

A RESPONSE

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Pentecostal perspectives on
“The Nature and Mission of the Church”
By Wolfgang Vondey

At the outset of my remarks, I must confess to you some degree of bafflement at my qualifications to respond to such a thoughtful paper regarding a significant document as “Nature and Mission of the Church.” I was not part of the WCC in 98 or 05 in the crafting of the document or its predecessor; I am not Pentecostal; I am not Roman Catholic and therefore was not part of the 1989 document; and I was not part of the BEM work. I’m sure that someone here knows why I am here, if only as someone who was found on the highways and byways and was compelled to come in.

I am, however, interested in things to do with unity in the church especially when it relates to the all important mission given by God. I am a practitioner. I am a churchman. I trace my roots through the Catholic church to the Methodist revival and the Holiness movement. And I find myself fully embracing new patterns of thinking by a mosaic generation that is learning to blur the historic lines of demarcation and separation; Replacing them with integrated thinking, and the new discovery of old patterns and the petrification of contemporary styles. I love the dynamic nature of the Church and chafe at anything that contains or limits its effect in the world. Unfortunately our historic patterns of division have done an effective job at just that – distracting and dividing our efforts such that the impact of Christ’s Body in the world is something less than intended. And so, my interest in these issues – relatively new to my life – come from a deep desire to see the work of God in the world find effect in transformation that reflects God’s own image.

Now, to the matter of Dr. Vondey’s paper. I honestly find it hard to follow at the level it deserves mostly out of my own lack of familiarity with the nuances of the history and heritage represented. I appreciate the paper and admit that I am a friendly respondent having learned much. I was particularly pleased to see the recognition of the shifting center of gravity in the patterns of doing church from the north and west, to the south and east. Of course this is hard to ignore especially in Pentecostalism given the way in which those areas are far outstripping the North American church in growth and impact.

This having been said, however, it occurred to me that while Dr. Vondey indicates accurately that NMC is largely built upon the traditions of the North and he is suggesting that attention should shift to the South, both are a response to the effect the Church has had in different times in those locations. In other words, while 50 years ago we would have had little difficulty accepting the basis of ecclesiological discussions as coming from the west due to the apparent success and effectiveness there, now we question such a basis for such discussions because the Church is in fact finding greater effect and growth elsewhere. To what extent does that very fact tell us that our conversations about the nature of the Church largely follow our perception of its effectiveness in contextual mission? So perhaps we ought to reverse our approach. Rather than engaging in asking what the nature of the Church is and then how that impacts its mission, a better question might be, “Where is the Church finding greatest effect in mission and what is the nature behind the effect?” That may actually help us find a greater depth in the nature of the Church on Kingdom principles and less held hostage to the bias of our cultural imposition. One may be prescriptive and propositional, the other descriptive and relational. I realize that Dr. Vondey alludes to this in various places and especially on page 5, but

perhaps beyond the connection between nature and mission, there is also a question of order or sequence in discovery. I would imagine that Pentecostals, as well as the Holiness family from which they come, would naturally want to look from mission into nature to find out where God is most at work and go there to discover questions of nature.

My greatest interest, however, was piqued when Dr. Vondey began to address the matter of evangelism. This perhaps more than anything else, in my humble opinion, represents the visible litmus test of church groups today. While it is true that there appears to be no clear description within the NMC document regarding evangelization, thereby leaving the matter open to interpretation and self definition, in reality it may be the one thing that most serves as a watershed in our understanding of mission. It seems to separate churches into the broad camps we have created.

For example, many churches focus on evangelization as the effort of “getting people saved.” While they may also have a department of compassionate ministries, those efforts are largely comprised of benevolence funds and missionary endeavors that in many cases are merely token efforts of social correctness. Yet true solidarity with the poor and disenfranchised is lost in their formula for evangelism. Interestingly, these are the very foundations of the Holiness movement and certainly that DNA is somewhere written on the Pentecostal churches who trace their roots to that gene pool. So it seems that perhaps we have been unfortunately influenced by a generic evangelicalism that deadens the very foundations of our nature and thereby narrows the contours of our mission.

On the other hand, many churches focus on service, acts of mercy, as the means of fulfilling the mission – soup kitchens, clothes closets, community development, social activism. And while these churches may have a department of evangelism, they certainly do not claim to be the hotbed of “soul winning” or the Evangelism Explosion training center.

Of course I realize that these descriptions are generalizations, but they represent a tendency that, thankfully, is beginning to break down. Perhaps they have come to this disparity in defining evangelism out of reaction to one another. After all, isn’t it the “liberals” who do the social stuff, and the “conservatives” who do the personal. And over time, we define evangelism in our own way to suit our own interest and focus. And the next step, then, is that we redefine the nature of the Church to accommodate our understanding of its effect.

In fact, mission is not merely a task focused upon the “outside world.” Mission turns all things to God. That being the case, there still remains the obligation for some discrimination between those that are and those that are not so “turned to God.” Ideally that discrimination is effected not through exclusive, bounded-set thinking or attitudes, but through welcoming, inviting, centered-set attraction. Evangelization, therefore, becomes simply methodological. Perhaps mission really could be described as “the effect of the Church” both in and outside of itself. The nature of the Church, then, would be “the condition of the Church. One proceeds from the other. One is shaped by the other. Much as there are two sides of one coin, so there are two inseparable dimensions that comprise the Church each drawing value and substance from the other.

While it would be ideal if each church or family of churches might reflect both emphases in the continuum, the reality of our family histories as separated people works against it. So our ecumenical agenda really is in seeing the work of Christ in one another. I remain convinced that the most effective ecumenical process to finding oneness may actually be by beginning with mission. Clarifying and engaging. Understanding and being understood. In that we begin to find the breadth of God’s work in the world which then allows greater understanding of the nature of the Church through whom that mission is lived out.

I am encouraged that the rising generation is already on the road of discovery and understanding that transcends many of our previous lines of definition and demarcation.

Thank you Dr. Vondey for helping me think a bit farther on the Way.