

The Eyes Have it: How to Find Out Your Church's Holistic Ministry

How do you look at something? That can mean, “With what do you look?” as in using an instrument: microscope, MRI, x-ray, telescope, ultra-sound, glasses, binoculars, infrared scope, etc.

It can also mean, “What perspective do you use?” as in how you view life, issues, and beliefs: Christian worldview, liberal! moderate/conservative, orthodox/neoorthodox/unorthodox, optimistic! pessimistic.

How do you look at your community? Opportunity for or obstacle to change? “Field white unto harvest” or wasteland? Us vs. Them? Babylon or New Jerusalem? A place to embrace or a plague to avoid?

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How can you look at your community from God’s perspective, and in so doing, make a difference in your world?

What do your congregation’s participants need to do to find out what ministries they ought to be doing in their community?

1. Look up: in prayer

Any attempt to launch out into the mission field of a congregation’s holistic context must begin with prayer. We must receive God’s insight into whom, what, where, and how we are to serve. We discern God’s invitation to holistic ministry as we get in on God’s plan. However, sometimes the initiative does not spring from us as we seek God’s will; rather, process begins when we receive requests from people who ask us to pray for them and we detect a pattern of need. Need doesn’t necessarily constitute call, but it can get us moving.

2. Look forward: into God’s future

- God’s plans come into focus as we develop a biblically based mission and a compelling vision statement. A mission statement, common with all churches, shows us “this is it,” like a snapshot, and a vision statement, unique to our congregation, shows “this is where we are going,” like a video. Keep both brief— something you can state in a long breath.
- “Go!” forms the framework for the future. We go because the Scriptures say, “As the Father

sent [Jesus] into the world so [Jesus] sends us . . . into all the world to make disciples of all nations” (John 17:18; Matthew 28:18- 19). How did Jesus go about making disciples? He went preaching, teaching, and healing (Matthew 9:35), thus providing us with a missional model for ministering to the needs of the whole person.

- We also go because the theologians systematically fill out the framework. The late Bishop Lesslie Newbigin’s challenge to be a missionary church has been contextualized for North American Christians in a recent book from “The Gospel and Our Culture Network”: *The Missional Church*, edited by Dr. Darrell Guder (Berdman, 1998). Dr. Ron Sider’s new book, *Good News and Good Works* (Baker, 1999), champions a theology of the whole gospel, formed as a triangle of word-deed-sign. Bryant Myers adds to the picture a fourth dimension (spirituality, i.e., Christ in you) in his new book, *Walking with the Poor* (Orbis, 1999).

- We go because of our view of the church. Our church is not a country club that services its members’ needs; we’re a mission outpost that exists for “others” hungry and hungering for good news. Our facilities, programming, personnel, and budget should reflect such an orientation.

- Our framework also has missiological implications. Our missionary God calls forth a missionary people serving from mission outposts in a mission field context.

3. Look around: through surveying

Some of our discernment comes as we ask, seek, and knock. We ask by polling our community (e.g., querying people about needs in the area) or developing questionnaires (“What are the things money can’t buy?”) to implement needs-based topics addressed by special events, preaching, and teaching.

We seek out holistic ministry opportunities by conducting windshield surveys (driving around), walking around, naive listening (overhearing the questions and concerns raised at public events such as a t-ball game or community concert), and intentional conversations that come through guided focus groups.

We knock on doors of neighbors’ homes and the offices of key community leaders and service providers.

4. Look in: “Know thyself”

Develop a process for discerning and implementing your congregants' spiritual gifts, personalities, and passions. Start a skills bank that documents their talents, abilities, life experience, occupations, and interests. And congregations as a whole, I believe, also have spiritual gifts, personalities, and passions, that need to be acknowledged and developed.

5. Look across: secure partners

Who are the natural allies that can serve alongside your congregation? Look for churches in your ecclesiastical district or from your area. Also find those that share your theological orientation.

What new alliances can you build? They might be regional or national in scope. They might range across denominational, theological, and/or racial/ethnic lines.

6. Look out: "Surprise, Surprise, Surprise!"

Finding out what God wants your congregation to do in holistic ministry is a risky adventure.

You will be stretched, have your resources strained, and experience a strengthened faith. Church consultant Bill Easum prods us with these provocative words: "If it's possible, God's ~ not in it." As another person has said, "Faith is moving to the edge of the darkness and then taking one more step." We don't know where, when, why, how, or to whom God's going to lead us. But lead w God will — if we're willing to follow God's leading.

When that happens, the Apostle Paul's comforting and challenging words can assure us (Ephesians 3:20-21, "Olson version"): "Our God is able to do above and beyond what we are able to ask or imagine, according to God's power at work within God's church. And unto God be the glory in the church [in your church!] through Christ Jesus, both now and forever. Amen!"

What do you see when you look at your community? What "eye-wear" have you found helpful?

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