CATCHING THE WIND
EXPLORING MISSIO DEI IN CONTEXT
I first discovered the term missio Dei (Mission of God) in my theological studies with the Church Mission Society. The term gave language to a construct of missiology born out of my (at the time) 16 years chasing Jesus, both in and out of vocational Christian ‘ministry’. This construct had grown in my mind through both my Reformed theological roots and my own experiences of faith and mission, seeing everyday people like myself encounter Jesus. People who often weren’t ‘looking for God’, and who often encountered God outside the formal ‘mission’ activities of the Church. These encounters happened in all kinds of places: on building sites (I’m a bricklayer by trade), overseas mission trips, riding with motorcycle clubs, among the homeless and even way back on the school playground as a new believer. Oh, and I should of course say, sometimes even in Church. Some of these experiences, including my own conversion, were visibly powerful, others were so tender and fragile they could have been missed in a blink.

In simple terms missio Dei is an expression that mission is primarily a part of who God is, rather than an activity or aspect of the Church. Alternatively, to use a now popular phrase, “It is not so much that God has a mission for his[sic] Church in the world, but that God has a Church for his mission in the world.” In the late 1930s Karl Barth was one of the first theologians to articulate mission “as an activity of God him[sic]self”, and the concept was articulated more clearly (without yet being named) at the Willengen Conference of the IMC in 1952. The concept is more specifically derived from trinitarian theology, the sending of the Son by the Father, and the Spirit by the son, is expanded to a fourth mode, by God’s sending of the Church. This is expressed most explicitly in John 20:21: “As the Father has sent me, so am I sending you.”

As I’ve already noted, the concept particularly appealed to me given my Reformed roots – it seemed to invoke something of the sovereignty of God – the “I can’t do it” aspect of mission (1 Cor. 12:3). This is important in diminishing the evangelical guilt experienced by many Christians at their lack of evangelistic competence. I remember an encounter with a work colleague many years ago, who had heard about my former exploits with an international mission agency. He said, “If you’re a missionary then save me. Make me believe”. In my characteristically subtle and gentle way, I replied by saying something like, “I can’t save anybody mate. I’m just a human being. That’s between you and God. Not my problem.” I had already learned the hard lesson that taking responsibility for other people’s salvation was a one-way ticket toward spiritual exhaustion and disillusionment – for the minister and lay person alike. Missio Dei at its most basic level means that I can’t do it and I don’t need to. Not long after returning from time spent overseas, at a Church event in St Albans I met a young lady from a North–African country I had recently visited. We got talking, in my somewhat limited French, about her homeland. During this conversation I offered to pray for her, knowing how difficult a place she came from, and while praying I had some sense that God wanted her to be a light in her homeland. I prayed into this (still in broken French). The young lady began to weep, and started passionately calling out to God in her beautiful language. The night went on and eventually I went home, encouraged by the encounter. The next day I received a call from her friends, who excitedly told me that their friend hadn’t been a follower of Jesus before that night, and had been baptised the very next day after giving her life to Christ. I felt sick. I never would have been so bold had I known she was a visitor to Church. I never would have dreamed of being so non-‘seeker-sensitive’. And I still probably wouldn’t. The point of my telling this story is that if mission is the story of God, there’s isn’t always much we can do to get in the way. Of course I’m not saying that we should forget about being seeker sensitive, what I am saying is we should try to discern where God is at work, and get involved. God was obviously at work in this young lady’s life. Did God need me to be part of it? No. Was it a great privilege and pleasure to be a part of it? Emphatically, yes.

I wish I had those kind of experiences on a regular basis. But I don’t. I don’t think there are many people who do. In fact I believe that the way extraordinary events and miracles are written of in the Bible hints that they were probably surprising and unusual to the people involved in them. In our present culture of individualism, we battle the demon of over-inflated self-importance. In his excellent little book on leadership, Henri Nouwen suggests the three biggest temptations for the 21st century Christian worker are to be relevant, popular and...

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3 Bosch, Transforming Mission, 389.
4 Ibid., 390.
powerful. He suggests instead, that in post-modern culture a more appropriate model is that of prayer, vulnerability and trust. This translates well into the concept of missio Dei – if mission is born of the activity and nature of God, we do not need to be relevant, popular or powerful; the outcomes do not rest on our shoulders. Instead we prayerfully engage with what we discern God is doing, we trust God and our Christian communities, and we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, living works-in-progress. Our stories are stories of redemption and restoration intertwined with God’s big story.

The most challenging part of this perspective in practice for me has been its breadth. Living and working as a lay chaplain in the town recently voted the worst place to live in the UK, it’s easy to be overwhelmed by need and opportunity. After telling a non-churchgoing friend that my ‘job’ is to be a Chaplain working with homeless and socially excluded people in Luton, they replied “sounds about the most secure job in the country”. At other times the challenge has been to think, “Is God even at work here?” the sense of need can be overwhelming. This has been a critique of missio Dei as a missiology. It has been criticised for being overly broad, to the point where it can become meaningless or can be embraced by mutually exclusive theologies. It has also been criticised for potentially diminishing the Church/human input to mission to such an extent that it can lead to apathy. In other words, “getting involved with what God is doing” is potentially an invitation to running away or burnout. Herein lies the importance of discernment. A course I recently took on Spiritual Accompaniment encourages the process of “listen, notice, stay” – listen to the person you are accompanying, notice what God is doing, stay with that movement. It occurred to me that this is potentially a useful model for a contextual application of missio Dei. Listen to the place, the community, the subculture you are serving; notice where God is at work in individuals, groups, places, stay with the movement of God where you are serving. This has been a challenging process for me. It is time consuming – building the relationships required and acquiring the data and experience to understand a place and a community enough to do this can’t be done in under a year. The fruit of this time spent has been the birth of much of what we are doing now. For example we listened and noticed that people at a homeless welfare centre were engaging with Christmas and Easter services held at the drop-in, but weren’t going to Church. So we brought Church to them, in the form of pastoral care and running a weekly service. Today we met for the first time in the little “chapel” we’ve commandeered in a disused temporary building onsite. We also noticed that people from a drug and alcohol recovery group in Luton were engaging with faith and spirituality through their recovery programmes. For some this engagement took the form of a tangible encounter with Jesus, but didn’t translate into Sunday morning attendance. Thankfully our Vicar was willing to meet them where they are, not expect them to come to us, and so he helped us start a Fresh Expression of Church, modelled half way between a recovery meeting and a Sunday morning service. The group’s inception from the beginning has relied heavily on input from its members. There are other examples I could give, and I’m sure given enough time there will be plenty of examples of where we got it wrong. But what we are doing feels less like ministry and more like midwifery. We are playing a part in the incarnation of God’s Kingdom in surprising places. Sometimes we are just trying to stay out of the way.

In conclusion, I don’t really know! What I can say is that having embraced missio Dei as a steering principle, my “work” feels a lot less like the awkward door-to-door and street preaching of my youth, and a lot more like going on a treasure hunting quest with Jesus. In the numerous sources I have read on the subject, I have found no other which better captures the essence of missio Dei than the following passage from J. Bavinck’s An Introduction to the Science of Missions:

We can think thankfully of the names of numerous great missionary heroes without forgetting for a single moment that importance is not to be attached to them, but only to God. God alone

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6 ibid., 73.
7 ‘It’s the end of humanity’: Luton is voted the worst town in the UK <http://metro.co.uk/2016/01/19/its-the-end-of-humanity-luton-is-voted-the-worst-town-in-the-uk-5632960/> , last accessed 4.08.16.
10 Jesuit Institute, ‘Emmaus programme, What is Spiritual Accompaniment?’, <http://jesuitinstitute.org/Resources/EmmausResources/What%20is%20Spiritual%20Accompaniment%20(Session%201).pdf>, last accessed 4.08.16.
is great. We suffer defeats, we erect barriers, we dig graves; we are repeatedly discouraged, disappointed and powerless, but God goes forth from age to age and does his [sic] great and glorious work, in spite of, and yet also with the utilisation of, our weak and unworthy powers.\footnote{\begin{flushleft}John M. Bavinck, \textit{An Introduction to the Science of Missions}, trans. by David Hugh Freeman (Philippines: P & R Publishing, 1992), 280-281.\end{flushleft}}

What I have learned is that mission finds its genesis in God, not in human effort. The history of missions is God’s story of mission. I believe that we as the Church can be most effective when listen, notice and stay with what God is doing, and calling us to, specifically.

My prayer is that God’s Church will continue to embrace mission as a part of her identity, her raison d’être, not an optional extra.

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