

# EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

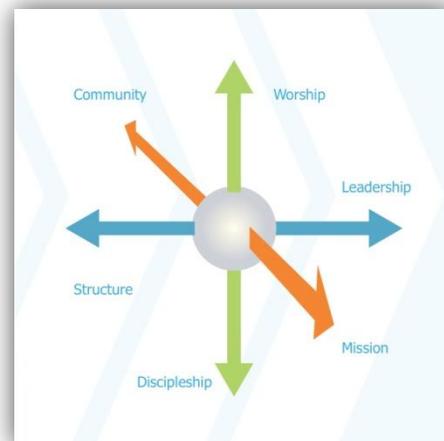
## Missional Is as Missional Does

In his 2006 book, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*, Alan Hirsch argues rather passionately that six components give evidence of “missional DNA” in our churches:

- a missional-incarnational impulse,
- apostolic environment,
- disciple making,
- organic systems,
- communitas, and
- the lordship of Christ.

You may want to read the book to fully understand what Hirsch means by each of these phrases. In my own congregation (Hosanna! A Fellowship of Christians, in Lititz, Pennsylvania), we took Hirsch’s six points and adapted them somewhat. In the diagram below each arrow points in a particular direction and is paired, both structurally and thematically, with its opposite, so that Worship (upward) and Discipleship (downward) are both aspects of the same impulse toward spiritual formation.

My point in offering this is to suggest that “missional is as missional does”; that is, talk about being missional is only helpful to the degree that it impacts what we do in our ministries and how we do it. We cannot dress up in “missional clothes” and declare ourselves to be on mission with God; rather, we must change our attitudes, behaviors, priorities, and aspirations...both individually and collectively. And that is hard work.



## The Train Has Left the Station

This is true for all of us—as individuals, congregations, denominations, and, yes, as institutions of higher learning. In short, Evangelical Seminary must not only teach missional but must also practice it ourselves, lest we be hypocritical about such things (as seminaries are sometimes). We must be willing to embrace change to at least the same degree that we insist our graduates do, and be as open to the fresh wind of the Spirit as we want churches to be.

The world of the past century is not coming back. That train has already left the station, although there is a crowded platform of would-be riders hoping desperately for its soon return. Personally, I believe the megachurch model...with its insistent commitment to “bigger, better, faster”...to be the last hurrah of the old, consumer-driven model. That is

not a criticism of “big church,” but of a mindset (whether expressed in large churches or small) that counting heads, bricks, or money is the best way to assess mission. It isn’t. We know that now. We should have known that earlier.

Many are anxious and aghast that millennials are leaving the Church in droves. Yes, we ought to grieve this, but also to repent that the Christianity they have too often seen is one that is a mile wide but only a half inch deep. They see our hypocrisy so much better than we see it ourselves. And yet they widely identify as “spiritual” for they recognize an ache in their souls that won’t be satisfied with coffee in the church café. We insist, along with St. Augustine, that they need Jesus (that they have a God-shaped vacuum that only He can fill), but the Jesus we have presented looks a tad too much like ourselves to be admired, much less followed all the way to the cross.

We have too often sold them a truncated gospel—one full of language about the forgiveness of sins, but far too empty of wisdom for living life in a broken world, much less practicing hope for what God is yet to do. We speak of holiness but they seek wholeness...and here’s the shame of it all, what they want has been sitting on our back shelves the whole time.

That’s why Hirsch calls the components of his missional DNA the “forgotten ways.” This is nothing new; this is the Stuff from which Church was originally concocted. This is what God has been up to since the very beginning. The message of Jesus was not that everything is falling apart, but that everything is coming together in the One who is both Alpha and Omega. The hope behind that message was the presence of a redemptive God in this broken world, a God restoring and renewing all things. Jesus presents a God on mission, criticizing all bad religion that inhibits the people He loves from being healed and becoming agents of His shalom, and blessing all those—of whatever level of brokenness or experience of shame—who seek abundant life in the kingdom of God.

What I have said here of American Christianity in general is also true of theological education. We have been arrogant, thinking that we knew best what the Church needs, even when no one was buying. We have been stuck in our heads, thinking that we can learn only from books what the wisdom of God also teaches us through deep personal encounter with our Savior. We have been complacent, expecting that our existence alone provided justification for your support, without having to make our case that what we do is absolutely critical to the mission of the local church. We have been short-sighted, believing that what we did in the past was sufficient for the present, and for the future as well. We too, must repent of our hypocrisy, for we have presumed to teach others how to lead without modeling humble, teachable, wise leadership ourselves.

### Hope Does Not Put Us to Shame

Yet there is Hope, and Hope does not put us to shame (Romans 5:5). There is hope for the American church, for each of our local congregations, and for our institutions of higher learning, including Evangelical Seminary. For God is still with us, and God still loves us, and God still invites us to be His partners in His mission in the world. The good news is that not everything I have said about theological education applies to Evangelical Seminary, and not everything I have said about the state of Christianity in our culture applies to the EC church, much less our own congregations. To the degree it does we are invited to confess and change our ways. We are expected to be a prophetic community for the Church and the World for this generation.

But prophets are often stoned, or imprisoned, exiled, silenced, or treated in some other contemptible way. This is a primary reason that many are not courageous enough to be counter-cultural in an upside-down world; they do not

want to pay that price. The testimony of the biblical prophets...and of Jesus himself...is that the heaviest rocks came sailing at us from the hands of those who claim to know God. To be on mission with Jesus in this world is to risk the wrath of those who think themselves righteous. It is to be judged heretical by the witch hunters of our world. It is to be considered suspect, not leaderly, or even dangerous. Being on mission with Jesus is often a lonely place. Yet there is Hope, and Hope does not put us to shame. For God takes up the cause of His people and it is His blessing, His joy, and His approbation we seek.

### Missional Seminary

How then is Evangelical Seminary practicing what you are preaching? How are we contributing to your own aspiration to be missional? How can we serve you better in the years ahead?

- *We're re-emphasizing ministry practice.* And hiring more ministry practitioners to teach it. The “academic stuff” is still important—how we think theologically, how we interpret Scripture, how we tap into the wisdom of the past—this matters, lest we become loud proclaimers of empty nonsense. But our grads must get up in the morning and do the hard work of practicing the Gospel. So we will teach them how to do it well.
- *We're more interested in wisdom than knowledge.* One of our aspirations is to be a “wisdom laboratory” where those seeking degrees...and many, many others....come to be refreshed in the practical, mysterious, mind-blowing wisdom of God. Yes, we will still hire experts who know things. We recognize that knowledge alone, while far more accessible than ever, is not the same thing as wisdom...and not nearly so valuable.
- *We're forming, not norming.* Most seminaries, to this day, have a roomful of cookie cutters that they take to their students, with the intent that those students emerge “normed” into a clone-able pattern. If you go to Dallas, you'll become a dispensationalist; if to Westminster, you'll be thoroughly Reformed when you finish. We're more interested in providing our students with space assistance to be “formed” into the character of Christ, and thus emerge a more authentic version of what God created each one to be from the beginning.
- *We're people of good news, not bad news.* The message of Jesus truly was gospel: God is here. You are already blessed. You are already loved. There is no condemnation. Peace I give unto you. And his invitations were equally wonderful: Rest. Do not be afraid. Love one another. Trust me. So we train our students to hear, know, trust, proclaim, worship, and serve in the spirit of this good news, for we serve in a broken and complex world.
- *We're serving the whole church, not just the pastor.* The spring 2017 issue of *Enthuse*, our seminary magazine, is devoted to this theme. In there we explain all of the many ways we serve the local congregation beyond just the training of its pastor—our continuing education opportunities, our museum, our leadership program, our counseling services, our library, our Faith in the Marketplace breakfasts, our Speakers Bureau, etc. Check it out!
- *We're not interested in flying solo.* We love working with others. Unfortunately, we serve in a highly competitive environment where ministries and their leaders often prefer to be competitors instead of collaborators. We are grateful for our partnership with Huntington University, which we have recently announced will remain a collaboration, rather than a merger. We will continue to seek additional partners for the mission God has given us.

- *We're thinking outside the box.* I will have more to say on this, I suspect, by the time I see you in person at conference, but we are hard at work on some creative ideas that will make you sit up and take notice. God has given us some direction regarding program development that we believe will serve the Church well for this generation, and perhaps redefine seminary a bit in the process. Maybe we'll throw the whole box away!
- *We're proudly EC.* We are also the seminary of choice for United Methodists in our part of the country (and have been for a generation now). We are also on our way to becoming once again the seminary of choice for the United Brethren denomination, and for a growing network of evangelical Anabaptists. And others. But we are still glad to be EC...founded by you, serving you, and dependent upon you as our best partner in ministry.

"If you want to build a ship, don't summon people to buy wood, prepare tools, distribute jobs, and organize the work, rather teach people the yearning for the wide, boundless ocean" (Antoine de Saint-Exupery, as quoted by Alan Hirsch in *The Forgotten Ways*).

Sixty-four years ago you created a seminary that provoked a yearning for the wide, boundless ocean of the kingdom of God. The last two members of that founding generation (Margaret Maurer and Jim Yoder) passed away this spring; in remembering them we remember the missional roots of our own enterprise. We will continue to teach our students in this generation to want to sail across that deep ocean... and trust you, as leaders of God's churches, to build and captain the boats that will take them safely there.

Gratefully,

***Dr. Tony Blair, President***