western "civilization" went hand in hand. The abuses, and contributions, of missionaries and the close connection between mission and imperialism in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific are well documented. Throughout the nineteenth century and for the first half of the twentieth century the Western churches thus had their missions, the churches' missions, around the world.

God used the missionary efforts in these missions, however, to plant the Church catholic in almost every region of the world. The advent of a genuine global witness of the Church in six continents in the middle of the twentieth century thus significantly altered understandings of mission. Discussion in ecumenical councils turned from the role of the churches' missions to wrestling with the nature of the mission of the Church. Mission was seen less as something done by individuals in far off places and more as the central calling of the Church. These theological shifts led individuals such as Emil Brunner to state: "The Church exists by mission as fire exists by burning" and Stephen Neil to proclaim: "The age of missions is at an end; the age of mission has begun."

The predominance of this church-centered view of mission in the mid-twentieth century was short lived. While ecumenical missionary conferences promoted the coterminous nature of Church and mission, individual theologians and missiologists were beginning to look beyond the Church for the locus of God's action in the world. The mission of the Church (the Church's mission) was to give way to the mission of God (God's mission or the *missio Dei*.)

Most missiologists today would affirm that the mission of God, the *missio Dei*, is God's action in the world to bring about God's Reign. The Trinitarian God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, has effected a new order, a new *shalom*; one in which all of creation can find new life and new hope. Today's mission thinkers affirm that the Church, as the Body of Christ in the world, does have a crucial role to play in the salvation work of God. The Church is called and uniquely empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate with God in God's mission of justice, compassion and reconciliation.

Participating with God in the healing of the world, effecting God's *shalom*, is at the heart of God's mission, is at the heart of our common calling as Christians.

The Biblical Story of God's Mission

So what is this mission? What is God's mission as given to us in Holy Scripture?

In the opening chapter of Genesis we learn that God is the God of all creation. Out of God's love, God brought everything into being; the heavens, the earth, all living creatures including humanity, and "it was good." At the very start of the Biblical story we learn that God is a God of the whole cosmos, a universal God, who watches over and cares for all of creation.

The story continues, however. No sooner had this universal, loving God created humankind, then we turned our backs on God. In our sinfulness, we chose to live unto ourselves. We became alienated from the love and power of God and we became alienated from each other and from creation. And so the Catechism in the back of the Book of Common Prayer describes sin as "the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation." Sin is about a state of separation, separation from God, separation from each other, separation from all creation. Sin is about isolation, division and broken relationship.

But God did not want humans to be alienated from God and from each other. The loving creator chose to rebuild the bonds of love that had been severed through human sin. God's mission was to reconnect with humanity and heal the divisions that separate us. The central element of God's mission, the *missio Dei*, is God's desire to restore to

unity that which had become broken; to reconcile a divided world, to heal a hurting humanity.

To fulfill this mission, God chose a particular people as an entry point into the world. Through Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, God began a new relationship with humankind. The whole of Hebrew Scripture is the telling and retelling of the quest for relationship between God and God's chosen people. To help define this relationship God gave the Law. The Law stood as God's assurance of love and faithfulness. By following God's commandments the chosen people would stand as a beacon of hope in a world separated from God.

God's covenant with the Jews was not, however, an exclusive arrangement. The new relationship begun with Abraham, and clarified by the Law, was intended for all of humanity, a light to the nations. God's covenant was to be the vehicle, the door by which all the peoples of the world could be joined both to the almighty Creator and to each other. Israel's role in God's mission was to serve as a centripetal force pulling all of humanity back into relationship with God. The servant songs of Isaiah thus proclaim clearly that God's mission in the world is to bring salvation to the ends of the earth, to set free those who are oppressed, to open the eyes of the blind (Isaiah 42:6-7); to heal the separation between God, humanity and all of creation; to restore the peoples of the world and all of creation to unity with God.

The story of God's mission, however, does not end with God's covenant with Israel. It goes on. As Christians we affirm that because of God's love for the world and desire to be united with all of humanity, God took a unique and decisive step. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God enters the world anew and takes the responsibility for God's mission directly upon himself. In Jesus, God creates a New Covenant, a new means by which all the world could be joined to the Creator. Jesus was sent into the

world to be the way, the truth, and the life. (John 14:6) As the human form of the creator God, Jesus mission is coterminous, one and the same, with that of the Creator. His mission is God's mission.

The ultimate act of Jesus self-giving participation in God's mission is his sacrifice upon the cross and victory over death. The joining of Jesus' pain and suffering with our pain and suffering on the cross is where we are passionately connected with God, with one other, and with all creation. On the cross is where this new relationship, this right relationship, with God and each other is effected. In Jesus' resurrection three days after the agony of the cross, we are given the promise of restored life in him. In Jesus' death and resurrection we are given the means by which we become one with each other and with God. In the death and resurrection of Jesus the divisions between God and humanity are overcome, and the promise of reconciliation is made real.

The reality that Jesus takes on God's mission in his incarnation, death and resurrection is not, however, a departure from the mission that God entrusted to Israel. Jesus did not come to break down the Law but rather to fulfill it. Over and over again, Jesus demonstrates his solidarity with, and preferential option for, the poor, the sick, the outcasts and those at the periphery of society. The gospels are a living testimony to Jesus' life and ministry as the source of God's salvation for the world. In Jesus the Reign of God is made real and tangible in our broken world.

There is however, a difference between God's mission as it was entrusted to the Jews and how it was realized in Jesus the Christ. Whereas Israel represented a calling in of humanity to union with God, Jesus turned the direction of God's mission around. Instead of a centripetal force, God's mission, realized in Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit, becomes a centrifugal force, a going out. Jesus demonstrates in word and deed that the Reign of God, made real in the sending of God's son, must continue to expand, to move out to the ends of the earth. "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." (John 17:18) Jesus thus sends out his disciples,

empowered by the Holy Spirit, to be the bearers of His mission, God's mission, in the world.

The movement of God's mission in heralding and making real the Reign of God to the ends of the earth is exemplified in the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles, specifically the life and writings of Paul. It was Paul and his co-workers that reached out to the Gentiles with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Paul's outreach was informed by his understanding of the Body of Christ as the prime agent in God's reconciling mission. As followers of Jesus Christ today, as the Church, we continue in this apostolic vocation to serve God's mission and are thus called to preach peace to those who are far off and to those who are near. Participation in God's mission, therefore is at the heart of the baptismal call. Baptism is our commission, co-mission, in God's mission. Just as God sent Jesus into the world, and Jesus sent his disciples to the ends of the earth, we too are sent in mission.

Returning to the Catechism we thus find the profound missiological affirmation on the relationship between the Church and God's mission. The Catechism states that: "the mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." The calling of the Church, the calling of every Christian, is to participate with God in the restoration of unity between ourselves and God and ourselves and each other; to participate in the *missio Dei*. It is the work of the Church to herald and effect the new order where alienation, division and separation give way to inclusion, reconciliation, and unity. As the Body of Christ in the world today, we are called to work for the restoration to unity of all people with God and each other in Christ. Participation in God's mission, effecting God's *shalom*, therefore is at the heart of the baptismal call. Baptism is our commission, co-mission, in God's mission. The imperative is clear.

The MDG's, God's Mission, and our Response.

And here is where the Church, the Body of Christ generally, and the Anglican Communion and The Episcopal Church in particular, can play an incredible important role in the movement to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Being faithful to the call to God's mission, participating with God in effecting God's *shalom*, is what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus. The MDG's thus serve as an invitation to get on with what God wants us to be about; to join with sisters in brothers in Christ, with people of other faiths, with wider global civil society to be about the repair of the world.

As Anglicans then, as members of a family of 38 regional or national churches, in 164 countries with close to 80 million members, the Anglican Communion is one of the single best networks to foster and advance the movement to achieve the MDG's. Government, academic, and cultural leaders alike, from English Prime Minister Gordon Brown, to the economist Jeffrey Sachs, to the rock star Bono of U2 have all recognized the key leadership opportunity of Churches, and the Anglican Communion in particular, in the global movement to achieve the MDG's. The movement is not about a single quick fix, a one off program that is done today and forgotten tomorrow. No it's about building a movement, a movement of God's people in response to the *missio Dei*. So as Christians, as Anglicans, as Episcopalians, we have a key, if not central role to play in the *shalom* movement of the MDG's. Let us not hide our light under a bushel. Let us name and claim our missiological motivation for achieving the MDG's and then play our role in God's mission of restoration and reconciliation.