

## Missio Dei

*Missio Dei* is church started in Minneapolis by Mark and Amy. The church's website describes the emerging congregation "as a community anchored in the neighborhood and centered on Jesus' way of peace, hospitality, simplicity, and prayer."

The neighborhood "is a diverse neighborhood of immigrants, refugees, punks, artists, homeless people, students, activists, and professionals." The neighborhood is the most densely populated square mile between Chicago and Los Angeles, containing close to 9,000 economically diverse residents. More than two thirds of the neighborhood is low-income or below the poverty level. With the exception of a church-sponsored coffee shop, *Missio Dei* is currently the only church that actively meets in the neighborhood.

The community life of *Missio Dei* centers around two households in which some of the members choose to live. Mark's exposure to Anabaptist theology at Bethel Seminary caused Mark and Amy to seek a relationship with the Central Plains Mennonite Conference.

*Missio Dei* identifies itself as a "new monastic" community with a "rule" for common life. The preamble of this rule says, "*Missio Dei* is committed to Jesus' way of peace, simplicity, prayer and hospitality. *Missio Dei* lives to embody Jesus' presence – particularly in this neighborhood. Members of *Missio Dei* commit themselves to three things: centering their lives on Jesus Christ, being present to the neighborhood, and sharing their lives with one another."

On Saturdays from noon until 4:00 p.m., the community participates in what has come to be known as the "Hospitality Train." The community loads up their bike trailers with fresh ingredients and high-quality cooking equipment to feed people good food at a vacant lot which they observed to be an occasional gathering place for some in the neighborhood. Increasingly musicians will come and play while the meal is being served. It has become a place where the diverse segments of the neighborhood gather. It also "brought them under the scrutiny of homeland security officials during the Republican National Convention."

The leaders of *Missio Dei* understand that God's mission precedes human initiative. Amy stated, "None of the people who were involved in starting *Missio Dei* had any background in the neighborhood, so we really wanted to see where God was at work and submit ourselves to the neighborhood." This attention to God's preceding mission resulted in the church's decision to dovetail with existing initiatives in the community. Though she is certified English as a Second Language teacher Amy said, "Instead of starting an ESL [English as a Second Language] course or program, we volunteered at one and now I teach ESL at one of the programs locally. Instead of starting our own [bike] cooperative, Josh – one of the congregation's leaders - works on bikes and builds bikes at an existing bike cooperative." Church leaders spoke of trying to learn from the neighborhood and then asking God to show them where God is working and where God wants them to get involved.

Church planters, Mark and Amy, tie the ideas of God's preceding mission and hospitality together as a single value. Hospitality for this church is not only something offered but also something received. The vision of leaders at *Missio Dei* reflects a reaction against modern church patterns that limit the common life experience to Sunday morning worship and mid-week programming. Mark emphasizes the importance of being clear about the community's "rule" as people come to explore the church: "We have a standard [articulated] that we're calling people toward. So if one person doesn't engage as much as someone else, it's still the same standard we're working toward."

The church also ties theology and ethics together as a single value. “We don’t divide a line between ethics and theology. So simplicity, peacemaking, prayer and hospitality are shared commitments that really shape how we see the Gospel. . . Everything in Scripture has to be discerned in light of Christ’s presence.” Josh adds, “We try not to see doing some sort of service that’s abstract from Christ, but instead, try to live with Jesus because we believe that Jesus is doing these things *and his kingdom exists*, and this is what it looks like.”

“The goal should be to live out your faith with a family of people who live out their faith with you and that you’re hospitable, and you have a . . . porous boundary of who can be family. That’s different than going into the bad neighborhood to try and save it.”

Mark suggested that the central leadership challenge for him is “figuring out how to hand things off, even if they could be done better if I just did them myself.” Mark believes that there is much that could be improved in the traditional educational models found in seminaries. “For most seminaries, even in their urban ministries programs, [the training] assumes you’re coming into an existing 200-member congregation that has certain kinds of programmatic approaches to urban ministry.” So what would the leaders of *Missio Dei* recommend as a proper training path? Mark has a high view of the church as theological training ground: “We can handle the theological training here.”

This seems to be consistent with the church as conceived by anyone labeled “monastic.” In keeping with the monastic tradition, the church maintains open spaces for short-term apprentices to join fully into the community’s life for 3 to 9 months as a way of forming others in this way of being the church. While it is hard to argue with the effectiveness of the church-based theological training that *Missio Dei* is able to do, it is in large part due to Mark’s own ability to be an effective translator of his formal seminary education to his base community.

As the interview came to a close, Mark’s parting words to me seemed to symbolize the breadth of all that was shared: “I hope you enjoy your long trip home. I mean, I’m tired and you look tired. We have a spare bedroom if you want to spend the night.”

1. As you reflect on this story, identify the ways you see *Missio Dei*’s conviction that mission originates with God and what God is doing in a context.
2. Compare and contrast *Missio Dei*’s experience with the Sending of the 70 in Luke 10.
3. Reflect on Mark’s observations about theological education and leadership development as essential to vital congregational mission. How is *Missio Dei*’s work in these areas different than the ways you think about theological education and leadership development? What conclusions do you draw from this story that might inform the work of your congregation?