

Mission today – a few critical comments (James Brown)

It has currently become fashionable in many protestant churches to speak of mission as being of the essence of the church; its heartbeat, to quote the opening words of the theses paper for our conference. I am an ordained minister of a church (The Church of Scotland) that has also currently hopped onto this mission merry-go-round. 'We are a mission-shaped church', we hear there. Mission is the essence of the church, its *raison d'être*.

I have no intention of calling this assertion (self-justification?) totally into question, but I simply must question it critically. Just as the eight theses or propositions of this conference seek to question and reinterpret the word Mission. Rendering it unrecognisable in the process?

For, honestly: Our aim is to be God's ambassadors, affirming diversity and acting as an ecumenical, dialogical, critically reappraising, intercultural, international, welcoming, communicative learning community. – How much of Mission in the primal sense of the word is still left here? And how much Mission (as most of the faith communities gathered together in the International Church Convention would understand the term) is still to be found in this everything-and-nothing redefinition? Do we perhaps mean something else but have (for whatever reasons) simply stuck the label 'Mission' on it? Even at the mere language level, I am highly sceptical.

Missio – sent. Where? In all directions at once? Is that intentional or accidental? ... Mission is everything. Don't we run the risk, in making this assertion, of turning it into its utterly meaningless opposite: Everything is mission?

But enough devil's advocate to start with. Right now, I would like to understand what the intention is behind all of this. What will *change* for me, what will be *different* as of now for our congregation in Bochum, for the International Church Convention congregations?

I fully understand if there's a desire here to rediscover church as a movement and ourselves as 'followers of the Way' (Acts 9:2), to shake things up a bit, to let in some fresh wind (*ρῦαή, πνευμα*). But aren't there other images for this that can serve us better? Since 1560, the Church of Scotland has understood itself as an Exodus people (just as the Second Vatican Council was to rediscover the concept of the Church as the People of God on the move 400 years later). To my taste, this fits better to the searching, changing (church) people in search of repositioning or relocation as outlined in our eight theses.

For the past 25 years I have served an English-speaking congregation in Bochum that I founded back in the mid-1990s together with a UCC (USA) colleague. But we certainly don't think of ourselves as a congregation 'with [...] missionary orientation' as Thesis 7 suggests. We simply responded to a need. My colleague and co-founder Bob Haworth conducted a funeral service in English at the request of a bereaved family, and out of that a consciously international, ecumenical, open and welcoming English-speaking congregation very soon emerged. We were simply there. We reacted and we are (still) active. Was that 'Mission'? Is that 'Mission'? Or doesn't the concept *ministro, ministrare* (Latin: to serve) fit better? 'Minister' (that is: servant) is the word used in Scotland to denote pastors.

Similar things can be said of the other congregations who are currently active in the regional IKK convention in Bochum: Korean, Finnish, Indonesian and Hungarian congregations. Only one congregation – the predominantly African 'Grace Outreach International Christian Fellowship' in Bochum – can be said to be consciously mission-oriented, although even they use the somewhat milder word 'outreach' in their name, a word that is occasionally used in German and that means something along lines of: to stretch out a hand, look for the bigger picture, move beyond ...

I still have a lot of questions, not least: Am I now a missionary, or still a pastor, a 'minister'?