

Christ's Mission and Ours

Rev. Harold Wells, East Plains, July 10, 2022.

Luke 4: 16-22; Matt 28: 16-20.

The Christian Mission: Mission and Missionaries. This is a controversial subject in our time, particularly from the perspective of our Canadian indigenous church members.

Since we are soon to enter a new chapter in the history of our congregation, with the arrival of a new minister, it seems a good time for us to think deeply about mission:

What is Christ's mission, and what is our mission, in Christ?

To put it differently: As followers of Jesus, what is our task, specifically, as a church, and as individual Christians? What's our job?

First, let's explore this word 'mission' and its biblical roots, using these two very different texts, from Luke 4 and Matthew 28.

We may note that the English words 'mission' and 'missionary' do not appear in most English translations of the Bible. So why is it such a prominent concept for us, and where did it come from?

Well, as you know, what we've called the Old Testament is written in Hebrew, and the New Testament in Greek. The Bible did not exist in English until the Reformation of the 16th century, about 500 years ago. The English Bible is fairly recent in Christian history.

For many centuries, our British and European ancestors used a Latin translation of the Bible – Latin, of course, being the language of the Roman Empire.

And that's where the word 'mission' comes from.

This word 'mission' derives from the Latin word *missio*, which means 'SENDING'; the verb is 'mitto' – to send. It means a task, or goal, which one is 'SENT' to accomplish. To have a mission is to be SENT to do something.

In the New Testament we hear a lot about being sent. In Luke we're told that Jesus sent out seventy of his followers to preach the Kingdom and heal the sick.

We also hear that Jesus himself was 'sent', that he himself has a 'mission'.

In Luke 4, which we read this morning, he says he was anointed to bring good news to the poor; he was 'sent' to proclaim release to the captives, sight to the blind, and liberation to the oppressed. He was 'sent' for this.

In other words, Christ's own mission has everything to do with compassion and justice for the oppressed and poor of the world. It has everything to do with what we in our time call 'social justice'.

And I might add that in our time the mission also has the dimension of eco-justice, ecological justice, i.e., looking after our natural environment. Of course, in Jesus' time, that was never heard of.

But now we know that if we don't do justice to nature, all of us are toast! If we care about people, including ourselves and our families, we also have to care for the environment, which sustains us all.

So, as our creed says: We are called to "live with respect in creation," and to "love and serve others," and "to seek justice and resist evil."

In the gospel of John, we hear Jesus say: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

So our mission is to continue Christ's own mission. As disciples of Christ, we participate in his ongoing mission to the world. Which has everything to do with reaching out to people in need. The oppressed and marginalized, the poor, the disabled.

Maybe sometimes we will be in need. All of us, at some point, are in need. It may be the church's mission to reach out to you, or to me.

But there's another whole dimension to Christian mission. Our creed refers to that also: "We are called... to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope."

We found that in other biblical text this morning: In Matthew 28, the risen Jesus sends his disciples out into the world: "Go, go!" he says, "and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...., teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...."

So, 'mission' is also about preaching and teaching the gospel message of Jesus, and the message about Jesus: Communicating the message about his death and resurrection, the message of the love of God for all people, telling the good news of forgiveness and grace, and the hope of eternal life.

Our creed includes this too: "We are called... to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope."

This includes growing the church, drawing people into the Christian community, and engaging them in the Christian mission.

Notice, he says “make disciples.” He doesn’t say “make church members,” but “make disciples.” Disciples are learners and followers.

Being disciples as part of the church is not the same as being members of a club. It’s certainly not just a matter of ‘bums in pews.’ Rather it’s being part of a mission – an outreach into the world. That means that we are all disciples together, and we are all on mission together.

Keep in mind that Jesus’ disciples are called to live and work in community. Discipleship is not just a personal thing, done in isolation, but something done together, as part of a community, the church.

So, growing the church is part of the mission.

That, in brief, is the biblical foundation of our concept of ‘mission’. We can say it has two dimensions: reaching out to the poor and oppressed, with justice and compassion; also ‘making disciples’, communicating faith in God, through Christ, which includes growing the church. These two things go together.

As I said at the beginning, the whole concept of ‘mission’ is controversial in our time. Particularly, Canadian indigenous members of our United Church, have questioned our use of the concept. And why would that be so? What’s their problem?

The problem is that our indigenous people have often had a bad experience with Christian mission and missionaries.

Christian white settlers first arrived on this continent about five hundred years ago, looking for land and riches, a place to spread out and prosper. They found this huge, rich continent.

They encountered the indigenous people, whom they called ‘Indians’, and often regarded as ‘savages’.

Understandably, they met some resistance from the indigenous people. Many bloody battles were fought.

We settlers did possess superior weaponry, great sailing ships and guns, and the other rudiments of the early modern world which made it easy for them to conquer and dominate the indigenous people.

Our white settler ancestors, mainly from France and Britain, felt very superior to the people who already inhabited the land.

Since these white settlers were Christians, they also felt their religion was superior, and that the indigenous people needed to be evangelized.

The settlers, generally, looked down upon them and considered them pagans or heathens, in need of our advanced civilization.

So our settler forebears, over a few centuries, vanquished and dominated the indigenous folk. They were driven away from their best hunting and fishing grounds. Great numbers of their people died of new diseases that the settlers brought with them. Their populations were decimated. The coming of white settlers was a huge disaster for them.

Now among the settlers were the missionaries, the Catholic priests, the Protestant clergy, and lay people who worked with them.

Some of them were truly benevolent, truly cared about the original inhabitants of the land. They reached out not only with the gospel message, but also with education and with medicine.

And many indigenous people were drawn to the message of the compassionate and loving God, and to Jesus the Saviour; they found in the Christian message elements in common with their own traditional religions.

Generally they also appreciated some elements of the modern world that the white Christian folk brought with them. The education, especially literacy, the medicine, means of transportation, and unfortunately also, the weapons.

Considerable numbers of indigenous people were 'converted' and became Christian.

And still today we have within our Christian denominations many truly devout, Christian indigenous people, who choose to embrace the Christian faith.

But today they are sharply aware of the abuses that have occurred, and of the continuing injustices suffered by their people.

They deplore the fact that the missionaries cooperated with the settlers, and that the Christian church was closely connected to colonialism. As they saw it, Christianity and colonialism went hand in hand.

Among the most atrocious things done by some of our ancestors was to set up residential schools, and to force indigenous children into those schools, often against the will of their parents. The children were taught to despise their own religion and culture, and forbidden to speak their own native languages.

Terrible abuses happened in some of those schools. To our shame, we're learning more and more about the great numbers of children who were abused, and many who died in those schools.

We see this now as a horrendous example of Christian imperialism: of the arrogance of Christians, who sought to absorb and assimilate indigenous children, to stamp out their religions, cultures and languages.

Because of this dark history of Christian missions, many of our Christian indigenous people, while continuing to love God the Creator, and continuing to love Jesus, have come to dislike the whole concept of mission and missionaries.

Now similar things happened in many other parts of the world.

I personally am most closely aware of Christian mission and missionaries in Africa, since my wife, Pat, and I were actually sent out as missionaries from the United Church of Canada to the small African nation of Lesotho. A small nation totally surrounded by the Republic of South Africa.

That was in 1976; and we worked there for five years, until 1981.

We were supported there, of course, by the contributions of congregations like this one to Mission and Service. In those days the Women's Missionary Society was a strong supporter of world missions in local congregations.

During our years there, we realized that the African missionary history is a mixed story of oppression and colonial exploitation on the one hand, and excellent compassionate outreach on the other.

Now already, by the time that Pat and I went to Africa, the United Church was well aware of the ambiguous legacy of mission and missionaries.

Early in the 1970s the United Church Board of World Mission was re-named, the Division of World Outreach. The word ‘mission’ already had a bad odour in some parts of the world. But we retained the term ‘missionary’. So Pat and I were called ‘missionaries’. (A few years later, the term ‘missionary’ was dropped, and we spoke only of ‘overseas personnel.’)

Also, already at that time, in the 70’s, the United Church regarded the African churches (and other churches in Latin America and Asia) as partner churches. They were partners, not just the objects of our missionary activity.

In our case, we went to our partner church, the Church of Lesotho, at their request.

That church in southern Africa was already well established, having been planted there by French missionaries in the 1830’s.

Of course, without the work of the original missionaries in the 19th century, Christianity would not exist on the African continent. The church was there, strong and alive, in Lesotho, because the original missionaries planted it there.

That church had requested of the United Church of Canada someone to help teach and train their own ministers; also to teach and serve as chaplain and pastoral minister to the national university. They recruited me.

So we went there at their request, not imposing upon them; my task was to assist them with their own agenda, to educate their ministers, and to serve as lecturer and chaplain at the university.

Similarly, Pat served as a high school teacher in a church-related secondary school. That’s because there was a severe shortage of secondary school teachers; Pat taught four different subjects, to huge classes of up to 60 teenage boys. We both loved our work there.

Other United Church missionaries in that country also served – there was another high school teacher; there was a construction engineer, who went there to help construct new school buildings. There were missionaries there also from France, Switzerland, and the USA.

In several other African countries too, the United Church sent ministers and teachers, but also doctors, dentists, nurses, agricultural experts, and so on.

At the same time, the United Church was actively engaged in advocacy, that is, advocating, campaigning with our government and with international business, against

the racist system of apartheid in South Africa, and against colonial oppression in other parts of that continent as well.

The United Church spoke of the 'dual mandate' for mission, as we found it in the scripture: reaching out with the gospel message of the love of God, and also reaching out with practical assistance in the fields of education, medicine and agriculture.

It's notable that African Christians too have an ambiguous attitude to the Christian missions and missionaries which had operated in many African nations especially through the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Great numbers of Africans responded warmly and enthusiastically to the gospel of Christ. Everywhere you go in Africa you will meet warm hearted, loving Christian people, and strong, vital churches.

At that university in Lesotho, our chapel was crowded every Sunday with large numbers of young students, as well as faculty and staff, who sang and prayed with gusto.

But these same Christians knew all too well that Christianity had been accompanied by colonialism and was all mixed up with white, racist capitalism.

One time the famous Bishop Desmond Tutu came to our campus and spoke to a huge crowd that gathered to hear him. He stated the matter humorously:

With a twinkle in his eye, Tutu said: "When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible, and we had the land. Now, we have the Bible, and they have the land."

Again, he said: "When the missionaries came to Africa they told the people to kneel down and pray. And when they had their eyes closed, they raised the British flag."

That was an Anglican bishop speaking.

These comments evoked roaring laughter and applause from that crowd of students. You could tell jokes against the missionaries and their collusion with the colonists. Nevertheless, the church was crowded with those same students the next Sunday morning.

So Africans tend to be suspicious of missions and missionaries, but they love the faith that the missionaries brought to them, and they also love the elements of the modern world which they brought with them.

In the first African village, where our family lived, there was a huge mission hospital, which served a vast rural, mountainous area, staffed mainly by Christian French and Swiss missionary doctors and nurses.

I knew two of those doctors very well, one man from France; a woman from Switzerland. They were fine, dedicated professionals, who worked hard for the people, with great love. They were sent there and financed, of course, by ordinary congregations back in their home countries.

That country also had a great system of elementary schools, originally set up by missionaries, originally staffed by missionary teachers, though gradually the local people have been taking over the tasks of teaching.

It's interesting to realize that most of the national political leaders of the new African nations in the post-colonial period, were educated in missionary schools – people like Mandela, Kaunda, Kenyatta, Tutu, and so on, began their education in Christian schools set up by missionaries.

Now, bringing our thoughts back to our own mission outreach here at East Plains: We have a long history of support for mission overseas, and in Canada, which we can be proud of.

From its beginning, as a Methodist Church here on Plains Road, and after 1925, as East Plains United Church, a great deal of good has been done for great numbers of people in many places, both in Canada and around the world.

Through givings through what used to be called “Missionary and Maintenance,” and then “Mission and Service,” we've been part of a major program of outreach, of many kinds, of the United Church of Canada.

I could spend a long time spelling out in more detail the many forms of mission we've been involved in, in recent years.

But let's keep in mind that East Plains Church itself is a kind of mission.

In our task right here in Aldershot, of building and nourishing faith, in the inspiration of Christian discipleship within our personal lives, in the life of worship and prayer, and many forms of service to our local community, including now the Child Care Centre, this church too is worthy of support.

A great deal of good has been done in many parts of the world, supported by the contributions of this congregation. I won't even try to list the many projects of faith and compassion that have been carried out by East Plains people.

We can't begin to measure or quantify the good that has been done, emanating out of this congregation over nearly 180 years, or even during the last 40 or 50 years that some of us can remember. In fact, we never see the full effects of what we do.

It's rather like standing by a quiet, still pond or lake, and throwing a single small rock into the water, and watching the ripples that spread out in all directions.

Our small acts of justice and compassion have impacts that spread out, in ways we can never see, in the lives of people we will never meet.

Because of something we sent, or something we did, the lives of persons and families have been blessed and enriched by new faith and hope.

Because of our small gifts, someone's life has been saved, through medical care, someone's life, and the life of a whole family, has been turned around by education they otherwise wouldn't have had.

We'll never know what good we have done through our exercise of mission, right here in Canada, and in many places around the world.

Our next hymn expresses this so well: "In loving partnership, O God, help us your future to proclaim. Justice and peace is our desire, we humbly pray in Jesus' name."

The hymn is 603 (Voices United) "In loving partnership we come."

