

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

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Though I recognize that many missiologists and practitioners with far greater experience and knowledge than I currently possess could also contribute richly to this dialogue, I humbly accept with gratitude this opportunity to interact with the insightful reflections presented by Dr. Kathy Mowry. In her paper, Mowry offers several significant conceptualizations regarding the condition of marginalization and position of social exile that the Church in the United States has recently experienced. Mowry wisely emphasizes that this marginalization has been as of yet only partial, leaving us with just "one foot in exile." With vivid images and poignant remarks, Mowry paints a clear picture of the challenging situation the Church is facing on multiple fronts. Externally, we are confronted with social disintegration, rapid technological changes, and new patterns of immigration. Internally, the decline of denominational ties, the irrelevance of traditional forms of worship, and a widespread confusion about the purpose of the ecclesial body have all contributed to the Church's disenfranchisement in society.

Other voices in the missiological field have also noted that the Church in North America "has moved away from its position of dominance as it has experienced the loss not only of numbers but of power and influence within society" (Guder 1998, 1). It does not take an expert to recognize that religious affiliation in the United States has been on a steady decline in recent years. Many studies have been conducted that focus on this contemporary phenomenon known as "the rise of the nones" in an attempt to underscore the possible reasons behind these changes in the North American religious landscape. Mowry's study, however, focuses on the other side of this equation, namely, the condition experienced by marginalized congregations. From the outset, Mowry frames her discussion in light of several thought-provoking questions: "How have congregations come to be here? Why are we suddenly awakening in this place of marginalization? How is it that we have not noticed as the whole world has changed around us?" (3). In seeking to illumine a pathway toward discovery, she highlights common tendencies emerging among marginalized congregations who, in the midst of chaos and change, seek simply to hold on for dear life while unwittingly falling into a power-driven and anxiety-ridden survival mode. With compelling style, Mowry describes three deficiencies that characterize the life of congregations with one foot in exile: the lack of a theology of place, atrophied muscles of eschatological imagination, and missing practices of dispossession.

Without mitigating the Church's arduous and complex task at hand, Mowry's optimism is clearly felt from the beginning. After all, the relegation of the Church to the margins may ultimately present new opportunities to improve its witness of the Christ who was Himself often found at the margins. Mowry asserts, "Exile is a grace sent to break us of our frantic griping and gripping and lead us into deeper understandings of our calling as the people of God" (3). This crisis may serve to reawaken the Church to renewed possibilities and call us back to the basics. As we begin to experience the grace of God anew in the midst of turbulent times, we may in fact rediscover that our mission and purpose do not stem from crafting attractive programs or charting our institutional health through traditional quantifiable metrics. Rather, the Church must partner with God in His mission with invigorated passion for the lost and broken, remembering that God's own redemptive initiative is rooted in His desire to restore and heal all of creation.

Space does not allow reflection on each of the insightful implications Mowry highlights in view of the Church's current predicament. However, I would like to specifically affirm her timely call for the Church to foment "further practices of doxology" if we are to turn the tide (17). I wholeheartedly agree with Mowry that it is in the act of giving our very lives – sacrificially, generously, sacramentally, and corporately – that the Church will be reawakened to a new sense of hope and purpose in a changing world. The implications of becoming more Eucharistic in our efforts and embracing a "field hospital" mentality must not be easily dismissed. It is precisely in the act of giving, healing, and reflecting Kingdom values that Christians become a beacon of light in the midst of darkness. In light of this challenge, Mowry's conclusion provides the Church a path forward through her consideration of four movements, namely, living for the Reign of God, seeking the *shalom* of the city, offering our lives freely, and dying to our old ways so we can be resurrected to a new way of life. Undoubtedly, a paradigm shift is needed if we are to appropriate God's grace more fully in the midst of exile.

In final reflection, I would like to offer one more practical step the Church must take if we are to altogether reflect our catholicity, oneness, apostolicity, and holiness with one foot in exile. We must rediscover the power of corporate prayer. Perhaps like never before, a renewed vision for mobilizing our people to pray for our churches, our cities and our country has captured the hearts of church leaders across the nation. Hundreds of networks have arisen to stimulate corporate prayer. I personally have witnessed the effects of this renewed emphasis in my own city of Kankakee, Illinois. Recently, two lay leaders from two churches in our city have brought congregations together across denominational lines with a fervent desire to see God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. One evening each month, members from twenty-three churches gather to pray for *shalom* in the city and for each other. As a result of this initiative, prayer walks have been conducted, partnerships have been formed, and a spirit of collaboration has developed amongst the various churches united in this effort. We know that God is glorified through these attempts to build bridges of hope. As one of the key leaders of this initiative asserts:

The benefits that we have seen from God's people getting together to pray are immeasurable. In addition to being able to pray more effectively for each other, breaking down walls based upon preconceived denominational and/or racial biases, and showing those outside the Church that Christians can actually get along, we have experienced ways to effectively be the hands and feet of the body of Christ.¹

Just as the Israelites were to be "a distinctive people displaying an attractive lifestyle to God's glory before the surrounding nations" (Goheen 2011, 25) even in exile, so also should the North American Church with one foot in exile be a "sent" people to reflect the glory of the King and extend his healing grace in the darkest places of earth. As we look *upward*, seeking God's presence so that His work of restoration might flow to all peoples, and *outward*, reaching out to a desperate world devastated by evil, we become the light of the nations. Perhaps, only as we lay down our lives and extend the grace and healing of Christ will the walls we have stealthily constructed around our "city on a hill" come down for all to see the glory of our King.

¹ E-mail correspondence with Tom Cooke, one of the lay leaders behind these efforts, on July 22, 2016.

Bibliography

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