**When the Church Stops Working**

By Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand

**Study Guide**

**Ch. 6:  “Forget the Mission Statement—Get a Watchword”**

**Giants, ants, and mission statements:** We are all familiar with the notion of a mission statement.  As Root and Bertrand put it, mission statements tell us (churches, businesses, or whatever) why we exist, and they are necessary for growth.  Without them, both giant corporations and ma-n-pa grocery stores die as the world changes around them.  With them, we can accelerate into growth, cultural relevance, and all measures of success.  Of course, our authors have already criticized acceleration and such secular measures of success.

Mission statements and missional theology are not the same.  Mission statements are to organize us to get something done.  They focus on people and production.  Missional theology is about what God is doing; in it, God is the agent, not us. Mission statements don’t lead to waiting; they are a call to action.  Missional theology waits on God.  In it, we wait and witness, even wait as a form of witness.  We witness to God’s action, so we need to wait to see what that action is. Mission statements are fine unless they are all we have.  By themselves they escalate stress and lead to burn out.  We work and we work, but it is our action not God’s.  To avoid this, Root and Bertrand suggest considering a watch word first, rather than pursing a mission statement.

**Watchwords:** According to Root and Bertand, a watchword is “shorthand for a story of a deep experience that has shaped a group of people.”(105).  Watchwords feed the church community and function as the foundation of the church’s ministry.  They are not a passwords used to keep people out.  Instead, they reveal stories of the mystery of God’s action.  Our watchword, as short-hand for the story of what God is doing in us, shapes our lives because it “is a story of slogan of how this church, this community, has encountered God.”(106). The watchword shapes how we see the world and cope with the crisis of the living God. We live out our watchword.

**Our Watchword:**  We cannot purchase or expropriate a watchword.  It has to be *our own* because it expresses what God is doing in *our* community.  Church leadership needs to help our community find its watchword, then lead us by living into that watchword.

How do we find our watchword?

1) Encounter each other.  We need to truly encounter each other rather than use each other to meet some accelerated goal.

2) “We need to wait in the right way so that we can encounter God.”(108-109). The secular world works against that by focusing us on the immanent, what is in front of us, rather than the transcendent, that which is beyond the immediate, where God is.

Both of these are done by telling stories.  We encounter others by sharing our stories. We wait on God by telling stories of what God has done and is doing in and through us.  Our watchword is discovered when we find a theme in these stories.

A real watchword is not a marketing slogan, the banal symbol of a brand.  A real watchword emerges from our lived experience with God, with waiting on God’s action instead of jumping into ours.  We would never give our life for a brand, but we might for the loving God who comes to save us.

**First Move: Learn to Encounter**

We have already seen that the acceleration driven by secular society keeps us from encountering others.  When with a person, we look beyond them to what is next or how they can help us get there.  True encounters respect healthy boundaries but include a true back and forth in which we truly “see” each other rather than look past each other.   CoVid did not help.  Encountering is a nearly lost art that we need to recover.

**Second Move: Encounter God**

As Karl Barth pointed out, we can encounter God in anything, but God does use certain things to create encounters: preaching, prayer, mission (and I would add worship.)

**Hearing God:** The Bible is a certain means of encountering God, and its stories are a key component of the encounter just as our stories are an essential component of encountering each other.  In the Bible we hear God, and in Deut. 6, God commands Israel to tell their stories.  Reading the Bible is a form of waiting that leads to encounter.

**Seeing God:** We see God in the sacraments, or, better, in the sacramental.  Root and Bertrand are not concerned here with the number or form of the sacraments—each Christian tradition has its own version of that.  When we perform the sacraments, in the context of prayer, God meets us.  God is there and encounter is possible if we wait rather than accelerate.

**Serving God:** We often think of mission as something that we bring to the world in Christ’s name, as if the gospel is a commodity that we are marketing.  But our service is a form of encounter where, at times, the world speaks to us in Christ’s name.  We encounter God and are changed in our acts of service.  It is not unidirectional because it is God’s action more than ours.  For example, when our youth go on their summer mission trip, and spend a week working for other people, the get more than a good feeling that comes with such action, they also encounter God in the folks the serve, in the work, and in all the events of that sacramental week.

**REFLECTION:**  What is Southminster’s story?  How have we encountered God?  Have we had a watchword for that story?  Has the story changed since our last watchword?  Do we have one now?  What do you think would be the watchword for this point in our story? Are we prepared to wait on God to see where our story goes next?

Would you want to participate in a version of the PEEL project (113-115)?  What do you think that would be like?  What can we do to learn to encounter each other and learn to encounter God afresh?