

Chapter Five

The Holistic Mission of the Church for Canada: God's YES to the World

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Introduction

The Canadian society has been changing steadily in past decades. The assumptions about the role of the Church and Christianity in Canadian society are very different now compared to 30 years ago. At present, the institutional church is viewed negatively by default. Identifying yourself as an evangelical Christian does not illicit a response of respect or admiration that it did previously. More often than not, it now produces a reaction of caution or suspicion. Why is this?

The reasons are often not obvious at first. Two observations do help us understand. A secular media does not understand the historic Christian faith and therefore equates anyone with genuine faith to be a fundamentalist. And to be a fundamentalist implies that one is irrational, potentially violent, and not a helpful citizen in our multi-cultural Canadian society. Secondly, what is making the news is the shameful and sad history of abuse within the Catholic church and the treatment of First Nations Peoples in the schools run by the mainline denominations (with the funding of the government).

Another significant change is that of a movement away from a model of society influenced by Christian values to a multi-cultural society dominated by a militant secularism. Canadian educational institutions and the media have been taken over by secularism. Secularism assumes that belief in God is irrelevant (or potentially dangerous) to societal good. A secular world does not deal properly with either the spiritual core of the person or with the innate dignity and value of persons or communities. We believe that the many negative effects of secularism on our society have yet to be recognized.

Intriguingly there is another challenge to the discipling of our nation that comes from the very success of the historic Christian presence in our land. Dr. Donald Goertz of Tyndale Seminary talks about the Canadian success story of the evangelical Church impacting our society. This impact is seen in the way in which our government has institutionalized “compassion.” Both federal and provincial governments are concerned about the welfare of the less fortunate. Social policies, including the social welfare programs, tax credits for low income Canadians, disability pensions, per diem subsidies of religious hospitals and caring institutions, communicate the message that the state is there to care for the less fortunate. This is a good thing. But many people think, even if they don’t verbalize the question, “If the state is there to care for the unfortunate, why should Christians get involved?”

This chapter will address the need and challenge of the Church in Canada to engage in holistic mission in our changing Canadian context. The first section will present Biblical and theological foundations for holistic mission. The following will bring to light some of the benefits of a passionate commitment to holistic mission. Next we will review some of the issues that arise when we engage in holistic mission and learn some wisdom from practitioners. The final section will share some stories and examples of churches and ministry organizations that are compassionately sharing God’s love with their Canadian neighbours.

Biblical Foundations for Holistic Mission

A Biblical foundation for holistic mission must begin with the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. Holistic mission is communicating the good news about God’s love both by sharing the message of God’s love and by practical acts of caring, compassion, and justice. Jesus’s brief years of ministry in Palestine demonstrated this commitment to a whole Gospel, the sharing of God’s love in both word and deed, time and again:

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23).

But it is fair to ask if His supernatural ability to heal and His exercising of this gift is really an example for us as His followers. After all, there are many things about Jesus that are unique to His calling, such as His sacrificial death on a cross. Times have changed, it can be argued. The government and professional caregivers are now the way to care for the poor.

However, not only did Jesus go about healing and teaching, He clearly taught His followers that compassionate caring for the marginalized is extremely important. So important that it is at the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Matthew 25:31-46 simply cannot be ignored:

“Then the King will say to those on his right. ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me...’

'Lord, when did we see you hungry...?' To the righteous he will say, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me.' But to those on his left he will say, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matthew 25:31-46).

Secondly, it is part of our obligation as Christians to care for our neighbour. The great commandment summarized in Luke 10:27 has two parts. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbour as yourself.* The apostle Paul echoes the second part of this pivotal teaching in Romans 13 when he says, "owe no one anything except the continuing obligation to love our neighbour, our fellow man."

A third Biblical foundation for holistic mission is the Kingdom of God. The best place to begin thinking about the meaning of the Kingdom of God is to read the Lord's Prayer. "Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven . . . "

The Kingdom of God is seen in the midst of our world anytime God's will is being done. Dallas Willard's comments in his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, are helpful: "Now God's own 'kingdom' or 'rule' is the range of His effective will, where what He wants done is done. The person of God Himself and the action of His will are the organizing principles of His kingdom..." (p. 25).

The Kingdom of God having come and coming is the big idea of the Gospels. The good news of the New Testament is that God is breaking into our world in a new way. Through Jesus, He has broken the power and penalty of sin. Rather than being slaves to sin, the possibility now exists for people to live out God's will in the world.

Isaiah 58 powerfully puts together the justice, compassion, and spirituality of the Kingdom. The Israelites had been seeking God and His favour through fasting and specific religious acts of humbling themselves. But God would not hear them because of the exploitation and violent feuds that were present in their community that was making their pious actions hypocritical.

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: To loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke; To set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood" (Isaiah 58: 6-7).

The vision of the Kingdom of God is about a new era of compassion, societal peace, and *shalom*. It is the vision of a new humanity, a new people who love their neighbours as themselves, who worship God joyfully and join Him in his great mission of making known His loving intentions towards every person, tribe, and nation.

The Church becomes the new community, making visible a new way of living that result from the breaking of the reign of God into the world. In the New Testament, the book of Acts chapters two through four are very powerful. The new community of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, began by sharing with the needy. In the face of persecution, they remain bold and steady to their vision of generosity and community.

“All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to the number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:44-47).

A Biblical theology of mission sees the Church as existing for mission, as existing to be part of God’s missionary intention towards the world. In his classic work on mission, David Bosch states: “The Christian faith, for example, sees ‘all generations of the earth’ as objects of God’s salvific will and plan of salvation or, in New Testament terms, it regards the ‘reign of God’ which has come in Jesus as intended for ‘all humanity.’ This dimension of the Christian faith is not an optional extra—Christianity is missionary by its very nature, or it denies its very *raison d’etre*.”

“The missionary task is as coherent, broad, and deep as the need and the exigencies of human life . . . ‘the whole Church bringing the whole Gospel to the whole world.’ People live in a series of integrated relationships; it is therefore indicative of a false anthropology and sociology to divorce the spiritual or the personal sphere from the material and the social.” (p. 9)

Mission is God’s yes to the world, and participation in holistic mission is why the Church exists.

Unanticipated Benefits of a Passionate Commitment to Holistic Mission

A thoughtful and passionate commitment to being totally involved in God’s yes to the world results in a number of very positive benefits for a local congregation.

Local congregations begin to experience the power of a compelling vision. The vision that we are co-workers with God and that we are participating in extension of His kingdom of righteousness and love, can give focus to the various competing dynamics that exist in local churches. We are about worship and fellowship, and that worship and fellowship is both preparation and participation in God’s yes to the world. Every person, young and old, not just those leading the morning worship or serving on one of the governing and guiding committees of the Church, is involved in the wonderful task of making a positive difference in this world guided by the compassionate Spirit of Jesus. Holistic mission provides a compelling vision because everyone can imagine their role within the scope of the vision.

Discipleship is automatically stimulated in churches committed to God’s holistic yes to the world. When the essential calling of the Church cannot be fulfilled by the experts, people experience an increased need and desire to experience the blessing of seeing God work through them to positively impact their neighbours and their work places. This desire results in a greater desire to “obey everything I have commanded you.” Matt. 28:19. Doing what Jesus commands revolves around developing an individual morality built on love of neighbour and love of God. It means making the great truths of the Scripture come alive in our own lives. It means beginning to live the radical life taught by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, a life where God’s kingdom and his righteousness are of first priority; where:

- Our inner lives are changing to reflect truth goodness.
- We do not allow anger, malice, and contempt shape our actions.

- Sexual purity begins in the hidden realms of the heart.
- Our integrity is evident and our speech does not manipulate others.
- We surprise others with our aggressive generosity.
- We love our enemies and thus reflect God's character.
- Our compassionate actions are done for God and not for the praise of others.
- We are serving God and not material comfort and wealth.
- We are free from worry about the normal concerns of life.

A passionate commitment to being involved in the compassionate movement of God in the world reduces the potential (and unintended) downsides of a church growth vision. Sometimes a strong focus on church growth can be interpreted as being motivated by the desire to grow a power base, to grow in importance and success because my church is growing in numbers. Sometimes Christians don't seem to really care for our neighbours who are caught in the harsh injustices of our world as we seek to pull them into our lifeboat and then row like crazy back to the comfort of our ship. We "help" people only to get them to listen to our words.

Holistic mission does include evangelism. It does imply that people will respond to the message of hope spoken and lived and will become members of local churches. However, holistic ministries undercut misinterpretations because our lives demonstrate a commitment to love others and care for them, regardless of whether they become members of our congregation or even, for that matter, respond to the invitation Christ extends to them, to turn and be saved. It demonstrates to our watching secular world that Christians genuinely care for others.

A commitment to holistic mission engages the gifts of the whole body of Christ. When all the attention of the Church is focused on witnessing (in terms of verbally presenting the claims of Christ to non-Christians) and on having persons become members of the church, there can be a downplaying of the gifts and calling of the majority of church members. Not all are gifted as evangelists nor is everyone born with the ability to teach the truths of the Christian faith. A commitment to being involved in God's yes to the world with a focus on the Kingdom recognizes the diverse and complex reality of right relationships with each other, with the earth and with our God. Every believer can really see his or her role in this great movement of God. The community of faith then becomes the salt and light to the cities and towns in which it lives. Gifted and called believers cause the arts to flourish, work to be valued, and wealth to be generated and shared. Compassion for the suffering stimulates thoughtful acts of generosity and sustains efforts to increase social justice.

Finally, a commitment to holistic mission causes local evangelical congregations to be repositioned in the minds of the community. This is particularly important in our current Canadian reality. Too often churches with a passion for "winning the lost" are viewed as extremist or odd, self serving and almost dangerous. When neighbours see the Church serving with integrity and compassion, they must acknowledge that this "Christianity stuff" does have a positive impact in their own community.

Christians are already involved in serving in their society according to a study in 1999 by Volunteer Canada & the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy. It showed that "religiously

active;” i.e., those who attend church weekly (or at least once per month) are disproportionately represented in those who give money to worthy social causes and who volunteer for these causes. “Particularly striking are the findings that 79 percent of religiously active volunteers are involved in secular agencies and that more of the religiously active volunteer in non-religious agencies (34 percent) than do the religiously inactive (25 percent). Religiously active volunteers are only 14 percent of all Canadians, but they are 43 percent of all volunteers, and they are responsible for 50 percent of all hours volunteered in Canada.” (p. 31)

However, because of the secular blinders on the eyes of the media of our society, this reality is overlooked. When churches reach out, these perspectives begin to change, and faith communities gain some credence for their contribution to the good of our society.

Issues, Perspective, and Wisdom

It has been our observation and experience that many Christians begin their involvement in social ministry by helping meet someone’s immediate and most obvious need. That is wonderful. Motivated by Christ’s heart of compassion we reach out. We provide relief. But very quickly we begin asking ourselves how people have come to be in their various situations.

In the international setting, Christian humanitarian organizations are often called relief and development organizations. This is because there is a continuum of responses depending on the causes of the crisis or problem. The following chart illustrates this idea. On the left are relief responses that are appropriate and most helpful when responding to a crisis. On the right are developmental responses that make sense when the problem is a chronic situation.

Immediate Relief	Long-Term Development
Emergency feeding programs	Agricultural improvement
Blankets and shelter	Clean water project
Emergency medicine	Public health teaching

It is helpful for church leaders to have the concept of a relief-to-development response continuum in mind when getting involved in compassionate outreach to their community.

Others have expanded the idea introduced above. In their excellent book, *Churches that make a Difference*, authors, Sider, Olson, and Unruh, include a very helpful discussion of the various types of social ministry.

“Social ministries fall into four basic categories: relief, individual development, community development, and structural change.

1. *Relief* (giving a hungry person a fish) involves directly supplying food, clothing, or housing to someone in urgent need.

2. *Individual development* (teaching a person to fish) includes transformational ministries that empower a person to improve their physical, emotional, intellectual, relational, or social status.
3. *Community development* (giving a person fishing equipment) renews the building blocks of a healthy community, such as housing jobs, healthcare, and education.
4. *Structural change* (helping everyone get fair access to the fish pond) means transforming unfair political, economic, environmental, or cultural institutions and systems.

“The following table illustrates ministries of all four types that address four different social problems: housing, un- and under-employment, family brokenness, and health. As this table makes clear, each type of social ministry has an important role. If a family has no groceries, they need a food basket—now. But a food basket provides only temporary relief. What will it take for that family not to need groceries next month? They may need information, skills, mentoring, or counseling to help them make changes in their situation. This personal transformation, however, will have limited impact if there are no jobs in the neighbourhood, or if the family is spending most of its income on rent because there is no affordable housing. Those problems in turn may be rooted in unjust policies or institutions, such as a school system that fails to prepare people for the workforce, racist lending practices, or public transportation policies that limit people’s ability to get to good-paying jobs.

God wants to renew every area of human society, from moral choices to family relationships to neighbourhood association to community institutions to laws. Holistic ministries, therefore, confront sin and foster transformation at every level.” (p. 87)

Social Ministry Types

	Relief	Individual Development	Community Development	Structural Change
Housing	Homeless shelter, emergency housing	Home ownership seminar, credit counseling	Affordable housing construction and rehabilitation	Lobbying against redlining and other unfair lending practices, suing slum lords to improve housing conditions
Un- and Under-employment	Food pantry, clothes closet	GED tutoring, job training, budget counseling	Day care centre and after-school program for children of working parents, training in small business start-up	Advocating to raise the minimum wage, promoting tax incentives for job creation in low-income areas
Family brokenness	Family crisis hotline, family services	Parenting classes, family counseling,	Legal aid clinic that offer family service, family	Encouraging employer to adopt “family

	information, and referral clearinghouse	divorce recovery support group	mediation court	friendly” policies, promoting pro-marriage legislation
Health	Free immunizations, vouchers for medicines	Overeater anonymous support group, health seminars	Community gymnasium, health clinic with sliding scale fees	Lobbying for affordable health insurance, antismoking campaigns

It is also important to think carefully about poverty and holistic ministry from a Biblical foundation. Poverty is not only economic, nor is the good life only about being rich. The official Canadian version of the good life may not be the best place to end up.

According to Bryant Myers, writing in *Walking with the Poor*, relationships are ultimately the point of the Biblical story. “Relationships must be restored in all their dimensions. First and foremost, in an intimate and serving relationship with God, through Jesus Christ. Second, in healthy, righteous, and just relationships with ourselves and our communities. Third, in loving, respectful, ‘neighbouring’ relationships with all who are “other” to us. Finally, in an earth-keeping, making-fruitful relationship with the earth.”(p. 50)

An understanding of God’s *shalom* as the outcome of our holistic ministry is also very helpful. *Shalom* means more than the absence of strife. Quoting Wolterstorff, Myers suggests that we must add the ideas of justice, harmony, and enjoyment to capture the full biblical meaning of the word. “*Shalom* means just relationship (living justly and experiencing justice), harmonious relationships, and enjoyable relationships. *Shalom* means belonging to an authentic and nurturing community in which one can be one’s true self and give one’s self away without becoming poor. Justice, harmony, enjoyment of God, self, other, and nature: this is the *shalom* that Jesus brings, the peace that passes all understanding.” (p. 51)

With an understanding of God’s will for each other and our societies in front of us, we can then turn to thinking about poverty. Poverty is a multi-dimensional reality. The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada paper, “Good News to the Poor!”, gives the following very helpful definition of poverty: “Poverty exists when persons, associations, or institutions lack the resources and space they need to fulfill their God-given responsibilities and callings...People can be weakened in their ability to [live fully human and fulfilling lives] for more reasons than simply the lack of material resources. They can be family-poor, job-poor, friends-poor, food-poor, cash-poor, culture-poor, land-poor, etc. “(p. 2).

A multi-dimensional understanding of poverty helps with a Christian response in a number of ways. First it helps us begin to think about matching our compassionate response to the primary source of the problem. It also helps us to understand that our calling is very complex as there are multiple causes of poverty. Finally it helps us realize that all of the gifts and callings of the whole Church are needed to fulfill God’s vision of persons living fully human and fulfilling lives.

One final word of wisdom—be aware of the reality of unintended consequences in a fallen world and of the need for genuine humility. Unfortunately, sometimes our

compassionate responses can cause more harm than good. As cautioned in *Moved With Compassion*, by Vision Canada: “One of the lessons I have learned is that when relief responses are prolonged for too long, there can be very negative impacts which are damaging to local communities. For example, in Ethiopia, the giving of wheat and oats from Europe and North America effectively prolonged the famine. Why? Because there was no market for locally-grown food in some communities. People could get good food for free, so why pay for locally-grown food? As a result the local farmers had no where to sell their grain, stopped planting, and got in line for free food with everyone else” (p.14).

As the Church reaches out in compassion, we need to be humble in our diagnosis of the situation. We need to be aware of the complex mix of causes rooted in the brokenness of the individual and the family, and of root causes stemming from systemic injustice of social systems. We need to go as learners who have received the grace of God and who know that God is gracious to everyone. We go fully aware that our job is not to solve the problems for the poor, but to point them to the grace that comes directly from God. It is our calling to come alongside and, respecting the God-given dignity of everyone, travel the path to the *shalom* that God desires all to experience.

Canadian Examples of Holistic Ministry

Canadian Christians are reaching out in holistic ways to touch their neighbours with the compassion of Christ. There are many stories of how that is happening. Some of these stories were captured in the book by Vision Canada, *Moved With Compassion*. The next section highlights just a few of the stories about God using churches to reach out in holistic ministry.

Churches and ministry organizations in partnership—the story of the Hughson Street Baptist Church in Hamilton, Ontario, is a fascinating one of community-based compassionate outreach *and* ministry partnership. HSBC has been in the north end of Hamilton since 1887. By 1990, the church was dying—there were only 12 elderly individuals as members and the building was falling apart. Then God called Pastor Peter Wright to the church and through his youth ministry called Reach Forth and his commitment to coaching in the local schools, the church changed dramatically and youth began to come. By the end of 1994 there were about 40 people attending the church

In 1995, Dwayne Cline became the pastor of the church. During his first year of ministry the church determined that God had placed them in the north end, one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Hamilton, for a reason. The church purposed to become a neighbourhood church, not a regional church like so many urban churches where members live all over the city and drive to the church on Sunday. This calling resulted in three things—all ministry was directed to the neighbourhood and its needs, a commitment of church members (led by the pastor) to move into the neighbourhood, and the involvement of the church leadership and members in local schools and committees.

The result is a church that naturally blends holistic outreach/service ministry with more traditional ministry. Its current ministry brochure includes a community-involvement section with the opportunities to serve in the breakfast club, organized by the North Hamilton Health Centre, or to help with tutoring and homework, or to work with ESL (English as a Second Language) students.

The partnership between this church and IT (International Teams) is only two years old. The results have been very positive. More resources are available to the church to reach out as IT missionaries serve as part-time church staff with a focus on outreach. Christian leadership opportunities in the neighbourhood have increased; strategic thinking on church planting, social ministry, community development, and evangelism have all been enhanced. As Pastor Dwayne expressed it, “if we were at a 3 out of 10 on a scale, the IT partnership has moved that to a 6 or 8.” The church has moved beyond a middle-class idea of evangelism, “it wouldn’t work in our neighbourhood,” to one that is more communal than individualistic.

The church now has 140 attendees every Sunday and has run out of space. It is praying about moving the morning services into the auditorium of the building (former school) across the street!

In Toronto, the Toronto City Mission has developed some very good partnerships with local churches. The annual Christmas outreach dinner at Spring Garden Church in North York provides one example of some of the dynamics of this partnership.

The staff team of the Toronto City Mission does the background work for the Christmas hamper and gifts component. Needy families are interviewed and registered in the program. The personalized gifts and food vouchers are provided through an Adopt-a-Family program run by the mission. Spring Garden Church then hosts all these families and others to a Christmas celebration. It includes a turkey dinner with all the trimmings, each table has hosts from the church, and the evening includes plays and songs that celebrate Christmas. The warmth and welcome of a caring community is provided by the members of Spring Garden Church. In the end, Christmas generosity is shared and poor people are part of a celebration where they feel at home.

The ongoing impact has been the development of real relationships between some needy single-parent families in the neighbourhood and members of the church. This in turn led to a quick and compassion response when a fire destroyed part of the home of one of these families. A number of members from Spring Garden Church got involved in this situation of need. Last fall, this woman accepted Christ and is now attending Spring Garden Church on a regular basis.

Churches working together to reach out—“Love Abbotsford” is an example of a different strategy of holistic ministry. It is an annual event that invites churches all across the city of Abbotsford, British Columbia, to reach out to their community with planned acts of kindness, no strings attached. On one weekend in June, many of the churches of the city mobilize their membership and find creative ways to serve their communities in what is being called, Servant Evangelism. Last year, hundreds of individuals from over 20 churches participated in this day of caring.

The Love Abbotsford team is hoping that their experience will stimulate other cities to reach out in similar ways to their communities. They are sharing their resources and experiences through a web site, www.LoveYourCity.com.

Individuals—The professionalization and politicization of compassion in Canada has resulted in a tremendous need for **individual** Christians to put a real face on the kindness and love that knowing Jesus brings into our world. Professionals are only allowed to let

their clients come so close and no closer. They often leave their offices and commute to their homes far from the struggling people who they assist.

Each of us as Christians has the opportunity and calling to be the human face that reflects the compassionate face of God seen in Jesus. We can be those who bring the reality of the spiritual back to the core of our society that has been hollowed out by secularism.

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Web Resources

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