Challenges to Seeing Through a Missional Lens

1. Seeing Our Neighborhoods as a Potential Market

One temptation is to view *Leading Congregations in Mission* as the latest and greatest church growth strategy. For example, a congregation decides to put on a dinner and a talent show for the neighborhood. Invitational fliers are sent to homes and great food is provided at the dinner. Many from the neighborhood attend the dinner. A congregational member remarks, “This is a wonderful project that takes work to pull off. It's great to do, but some of us have been wondering lately... why none of these people who get involved turn up in church on Sunday?” Beneath this question lies another question - **What are we doing wrong, why don’t people come?** The assumption behind this deeper question is because people don’t come there is something wrong with us.

As a result, people default to tactical solutions, thinking if they just advertise better, do worship better, or train their greeters people will come. This approach attempts to solve a problem that is not the problem at all. The question is not how to advertise better, cook better, or plan worship better. The people in our neighborhoods who are not attending church have no idea we are doing any of these things. The missional question is how we develop relationships with people in our neighborhoods without requiring them to come to us. No level of marketing or programs will compensate for a lack of personal connection in our neighborhoods.

2. Programmatic Focus

When we introduced LCM at our first training session, some people felt disoriented and asked: **But what about the church?** By “church” they typically mean the church building they drive to weekly for services and programs. Our congregational buildings provide sacred space for gathering and ministry. This is important. *LCM* comes out of a deep commitment to help local congregations (i.e. the church) discern and lead mission in changing context.

However, many mainline denomination congregations have bought in to an American consumer-driven model of the church. In this model local congregations become like drive-ins where people who are all alike come to consume the kinds of religious goods and services that suit their spiritual taste buds. Many U.S. congregations in Community of Christ and other denominations have become places radically disconnected from people in their neighborhoods. How can we faithfully live into Jesus’ commandment to love the Lord and our neighbor if we never have time to connect with our neighbor? Something has to change. This change is not about, organization or programs. Organization and planning have their place but this is not the fundamental challenge. What has to change is the way we understand and practice being God’s
people. LCM is in part about how we rediscover the ancient Christian practice of hospitality, hear the stories of people in our neighborhoods, and invite them into loving community. In this approach we form our churches around what God is doing out there already in our neighborhoods.

3. Idealism

Idealism is a challenge in many of our churches. There are many discussions about how the church needs to change. It does! There is no doubt about that, but what does it mean? What often happens is pastors look for some ideal understanding of what the church should be, and then present the congregation a program or plan that will lead to this ideal.

Some leaders want to go back to the ‘original’ or ‘pure’ New Testament church and make it the benchmark of what their local church needs to look like. Others want to point to some specific time in church history that has special significance to them as the ideal. All these proposals have their idealized view about what the ‘true’ or ‘real’ church needs to look like.

One should be suspicious of any approach to idealize any specific church of the past or present. Our call is not to copy some prior or other form but to incarnate or live out the gospel in ways faithful to our identity, message, mission, and beliefs today. We are called to live and convey essential truths in language and form that speak directly to our changing contexts for ministry.

4. Modern Fragmentation

Modern fragmentation encourages a separation between inward and outward, sacred and secular. This way of living leads to a lack of integration or recognition that our outward response is dependent on our inward journey and preparation. Jesus challenges us to learn to love God together (it is about the blessings of community) and to follow God’s love for the world into our neighborhoods. This is the core of the gospel.

Our challenge is go deeper in our relationship with God and one another. When we engage in practices that deepen these relationships we then have the capacity to relationally incarnate or live out the gospel in relationship with our neighbors. There is no separation or fragmentation. Our outward actions become an extension of our deepening relationship with God and one another in sacred community.

5. Unlearning Habits to see with Fresh Eyes
Defaults are automatic responses we do out of habit because we’ve responded that way so many times, for so long, we don’t even realize how they shape our imagination of the future. Defaults can be good. They help us internalize good habits. However they can also blind us to assumptions we might need to rethink in this strange, new place where we find ourselves as congregations.