Reconceiving Success: Mission as Faithful Witness

Graham A. Meiklejohn

Dr. Graham Meiklejohn is the Academic Director of and lecturer for the Scottish Baptist College, Scotland.
graham.meiklejohn@uws.ac.uk

Abstract
Explorations of success criteria for church-based missions are abundant, but they are not always helpful in supporting the well-being of practitioners. This article argues for abandoning success criteria in missions and instead viewing missions as a practice of faithful witness. Using David Bosch's critiques of the evangelical and ecumenical models for missions, the discussion explores faithfulness as prophetic dialogue and witness as an eschatological concept to develop a more supportive approach to local church missions.

Keywords
David Bosch; mission; success criteria; faithful witness

Introduction: Missions and Success

Does it matter if mission is successful? In my experience mission and success do not make easy bedfellows. I have wrestled with the question for nearly fifteen years since being involved in several missional roles/organisations and latterly in academic reflection. Most people will acknowledge that mission is not just 'people in the pews' or the three 'Bs' — 'bodies, budget, and buildings' as Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer put it — but, from my experience, parameters for missional success include, amongst others, spiritual formation, discipleship, transformation, or opportunities for presenting Jesus to an unchurched society.[1] While this is a step in the right direction, there is still a focus on the outcome of missions being successful. Gil Rendle argues that there is a difference between *counting* and *measuring*, but still concludes that measuring is important to track outcomes.[2] However, I suggest that

[1] Ed Stetzer and Thom S. Rainer, *Transformational Church* (B&H Publishing, 2010), p. 26.
[2] Gil Rendle, *Doing the Maths of Mission: Fruits, Faithfulness, and Metrics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), p. 16.

neither counting success nor measuring outcomes are helpful for missional practice.[3] Developing missional practice should not be about redefining the outcome to measure but recognising that any sort of measure is inherently counterproductive for the faithful witness to God's kingdom. Instead, missional practitioners should *discern* what *God is doing* rather than *measure* what *they are doing*. By revisiting David Bosch's *missio Dei* in *Transforming Mission* and more so his analysis of the evangelical and ecumenical models of mission in *Witness to the World*, I argue that conceiving of missions as faithful witness avoids the unhelpful suppositions inherent in both models, bringing clarity to the question of measuring success in missional practice.

The Mission of God and Faithful Witness

Bosch's *Transforming Mission* remains a seminal work in mission studies particularly for its emphasis on the *missio Dei*. Bosch traces the idea back to the 1930s and the Barthian influence that understands mission 'as an activity of God himself'.[4] There is one mission of God through which all other missions of the church are 'derivative'.[5] Significantly, Bosch suggests this means the primary objective of church-based missions

> can therefore not simply be the planting of churches or the saving of souls; rather, it has to service the *missio Dei*, representing God in and over against the world, pointing to God, holding up the God-child before the eyes of the world in a ceaseless celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany.[6]

In short, church-based missions should *point* to God, *represent* God, *hold up* Christ before those who do not yet know him. From this perspective a good umbrella term for missions is *faithful witness*.

---

[3] 'Missions' is too broad a term to be useful in most cases when it can encompass world Christianity, colonialism, contextualisation, and so on. As indicated by locating myself in the conversation, I am primarily thinking about intracultural mission in the West through the activities of local churches and organisations. While some of the conclusions may be instructive for wider conversations, I suspect the approach and experiences would differ.

[4] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991), p. 389.

[5] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 390.

[6] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 391.

As Bosch notes, this approach is a return to the centrality of the trinitarian nature of God.[7] Viewing the *missio Dei* as the sending of the Son and Spirit alone, however, can result in a kind of open-endedness which detrimentally lends itself to measures of success. Bosch primarily emphasises the sending movements of the persons, but the soteriological nature of the Trinity must also include their return.[8] The Son proceeds from the Father only to be reconciled to the Father through the resurrection and ascension, inaugurating a recapitulation of human nature. The Spirit spirates from the Father, and in a continuous, dynamic movement, dwells within Christians so that they might participate in Christ's reconciliation of humanity to the Father. The persons of the Trinity are never sent without an inevitable return. Thus, the mission of God is not found in sending alone, but also the return of the persons, gathering with them all who are indwelled by the Spirit and reconciled to the Father through the Son.

To build upon Bosch, it is not only that 'to participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people', but it is also to participate in the reconciliation accomplished by the return of the Son and Spirit to the Father.[9] I suggest, therefore, that the mission of God can be summed up in the following: 'To reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven.'[10] This approach places the emphasis of the *missio Dei* on the story of reconciliation not only on the 'sent-ness' of the triune persons. By extension, the emphasis of the *missiones ecclesiarum* (i.e. church-based missions or, in this discussion, missions for short) is not on the sending activity, but rather

---

[7] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 390.

[8] I acknowledge that the return may be implicit in some understandings of 'sent-ness', but here I want to make it explicit in order to emphasise the already completed *missio Dei*. In doing so, I follow St. Thomas Aquinas's idea of *exitus* and *reditus* where 'the eternal processions of the Son and Holy Spirit are the path of our return to the Father'. Dominic Legge, *The Trinitarian Christology of St Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 13. Cf. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences* I. d. 14, qu. 2, ans. 2, especially the idea of the circle or return — 'For just as we have also been constituted through the Son and the Holy Spirit, through them too we are joined to the ultimate end.'

[9] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 390.

[10] Colossians 1:20 (NIV) — the verse continues 'by making peace through his blood shed on the cross'. Again, it is not just the 'sent-ness' (or incarnation) of the Son that is determinative, but the act of reconciliation through the Son's death, resurrection, and ascension.

the faithful witness to the reconciliation of all things, which God has already achieved through Christ. Focusing only on 'sent-ness' leaves the purpose of the *missio Dei* open-ended, while the return emphasises the story of reconciliation. Detrimentally, the open-endedness, when extended to church-based missions, gives rise to two problems explored below: first, the mistaken belief that humans are tasked with completing the *missio Dei* (the core criticism of the ecumenical model); and second, the mistaken belief that we can measure the progress towards completion (the core criticism of the evangelical model).

Evangelical and Ecumenical Models of Mission

Bosch's earlier work, *Witness to the World*, critiques two common models of church-based missions — the first he names the *evangelical* model and the second, the *ecumenical* model. The evangelical model is rooted in an 'other-worldliness' which considers the present creation to be 'temporary' and therefore 'unimportant'.[11] Christians in this model separate from the world and focus on saving souls, 'without having to introduce any changes in their pattern of life as regards social involvement'.[12] Bosch's criticism of the evangelical model is nuanced and profound. He rejects the proposal that conservative churches are experiencing growth because of their fundamentalism, instead arguing that 'despite their spine-chilling sermons about sin, Satan and hell [they] do not constitute any real threat to their listeners' life-style'.[13] In short, the message might sound harsh, but it is less challenging to a comfortable life-style than the hard work of battling social injustice.

Bosch's second critique of the evangelical model is the 'almost fanatical clinging to existing structures and patterns of life'.[14] Bosch argues that 'the more the gospel is proclaimed as an other-worldly reality, the more the existing order is uncritically upheld'.[15] In short, the

[11] David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (Wipf & Stock, 2006), p. 207.
[12] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 207.
[13] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 207.
[14] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 207.
[15] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 207.

evangelical model not only maintains the status quo but paradoxically promotes collusion with cultural norms. The evangelical model becomes a 'victim of the capitalistic mentality' so 'church and missionary society are run like secular organisations'.[16] Bosch concludes that the capitalistic mentality remains a subtle but dominant driving force behind missions such that 'success must be demonstrable' through an 'emphasis on growth in numbers'.[17]

On the other hand, the ecumenical model argues for a continuation of God's salvation through a liberation of creation and an on-going redemption. Bosch carefully distinguishes liberation theology from classical liberalism where the latter was 'gradual improvement' while the former was revolution not evolution.[18] Whether agreeing with Bosch's assessment of these two theological approaches or not, significantly there is a convergence between the two models. Both see the world as corrupted and change can only come about by discontinuity — for the evangelical model, by God's revelation and for the ecumenical model by human revolution. The main emphasis in the ecumenical model, therefore, is that humans are the architects of their own future.

Bosch criticises the ecumenical model for equating salvation with socio-political liberation: 'Evangelisation is absorbed into political action; salvation is social justice.'[19] For Bosch, this leads to a new Christendom where society is synonymous with the kingdom of God and becomes a 'variation of the old heresy which locates the Kingdom either in the Church or in [human hearts]'.[20] Furthermore, taken to the logical conclusion, this approach diminishes the church until 'the Church becomes entirely a part of the world, indistinguishable from any other element in it'.[21]

---

16 Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 208.
17 Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 208.
18 Due to the revolutionary nature of change, Bosch suggests 'liberation theology is therefore a form of apocalypticism'. Bosch, *Witness to the World*, pp. 213–214.
19 Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 215.
20 Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 216.
21 Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 217.

Despite these two models being at opposite ends of the spectrum, they both suffer from a misappropriation of the relationship between church and world. For the evangelical model, the other-worldly focus leads to an uncritical appropriation of cultural norms; for the ecumenical model, the this-worldly focus dissolves church into world.[22] Bosch advocates an 'essential difference' between church and world so that 'in her prayer the Church vicariously does for the world what the world neither does nor can do for itself'.[23] While Bosch develops his response in one direction, the following discussion suggests that conceiving of missions as *faithful witness* navigates the problems raised by Bosch's analysis, particularly when applied to measuring success in missional practice.[24]

Responding to the Evangelical Model: Faithfulness and Prophetic Dialogue

Considering the prophetic as an act of faithful witness can counter the evangelical model's captivity to the 'capitalistic mentality' and thus its propensity to measure success in numbers. Prophecy is used in many ways from foretelling to forthtelling, from mystical proclamation to tangible transformation; however, a straightforward definition is simply the faithful witness to God's mission.[25] Using the prophetic to consider church-based missions, Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, citing Baziou, note a change in missions from 'expansion' to 'encounter' and

---

[22] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 224.

[23] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 219.

[24] Like the proposal here, Bosch considers the 'most adequate formulation' for mission uses the umbrella term 'witness'; however, Bosch subdivides this into proclamation, fellowship, and service. Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 227. This leads Bosch to develop a response in a particular way that while not contradictory, does not answer the questions of missional practice as discussed here.

[25] For example, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* defines a prophet as one who 'characteristically speaks for God as a messenger speaks for his master'. R. W. L. Moberly, 'Prophecy', in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology,* ed. by Ian A. McFarland, D. Fergusson, K. Kilby, and I. Torrance (Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 413–414. *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* puts it concisely as 'an immediate communication of God's (Christ's) word to his people through human lips' and translates *nābî* as one who witnesses or testifies. A. Lamorte and D. F. Hawthorne, 'Prophecy, Prophet', in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd edn, ed. by Walter A Elwell (Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 960–962.

propose prophetic dialogue as a helpful approach to navigate this change.[26] Dialogue balances bold proclamation (*expansion*) with respectful listening (*encounter*), while the prophetic recognises that 'in its annunciation of the gospel, the church must be equally passionate about its denunciation of injustice and evil'.[27] Unlike the evangelical model with its other-worldly ignorance, prophetic dialogue has no uncritical embrace of the present order. Bevans and Schroeder recognise that 'Christian life goes against the grain', describing mission as *countercultural* (although not *anticultural*).[28] Citing three examples — Gerhard Lohfink, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, and Craig Van Gelder — Bevans and Schroeder understand that churches should be a 'contrast society', 'resident aliens', or 'demonstration plots' where 'being the church […] is a prophetic act'.[29]

But how does the prophetic relate to measures of success? Insightfully, Bevans and Schroeder use Jeremiah to show that prophetic 'action was hardly popular with the king or with the people in general'.[30] This is illustrative of a wider concept where a prophet faithfully witnesses to God's will 'in season, out of season, despite opposition, derision, and persecution'.[31] Similarly Ezekiel is told to proclaim God's words 'whether they listen or fail to listen'.[32] Leslie Allen notes 'the response of the recipients to the message of their sovereign (אדני Lord) is strikingly described as *immaterial*, whether acceptance of the message or — more likely in view of their sinful nature — rejection.'[33] One of the key aspects of prophetic action is the faithful witness to God's mission regardless of the reception. Hauerwas and Willimon advocate that Christians live in a way which is 'alien' to the rest of the world, where 'what makes sense to everybody else is revealed to be opposed to

[26] Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Orbis Books, 2011), p. 19.
[27] Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 19.
[28] Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 34.
[29] Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 35.
[30] Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 31.
[31] Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, p. 31.
[32] Ezekiel 2:7 (NIV).
[33] Leslie C. Allen, *Word Biblical Commentary 28: Ezekiel 1–19* (Word Books, 1994), p. 39 (emphasis mine).

what God is doing among us'.[34] They follow this up with an impactful soundbite: 'Jesus was not crucified for saying or doing what made sense to everyone.'[35] In other words, faithful witness is the opposite to measured success.

Rather than the capitalistic mentality that requires success to be evidenced, faithful witness should be the key motivation in missional practice. Instead of fruitfulness or growth being success criteria measured by a defined outcome, the goal of church-based missions is to faithfully witness to the *missio Dei* regardless of the outcome.

Responding to the Ecumenical Model: Witness and Eschatology

When it comes to the ecumenical model, faithful witness counters two interrelated concerns. First, that the *missio Dei* too easily becomes anthropocentric, that is, humans try to accomplish the mission of God themselves; and second, that church-based missions too easily slip into thinking the work of Christ is yet to be completed. The first of these concerns is highlighted in many missional models that claim to be incarnational. David Hesselgrave argues that incarnationalism too quickly claims continuity between Christ's ministry and the life of churches today, while his preferred model is representationalism, which emphasises the discontinuity.[36] Furthermore, this type of incarnationalism leads to missions where individuals and churches continue the salvific work of Christ themselves as if Christ's work remains unfinished.[37]

In contrast, representationalism leads to missions where individuals and churches witness to Christ's work as ambassadors who are the beneficiaries of Christ's finished work on the cross. Moreover, Andreas Kostenberger's critique of John Stott's incarnational model is an insightful reminder of the uniqueness of the *missio Dei*. Kostenberger

---

[34] Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 74.
[35] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, p. 74.
[36] David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today* (Kregel Publications, 2005), p. 141.
[37] Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict*, p. 152.

rejects the incarnational model as 'jeopardizing' the salvific and divine nature of Christ's incarnation upholding 'Jesus's incarnation as thoroughly unique, unprecedented, and unrepeatable'.[38] Once again, Kostenberger and Hesselgrave's critique of incarnationalism mirrors Bosch's observation that the ecumenical model is 'impatient with a God who "is a long time coming"', and 'takes matters into [their] own hands and tries to build the future with [their] own means'.[39] Rather than mimicking the act of salvation or worse, entertaining the idea that we are responsible for completing God's kingdom, church-based missions should be no more than, but certainly no less than, the faithful witness to the one saviour, Jesus Christ and the kingdom that God has established.

The second related concern is that church-based missions too easily become about progress towards a perfect world, thus suggesting that the *missio Dei* is incomplete and necessitates human completion. With Augustine's eschatology in view, R. A. Markus observes that 'no social arrangements, no human justice or ingenuity, could establish the Kingdom of God or bring us any closer to it; only God's saving acts could do that'.[40] This is, according to Luke Bretherton, because Augustine's eschatology resists triumphalism ('marked by an expectation of progress until the church would overcome the world') and separatism (caused by the belief that 'history is oriented toward regress or a movement away from God').[41] The present situation, therefore, 'neither promises nor sets at risk the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is established, if not fully manifest, and the "end" of history is already achieved and fulfilled in Christ.'[42] Church-based missions, therefore, *should not* be about establishing the kingdom of God, but rather, *should* be about witnessing to the kingdom of God already established and the potentiality of reconciliation inaugurated by Christ. Christian witness to the kingdom of God may render the kingdom more

---

[38] Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel's Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 216.
[39] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 216.
[40] R. A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 55.
[41] Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 82.
[42] Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics*, p. 82.

clearly visible to the world around us and it may release reconciliatory potential by inviting others into the kingdom, but our missional endeavours do not institute or ultimately complete the kingdom. Whatever the result of faithful witness, it does not impinge upon the inevitability of God's kingdom.

Faithful witness, therefore, becomes a key motif for church-based missions to resist the temptation to control or complete the *missio Dei* and emphasises the role of Christians to point towards God and Christ's completed work on the cross. Built upon Bosch's critique of the ecumenical model, missions as faithful witness changes the goal of missions from that which humans can establish to that which God has already established.

'Successful' Mission as Cultural Collusion

Considering faithful witness as a response to the problems of both the evangelical and ecumenical models can also point towards a response to measuring success in missional practice. If church-based missions consider outcomes to be 'immaterial' and do not try to control the *missio Dei*, they will be in contrast to many missional movements in the contemporary church. While sometimes with good motives, the reality is that much missional practice is subtly (and often unconsciously) linked to the capitalistic mentality where growth is evidence of success. Even the best-intentioned talk of fruitfulness/spiritual maturity remains symptomatic of modern liberalism's obsession with human development and progress.

Martyn Percy critiques the Fresh Expressions movement as being influenced by the 'contemporary cultural obsession with newness, alternatives and novelty'.[43] Andy Crouch also observes that churches often fall prey to cultural phenomena, be that modernity's 'pretensions

[43] Martyn Percy, 'Old Tricks for New Dogs? A Critique of Fresh Expressions', in *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: Explorations in Emerging Church*, ed. by Louise Nelstrop and Martyn Percy (Canterbury Press, 2008), pp. 27–39 (p. 29).

of control' or postmodernity's 'disillusionment with […] institutions'.[44] Like Percy, Crouch decries churches' 'addiction to novelty' and argues that the sacraments' post-individualist and post-consumerist approach should 'offer us a chance to detoxify from (post)modernity's clamour of newness'.[45] According to Percy, new forms of church arise out of post-institutionalism rather than a genuine recovery of a missiological tradition and therefore 'religion and faith have become consumable commodities'.[46] On the surface novelty is appealing, but Percy argues it is a shallow façade or 'simulation' underwritten by the mistaken belief that 'in-dwelling the novel will somehow take us somewhere different, and better — it is a pure but subtle form of consumerism'.[47] The implication is undoubtedly clear — this kind of collusion with capitalist consumerism takes the need for control from the ecumenical model and marries it with the need for evidenced success from the evangelistic model. As such, any mission that colludes with capitalist consumerism is diametrically opposite to the approach of faithful witness where the response to missional activity is immaterial while maintaining a critical distance from context.

Kester Brewin critiques transactional methods of church-based missions. As Percy above, Brewin suggests that much missional activity is commodified because it is driven by what is received in response to what is given — a market exchange.[48] Church-based missions motivated

---

[44] Andy Crouch, 'Life after Postmodernity', in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, ed. by Leonard Sweet (Zondervan, 2003), pp. 63–104 (p. 73, and p. 78).

[45] Crouch, 'Life after Postmodernity', pp. 87–88.

[46] Percy, 'Old Tricks for New Dogs?', p. 30. Of course, this is not how those involved in Fresh Expressions think about it. Jonny Baker writes, 'We're not doing this to try and make church more attractive, we're doing it because it's what we're like. It's to try and express our Christianity in a way that is authentic.' Jonny Baker quoted by Maggi Dawn: 'You Have To Change To Stay the Same', in *The Post-Evangelical Debate*, by Graham Cray, Maggi Dawn, Nick Mercer, Michael Saward, Pete Ward, and Nigel Wright (Triangle, 1997), pp. 35–56 (p. 49). I suspect the best new forms of church tread a thin line between authenticity and cultural collusion recognising that what is 'authentic' is often culturally shaped. For example, Root suggests the pursuit of authenticity can negate the transcendent where 'spirituality, then, is bound to and even serves the immanent frame'. Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* (Baker Academic, 2017), p. 11.

[47] Percy, 'Old Tricks for New Dogs?', p. 34.

[48] See especially his evangelism programme illustration. Kester Brewin, *The Complex Christ: Signs of Emergence in the Urban Church* (SPCK, 2004), pp. 119–120.

by outcomes of any sort are inherently a commodification of the activity where churches/agencies expect a return on their investment (be that of money, time, energy, prayers, or social action). Crouch connects the obsession with novelty to commodification through equating new forms of church with a market niche, citing that 'this is akin to a small store seeking to serve customers that the national chains overlook'.[49] However, even this is 'participating in the same consumer economy' drawing comparisons to Starbucks making 'expensive coffee cool' and the independent stores that benefit from the phenomenon.[50]

In short, even the novel and alternative forms of church too often buy into consumerism by expecting a return on investment. In an extended quote Brewin warns,

> Thinking more widely about our cities, they are massively dominated by market exchange — economic beasts driven by capital and profit […] The Church would be foolish to try to play the city at this game and boost its 'market share', 'reposition itself in the market' or 'rebrand' its message with modern advertising and marketing methods, for the essence of what we have cannot be bought or sold. It is not to be consumed and is not a lifestyle choice.[51]

Under the guise of spiritual language, profit becomes new members; market share becomes church planting; capital becomes tithing or spiritual gifts. Even when wrapped up in biblical language and with good intentions, the capitalist consumerism driving mission validates the anthropocentric temptation to take control of the *missio Dei* to gain 'success' for individual, church, or organisation.

The Practice of Faithful Witness and Missions

So far, faithful witness has been defined by what it is not or what it avoids. It resists the anthropological desire to control the *missio Dei*; it avoids the capitalistic mentality that would measure success through outcomes or responses; and it resists an other-worldliness that hinders its ability to challenge injustice. Positively, approaching missions as

[49] Crouch, 'Life after Postmodernity', p. 76.
[50] Crouch, 'Life after Postmodernity', p. 76.
[51] Brewin, *Complex Christ*, pp. 126–127.

faithful witness broadens the scope of missions ensuring that it does not become passive spectating. Second, faithful witness uses discernment as the primary tool to enable churches to determine the *missio Dei* for their local context without being swayed by external pressures. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, faithful witness releases churches and church leaders from the unbearable capitalistic burden of success.

While the evangelical model shrinks the scope of missions to personal holiness, the ecumenical model reduces missions to an anthropocentric political agenda. Based upon the *missio Dei* as the reconciliation of all things, faithful witness recognises the breadth of missions, including a reconciled creation (encompassing the non-human) and resisting systemic injustice that perpetuates abusive patterns of behaviour. It is perhaps Jürgen Moltmann who best captures the fullness of reconciliation when he suggests that 'we should bow before the earth and beg for forgiveness for the injustice we have inflicted on it, so that we may once more be accepted into community with it'.[52] While the agency of creation to grant forgiveness is debatable, reconciliation is necessary across all planes — other humans, the wider created order, ourselves, and with God. Churches who embrace the call to faithful witness recognise the world is not as it should be and advocate for the world as it could be by seeking out the unreconciled places and becoming ambassadors for the ministry of reconciliation 'as though God were making His appeal through us'.[53] Therefore, witnessing is not passive spectating but active participation in revealing God's kingdom.[54]

To be a faithful witness is to be an ambassador who prepares the way for the sovereign; who advocates for the concerns of the

---

[52] Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology* (SCM Press, 1997), p. 116.

[53] 2 Corinthians 5:20 (NIV).

[54] Witnessing in the normative sense of the word is to give testimony to an event or occurrence. This does not render Christians inactive bystanders. First, the act of witnessing is active and necessary ('how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?' Romans 10:14 NIV). Second, I imagine a witness as an ambassador or emissary — one who represents another without being conflated with the other ('We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.' 2 Corinthians 5:20 NIV).

sovereign; and who represents the sovereign to their immediate context. Far from being a passive spectator, an ambassador is an active participant in representing the sovereign to the world (i.e., to repeat Bosch's words, 'holding up the God-child before the eyes of the world in a ceaseless celebration of the Feast of the Epiphany'). Faithful witness recognises church-based missions as derivative from the will of God and therefore not self-determined, which means that far from being reductive, the *missio Dei* is broad, far-reaching, and transforms every aspect of the created order.

In the same way that faithful witness can wrongly appear to be passive inactivity, it can also appear to be vague and lacking direction. While, on the one hand, providing a ten-step programme is not the aim, church-based missions as faithful witness should result in concrete and tangible action within a given context. The ecumenical model's tendency to conflate socio-political goals with church-based missions reduces its ability to discern the *missio Dei*; the evangelical model's success-driven approach limits church-based missions to only that which fulfils its success criteria. Faithful witness, however, relies on discernment to perceive the *missio Dei* within the local context.

Haley Barton describes discernment as 'an ever-increasing capacity to "see" or discern the works of God in the midst of the human situation so that we can align ourselves with whatever it is that God is doing'.[55] Significantly, discernment upsets the status quo by confronting us with what is beyond our normative experience.[56] She argues that discernment takes Christians beyond systems of thought that stifle their perception of God's will and helps to 'get outside our paradigms so that we can see old realities in new ways'.[57]

Ryan Newson describes discernment as a powerful 'counter-practice' which shapes Christian action in a society marked by 'moral incompetence'. For Newson, discernment is not 'quietistic in the face of injustice', but rather, 'Christians engaged in communal discernment are

[55] Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together: A Discernment Practice for Leadership Groups* (IVP Books, 2012), p. 20.
[56] Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, p. 26.
[57] Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, p. 24.

being prepared – whether they realize it or not – to see that authentic and lasting change in the world comes not by quietistic inaction, but by boldly and lovingly confronting what needs confronting with gospel means.'[58]

Discernment done well implements a countercultural approach without it becoming anticultural. Faithful witness requires ecclesial communities to listen to God's *verbum externum* and, therefore, be critical of the surrounding context when necessary; but it also requires ecclesial communities to listen to the needs of the local context and respond in love. It is neither the other-worldly approach of the evangelical model that dismisses the value of the world; but it is not the uncritical approval of the ecumenical model. While a ten-step programme is the easy way to arrive at concrete actions, it would just create success criteria; however, the practice of discernment, while more effort and less prescriptive, will nevertheless lead to concrete and tangible action.

At the heart of this discussion is the question of successful missions and, in conclusion, I return to that theme. The simple conclusion is that church-based missions as faithful witness releases leaders and missional activity from the pressure of measuring success. Establishing communities of faithful witness recognises that God's sovereign grace is active in missional practice, not human achievement, and humans do not have control over God's sovereignty. On a pragmatic level, like the prophets called to speak regardless of the response, missions of faithful witness continue to act in ways God has called them, regardless of their success. By acting as faithful witnesses, leaders and practitioners are released from the responsibility of outcomes and results. Faithful witness is not anti-growth per se, but faithful witness breaks the link between measuring human achievement and the *missio Dei*.[59]

---

[58] Ryan Andrew Newson, *Radical Friendship: The Politics of Communal Discernment* (Fortress Press, 2017), p. 157.

[59] There is a further aspect of faithful witness as a tool for the decolonisation of mission. Not only does it remove the pressure of success-based ministry, it also transforms knowledge. Instead of mission being about an exchange of ideas/knowledge (with the assumption that the Christian's knowledge is superior to the non-believer's), faithful witness is an open-ended presentation and representation of God's presence within creation. The invitation is to engage

Of course, much missional practice is reacting against the failure of churches to be successful — why would you keep doing the same thing when the church is diminishing? The easy answer is to restate the example of the faithful witness of the prophets; the more complex answer recognises that failure has also been defined by cultural norms in the same way as the success criteria. Furthermore, little of the promised growth has materialised from decades of missional practice based upon these criteria for success. Being wedded to the capitalistic mentality has caused churches to lose their relevancy within society to speak out on the issues that matter.

Aimed specifically against Donald McGavran's homogeneous unit principle, Bosch's strongest criticism is where the pursuit of success/growth has disfigured the gospel:

> If it should happen – for instance in the USA – that racial integration in a specific church causes a decline in church membership, he [McGavran] recommends racially segregated churches because, so he believes, it has been proved that such homogeneous churches grow more quickly than those with a heterogeneous composition.[60]

Bosch's pointed criticism on the corrupting effect of success criteria on the gospel should end the matter on success criteria for the missions of churches. In light of this criticism, it is no wonder that growth-driven missions have led to the calamitous, and paradoxical, irrelevancy of churches within society. While not the easy approach, church-based missions as faithful witness recentres churches as prophetic ambassadors of God's reconciliation, acting out of the certain hope of the *missio Dei*, and not swayed by the allure of novelty or the comfort of capitalist consumerism.

---

with the personal God directly rather than accept beliefs or concepts — it is an epistemological shift from truth in knowledge to truth in encounter, where the missioner is not the arbiter of truth but points to the encounter.

[60] Bosch, *Witness to the World*, p. 208. The homogeneous unit principle (HUP) is McGavran's idea (first posited in the 1970s) that churches grow most successfully when Christians reach out to those who are demographically similar, creating a monolithic church culture.