



THEOLOGY OF MISSION IN THE MALAWI ASSEMBLIES OF GOD: *An Ecclesiological Omission*

ANDREW MKWAILA

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Abstract

The theology of mission in the Malawi Assemblies of God has its origins in a determination arising in the late 1990s and early 2000s to send out foreign missionaries. This article traces the roots of this theology of mission arguing that the nature of its focused and pragmatic development led to a myopic application neglecting other key areas of theological consideration including notably that of ecclesiology. The article concludes by putting forth constructive proposals as to how local churches of the Malawi Assemblies of God may translate such a theology of mission into their congregational life.

Keywords: Theology of Mission, Ecclesiology, Malawi Assemblies of God, Missional Church.

Introduction

At the close of the twentieth century a movement to engage in cross-cultural missions emerged in the Malawi Assemblies of God (MAG) as well as in many of its sister churches in Africa. For almost two decades now, the church has been giving increased attention in its formal and informal training structures to the fact that “God calls His Church—including the African Church—to actively participate in His mission to redeem fallen humankind.”² The discussion regarding missions has since moved beyond its infancy; a number of missionaries have been sent by the MAG in recent years to other countries in Africa, and theology

of missions courses occupy a place of central significance in many of its training programs. Yet, despite this progress, valid questions are being raised regarding this movement and the underlying theology of missions that has been developed to support it.³ The questions that have been raised have centred on the efficacy of the nascent missions movement. The core of the concern has been whether the church is producing the number of missionaries commensurate with its age and the prominence given to mission in the church’s discourses. This particular concern and others are comprehensively addressed elsewhere; however, we do well to note that the issues relating to international missions engagement are only one factor among many that a robust missiology in the MAG will need to contend with if it is to be a fully efficacious force in shaping the church.⁴ This essay focuses on a subject that has received almost no attention yet, namely that of *ecclesiology*. The thesis being advanced here is that the implications of the *missio Dei* – as it has come to be understood in the MAG – are far-reaching and should, among other things, lead to MAG local congregations that consciously view themselves as agents of *missio Dei*, and allow that understanding to shape the entirety of their life together as the people of God.

This essay reviews the origin of the discourse regarding missions in the MAG and seeks to demonstrate that the effective omission of ecclesiological considerations in its missiology was in fact a natural result of the trajectory established when the missions movement in the MAG was born. Subsequently, elements aimed at the construction of a missional ecclesiology are presented in the hope of spurring further discourse and action towards fostering local congregations that are ever increasing in their embodiment of God’s mission.

A Developing Theology of Missions in the MAG

The MAG is a fellowship in the tradition of “classical Pentecostalism.” The defining feature of classical Pentecostalism has been the baptism in the Spirit.⁵ This experience has traditionally been viewed and interpreted in a mission-oriented perspective—the Spirit empowers believers for sharing the Gospel.⁶ The result of both the collective and individual experiences of the coming of the Spirit was that, in many segments

¹ This paper is an adaptation of a chapter of the author’s doctoral dissertation entitled *Towards A Missional Ecclesiology in the Malawi Assemblies of God*.

² Enson Mbilikile Lwesya, ‘Ten Million Reasons for Developing Great Theological Training Systems in Southern Africa: Towards Re-Engineering Our Training Systems,’ *Ethne: The Online Journal for Pentecostal and Missional Leadership* 3 no. 1 (2012):13.

³ Unless dictated by the immediate context, missions should be understood as implying international and/or cross-cultural missions, despite the theological deficiencies surrounding this popular understanding.

⁴ A key source for understanding and assessing these tensions is Enson Lwesya’s article entitled ‘Comparing Apples and Mangoes Towards Assessing the AAGA Missions Enterprise,’ *PneumAfrica*, 2 no. 1 (2016).

⁵ Allan Loder, ‘The Classical Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit-Baptism: Some Exegetical Considerations,’ *Didaskalia* (Otterburne, Man.) (2002), 13(2), 73.

⁶ Allan Anderson, *Spreading Fires: The Missionary Nature of Early Pentecostalism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 65.

of the movement, a wave of missionary outreach was ignited that has continued in one form or another to the present day. Very early on in the life of the movement, missionaries began to fan out across the globe, perhaps most conspicuously from North America, often through individuals and movements connected in some way to the Azusa Street revival of 1906.

Notably, however, as classical Pentecostal churches such as the Assemblies of God began to be established in Africa in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, the impetus to organise and conduct sustained international missionary engagement in the same measure in African Assemblies of God churches, such as in the MAG, as it was in the North American churches, has seemed to be lacking. An exception to this was that, in a limited sense, the MAG was a cross-cultural movement right from the beginning as it sought to evangelise and win converts across Malawi's many constituent tribes.⁷ However, for a long time, the church did not develop a sustained vision for cross-cultural missionary work beyond the borders of Malawi, a factor that characterised many other churches in Africa.⁸

There may have been several reasons for this perceived lack of missionary endeavour and vision. Perhaps one reason was the ecclesiology bequeathed to the church by US-AG missionaries who worked together with the MAG church in its early days. While the MAG was started by Malawians, US missionaries played a very significant role early in the life of the movement by working alongside their Malawian counterparts and being heavily involved in the training programmes of the movement. The primary theoretical framework for US missions involvement from the 1950s was the stated goal of developing *indigenous churches* that would be self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating as suggested by such missiologists as Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, and popularised in the Assemblies of God by Melvin Hodges.⁹ When the US-AG missionaries were involved in starting new churches and helping young churches grow, their goal was churches that attained to these three-selves. Over time, this indigenous church model and the three-selves, in turn, became a paradigm through which younger Assemblies of God churches, such as the MAG, came to measure their progress towards maturity as a movement.

Consequently, while this concept of the indigenous church served to strengthen the MAG and – along with an evangelistic understanding and interpretation of Spirit baptism – helped the MAG to become engaged in its evangelism, it did not help foster foreign missions outreach. Self-propagating both in the eyes of the missionaries and the Malawians themselves was defined as reaching only other Malawians with the gospel.

Former leader of the Malawi Assemblies of God, Lazarus Chakwera, argues that the concept that the development of younger churches such as the MAG would be reached when they were able to minister and evangelise independently in their own nations was in fact a popular misreading of Hodges.¹⁰ In other writings, Hodges stated that Western missionaries alone could never reach the unsaved and that the indigenous New Testament churches that the missionaries should seek to establish should realise and fulfil their own missionary responsibilities beyond their national borders.¹¹ Regardless of Hodges' broader intent, the misreading prevailed. Thus, in the MAG, while there was no theological objection to foreign missions, there was no impetus for it. As such, in its early decades, the church did not systematically engage in foreign missions.

This may not have been the only reason for this lack of cross-cultural missionary vision. In the minds of many MAG members, a missionary was synonymous with the *white* people. The fact that Malawi is an economically-challenged country meant to some that Malawians could not participate in missions as they did not have the necessary finances as the [Europeans and Americans] did.¹² In the 1990s, however, this perspective began to change. In the MAG and its sister churches in Southern Africa, people began to wonder why Africans could not be missionaries. Slowly, a missionary consciousness began to develop.

Perhaps the first substantive official recognition of this expanded cross-cultural missionary calling occurred in 1997 at a conference of denominational leaders, Bible school teachers and others from across the Assemblies of God churches from East Africa. This conference took place in Iringa, Tanzania. The meeting squarely addressed the subject of missions, reflecting the emerging realisation that Africans should play their full role in cross-cultural missions. While a

⁷ Lazarus McCarthy Chakwera, *The Development of the Eleventh-Hour Institute to be Utilized as a Means of Mobilizing, Training, and Sending Missions Workers from Malawi and Nearby Countries to Unreached Peoples* (Deerfield, IL: Trinity International University, DMin diss, 2000), 18.

⁸ Yusufu Turaki, "Evangelical Missiology from Africa: Strengths and Weaknesses," in *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*, ed. William D. Taylor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 277.

⁹ Warren B. Newberry, 'Contextualizing Indigenous Church Principles: An African Model,' *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 8, no. 20. (January 2005): 96, http://www.apts.edu/aeimages//File/AJPS_PDF/05-1-WNewberry.pdf.

¹⁰ Chakwera, *The Development*, 18.

¹¹ Chakwera, *The Development*, 19.

¹² Gregory Chawanangwa Mvula and Enson Mbiliile Lwesya. *Flames of Fire: The History of the Malawi Assemblies of God and Pentecostalism in Malawi* (Lilongwe, Malawi: Assemblies of God in Malawi, 2005), 305.

number of resolutions emerged from that meeting, one in particular was significant for the fostering of the missionary initiative in the MAG and its sister churches. That resolution was to “train toward the ultimate goal of harvest, which means we must train missionaries from East Africa to the world, pledging ourselves to prepare more [training] material for missions.”¹³

At least two major actions resulted from the Iringa meeting. The first was the formation of a Regional Missions Agency in which the MAG was a participant. The long-lasting impact of this board was limited in that, very soon, it faltered. The logistical mechanisms to sustain a multi-country missions board among the Assemblies of God churches of East Africa did not exist. Nonetheless, its formation did represent progress in that, prior to that time, the MAG and some other East African AG churches did not have a missions-sending agency. Thus, even though it was short-lived, it became the precursor to a fully-fledged missions department within the MAG.

The other concrete action that resulted from the 1997 meeting was the formation of a mobile school of mission called the Eleventh Hour Institute (EHI) which was established with the two-fold purpose of affirming the cross-cultural missions efforts of African pastors and missionaries and to provide short training courses for missionaries from Africa.¹⁴ Chakwera, who had been recognised as having a robust vision for missions, was delegated to head the institute.¹⁵ Therefore, the first EHI training session which was conducted in 1999 was held in Lilongwe, Malawi. This first meeting attracted a cross-section of participants from the MAG including, significantly, families who were commissioned as missionaries to North Africa. Early progress towards becoming a missionary-sending church was being realised relatively quickly.

Around the time of and subsequent to the Iringa meeting, a rising awareness of missions in Malawi manifested itself in other ways. In association with the US Assemblies of God, the MAG opened a seminary in Lilongwe whose Master’s Degree-level training focused almost exclusively on missions. The stated aim of the school was to “mobilize the church for global mission in Pentecostal power.” At the undergraduate level, the MAG Bible school also changed its mission statement from “providing quality theological education” to “biblical training to touch the nations in the power of the Holy Spirit.” The call that MAG leaders discerned to participate in missions led them

to establish the institutions, initiatives, and processes noted above as a means of inspiring the church to fulfil that missionary calling. Naturally, one of the primary tasks of the mobilisation effort became articulating a missionary theology that would provide the biblical underpinnings for its missions efforts. Thus, in the case of the MAG, the attempt to engage in missions became a catalyst for sustained efforts in developing a theology of missions.

This developing theology was articulated primarily in the form of a biblical theology of missions. Both in the seminary and the meetings of the EHI, keynote courses that were developed and taught took a biblical theology approach. A diachronic approach to the Scriptures was adopted that attempted to showcase the *missio Dei* as the unifying theme of the Scriptures and, consequently, as the responsibility and privilege of the MAG to participate in.

Despite these consistent efforts in deliberately casting a theology of mission, over the years, the number of missionaries who were deployed by the MAG did not meet the hopes that were widely shared, both by leaders like Chakwera in the MAG itself, and some of its missionary partners. At the beginning of 2012, for instance, the MAG had approximately five missionaries deployed in African nations and India. Looking at these figures, some close partners have continued to question the efficacy of these educational and awareness initiatives.¹⁶ The feeling being expressed by these sentiments is that the MAG and its sister churches in Africa have not made significant progress in fulfilling its missionary mandate, and that much more could be done to reach the nations.¹⁷ This well-intentioned criticism obscures a fundamental shift that has slowly been occurring in the MAG from the self-perception of the church as being an exclusively missionary-receiving church to also being a missionary-sending one. The limitations placed on the self-understanding of the church created by a misinterpretation of Hodges’ indigenous church principles have largely been shed. In and of itself, this represents something of a radical transformation.

It is possible, therefore, to concur that far more can and should be done in missionary outreach, while simultaneously acknowledging that great strides have been made towards fostering a critical mass in the church that has been inculcated with a missionary vision. Thus, Chakwera’s assertion that in Africa there is a realisation that mission is from everywhere to everywhere and that the realisation has dawned that the African church also has a role to play in missions

¹³ Chakwera, *The Development*, 16.

¹⁴ Africa’s Hope. Eleventh Hour Institute adopted from <http://africashope.org/what-we-do/ministries/ehi>.

¹⁵ Chakwera, *The Development*, 11.

¹⁶ Antonio Pedrozo and Brad Walz, ‘Missional Mentoring: How National Churches with Strong and Effective Missions Outreaches Can Mentor Those Without,’ in *Globalizing Pentecostal Missions in Africa: The Emerging Missionary Movement in the Africa Assemblies of God*, ed. Denny R. Miller & Enson. M. Lwesya (Springfield, MO: AIA Publications, 2011), 110.

¹⁷ Dick Brogden, ‘Planting Churches among Unreached Peoples: How Do We Partner in Actively Reaching These UPGs?’, in *Globalizing Miller & Lwesya*, (Springfield, MO: AIA Publications, 2011), 13.

was not only descriptive; it was also prophetic.¹⁸ While Malawi is still largely an oral society and, consequently, much of the emerging missionary vision has been expressed through undocumented sermons, exhortations and business meetings at all levels of the church, there is a small but growing amount of literature that documents this emerging missionary theology. For instance, Warren Newberry, a long-time AG missionary to Malawi, documents how the budding missionary theology has manifested itself through calls by MAG leaders to expand the concept of the indigenous church, as it is popularly understood, to include “self-missionizing.”¹⁹ Speaking of the spiritual vitality in much of the church in Africa, Enson Lwesya argues, “because the Church is so blessed, it must refresh others. Its greatest way to do this is by extending itself to people from other tribes, nations and languages.”²⁰ Lwesya further argues that a missionary vision has, in fact, now emerged in the MAG and credits the Holy Spirit and the instrumentality of initiatives, such as the EHI, for this progress.²¹

The purpose of highlighting these efforts in articulating a theology of mission is not to make the assertion that they are fully developed theological formulations, but rather to underscore the point that theologising on mission is now occurring on a consistent basis in the MAG. Prior to the late 1990s, mission was not even on the agenda at all. As was indicated earlier, a biblical theology of mission approach is now being utilised to teach missions in both formal and semi-formal training arms of the MAG. Biblical theology has become the consensus methodology and perspective of theological thinking about mission in the MAG.

Considering the developments of a mission theology in the MAG, the noted need for the MAG to be involved in missions led it to begin to develop a theology of mission that could encourage a church in an economically-challenged African country to engage in mission. This emerging theology called for a hermeneutic that sees the *missio Dei* as the unifying theme of Scripture. While the deployment of more missionaries by the MAG is desired, it is difficult to

imagine that even the church’s current small scale missionary deployments could have been sustained without the underlying changes in thinking about missions facilitated by this emerging theology. While more issues regarding cross-cultural missions continue to emerge, such as missions and African migration,²² missionary care,²³ contextualisation²⁴ and missions to unreached people groups,²⁵ all these issues relate to and draw from the underlying justification for missionary enterprise by MAG and its sister churches being founded upon a biblical theology of mission that is being currently articulated.

The concern with cross-cultural missions in the MAG, and the articulation of a theology of mission that has accompanied it, represent a welcome development that should rightly be celebrated. Yet, at the same time, it may be argued that it is an incomplete development. Notably missing from the theology of mission that the church has embraced have been issues related to the life and ministry of local congregations in context. While not intentional, ecclesiology remains a *de facto* missing element of the MAG’s emerging theology of mission. The next section explores the reasons for this omission.

Ecclesiology: A Glaring Omission

Speaking of the limitations of the term *missio Dei* as it has emerged in Western theology, John Flett remarks that “*missio Dei*’s genesis as a response to the prolonged interrogation of mission motives, methods and goals helps explain this deficient theological development. It is not, in the first instance, a constructive concept; rather it serves a critical function.”²⁶ A similar limitation appears to have emerged in the MAG’s theology of missions in that while a biblical theology of mission should point to an all-encompassing perspective that affects every aspect of the church’s life and theology, the fact that the MAG has developed its initial thinking about mission as a specific response to the need to deploy missionaries appears to have caused its missiology to be truncated and almost exclusively focused on the issue of foreign missions. This appears to have occurred because, while a biblical theology has been articulated, the questions that have been asked of that

¹⁸ AG-US. (2005). Minutes of the of the 51st Session of the General Council of the Assemblies of God, Denver, Colorado, 67. He made this statement while delivering a keynote address at the world missions session of the 2005 US-AG General Assembly.

¹⁹ Newberry, ‘Contextualizing Indigenous Church Principles,’ 112.

²⁰ Enson Mbilikile Lwesya, ‘Missional Implications from Africa’s Trends: Globalization, Migration, Urbanization and Mission,’ *Ethne: The Online Journal for Pentecostal and Missional Leadership* 1, no.1 (2010).

²¹ Miller and Lwesya, *Globalizing*, 2011.

²² Enson Mbilikile Lwesya, ‘Missional Implications from Africa’s Trends: Globalization, Migration, Urbanization and Mission,’ *Ethne: The Online Journal for Pentecostal and Missional Leadership* 1, no.1 (2010).

²³ Milward Mwamvuni, ‘Missionary Care: How is the Two Third’s World Church Doing?’, *Ethne: The Online Journal for Pentecostal and Missional Leadership* 1, no. 1 (2010).

²⁴ Andrew Mkwaila, ‘Contextualization and African Pentecostal Missions,’ *Ethne: The Online Journal for Pentecostal and Missional Leadership* 2, no.1 (2011). Also see John L. Easter. ‘The Spirit, Context and Mission: A Pneumatological Framework for Contextualization’, *Ethne: The Online Journal for Pentecostal and Missional Leadership* 2, no. 1 (2011).

²⁵ Miller and Lwesya, *Globalizing*.

²⁶ John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2010), 293.

theology and the majority of the resulting theological and practical applications that have arisen as a result of that theology of missions have related to cross-border missions work. Substantively missing from the dialogue have been questions related to ecclesiology and the shape of the life and ministry of the local church in context.

It is something of a paradox that the most significant theological development in recent decades in the MAG, and one that has the potential to shape every aspect of the life of the church, should be confined primarily to one area of its ministry, namely, international missions. While further reflection and action in the area of missions is welcome and needed, the concept of the *missio Dei* by theological necessity calls for a broader, all-encompassing application. If the *missio Dei*, as it is understood in the MAG, is a concept that encompasses all of Scripture and is a concept that provides a hermeneutical key that explains who God is and his purposes in history and through his people, then it can legitimately be expected to shape everything that the MAG does.

Towards A Missional Ecclesiology

To draw a synthesis between the theological understanding of mission and the existential situation of the local church in Malawi is, in essence, to ask the question of what it means to be a missional or missionary church in the Malawian context. As part of the discussion that follows, I refer to the missional church conversation in Western society.²⁷ This exercise is a recognition that the journey into a discovery of what it means to be the church in a particular locality and culture is one in which local churches everywhere are called to engage. Therefore, while the church in Malawi is deepened and strengthened by asking what it means to be missional, it does so from a different starting point from the church in Western society. A consideration of that process in Western society will, however, ultimately strengthen the discussion as it relates to the African context. As the Chichewa proverb states; "*madzi atupa ndi ya m'njira*," which, being translated, means "a river is strengthened by streams that enter it along the way." As a means of facilitating such a re-examination and discussion, seven suggestions are made regarding elements that local churches in the Malawian context may foster to interpret a missional theology for their everyday lives and to be missional congregations.²⁸

Fostering a Missionary Self-Understanding and Vision

A fundamental challenge for a missionary congregation is the ongoing need for the church to educate itself and restate its reason for being in the light of God's mission. Every vision requires constant renewal. In the context of the life of the church, each congregation must continually seek to renew its understanding of God's mission from Scripture and its own place in furthering it.

The task for every church is to attempt to ensure that its vision for mission is not a preserve of a small segment of the congregation or of the leadership, but rather is diffused throughout the church through ongoing education. The need for this process is made more evident when one considers the rapid pace of social change in many urban contexts in Africa. A congregation cannot come to a place of remaining static in its understanding of its mission in the world. As the world changes, so must its appropriation and articulation of the eternal truths of mission.

It is also important that any missional vision must have the correct starting point. That starting point is an understanding of God who, in love, is the source of mission. A consideration of the character and acts of the Trinity must be the framework in which every congregation grounds its own self-understanding. The church participates in a mission to which God himself is already also committed. A missional vision is one that acknowledges this and seeks to let the missionary intent and actions of God act as parameters for understanding and providing the essential impetus to the pursuit of mission.

Creating and Renewing Structures for Mission

A missionary congregation is tasked with the challenge of creating administrative structures that are appropriate vehicles for it to carry out its mission to the world. Charles Van Engen makes the following statement regarding administration in the local congregation: "Administration is essential because knowing what we ought to do does not necessarily lead to doing it. The proper understanding of the Church's missionary nature does not automatically issue in appropriate action. This can only be done through intentional administration."²⁹

²⁷ For more on this, see Darrell Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans 1998). Also see Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

²⁸ These suggestions arose out of a period of study of two leading MAG congregations conducted in 2012. These congregations are the International Christian Assembly (ICA) and Glorious Temple. The congregations were selected because of a public profile they have developed within the movement as being churches committed to mission. The suggestions should not be considered as prescriptive, rather they should be considered as pointers to missional being arising from a consideration of how these two congregations are seeking to pursue missional faithfulness.

²⁹ Van Engen, *God's Missionary People*, 184.

The specific organisational and administrative structure of missionary congregations cannot be universally prescribed. Even within the framework of the same denomination, organisational arrangements in local churches, structures designed to mobilise the body and engage the world can look quite different. Each congregation must navigate its context and its own internal make-up to ensure that, from an organisational standpoint, it is structured to effectively engage in mission.³⁰ This will invariably mean creating completely new structures and ministries where necessary on the one hand and renewing already existing ministries on the other. In many cases, this may involve a combination of both.

It is also important that those ministries and functions that do not interface with the world directly, perhaps by design or otherwise, be fostered with an awareness of how their internally focused roles relate to God's wider purposes for the world and the role that the church has to play in fulfilling it. The internal life of the church witnesses to the world and to the realities of what life in the kingdom of God looks like. Jesus states, "by this shall all men know that you are my disciples: if you have love one for another" (John 13:35).

Embracing Diversity and Fostering Unity

With at least nine major ethnic groups, diversity has long been a feature of the ministry landscape in Malawi. Changes in politics, economics, rural to urban migration, and other factors mean that, for the foreseeable future, the phenomenon of diversity in Malawian society is going to continue to be an increasing trend. In the context of this reality, the task of fostering unity is not an easy one.

One particular feature of much of African society has been tribalism. This is to some extent a latent feature of some segments of Malawian society, yet one that is rarely discussed in public. Speaking of the potential role of the church in Africa in addressing tribalism, Nigerian scholar, Ferdinand Nwaigbo, remarks:

A church that justifies tribalism and mollifies its powerful force of divisiveness, condoning injustice and oppression, distorts its mission of love and unity and falls short of the revelation of God. A church that stands for co-operate humanity and hungers for justice is a true revelation; it is a symbol of hope for contemporary Africa.³¹

In addressing issues relating to tribalism and other points of tension that sometimes arise from various kinds of diversity, the church has the potential to be such a symbol of hope to the community and an embodiment of the "already but not yet" kingdom. In the context of diversity and difference, the declaration of a unity that is available in Christ is a powerful articulation of the Good News, one that declares the advent of the one new humanity and peace between God and humanity. The ministry context in Malawi and Africa means that local churches on the continent will continue to encounter diversity of various kinds. Fostering unity is not only essential for the health of congregational life; it is also a witness to the unity of the kingdom of God and a tangible reflection of its reality.

Pursuing Discipleship in the Light of God's Mission

A missionary congregation seeks to allow God's mission to shape all that it does, especially the critical function of discipleship. Biblical discipleship seeks to equip believers in Jesus Christ for participation in God's ongoing mission in the world.³² It is at once both a product and a key instrument of mission. This calls for a new conceptualisation of discipleship different from what traditionally prevails in much contemporary Christian thought. The end goal of discipleship and spiritual formation in the missionary congregation is to prepare its people for a life that furthers God's mission to the world.

In a reflection on the impact of the non-Western world on theology of mission, Wilbert Shenk argues that "a new criterion of theological validity ought to be adopted: "Only theology that motivates and sustains the church in witness and service to the world deserves to be accredited."³³ In a similar fashion, in the context of the local church, a model of discipleship that does not motivate its membership to face the world in mission must be rejected as biblically inauthentic. As members are equipped for and engage in service, the benefits will be realised, not only in terms of ministry results, but also in terms of their spiritual renewal and vitality.

Practising Pastoral Ministry

Closely related to discipleship is the practice of pastoral ministry. Consistent with tradition in the Pentecostal community, the laity in the missionary congregation should be viewed as being empowered by the Spirit of God for ministry. This ministry includes

³⁰ Guder, *Missional Church*, 227.

³¹ Ferdinand Nwaigbo, 'Tribalism Versus Evangelization in sub-Saharan Africa,' *AFER*, 47 no. 3 (2005), 158.

³² Matthew 28:19-20.

³³ Wilbert R. Shenk, "Recasting Theology of Mission: Impulses from the Non-Western World," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 25 no. 3, (July 2001), 105.

not only ministry to the world but priestly edification and care of the body. Thus, the laity has an indispensable role in the provision of pastoral ministry. However, the involvement of laypersons in ministry cannot validly negate the role of individuals who are called to this role in their capacity as leaders in the congregation.³⁴

As with all other dimensions in the life of the church, pastoral ministry must be shaped by God's mission. Thus, pastoral ministry in the missionary congregation is not viewed as a function that maintains the spiritual status quo but rather one that seeks to shape the congregation for mission. In pursuit of this ministry objective, the classical care and nurture functions of pastors must be valued. This calls for pastors to view their ministries as a call to come alongside their members as they live life in the light of God's mission and share both joys and sorrows. Ultimately, pastoral ministry in the local congregation is a reflection of Jesus who is the chief missionary pastor.

Ministering in a Manner Appropriate to the Context

The imperative of developing contextually appropriate ministry is one that arises from both theological and pragmatic concerns.³⁵ Ministerial appropriateness deals with form and function; Scripture and context and is a multi-faceted issue.³⁶ A missionary congregation is one that constantly seeks an awareness of its environment and the society in which it is found and seeks to shape its ministry accordingly.

Engaging in Church Planting and Cross-Cultural Missions

The mission of God that local congregations are called to participate in is one that knows no geographical boundaries. Regardless of a church's financial standing, the call to participate in mission in some manner is one that needs to be pursued and that also has positive potential for ministry in the local context:

As the church takes up its task to be engaged in missions, there will be a reflexive effect. As the church develops a vision for and becomes involved in missions to the ends of the earth, the more likely it is that the church will also be a missional church near to home. Mission has the potential to revitalize a missional vision for the whole world, including the neighbourhood.³⁷

The benefits of belonging to a denominational network, such as the MAG, includes having an available mission agency and structure that individual churches can partner with in various ways and according to their abilities. In considering these features of a missionary congregation that have been described, Flett's admonition is one that merits serious attention: "As there is no breach in the being and the act of God, so there can be no breach in the being and the act of his community. The Christian community is a missionary community or she is not the Christian community."³⁸

While suggestions have been made here as to how to translate a theology of mission into practice in the local church, it is hard to overemphasise that being a missionary congregation cannot simply be achieved by the mere institution of new behaviours or programmes. Rather, it must be a result of realising that the church is missionary by nature and that the Spirit who indwells the church is a missionary Spirit; consequently, it seeks to express that in the various respects described here and potentially in others that have not been articulated.

Conclusion

The emergence of the theology of the *missio Dei* in the MAG has been a welcome and needed development in supporting a nascent missionary movement. A consideration of this theology and the Malawian context points to the urgent need for this thinking about mission to be extended to the ecclesiology of the MAG with a view to shaping local congregations into communities that pursue and reflect God's mission.

In conclusion, it has been argued that it is not sufficient to pursue God's mission in a few select areas of its life and ministry, such as foreign missions; rather, that God's mission ought to be the defining reality that shapes everything that its local churches do. In other words, it must foster churches that

Let(s) God's mission permeate everything that the congregation does—from worship to witness to training members for discipleship. It bridges the gap between outreach and congregational life, since, in its life together, the church is to embody God's mission.³⁹

³⁴ David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 474.

³⁵ Andrew Mkwaila, 'Contextualization and African Pentecostal Missions,' *Ethne: The Online Journal for Pentecostal and Missional Leadership*, 2 no.1 2011.

³⁶ Charles H. Kraft. 'Why Appropriate?' in *Appropriate Christianity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft & Dean S. Gilliland, (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005).

³⁷ Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 220.

³⁸ Flett, *The Witness of God*, 293.

³⁹ Lois Barret, *Treasure in Jars of Clay: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), x.

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ANDREW MKWAILA

Andrew Mkwaila is the executive Pastor of International Christian Assembly, Lilongwe Malawi and an adjunct faculty member at Malawi Assemblies of God University (Lilongwe, Malawi) and Pan-African Theological Seminary (Lome, Togo). He may be contacted at andykwaila@hotmail.com.

