

Need: Perceived or Real?

Missio Dei and the Glut of All Things *Missional!*

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What is real and imagined? Is that going to bite me? Could they be a saint, a well-intentioned dragon, or diabolical? Does that situation really deserve my attention? These are just a few questions I have asked myself as a pastor in the City of Chicago, a missionary in Pakistan, and Area Director overseeing missionaries at the heart of the 10/40 Window. The answers are not easy to come by at first blush. How can we (and I) sort between perceived needs and the real needs?

Perceived needs, due to their immediacy, often capture our attention. A tragedy in the community or an on-going societal crisis beckons response in the moment. The question one needs to ask at such a time is: Does this need fit the mission to which God has called me? The question is not merely individual in nature. Most likely, an individual is part of a work of God (e.g. a church, a school) that has colleagues and a mission statement. Therefore, he or she has a broader responsibility to determine if a need is perceived or real. Does the need fit into the mission statement of the organization I serve? The perceived need may very well be real, but is it a real need that the organization and I need to address? To determine the answer, one needs discernment and focus. In the moment, it is easy to put the urgent before the important.

If the urgent does not match the mission, then the organization should not pursue it—unless strongly led by the Holy Spirit and unanimous agreement exists to make an exception to the rule. The practice of the discipline of discernment is necessary to fulfill real needs and bifurcate from perceived need. In some ways, this sounds calculated. It is, but consider why a person can make such wise choices to stay on mission.

Jesus said, “The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me” (Matt. 26:11). The context of this verse occurs in the home of Simon the Leper. Jesus is on mission. While there, a woman anointed Jesus’ head with very expensive perfume. Jesus allows her to do it because He is on mission. In this context of Jesus modeling mission, the disciples go off mission complaining that the expensive perfume could have been sold to provide for the poor. The disciples did not understand the missional nature of the moment. The disciples focused on the perceived need, while Jesus modeled for them the mission of the real need—being in the home of a leper and welcoming a woman who wanted to give her best to Jesus. The disciples lacked discernment.

The simple Jesuit method of discernment seems most effective. As a situation or a decision arises, the person should pray and focus on that which brings consolation (peace) or desolation (lack of peace). It is important to allow time to reflect, pray, and discuss with the community one serves. If there is consolation, then move forward with the real need. The opposite will hopefully take place as the community recognizes that

the need is outside the framework of the organization's mission. Such discernment requires prayer, discipline, and wisdom from other individuals who are part of the mission. Then, one must make a decision that may not be comfortable, but correct.