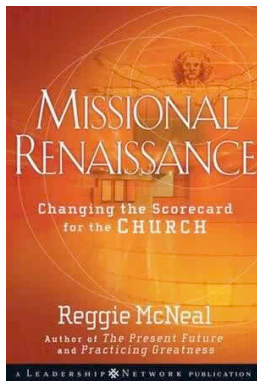


Jim's Tool Box

Rethinking Church with Reggie McNeal's *Missional Renaissance*

In case you have not read this column lately or if you have not heard about the new byline from United Methodist Communications, the latest buzzword in the United Methodist Church today is "Rethink Church." Actually, the Four Areas of Focus that I addressed last month is another "hot topic" right now.

But when it comes to "Rethinking Church," I have been reading a book this summer that has caused me to "rethink church." It is Reggie McNeal's book *Missional Renaissance* (Jossey-Bass, 2009). Whatever you have come to understand about what "church" is, you can toss it out the window when you read this book. Basically, McNeal challenges the church today by talking about three shifts that are needed if the church is really going to be missional:



- From internal to external in terms of ministry focus
- From program development to people development in terms of core activity
- From church-based to kingdom-based in terms of leadership agenda

Reggie McNeal goes on to say that these three shifts call for a new "scorecard" for the missional church, as he points out, "The typical church scorecard (how many, how often, how much) doesn't mesh with a missional view of what the church should be monitoring in light of its mission in world. The current scorecard rewards church activity and can be filled in without any reference to the church's impact beyond itself."

McNeal calls the church to much more of an outward focus. He points out that internally focused churches and ministries consume most of their energy, time, and money on a wide range of concerns, from survival to entertainment. In contrast, McNeal writes that externally focused ministry leaders take their cues from the environment around them in terms of needs and opportunities. They look for ways to bless and to serve the communities where they are located. Much of their calendar space, financial resources, and organizational energy are spent on people who are not part of their organization.

Another area of contrast between the missional church and the traditional church is that the missional church seeks to develop people rather than programs. McNeal says that this shift is especially difficult for most clergy leaders because the typical clergy training prepares church leaders to teach the Bible, manage the church, and grow the business.

In McNeal's view of the missional church he comments that church membership or some level of involvement in a local congregation will no longer be the primary spiritual expression of missional followers of Jesus. The missional leaders are shifting their commitments to people and causes beyond the church. They no longer look to or rely on clergy and church leaders to script or dictate their spiritual and personal development. The emphasis in the missional church is not to get folks to participate in programs and activities in the church, but rather to equip and

strengthen believers to be out in the world either in their daily lives or in mission activities with those who are not a part of the church.

As I read McNeal's book, I realized that it challenged many of my basic understandings about the church. As a representative of the institutional church, this book caused me to question what the role of the pastor and church leaders should be. Reggie McNeal defines the missional church as "...the people of God partnering with God in (God's) redemptive mission in the world." McNeal says that this notion of the church is both liberating and sobering. It is liberating in that we don't have to manufacture the work of God in ourselves or in the world. "God is doing the heavy lifting!" as he puts it.

It is sobering to think about the church in this way because it carries a great responsibility. As he puts it, "Our job is not to 'do church' well but to be the people of God in an unmistakable way in the world." Here is his description of our task, "We are to be the aroma of Jesus in the cemetery of decaying flesh. We are to be different in the hope we offer, in the grace we exhibit, and in the obvious sacrifice of love we display in dealing with others."

This would be a good book for a team of folks in your church to read. McNeal realizes that many traditional congregations will not reach the level of the missional church that he describes. But if you really want to "rethink church" especially about what it means for believers to be the church in the world (and not just in the church), this book will give you a lot to think and rethink. I know I'm going to be rethinking for quite awhile as I reflect on McNeal's teachings about what it means to be the church in the 21st century.