

## Go

**Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 1:8; John 20:21-23**

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In the current issue of *Interpreter* magazine, there's a story about The Sisters of the Precious Blood, a group of Catholic nuns in Dayton, Ohio. The sisters were distraught after a series of murders in their area in the early 1990s. After watching the local news one night at the convent, some of the sisters looked at each other and remarked, "Isn't that awful? Someone ought to do something."

When you say something like that in God's hearing, guess who that someone often is.

The women answered God's call to action. They began holding prayer vigils every time there was a new murder. However, they took it a step further by gathering at the crime scenes, which were often in dangerous locations. It was risky, but they wanted to make sure that fear and violence didn't get the last word. The vigils eventually became an ecumenical endeavor and continue to this day (Julie Dwyer, *To Be a Witness (United Methodist Style)*, <http://www.interpretermagazine.org/topics/to-be-a-witness-united-methodist-style>).

That's one way to go in witness and service.

We've been looking at the church's mission and what we do to fulfill it. If our mission is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world," if our goal is to be the body of Christ active here and now, what do we do? Borrowing from other churches' statements, we're seeing that God calls us to know, grow, and go. We come to know God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. We grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We grow in grace, in faith. We grow up in Christ, we grow together in fellowship, and we grow out in reaching and receiving new people who follow Jesus in fellowship with us. Growing out points to our going out to share the good news, to share faith with other people, to live out the good news.

"Go" may be the word we most associate with mission. In the church we use the word *mission* in a couple of different ways. When you hear

“mission” you may think about missions, missionaries, going to new places with the gospel and serving. And, that’s a vital part of being the church. The gospel has a way of turning the church inside out, sending us, impelling us beyond ourselves into the world around us.

We also use “mission” to talk about our defining purpose. Why are we here? Why is there a church? Why is this church in this place at this time? What does God want to accomplish here?

This is why we’ve talked about statements of mission, vision, and values. It’s why we need to think about strategy and how to implement the mission and vision.

The point of all this is to remember who we are and what we’re about. To be a church in mission doesn’t just mean that we send money to missionaries and international relief work. That’s important and we do that. Thanks to your generosity and volunteering, we bought supplies and packed between seventy and eighty cleaning kits/buckets for hurricane relief. We donate to many kinds of projects and we serve people in our own community. Being a church in mission means we’re committed to being part of God’s mission in this community and around the world. It means we know what we’re about. It means that we’re defined by going beyond ourselves. We’re motivated by the gospel, we’re following Jesus, and we’re empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Leonard Sweet has written that churches need to focus less on being “ABC” churches—Attendance, Buildings, Cash—and focus more on being MRI churches—Missional, Relational, Incarnational. If we have the MRI, the ABC will follow. *Mission* is the purpose that takes us outside our walls. It includes sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in meaningful, relevant, and compelling ways. Mission also includes serving others and working with Christ in the world. *Relational* means caring for others and allowing the Lord to create a spiritual bond between people. As we care and build relationships with others (especially those who aren’t presently in a relationship with Christ or part of the Church), we find ourselves used by the Lord to express his grace. *Incarnation* is how God gets involved in people’s lives. God became flesh in Jesus Christ and did all that needs to be done to save us. Now we’re invited to share in the kind of incarnational

ministry that takes the light of Christ into the dark places of this world (adapted from Steve's Blog, <http://pwcsteve.blogspot.com/>, 12/13/09).

Where do we get all this? How do we know the church's mission, what the church is and does? How do we know that God calls us to *go*? Mostly, we get it from Jesus. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his followers and he taught them. His last words to them before he went into heaven include instructions and the commission to go into the world with the good news. Those early disciples represent the whole church. What Jesus said to them, he says to us. We can find these instructions in all four Gospels and the book of Acts. Let's take a quick look at each of those and let our Lord Jesus form a picture of the church we're to be.

*He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation." (Mark 16:15)*

This attachment to Mark's Gospel recalls Jesus' commission to the church as a call to go and to preach to all creation. Followers of Jesus are always *sent* people. We're to go into the world. As we go, we proclaim and share the gospel, the good news. We're good news people who scatter all over the world. Here, Jesus says to take the good news to the whole creation. God has concern for all that God has made. What does the gospel lead us to do about the environment and pollution and the use of natural resources?

The creation can be a dangerous place. Huge plates in the earth's crust can shift and cause devastation in various places. Weather systems can produce hurricanes and tornadoes. A loving God rules creation. But God also allows physical laws to work. There's freedom in the world, and not just human freedom. Just because something happens doesn't mean God does it or even that God intended it to happen. The gospel response to something like the Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, the earthquakes in Mexico, and other disasters is to pray for people, to send aid, and for those who can to go and help.

*Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)*

This is the more familiar version of the "Great Commission." I like how Matthew introduces this scene. The disciples went to Galilee as Jesus told them to. They saw the resurrected Jesus. They worshiped him, *but some doubted*. I appreciate that honesty. Even after the resurrection, they continued to struggle and have questions for some time. Then Jesus spoke to them. Because Jesus is God-with-us and he is resurrected and exalted, he has all authority in heaven and on earth. Based on his authority, we go. He tells us to *make disciples* by going, baptizing, and teaching.

The heart of the church's mission is to make disciples. Not just converts, not just church members, but disciples. Disciples are apprentices of Jesus, attached to him, following him, learning from him, becoming like him. We don't achieve this on our own. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus lives in us, transforms us, lives through us, and empowers us to live his kind of life right where we are. It's a life-long process we're engaged in.

Part of being disciples is helping others become disciples. That includes all the ways we relate to people. All the ways we serve. It includes sharing faith and telling the good news. It includes getting people connected to the church, the fellowship of Jesus' followers. It includes teaching and training and then sending disciples out into the world to continue the process, to keep the cycle going.

That same *Interpreter* article tells about Jill Schmalz, who became a member of The Gathering UMC last fall. She lives out her faith through volunteering, small group ministries, and Christian education classes. She said there are easy ways to witness in day-to-day life.

"Sometimes, it can be as simple as including church attendance when discussing your weekend plans. ... People are curious, and most of us have experienced that longing for a greater purpose or understanding in life. When you make yourself approachable and are willing to listen, people will ask about faith. ... I am glad to share my story with others" (Dwyer).

*Then he opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:45-49)*

Here, Jesus roots the church's mission in God's great story of salvation in the Scriptures, starting in Genesis and running all the way through the Bible's account. Notice the relationship of the mission to the gospel, the good news about Jesus the Messiah who suffers, dies, and rises from the dead. Our message includes repentance and forgiveness of sins. The scope of our mission is *all nations*. Rather than the nations coming to Jerusalem to receive grace, God impels the church out from Jerusalem to take the gospel to all nations. We share in this mission as witnesses. The earliest disciples were eyewitnesses of Jesus' life and teaching, his death and resurrection. Our witness is based on theirs. But, we also know Jesus for ourselves and bear witness to what he does in our lives.

Again, this isn't some self-propelled activity. We can't pull it off on our own. The first disciples had to wait to be empowered for their mission and witness. We need the same power that was given to them—and that power is available.

*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

Here Jesus promises the Holy Spirit's power to enable his people to be witnesses. Again, the mission begins in the city of Jerusalem and moves outward to the nation of Judea, then to Samaria, then to the ends of the earth. For us, that means we start where we are, with those close to us. Then we expand our outreach and witness to others, to those who aren't like us, and, finally, into all the world.

I like the insight that one writer gives on this verse:

The power of the Holy Spirit is given for a definite task: the mission of the Church. God does not give the Spirit for the selfish glory or ease of a church or an individual. The power of the Spirit is no magic which we may control for our own purposes. It is a power which controls us. In answer to our prayers for a new outpouring of the Spirit's power, God may well respond: "What do you intend to do with it?" (Albert C. Winn, *The Layman's Bible Commentary*)

The Holy Spirit is how God is with us now, how Jesus continues to be with us—filling us, empowering us, motivating us, leading us, making us into witnesses who carry out the mission God gives.

Mark Stamm, at Perkins School of Theology, says that our membership vow to participate faithfully in the church's ministries by our witness has to be public. We're called to live the gospel publicly in ways that can be seen. That's what witness is.

An example is how The Gathering UMC in St. Louis is witnessing to its community through the Literacy Project. This reading mentor program teaches kids to read and provides support to school staff and families.

"We are committed to impacting the literacy rate in St. Louis Public Schools," said Sabra Engelbrecht, executive director of ministries at The Gathering. "Our witness is being present in some of the lowest performing schools in our state" (Dwyer).

*Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive*

*the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. (John 20:21-23)*

This is an account of the evening following Jesus' resurrection when the risen Lord appeared to his disciples. Jesus greets them with the customary blessing of "peace," but it's become so much more now. The crucified and risen Jesus is the source of true peace, wholeness, well-being, and blessing. He shows them his wounds from the crucifixion—reminders of the price God paid for us to be redeemed and saved.

He repeats the blessing of peace and then, having just shown them his scars, he says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Jesus came on a mission from God the Father. Now he entrusts his followers with a mission. Jesus was rejected. He suffered and died to fulfill his mission. He told us to expect similar treatment. Still, it's worth it. Because some do believe and find life in Jesus.

Then, as in the other Gospels and Acts, we see that we're not left on our own to carry out the mission. Jesus breathes on his disciples—maybe like God breathing into Adam the breath of life. In this new creation, Jesus gives life. And he says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Then he reminds them that forgiveness of sins is an essential part of their proclamation and ministry.

We can receive the same Holy Spirit who anointed and filled Jesus, who filled the first disciples, who has filled and empowered Christian witnesses through the centuries. Filled and empowered by God's Spirit, we take good news of forgiveness and new life to people everywhere.

There's a legend that after Jesus returned to heaven, angels asked him about his time on earth. One angel commented on the disciples. One of them had betrayed Jesus. One had denied Jesus. All of them had abandoned him. Even after the resurrection, they were slow to believe. The angel said, "And these are the ones you gave the gospel to, the ones you entrusted with a mission to go into all the world?" "That's right," said Jesus. "But what if they fail? What other plan do you have?" And Jesus said, "There is no other plan."

We're still called to be part of that plan. Will we try to keep the gospel as our private possession or will we join in the mission of Jesus? Will we go

into all the world and into our own “worlds,” sharing the good news, serving like Jesus, being blessed and blessing people wherever we are?