

WHAT'S GOING ON OUT THERE? (AND IN HERE?)

Every Christian community must work out its witness in dialogue with the particulars of its own social and historical situation.

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Introduction

There is never a time that a congregation exists in a vacuum. It always exists in a context. The primary reason why discernment efforts are required in congregations today is because the North American churches are facing an entirely different situation than they have ever before experienced. They are in the midst of a major transition from existing in a "churched" culture to one that is now primarily secular. As a result, North American churches who once enjoyed a "most favored institution" status, where culture was their ally, now find themselves "disestablished" and pushed to the margins of influence and status in North American culture. As a result, churches are experiencing a sense of drift, without clear purpose or direction. Change is necessary in order to become a more faithful missional church. The Discernment Process in which your church is engaged will enable your congregation to change in ways that will enable it to become far more faithful and effective in its witness and mission in a vastly changed environment.

This particular study, "What's Going on Out There? (and in Here?)" will help your church bring to the surface and explore the forces at work within its context – out there and in here – with which it must engage in order to become more faithful and more effective in its ministry and witness.

Through this study you will examine key factors and forces that are influencing the faithfulness and effectiveness of your church in its current situation. These forces are "calling the shots," creating both daunting

challenges as well as profound ministry opportunities for the church. They cannot be ignored. Addressing these challenges and seizing the opportunities together, leaders and members will be working together toward common goals as a more faithful missional church.

Why Explore Our Context?

The church community belongs to a context. Isaiah understood this when he confessed in the presence of the Almighty, "I am a man of unclean lips and dwell among a people of unclean lips." (Isa. 6:5). To understand and become fully responsive to God's activity in the world, the Christian community must come to a collective understanding -- a common view -- of its concrete historical situation. This collective understanding is essential for the transformation of the church. To know both itself and the "people" in whose midst it dwells is an ongoing discipline to which the church is called. To facilitate a process of self-knowledge and truth-seeking is necessary if, as a people, the church is to overcome the current impasse and find its way into the future.

The church community breathes the air of its social milieu. In the very life of its own people is reflected the spiritual climate of its environment. The people of God bear in their hearts and minds the marks of their society's crises and longings, its hopes and dreams. They cannot divest themselves of these things, this identity. To study the context is to attempt to comprehend the culture in which your congregation lives, moves, and has its being. Your goal is to become students of your church's cultural context, to discover the culture's dominant themes, and to grasp at some level the culture's aspirations, its priorities, its anxieties

An underlying assumption to guide your study group is that "God so loved the world..." (John 3:16). It is only by becoming a *student of the context* -- the world in which it lives -- that the church can faithfully discern and participate in God's mission on behalf of that world and love the world as God so loves it.

The Study Sessions

Each session in this study process will begin with an "hypothesis" -- a statement that seeks to describe a particularly important aspect of the church's context and its impact on the church. The material that follows will offer perspectives on the current cultural context for your consideration. The questions will guide your study group to interact with one another,

surfacing, sharing, and testing your own perspectives on the cultural context – and their implications for your church. Finally, there is a brief Bible study that invites you to consider the church’s unique “window on the world” – an important perspective as you consider your context for ministry.

The Goal of this Study

The goal of this study is to help members of your church to interact with one another in order to surface, share, and test their own experiences and observations about the cultural context in which you live – and its implications for your church.

There are five study sessions, followed by a summarizing session. The five study sessions and the “hypothesis-to-be-tested” in each are:

1. **Rattle, Rattle, Thunder, Clatter** – We come to church and church activities weary, rattled, and empty from hectic, out of balance lives. We come with little left to give. We are "free to choose" in every area of our lives, but what we fail to realize is that our choices then bind us. Often our choices block meaningful participation as the church.
2. **Me, Myself, and I** – We live in a culture of self-centeredness, instant gratification, and convenience. "What does it do for me?" shapes how we participate – or choose not to participate – in most activities, including the church. Our behavior often models the culture of self-centeredness, while our witness – to understand ourselves and live as God's people called into community with and for one another – is silent.
3. **The Church and McWorld** – We are constantly being bombarded with messages about who we are, what is important to us, and what we should be about. Daily we are being schooled by the culture we live in. What kind of people does our consumer culture want us to be? What kind of people does Christ call us to be?
4. **I am Different, therefore I am** – Personal freedom is an American birthright. We are free to adopt any values, religious beliefs, or lifestyle we like. With so much difference, there is little basis anymore for unity. The church, which has a message of unity in Christ that binds people together across their differences, often fails to demonstrate it in a convincing manner.

5. **Who's Your Church?** – A very common understanding of the church today considers the church a "place" where certain things happen. Or as a "vendor" of religious goods and services designed to meet people's self-defined needs. Each of these understandings leads to limited expectations and unsatisfactory participation patterns, restricting the church's vitality and witness. The future of our church depends on our understanding of church.

The Challenge Today

The *mission* of the church is to discern, celebrate, and participate in God's redemptive mission in the world. The greatest challenge facing churches today is to live *missionally* - to develop missionary sensitivities, vision, and practices for engaging in God's mission in today's context. The church is called to bring the Good News of God's creation into engagement with the deep yearnings and concrete challenges of its worldly context. The many efforts churches are making to "keep up" or "survive" are futile if this fundamental challenge is not addressed.

Participating in this study is an opportunity to begin to think, perceive, and behave *missionally*. The hope of this study is to stimulate conversation about the church and its mission in today's world. Its hope is that you will experience Christian community as you engage, struggle, learn, and care for each other. And its hope is to stimulate new awareness of and desire for God's continuing, transforming presence within the shared life and ministry of your congregation.

Session 1: Rattle, Rattle, Thunder, Clatter

Hypothesis: We come to church and church activities weary, rattled, and empty from hectic, out of balance lives. We come with little left to give. We are "free to choose" in every area of our lives, but what we fail to realize is that our choices then bind us. Often our choices block meaningful participation as the church.

As this statement indicates, for many the church is one more obligation. Their participation is shallow, erratic and unsatisfying. For others, church is a way to connect and find meaning through intentional, spiritually nourishing participation. For many there does not seem to be enough time for church. With working spouses and the changing face of the contemporary family, for most churches the “volunteer pool” has shrunk. It becomes increasingly more difficult to maintain the programs of the church. One congregation described itself as: “overwhelmed, overcommitted, and burnt out.” They said, “We have learned from our culture that all our time must be filled with activity. It seems the church adds to this problem by demanding more of our time and energy. We no longer take the time to listen and discern how God would have us fill our time.”

Some churches respond to this experience asking, "How can we get more members to do the work of the church?" They see this symptom as an operational problem to be solved, looking for ways to enlist more volunteers in order to relieve the overburdened few that carry the load.

But for others this is the wrong question. They are beginning to acknowledge that scarcity of time is just one symptom of powerful forces at work in our society today that shape expectations, drive behavior and

compete with the Gospel's call to faithful discipleship life. A mindset of scarcity sets in. "I don't have enough time!" The "Christian life" gets pushed to the margins, limited to one hour a week, to that time when we "go to church."

Use the following questions as a guide to reflect together on the life of your congregation in today's contemporary context. Invite the group to break into smaller groupings where greater opportunity for conversation exists. Appoint a recorder in each group to take good and full notes, preferably on newsprint. Report back to the whole group, if you break into smaller groupings for conversation.

1. To what extent do these paragraphs describe your church? Share a story, anecdote, or incident to illustrate.

2. What patterns or forces in particular is your church contending with as it seeks to be faithful in its ministry and mission?

What is the impact on your church?

What are the implications for your church's future?

Bible Study

Read Matthew 13:44-46 The Priority of the Kingdom of Heaven. This brief reading is about choices – the choices we have and the choices we make.

1. What is your pearl of great price – the treasure for which you would give almost anything – the something of surpassing worth?
2. What is the priority(s) of your congregation? For what would your congregation risk all that it has?

Session 2: Me, Myself, and I

Hypothesis: We live in a culture of self-centeredness, instant gratification and convenience. “What does it do for me?” shapes how we participate – or choose not to participate – in most activities, including the church. Our behavior often models the culture of self-centeredness, while our witness – to understand ourselves and live as God’s people called into community with and for one another – is silent.

Like global warming, it is difficult to become aware of some of the pervasive forces at work in our life that are so gradually yet powerfully having an effect. Peter Schmiechen in his book *Christ the Reconciler* describes two ways our American experience has shaped Christianity: individualism and functionalism. He argues, “Our culture has formed religion in structural ways that affect the way we think of religion and the church, as well as ways we organize and operate our institutions. American religion is founded on individualism, the freedom of the individual to believe and do whatever a person chooses. It is also practical and functional; it exists to do something and is justified only if it does something. When the two are joined together, *religion must do something for me!* The two principles of American religion account for much of its creativity and strength, as well as its problems and weaknesses.”¹

Individualism has led to ways of thinking and behaving that are destructive of Christian communal life. Individualism has led to what we may describe as particularly American heresies: 1) One can be a Christian all by one’s self – the church is not needed. 2) You can believe anything you want free from ties to tradition, family, authority and sacred texts. 3) Christianity becomes confined to the privacy of an individual spiritual life.

Functionalism leads to the triumph of doing over being. It causes the church to justify itself in terms of “usefulness.” It must produce something that the society will deem useful. Functionalism has led to a dominant understanding of the church as a dispenser or vender of religious goods and services designed to meet people’s needs however they choose to define those needs. The individual self becomes the center of this religion. If one chooses to participate in a church, it is based on what will contribute to personal happiness, well being, and meaning.²

We live in a cultural situation that in many if not most ways is antithetical to the life and teachings of Jesus. This challenges a congregation to approach its context with an open and teachable spirit. Looking in the mirror of their own experience, Christian communities must begin to name and deal with the forces of today’s context that are forming them – the church – into the culture’s mold.

Use the following questions as a guide to reflect together on the life of your congregation in today’s contemporary context.

1. Name those factors and forces you see at work in the world that are destructive of human life as God intends.

How are these forces impacting the ministry of your church?

2. In what ways does the culture of *individualism* and *functionalism* impact participation in the life of your church?

Bible Study

The New Testament talks about factors and forces, the fallen principalities and powers that are destructive of God’s plan. The church is a people being formed under the reign of God where these powers are being confronted and losing their control. The forces that limit, oppress, and distort God’s dream for human life were confronted and defeated in Jesus Christ. He brings about the end of the old, breaks the destructive powers and opens up the possibility of life, love, and freedom in community. Now, the Spirit’s mission—and that of the Christian community—of bearing witness to Jesus Christ and of bringing about the renewal of God’s dream for creation can begin.

Read Colossians 1:15–20; 2:13–15. How is Jesus Christ related to the creation in this passage? How is he related to the church? How is reconciliation brought about?

Session 3:

The Church and McWorld

Hypothesis: We are constantly being bombarded with messages about who we are, what is important to us, and what we should be about. Daily we are being schooled by the culture we live in. What kind of people does our consumer culture want us to be? What kind of people does Christ call us to be?

Rodney Clapp in his article “*Why the Devil Takes Visa*” presents an enlightening look at the power of consumerism at work in our world. “Consumer capitalism is much more pervasive and much less obvious, than smog or billboards. Look harder, and you can see it at work all around--shaping attitudes, bending behaviors, grinding an endless series of lenses through which to see and experience the world in a particular way.”³ He argues that consumerism as an ethos presents “a character-cultivating way of life that seduces and insinuates and acclimates.” It speaks “against the Christian virtues of patience, contentedness, self-denial and generosity--almost always with a velvet glove rather than an iron fist. It speaks in sweet and sexy rather than dictatorial tones, and conquers by promises rather than threats.”

The New York Times has estimated that the average American is exposed to 3,500 ads per day. The bombardment is so pervasive we are hardly aware of how strong an impact all these messages have. Advertising is the largest industry in the nation. Those who spend billions of dollars for those ads are very aware of the impact. So what kind of people does consumer capitalism want us to be? The consumer (that’s us) “is schooled in insatiability. He or she is never to be satisfied--at least for long. The consumer is tutored that people basically consist of unmet needs that can be appeased by goods and experiences.” The Christian however is taught to be

wary of insatiability; recognizing that our deepest longings are only met in God.

Use the following questions as a guide to reflect together on the life of your congregation in today's contemporary context.

1. What is "consumerism?" Identify a way in which you are being "schooled" by the consumer culture.

What is right with the consumer education you are getting?

What is wrong with it?

2. What is the impact of consumerism on your church?

What are the implications for the future ministry of your church?

Bible Study

The witness of the first community of disciples who were known as those "who turned the world upside down" is instructive while it may be uncomfortable. They were constantly challenging the dominant values of their culture. Often they paid the price. Churches today are often uneasy with those who challenge cultural values. It may have escaped our attention that "McWorld" isn't really our home. The Christian community is a sojourner community, "resident aliens" in this world. The church is not just a place where we worship and consume activities and programs that 'meet our needs.' Instead, the church is called to be a contrast community, helping those both inside and outside the church to find a new way home. As followers of God, we are exiles in search of a better land.

Read Philippians 2:1-11. What is the basis of Jesus' victory? From your experience, how does the way of Jesus contrast with the way of McWorld? How are these contrasting "ways" influencing your church?

Session 4:

I Am Different, therefore I Am

Hypothesis: Personal freedom is an American birthright. We are free to adopt any values, religious beliefs, or lifestyle we like. With so much difference, there is little basis anymore for unity. The church, which has a message of unity in Christ that binds people together across their differences, often fails to demonstrate it in a convincing manner.

In today's culture "difference" is highly valued and desired. Commercials and billboards scattered around countryside and cityscape create the perception that if you drive a particular kind of automobile, something desirable will happen for you: you will be *different* from the rest. Americans prize individual freedom, and that freedom is expressed in being different – different from our parents ("Mother, I'd rather do it myself!"), different from others ("Drink milk!"), different from the past ("This isn't your father's Oldsmobile!").

Indeed, today's popular culture values, encourages, and even drives us to form our identity on the basis of our differences from one another. Yet, beneath the popular acceptance of difference lies a deeper sense of separation and division. For example, people of a political persuasion may be clearer about who they are *not* and what they are *against* than they are about the party or platform they are *for*. With every major election, we hear a familiar refrain, "I'm voting for ___ because I don't want to see ___ get elected." When identity is wrapped up with being *different from* others, the result is behavior that excludes. When families, institutions, or society perpetuate exclusion on the basis of difference, anger finds expression. Difference that is fueled with anger leads to positioning ourselves in *opposition to* one another. The following pattern is common: precisely because the people who are opposed to what we want have refused to recognize us time

and time again, we determine to stand firm for what we want *no matter what*. We begin to form the assumption that our differences are irreconcilable. Without an overarching vision of unity difference leads to opposition and a cold war among groups.

Where the pattern of difference, anger, and opposition occurs, there estrangement comes to seem ordinary, routine, and accepted. It is not extreme to say that in America anger, conflict, and violence have become a way of life. "We appear to be moving more and more toward partition of the society by race, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and culture."⁴ Too often the church patterns its life along similar fault lines as the wider culture. Difference, anger, and opposition surface in the life of the church in ways that mirror culture rather than providing a hopeful alternative.

Use the following questions as a guide to reflect together on the life of your congregation in today's contemporary context.

1. How is "difference" understood and experienced in your wider community? How is it understood and experienced in the life of your church?
2. How are your understandings and experiences of "difference" being shaped by cultural patterns?

Bible Study

Within our cultural context the church has a unique mission – to proclaim and embody a vision of *difference within unity*. God's vision of unity is from "before the foundation of the world" (Eph.1:4), manifest in Jesus Christ and the community of disciples gathered by his Spirit. Rather than reducing or eliminating difference, this vision acknowledges and embraces it (2:11-22). The community that learns to demonstrate unity in Christ – by embracing difference and even opposites – is a witness to God's vision and a foretaste of God's promised future (Eph.1:10).

Read Ephesians 2:11-22, where the author describes the new unity made possible in Christ between opposing groups. What do you find hopeful about this vision of *difference within the unity of Christ*? What can you imagine *difference within the unity of Christ* might look like in practical ways in your church?

Session 5: Who's Your Church?

Hypothesis: A very common understanding of the church today considers the church a "place" where certain things happen. Or as a "vendor" of religious goods and services designed to meet people's self-defined needs. Each of these understandings leads to limited expectations and unsatisfactory participation patterns, restricting the church's vitality and witness. The future of our church depends on our understanding of church.

It is interesting how the ways we talk about something can give insight into some of the assumptions and expectations that are operating in our behavior. It is very common to talk about, “going to church” or to ask “what church do you go to?” In similar fashion we “go to the store”, “go to the club”, the game or the movies. We do not talk about “going to the family.” In fact to use those words in connection with family sounds awkward and wrong. We ARE family, AND we ARE church. At first this may seem to be merely a clever observation about our use of words. However, it is an observation being made by others that at the very least invites reflection about whether or not some of our ways of thinking and participating in the life of the church have become disconnected from their roots in the biblical message.⁵ The shift in choice of words from, “I go to church” to “we are the church” implies some very different ways of thinking and then behaving.

Most North Americans have grown up with an understanding of the church as “a place where.” For many, church was the building or a place where certain things happened in a predictable fashion and at a certain time. Participation in the life of the church involved going to that place and participating in certain activities. Often church leaders take great pains to

make sure that activities that are planned are held in the church building in order to make it clear that this was a “church program.”

The dominant experience of church in today’s culture is of a voluntary association, organized and run by professional clergy. While laity may be involved in certain aspects, in most of our experience the primary responsibility for the ministry of the church has rested with the professionally trained clergy – “the pastor.” There exists a clear and definite set of tasks that everyone (even those not involved with the church) knows are clergy duties. The problem is not with those persons engaged in clerical ministry, but with the fact that such a division can overlook the giftedness of the whole community, stimulate passivity and dependence, and restrict the scope and power of the church's ministry. This has served to reinforce assumptions and patterns of participation that find us “going to church” to receive the services provided by the trained few. Instead, the church is called to be a Christian community where commitment, accountability, trust, openness, long-term relationships, and sacrifice are the standards that guide its life together.

Use the following questions as a guide to reflect together on the life of your congregation in today’s contemporary context.

1. The church – “place?” or “people?” Which do you say? Why?
2. What role do cultural forces have in shaping your church’s understanding of itself as the church?
3. From your experience, how do “notions” or understandings of church shape experience (what we do and what we say) as the church?

Bible Study

The call to “*be* the church” assumes a particular kind of community, a community in which the Word of God is not only proclaimed, but also embodied in a life together of shared gifts. What would such a community look like?

Read Ephesians 4:1-16 and I Corinthians 12. What is the purpose of the gifts of the Spirit? What is the vision of the church within these texts?

Why do Christians need one another?

Session 6: Summary Session

Everything we do as a Christian community relates in some way to God's sending of the church to participate in God's mission in its worldly context. We once thought of the church as the sending agency; missionaries were the people who the church sent. Now as we read Scripture afresh in a North American context that is itself mission territory, we realize that *God is a sending God*, and the *church is the sent people*. What is God sending the church to be and do? The answer is expressed by each local congregation as it discovers its own context and discerns the purpose and practices of its life and ministry in response to the sending God.

In this summary session, explore the challenge and opportunity facing your church today – to become more fully a faith community called and sent by God to engage its worldly context with Good News. Share your answers to the questions below, sharing your learnings and hopes as a result of this study.

How have you become more aware of the factors and forces that make up your missional context?

1. Identify and share an insight or learning you have gained. What especially rang true for you?

Where do you hope God will lead your church?

2. Imagine out loud with one another: What would it look like if our church were engaging the context “out there” (in our neighborhood and community) and “in here” (within the life of our own congregation) with God’s Good News?

Where do you see this happening *already*? Where would you *like* to see it happen more?

Consider the missional transformation journey

Your congregation is being invited into an exciting and rewarding journey of transformation toward a missional church in Palo Duro Presbytery. On this journey you will discover what God is doing among you and around you – in your missional context. You will discern what God is calling you to become as a church on God’s mission. You will embark upon a more faithful and more fruitful path of congregational life and witness that will clearly demonstrate how God is sending you into the world today.

¹ Peter Schmiechen, *Christ the Reconciler: A Theology for Opposites, Differences, and Enemies* (Eerdmans, 1996) p. 30.

² Schmiechen, p. 9-24.

³ Rodney Clapp, “Why the Devil Takes Visa: A Christian Response to the triumph of Consumerism,” *Christianity Today* (October 7, 1996, pp 19ff).

⁴ Schmiechen, p.93.

⁵ See George Hunsberger, “Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God” in *Missional Church: A Vision For the Sending of the Church in North America*, Darrel Guder, ed. (Eerdmans, 1999) p. 78-82.