

Home Missions in a New Millennium

A Workshop by David Webber given at The Rural Conference, Balclutha New Zealand, June 25th – 28th 2009
Session 2: Of Mosquitoes, Maggots and Missions: Apostle, the Roots of Home Mission

I. Introduction

Linda saw the first one of the season while she was out sailing, garage sailing that is.

I hate them, mosquitoes that is.

Linda and I grew up in the great mosquito country of the Columbia and Kootenay Valleys in South Eastern British Columbia.

When we were growing up, from about mid May till the end of July, the mosquitoes where we lived were so bad that you had to wear head nets and gloves when you worked and played outside.

And then they invented DDT.

We used to mix DDT with diesel fuel, soak large sawdust filled grain sacks in the solution and then stake the sacks out in every pond and slew for miles around.

It killed the water born mosquito larvae.

In the Lumber camp where I grew up, one ingenuous fellow figured how to make a DDT smudger.

He mixed the DDT with old motor oil and rigged up a kind of intravenous drip over the hot manifold of his old jalopy car.

Each morning and evening he would drive the DDT/smoke belching rattletrap all around the lumber camp, especially where the kids were playing and the adults were congregating.

But there were still gazillions of mosquitoes everywhere.

Not until we got to the technical advanced aerial spraying of DDT did we begin to get the upper hand on them.

Of course the DDT got the upper hand on us, eventually.

We breathed it, drank it, ate it and even bathed in the stuff.

Little wonder one of my best childhood friends died of cancer far too young and I had a battle with Cancer myself while still in my twenties.

The fellow who drove the DDT smudger just died a summer or two ago from cancer too.

As a kid, when I would go outside to play, sometimes I'd stare at the gazillion mosquitoes glaring in at me through my head netting, and I would fantasize about turning the tables, about reversing the odds. I would imagine a nudist colony filled with hundreds of people ... and one lonely mosquito.

Can't you just visualize the delicious image of the poor little fellow, frantically buzzing around with a maniacal expression on his little face, knowing exactly what he was supposed to do but not having a clue of where to start, or where to end.

Like a mosquito in a nudist colony, that is kind of how Linda and I felt when we went to the Cariboo-Chilcotin region of British Columbia as missionaries 20 years ago this very month.

We knew what it was we were supposed to do but there was so much of it to do that we hardly knew where to start.

We were sent as missionaries to reach out to rural people like ourselves, to preach Christ and to foster faith and fellowship in his name among people, wherever there was no existing church.

Linda and I believed it was a vision for mission that Christ had given to us. The Presbyterian Church in Canada, after much hesitation at first, agreed. The main implements in our toolbox were the 1st century church, the house church ... and a 4X4 pickup.

The work was, by vision and design, to be rural, regional and completely interdenominational mission.

Our mission statement was, "*Reaching out with the love of Christ to people who live in rural areas beyond the traditional church*".

In the Cariboo-Chilcotin region of BC that amounted to about 70 thousand people who lived outside of the Cariboo's three villages and who are spread out over the Cariboo-Chilcotin plateau which is a little over 87,000 square kilometers (*To put that in perspective it is about 1/8th the area of Canada's most westerly province of British Columbia, or just a tad smaller than New Zealand's North Island.*)

The mosquito in a nudist colony syndrome meant that 80-hour workweeks quickly became the norm.

Five years later John Wyminga and Shannon Bell-Wyminga were sent to serve as ordained missionaries with us, to share the load.

It didn't take long before the mosquito in a nudist colony syndrome had us all going at about 80 hours a week.

About five years ago Charles McNeil was sent to serve as an ordained missionary, along with his wife Shannon, to share the load with us. But these rural fields are way ripe unto harvest, way more than what our present missionary staff can handle alone.

Now we are exploring ways of training up lay missionaries from within our own members.

Two of our elders are pioneers in this.

Ginny Alexander has completed a 2-year lay missionary training program at Whitworth College in Spokane Washington and serves as a volunteer missionary at large with us.

Bruce Wilcox, a local mill worker, has taken several online courses in ministry with the Elders Institute.

Bruce leads a congregation of retired folk in the hamlet of 100mile House every Sunday, doing all of the itinerate ministry that comes out of that, and it is considerable.

And then there is Gordon Kellett, a new elder who we are training and who is ministering in at least three fellowships as well as serving as a chaplain to the Forest Grove legion.

In addition we have John Noble, a Shantyman missionary who specializes in individual evangelism and who organizes cowboy churches at over a dozen rodeos in our area.

We have Reg Steward a former Baptist preacher and now a BC Cattlemen's Association consultant, who with his wife Alayne leads one of our house churches at Springhouse and also provides excellent leadership in a number of ways in our Mcleese Lake house church.

We have Clarence Colp, a retired Seventh Day Adventist pastor, and his wife Susan who have just moved into our area are starting to provide house church leadership too.

And we have a passel of young adults who provide extensive leadership in worship music, youth ministries and youth camps.

I could go on, but I think you get the point.

I think we are beginning to make progress with the mosquito thing.

And I hope the metaphor helps to illuminate the immensity of the mission task we talked about last session, if we have eyes to see it and ears to hear it and the mind to comprehend it.

In our case the only fly in the ointment showed up just a couple or three years ago.

I hate that fly, money that is.

Personally I never seem to have enough of it.

I spend inordinate amounts of time worrying about it.

It has never made me happy, even on those rare occasions when I have had more of it than I need.

Earning it has taken up more of my life than any other of life's endeavors.

The lack of it has prevented me from accomplish many dreams and visions.

And it is this latter aspect that has recently shown up as a fly in our missionary ointment, a mission-vision-budget-rotting maggot.

About a couple of years ago we discovered, sort of by the way, that we might not be receiving any more grant money from a bequest fund which we had counted on for over ten years to supplement our mission budget.

This maggot of information took about four months to pupate into a full fledged fly in the ointment, but when it did we had been cut off to the tune of \$25,000 per year ... with no notice given to adjust our annual budget.

This maggot, combined with our own mission agencies history of ratcheting back a portion of our mission grant each year, was threatening to starve the mission in the Cariboo-Chilcotin to death.

(Note: Thankfully the ratcheting back was stopped temporarily, after news of the fund being cut had collectively sunk in. And thankfully after much fretting and negotiating the fund was eventually replaced by another mission grant).

Money Maggots!

I think the maggot metaphor helps to illuminate the way home missions is decaying, within my denomination at least.

I can't tell you how much time and energy money maggots waste and how much fear they engender in the life of a missionary family.

The only consolation is that I know we are not alone.

As I talk to other missionaries within and outside of our denomination, working in and outside of Canada, I hear similar stories of the same money maggots.

The size of the home mission task in this new millennium, and the money maggots leave me wondering.

II. Rediscovering the Meaning of Mission

What I have been wondering about is this: With all the work to do in reaching out beyond the church with the love of Christ, with all the mission to do and with shrinking resources to do it with, what part of the word "*mission*" don't we understand?

When I ask that question, I realize my own understanding of Christian mission is woefully inadequate.

In 4 years of post-graduate studies in preparation for ordination, I was never taught one real course in missiology in my theological training. I was taught some unreal stuff called that, but it was not missiology, i.e. the area of practical theology that investigates the mandate, message and work of the Christian missionary.

Most of the recently written books that I have read on mission have been woefully inadequate, especially if they have come from folks in the wing of the church with the moniker "mainline".

And over almost 30 years of being involved with mission work in Canada, I have found my superiors in the mission agencies of my own denomination with little to help me in deepening my understanding. Shucks they don't even use the word home missions any more, having replaced it with "church extension" and the word missionary with "church extension worker."

To most of us in the mainline church, to most of us in the Presbyterian Church, at least in Canada, the word *mission* seems to have badly deteriorated.

It seems to me we have become very good at accepting what our secular culture preaches to us, and one way we have done this is by accepting as gospel the secular meaning and concept of mission. The secular meaning and concept of mission is "*purpose*".

We have let go of the very special and specific Christian meaning and concept of mission, which is, taking the Good News of Jesus Christ to people beyond the church.

In my context, we now specialize in making mission statements for our churches, statements of purpose, which we print in our congregational church bulletins and then proceed to ignore.

And I have come to suspect that a powerful Christian concept has been rendered as just so much secular flatulence because we have become generally confused about what Christian mission is.

If this isn't bad enough, we have been listening to the preaching of secular culture at another level as well.

We have bought right into culture's disgust for anything to do with Christian mission in our past.

We have developed a penchant for a sense of guilt for all those dastardly things our great-grand-parent missionaries *supposedly* did a hundred years ago, quickly forgetting that, in spite of some tragic mistakes, particularly with Canada's First Nations People for example, the huge majority of their work was faithful and true to Christ and his calling and his mission in the world.

As I shared in session one, my great grandpa Charlie was one of those missionaries, a Methodist sent from England to carry the Christian Gospel to the Indians, loggers, miners and fisherman off the rugged West Coast of BC about a hundred years ago.

I wonder what inspired him to leave his country and haul his very young family all the way to Cape Scott on the very remote northern tip of Vancouver Island where there was nothing but a few Scandinavians and a lot of cougars, (and the cougars were the friendly ones).

I wonder what led him daily to risk his life sailing the treacherous waters of the North Pacific from the Alaska panhandle to Victoria B.C.

I wonder why he spent the rest of his very long life doing this *mission* work and others like it inland, only to die in poverty in a home for the indigent?

I wonder, what part of the word *mission* did Charlie understand that I don't, that the church doesn't, any more?

And I wonder if what Charlie did was so dastardly that it should be written off by present day society and church as just European cultural

imperialism as the church tries to cleanse itself by rewriting its history, purging its memory of the word *mission* and generally dancing to cultures sacred media drummers?

A while back I got a phone call from an elderly Native man in Bella Coola whose last name is the same as mine.

Great grandpa Charlie baptized his dad Andrew in 1910.

I even found the date in an entry in great grandpa's diary to verify it.

The man phoned to thank me for my great grandpa Charlie because he had been raised as a devout Christian, partly as a result of Charlie's mission work.

The home of his growing up was culturally a very First Nations home; but one inculcated with Christian faith, love, hope, values, ethics and morality.

"It made all the difference," he said to me.

I wonder, what part of the word *mission* don't we understand anymore?

In all of my wondering I tapped the word *mission* into my trusty high tech computerized Webster's dictionary the other day.

It told me that the word *mission* comes from a very old Latin word meaning the act of sending (*mittere* ... to send).¹

I next typed in the word *mission* into the bible search tool in my Libronix Digital Library and I immediately got over 80 New Testament passages that came up with the word "*apostle*".

I shook my head as I looked at the list.

"That's strange," I thought, "I know I typed in *mission*."

Then it hit me, "Oh yea, that makes sense" (but don't ask me how the computer made the connection).

The Greek word for *apostle* (*apostolos*) comes from the very common verb "*to send*" (*apostellō*) the same meaning as the old Latin word for mission (*mittere*) "*to send*".

Only in Christian Scripture does this wonderful Greek word *apostolos* come into its own.

It means, "*sent one*".

¹Merriam-Webster, I. 1996, c1993. *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. Includes index. (10th ed.). Merriam-Webster: Springfield, Mass., U.S.A.

In the New Testament, in John's Gospel, it is applied to Jesus as the *sent one of God*: "*And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*" (John 17:3, NRSV)²

There is another even more definitive example of the word *apostolos* or *sent one* used for Jesus in Hebrews: "*Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the **apostle** and high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also "was faithful in all God's house."*" (Hebrews 3:1-2, NRSV)

In Mark's Gospel the word is applied, to those sent by Christ to preach to Israel, where the concept of *sent one* is combined with the idea of "*messenger*": "*Jesus (He) went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.*" (Mark 3:13-15, NRSV)

In Romans, Paul uses the word *apostolos* and applies it to himself as one sent by Christ's church to preach Christ to the Gentile world. "*Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them.*" (Romans 11:13-14, NRSV)

In 2 Corinthians Paul uses the word *apostolos* and also connects the concepts of sending to messenger: "... "*As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker in your service; as for our brothers, they are **messengers** (apostles) of the churches, the glory of Christ.*" (2 Corinthians 8:23, NRSV)

As I ponder the Latin word "*mission*" and the biblical Greek equivalent "*apostle*", suddenly I know three incredibly important things about mission that are as old as Christ's church itself.

Suddenly I have rediscovered the roots of Christian mission.

1. Jesus is the *apostle* or *sent one* of God for the salvation of all humankind.
2. Jesus sent out *apostles* or *sent ones*; messengers to proclaim salvation in his name to Israel.
3. And his church continued this *apostolic* work by sending out what we have come to call missionaries, *sent ones*, *messengers*, to proclaim salvation through the Risen Christ to the world.

² *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Thomas Nelson: Nashville

The key meaning and concept in the word *mission* it seems to me, is not *purpose* as in the secular bible, it is “*sending out*” and “*proclamation*” ... as in the Christian Scriptures.

The key concept in the word *mission* is carrying on with the work of the likes of Paul, Timothy, Silas, Barnabas, and Mark, those that the New Testament calls by that very functional word *apostles*, *sent ones*, *messengers*.

It seems to me that Paul uses the word *apostle* in this much broader and functional way throughout his earliest letters.

Whatever else *mission* means, in Christ’s church it means the continuance of the apostle’s work, the act of *sending out* people to proclaim salvation by grace through faith in Christ to those who haven’t heard it or responded to it yet, that is, and this is extremely important, those outside the church.

Christian mission has this specific and sharp meaning and focus for the church.

III. Flagging a Major Pothole

I have no sooner said this out loud than I realize that I have said a bunch of other things under my breath.

What I have said under my breath is, what is not mission.

What is not mission is all the good stuff the church does to care for its members, teach its members, provide for spiritual growth, order its life and administer itself.

These extremely important nurturing, caring, edifying and governing functions quite rightly can be collected under the term purpose but in my mind they cannot be called Christian mission.

Too many times in the church we have wanted to call everything we do within the church mission.

But mission is what we do outside the church, outside the faith community to spread the Gospel.

It is sending out *sent ones* as *messengers* of Christ.

By saying that *mission* is the very specific sending out of *sent ones* as messengers of the Gospel, I am also saying something else under my breath.

I am saying that good works by themselves are not *mission*.

But wait a minute, the Gospel account of Jesus sending out his apostles included a threefold ministry of proclamation and teaching and works ... that of healing and casting out demons.

For example Mark 3.13-15 quite specifically says, "*Jesus (He) went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.*" (Mark 3:13-15, NRSV)³

The parallel passage in Matthew's Gospel says: "*Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.*" (Matthew 10:1, NRSV) And even Jesus in his own participation in mission healed and cared for people.

Well I'll admit that all this is true, but I will also insist that all of the healing and caring are signs of the Kingdom that Christ is proclaiming, signs of his reign that he sends out his *apostles* or *sent ones* to proclaim. The ministry of healing and good works are illustrations of the proclamation, and by themselves they do not stand as mission. Without the proclamation of the reign of Christ there is nothing to illustrate.

What the apostle said is true: "*So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*" (Romans 10:17, NKJV)⁴

What I am getting at here is trying to put a warning sign up beside a huge pothole that can easily knock the wheels off the church and its mission.

The pothole is, and it has been well said before, that '*if we call everything the church does mission, pretty soon nothing is mission.*'

If we call all of the stuff we do inside the church *mission*, and if we call our good works by themselves *mission*, pretty soon the hard and risky work of proclaiming Christ and salvation and healing in his name outside the faith community to an audience who is sometimes far from hospitable, well that just falls by the wayside.

³ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version.* 1996, c1989. Thomas Nelson: Nashville

⁴ *The New King James Version.* 1996, c1982. Thomas Nelson: Nashville

I'll say it again, if we insist in calling everything *mission*, pretty soon nothing is *mission*.

Christian mission is sending out *sent ones* as messengers to proclaim Christ, his Kingdom and salvation and wholeness in his name, to people outside the faith community.

We have to keep the focus specific and sharp if mission is going to get done.

The way the church engages in mission, in this salvific *sending out*, at home and beyond, is by calling, equipping, sending and supporting people for missions.

And when the church becomes confused, negligent, reluctant or miserly in doing these things, it seems to me that the church has forgotten its biblical history, has lost its way, has declined, in the strictest sense of the word, its "apostolic" function, and borders on being disobedient to the *Sent One*, Jesus Christ.

IV. Conclusion

Pondering mosquitoes, maggots and missions causes me to wonder a lot these days.

In this secular society, which is a post church society, in New Zealand as well as in Canada, there is so much need for Christian missions, for sending out and proclamation, so much so that it is hard to figure where to start.

Sociologist Reginald Bibby tells us that less than 20% of the Canadian population are practicing Christians ... and that this figure is going to shrink by another 5% this decade.

The figures are comparable for New Zealand.

That leaves a huge 80% or more of our populations as subjects for our mission endeavors.

And yet mission budgets in the Presbyterian Church in Canada at least, are shrinking, and home mission work in Canada in the Presbyterian Church is shriveling up if not being supplanted by something else.

What is replacing it is a thing we call "church extension" which is primarily building large new churches to house Presbyterians who have moved from the city to the suburbs, that is, seeking to find and to serve people who are already Christian, preferably Presbyterians in suburbia.

With regards to mission, have we Presbyterians lost our way?

Or worse, are we becoming disobedient to the *sent one*, to the Christ? Perhaps the simple answer to this wondering lies in our congregational mission budgets.

Perhaps the simple answer to this wondering is in how much of our resources we are investing in doing mission and in just how directly we as congregations are engaged in the sending out of messengers beyond the congregation to the world on our very doorstep.

Which raises another really interesting question, Exactly who are the sent ones any way?

It is to this specific subject that I want to speak to in session three tomorrow.

But to conclude this session let me summarize what I have been trying to say.

I have spent a considerable amount of your time rooting through Scripture trying to rediscover the roots of Christian mission.

What I have said is this:

1. Christian mission is rooted in the ideas inherent in the biblical word “*apostle*,” which is a New Testament word that is primarily about function, not title or office.
2. The biblical word “*apostle*” and its variant forms has the concept of “*sent one*” and “*sending out*” in it, both of which highlight the function of going outside the faith community.
3. The biblical word “*apostle*” has the concept of “*proclamation*” or “*messenger*” in it, which in the New Testament primarily relates to the function of conveying the Gospel in word to those outside the faith community.
4. Mission then is primarily sending out “*sent ones*” or missionaries as messengers to proclaim Christ in word, illustrated by deeds, to people outside the community of faith. For any other aspect of church work to be classified as part of mission it has to serve this primary function. Good works by themselves are not mission and neither is the normal good work of the church nurturing and administering itself (If you call everything mission pretty soon nothing is mission).

I can do no better than end what I have to say with what Paul had to say: “*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*” But how are

they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent (apostellō)? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”” (Romans 10:13-15, NRSV)⁵

V. Insights and Story Telling (to 9:30 PM).

Tell the story of Kluskus how, due to the bands history of the RC church and residential schools, our focus was to send in a “good works” missionary in terms of a forester and how on our second attempt to send a couple who were a forester/nurse combination, that the Elders, two very insightful women said, “Well it is very nice that you send us a forester and a nurse this time, but what we really need is someone to teach us about following Jesus.”

⁵ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Thomas Nelson: Nashville