



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403
(612) 332-3421
www.westminstermpls.org

We Are the Church: Go forth into the world in peace

Tim Hart-Andersen

Sunday, October 1, 2023

Matthew 28:16-20

As I enter my final month with you before retirement, I begin a five-part sermon series on the Charge and Benediction I have used to conclude worship every week that I have preached here. I learned it from my father, and always figured he thought it up, only to learn later in seminary that it's actually from scripture – that's even better.

I heard it every Sunday growing up. It starts like this: *Go forth into the world in peace.*

That line echoes the scripture text from Matthew 28:

Go, therefore, into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

We call it the Great Commission, and that one sentence has had more definitional impact on how the church engages with the world than any other particular part of the Bible. It has had profound impact on the Church and the world. In the 19th century, Christian churches in North America and Europe heard the words of Matthew 28 as a compelling call to move out across the globe to bring the good news of Jesus Christ.

So we went. We taught the faith, started churches, set up schools, established hospitals, and spread the practice of Christianity. We also brought Western culture and ideas to those living in the global south and other areas of the

world. It was the theological corollary to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny.

When Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to *me*,” many in the in the Church mistakenly heard that as “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to *us*.” We tended to assume that authority unto ourselves. Well-intentioned or not, the impact of this missionary zeal often caused abrupt, and even devastating change – the opposite of what the love of Jesus would have wanted.

Some American churches sent missionaries overseas; others focused on North America. The westward movement of white settlers in the 1800s brought the new nation into conflict with indigenous peoples living on the land. As we know from our history lessons, military conflict and violence accompanied the displacement of

first nations. A different, lesser-known kind of violence followed, often with the church's complicity.

The "educational" institutions established by churches in collusion with the federal government were part of a 19th century systematic campaign of assimilation. The federal government aimed to take away Native culture, language, religion, practices, and traditions in order to *Americanize* and *Christianize* them. And they started with the kids; *we* started with the kids. Children.

The federal Commissioner for Indian Affairs said in 1886,

"The government aid furnished (to churches) enables them to sustain their missions, and renders it possible...to lead these people, whose paganism has been the chief obstacle to their civilization, into the light of Christianity."

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/amp/national/u-s-report-details-church-state-collusion-on-indigenous-schools>)

Ben Sherman, who was taken as a child to Oglala Community School in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, remembers the pain. “The government was not done with war,” he said, “So the next phase involved war against the children.”

At one point in the late 19th century, 85% of school-age indigenous children in this country were living at one of the nation’s 523 boarding schools. According to a report by the U.S. Department of the Interior, “thousands” of children likely died while at the schools. The cemeteries are now being uncovered. Half of those schools were operated by churches under a contract with the federal government, or run independently by religious groups, including Presbyterians. Some of them kept operating through much of the 20th century.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/08/30/us/natice-american-boarding-schools.html>

<https://www.pcusa.org/news/2022/2/23/restorative-history/>

American Christians went “into all the world,” intending to bring the Good News, but the news was not always good for those on the receiving end. Denominations – including ours – are only now coming to terms with what they did in the name of God. Repairing the harm begins with facing the truth and listening.

Missionaries brought with them, wherever they went, their predilections and prejudices. The impact of the coming of Christianity was traumatizing in some contexts. Dutch Reformed leaders, Presbyterians from the Netherlands, provided a theological rationale for racist apartheid policies in South Africa, much as Christian preachers had done in this country in support of the enslavement of Africans. Missionaries cut people off from their own language and culture and indigenous religious practices.

Jesus did not command us to take children from families and send them to boarding schools and strip them of their culture, their identity. Nowhere does Jesus tell us to reject long-established traditional ways of life that had been sustaining and identity-giving in communities for multiple generations – to wipe all that out, and insist that one culture or ethnicity or race would dominate others.

In the 19th century, in an act of ecclesiastical hubris, major American Protestant denominations divided up the globe as if it were theirs alone, in order to be efficient and not duplicate efforts. European Christians were doing the same, and our collective efforts were successful. There are 75 million Presbyterians in the world today; only 1.1 million are in our denomination. On any given Sunday in South Africa and South Korea and in Cameroon, there are more Presbyterians in worship than in the U.S.

What about Westminster? We were established in 1857, right at the time when the great missionary movements were gaining steam, and we joined in with enthusiasm in trying to fulfill the Great Commission. We “went into all the world.” In the 1870s our congregation began supporting missionaries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and continued doing so into the middle years of the 20th century. The work centered around education, healthcare, and evangelism. We had a story to tell, faith to spread, information to teach, and help to offer. We don’t know much about the specifics of the efforts of the people we supported, but we can imagine they had both positive and negative effects.

The helpful impact of efforts to fulfill the Great-Commission is evident in the lands where Westminster engages in global partnerships today. In English-speaking Cameroon, for instance, the country’s towns and villages are covered by a network of Presbyterian schools, clinics,

hospitals, and training centers. In Cuba the best high schools in that island nation before the 1959 revolution were run by Presbyterians and Presbyterians have played a key ecumenical role there since the triumph of the revolution. And in the Holy Land, in ancient Palestine, Presbyterians started churches in those places - Syria and Iraq - where we were giving the assignment in agreement with other denominations. We had historic relationships with other denominations in the region, which includes the Lutherans, which led us to partner with Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem.

Our current global partnerships began in early 21st century with a visit to Cuba. That visit marked the shift of our congregation's understanding of the Great Commission, a movement that had begun in Protestant churches across the north in the latter half of the 20th century. We began to change from the old ways of doing "mission."

In Cuba we met a pastor named Carlos Piedra. He had attended La Progresiva, the top Presbyterian school on the island before it was nationalized by the revolution. From there he went on the seminary. Piedra was raised as part of the extended family of our two Cuban guests here today, Reinerio and Dora Arce.

When we met him, Piedra was serving as pastor of a Presbyterian congregation called *El Redentor*, The Redeemer, in the city of Matanzas. We spent several days with him, and he opened our eyes to a different understanding of the Great Commission, new ways of encountering and engaging the world. Piedra helped us see that so often in “going forth into all the world” the North American church defines “mission” by what *we* think is needed, without pausing to listen to people in other contexts – as if Jesus Christ did not exist in other lands and other cultures until *we* brought him there.

This re-thinking has happened not only in global mission but locally, as well, including right here in our city, in our own outreach beyond the church.

I remember how Piedra said to us,

“We don’t need your *solutions* to what you see as our *problems*. We don’t need your *answers* to what you see as our *questions*. We don’t want what you think of as your *abundance* to resolve what you see as our *scarcity*. But if you want to come pray with us, worship with us, study the Bible with us, eat and drink and dance with us, please come. What we want with you is *amistad cristiana*, Christian friendship, and *solidaridad*, solidarity.”

He was dismantling – deconstructing – the old way we had been doing “mission,” and guiding us into a new way. That visit set the trajectory for Westminster’s

relationships with the three global partnerships that developed and are still active, in Cuba, Cameroon, and Palestine – and also for how we would try to live out our ministry right here in Minneapolis, in the local context. We don't parachute in to do something that we think needs to be solved and that will make us feel good about ourselves, and then move on to solve problems elsewhere.

Instead, we have created *covenants* with the local partners in each nation, five-year commitments to a defined mutual relationship, primarily about respecting and listening to each other. We agree to share our lives with one another – either in person or, now, through the Internet – as an expression of the love and grace of God.

From our Cameroonian partners we have learned the joy of praising God in music and dance. On our first visit to Kumba Town Presbyterian Church there were 11 adult choirs, and they all sang in worship – dancing and

praising God. We saw their emphasis on educating children as we visited the elementary school the congregation supports. We visited agencies where they teach young people to develop job skills. We saw clinics and hospitals and their work to diminish the scourge of HIV/AIDS. The Presbyterian Church is strong and growing across the country.

From our Palestinian partners we have learned the importance of creative resistance to injustice. When Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem was shot up and occupied by the Israeli military to use as a base for assaults in other parts of the city, they gathered up the colorful shards of glass and created beautiful things. They discovered the power of art as a way to persevere through trauma, a different way of responding to violence that can lead to healing. Today the university they started, Dar Al-Kalima, focuses on the arts, and thrives in that context as a beacon of a different way through conflict.

From our Cuban partners we have learned a theology of resilience. Congregations there have held on and continued to worship God and serve God through many difficult decades. The seminary has persisted in spite of enormous obstacles, and is now planning to expand to Havana, with the help of Westminster's *Enduring Hope* capital campaign mission component. The people in our small partner congregation have virtually nothing, so they depend on and support one another. We are part of their WhatsApp group and watch as they seek and offer help, especially around medicine, asking who has a couple pills of this or that, or if anyone has a particular treatment a neighbor needs. It's like a first-century Christian community, freely sharing the little they have.

Each of the churches with which we have developed partnerships finds itself in a nation living with conflict of one sort or another. And each shows bountiful signs of deep, unwavering desire for peace and justice. In Cuba,

the longstanding U.S. policy of economic blockade causes significant suffering. In Cameroon the English-speaking minority finds itself in conflict with the French-speaking majority, backed by the U.S. In Palestine, the Israeli occupation supported by the U.S. continues to harm Palestinians.

We hear about these struggles and recognize the importance of trying to influence our government's positions, as we can. The covenants with our partner churches include a commitment to advocate for change in our government's foreign policy toward their nations, for the benefit of both nations.

When we visit our partners, and then return again and again, and when they come visit us as they are today, we are building bridges of hope for change for a more just world.

Go forth into the world in peace. Go forth not to dominate, not because you think you know what others need, not because you see yourself at the center.

Go forth into the world in peace. That line casts the Great Commission in a different light, making it less triumphant, a bit more gentle and modest, respectful, willing to listen and learn.

And isn't that how the church should live here and everywhere! That is what Jesus was after in the Great Commission.

We are the church. *We are the church.* We have a message to share as Christians – and we are called to do that in ways that reflect the love and justice of God.

Go forth into the world in peace – knowing that Christ is already there, at work in the communities and in the lives of individuals we will meet.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.