

RESPONSE TO KATHY MOWRY'S "ONLY ONE FOOT IN EXILE"

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It is a privilege to read Dr. Mowry's insightful paper, "Only One Foot in Exile: Marginalization without Dispossession in North American Congregations." Her broad ministry experience—in local congregations in North America as worshipper, minister, and researcher; in Eurasia as missionary; and in academia as respected teacher and gifted communicator—provides a valuable framework in which to address our focus this session: *ministry in a changing culture, within changing congregations, and the challenge of leadership*.

Changing Culture

After painting a gripping portrait of exile, Dr. Mowry offers the perceptive observation that the church in North America is not experiencing exile in the way Israel experienced exile in Babylon. True exile involves dispossession and loss of identity. Mowry notes, "We have only one foot in exile" (p. 2).

I suggest that while our cultural context is indeed rapidly changing, using the term "exile" to describe our situation may be seen (especially by global Christians who are truly experiencing exile) as hyperbole. Referring to our present condition as "exile" may also make it difficult to appropriately respond to any true exile in the future. There is, nevertheless, significant cultural disruption taking place. While our time zones may not be changing in an exilic displacement, our comfort zones are certainly changing as we experience degrees of marginalization.

Changing Congregations

Dr. Mowry accurately describes the reality many congregations are presently experiencing – notably a grasping of idols (church facilities, religious symbols/traditions/practices, measurable results) and the lack of a helpful framework (theology of place/commitment to parish, eschatological imagination, practices of dispossession) to appropriately respond as the people of God. Most intriguing are Mowry's comments regarding dispossession. "To truly become multi-congregational fellowships both within a congregation and in the internationalization of a denomination, dispossession is a necessary practice" (p. 9).

It is easy to find the kinds of congregations Mowry describes – congregations in which an absence of mission has led to a climate of self-focus and concern with maintaining comfortable preferences. These congregations evidence a commitment to church rather than a commitment to mission. In Mowry's words, "For many the congregation has been seen almost as the ultimate end" (p. 11).

Mowry calls congregations to four critical shifts: 1) from metrics to the Reign of God, 2) from ministry focus on the sanctuary to ministry focus on the city commons, 3) from a victim mentality to a doxology of offering, 4) from revitalization to resurrection (p. 11).

Response: The Challenge of Leadership

If the first task of a leader is to define reality, it would be most accurate for leaders to describe our context as neither “exile” nor “partial exile,” but rather “pre-exile.” Should present trends continue, the church in North America might indeed find itself with one foot in exile, but that is not our present situation. *If* the “exile” motif must be used, then “pre-exile” most appropriately describes our current context.

As a church experiencing pre-exilic conditions, we may most benefit from taking our cues from the 8th century pre-exilic prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah) whose message and mission provide a valuable approach to our context.

The pre-exilic prophets both tell it like it is (pre-exile) and like it will be (exile). They focus on advocating social justice and righteousness (Amos); denouncing idolatry and unfaithfulness (Hosea); trusting in a holy, sovereign God rather than political alliances (Isaiah); and sounding notes of grace and judgment (Micah). In brief, the pre-exilic prophets call Israel and Judah to repentance for 1) idolatry; 2) social injustice; 3) double-mindedness (the lack of faithful devotion to God in both public and private lives).

The challenge of leadership in pre-exilic times, and thus in our time, is to:

- bring to memory the great and mighty acts of God, especially the creative ways He delivers and redeems (which may stimulate the imagination called for by Mowry, pp. 7-8).
- demonstrate single-minded devotion to God, covenant faithfulness, and love in action to neighbor (the double notes of our holiness message are heart purity and social justice).
- identify and renounce idolatry in all its forms (Mowry names a few, and there may be others to be acknowledged and abandoned), while avoiding trading one set of idols for another.
- call people to trust in God rather than in political alliances (a very timely message).

Today’s leadership must also be willing to do what the leadership of Judah and Israel—both kings and clergy—were often unwilling to do. We must honestly consider the ways we may be personally complicit in the sins the pre-exilic prophets address and repent of our unfaithfulness.

Conclusion

In this pre-exilic era, what is most needed is prophetic leadership that calls us to renounce idols, embrace the mission of God, and love God with a single-minded devotion that leads to active love of neighbor. If leadership is not effective in addressing these three sins – idolatry, social injustice, and double-mindedness – we will most certainly experience exile. However, while exile results in dispossession, there are worse things than discovering you have lost everything but God.

May God raise up leaders among us with prophetic voices – in our churches; in our universities, colleges, and seminary; and in our jurisdictional leadership – women and men who fearlessly call us to renounce our idols and faithfully point us to the sovereign God of grace.