

# February 2020 — What is mission?

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I was recently asked by a representative of the mission committee of a church in Florida to define “mission.” A simple enough question, but not so easy to answer, because any answer begs more questions. For me, at its simplest it is about the living out of our faith — to put into action those things that we believe and proclaim. To this end mission is transformative: It is about making a difference, but not just in other people; it should also be transforming us.



One of the misunderstandings about mission is that it is something that we do, that we are somehow initiators, so we speak of our mission or the church’s mission. The reality, though, is that it is God’s mission, and we are partners in it. So, to engage in mission is to begin a process of discernment, as some describe it, to “read the signs of the times.” What is happening in my community and the world? How does the Bible speak to situations like this? Where might God be calling us to play a part? Who are the other partners in this work? Who is already addressing this issue?

Then it gets interesting, for as much as we are seeking to make a difference, God is also seeking to transform us, for no one is without agency in God’s mission. The most interesting aspect of the story of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 is that neither the righteous, nor the unrighteous, know what is going on. They are clueless, so they ask the question, “when did we see you ...?” In this story the agents of transformation are the hungry, thirsty, sick, naked, strangers and prisoners who, in their encounters, as the story goes, lead some to righteousness and others to damnation. There are no intentional acts of compassion here, simply the transformation of some to meet another person in their moment of need as a most natural and therefore unconscious action.

Most of us are a long way from that, so as we reach out to address the ills of our community and the world, we also need to be open to transformation. To understand our part in the systems that make things this way. To recognize how our unconscious judgments painfully stigmatize and discriminate against others and contribute to the injustice in the world.

There is a further dimension to this. Oftentimes it is easier to reach out to others who are physically distant to us, because at arm’s length it is harder or more abstract to make the connections between their experience and ours. If we can help a community across the world realize Jesus’ promise of life in all its fullness, we should also be doing the same with communities nearer to home, our immediate neighbors, and be making the connections so that we can play a larger transformative role and be more thoroughly transformed ourselves.

Which brings me back to my questioner from Florida, a woman who had just turned 80, with whom I had a most engaging and stimulating conversation. Listening to her I learned that mission is not always about big projects, although that’s what she was calling about. She told me she lived in a community and belonged to a church where not everyone saw things the way she did, especially around politics, but she was not deterred. She established friendships regardless, and with her friends would go to the movies, and sometimes she would pay, so they saw thought-provoking films, which they would discuss afterwards, enabling them to hear each other and learn from each other. A small witness, but a powerful one in these times, which reminds me of another definition of mission: “crossing frontiers and changing lives.”



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