

MISSIO DEI

Wesleyan-Holiness Missional Discipleship
in the Church of the Nazarene's Colleges
and Universities

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The very nature of the Triune God is mission, *missio dei*. The missional pattern of the Triune God is captured in the words of Jesus, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). God the Father sent Jesus Christ to redeem all of humanity and creation. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to empower and guide humans. And the Triune God sent the Church into the world to participate in the new creation.

The love of God expressed in the eternal community of love gives rise to the missional character of God. The love the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share is also expressed toward creatures. The Church is a sent people, responding to the call of Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to go into all nations. The Church witnesses to the Lordship of Christ and participates with God in the building of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 28:19-20).

The Church is an instrument of God’s mission for the redemption of all of creation.¹⁰ In this regard, Nazarene colleges and universities are instruments of God’s mission as redemptive agents in the world. As educational institutions, they participate in God’s reconciliation, healing, and redemption of humanity specifically and of creation in general. Redemptive possibilities in higher education can be discovered through collegiality in seeking knowledge, through mutual engagement within the teaching-learning encounter, and through cultivation of a spiritually nurturing atmosphere for all participants.

God's eschatology involves mutual participation in the new creation. Participation in the life of the Triune God is not only a future hope but a present reality (1 John 1:3). Christians act not only in light of the past but also in hope of a future in which God's love reigns supreme. Nazarene colleges and universities serve the mission of the Church by equipping the next generation and by transforming persons and communities into holiness circles of grace. Teaching and education is a "means of grace"¹¹ through which humans and human relationships can be restored. The goal of this restoration in believers is the recovery of and the total transformation into the image of God.

Education in a Christian context is sacramental, because it is fueled by an optimism of grace as expressed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Through Christian education and teaching, teachers mediate God in the Church and world. Educators taking this perspective of teaching seriously view their task as not only a profession of knowledge but also a humble desire to engage students within the context of mutual experience of the other. Educating from humility elevates the ability to extend and receive grace—to make teaching and learning a graceful exchange of ideas and experience. In and through this activity, God is especially present and active. As students respond, they discern God's call by reconstructing their lives and repairing the world in their willingness to be "broken" and "poured out."

The *missio dei* from a Wesleyan-holiness theology includes an understanding of grace. God's commitment to love his creation and God's gracious identification with humanity in the incarnation are central to John Wesley's "optimism of grace."¹² Because grace entails God's loving and non-coercive presence, it cannot be forced upon us: depriving human beings of freedom is not the nature of God's grace. Instead, grace makes possible the human response, as the Spirit works in us both to communicate love and to begin the process of renewal and character formation in the image of God.

The optimism of grace rests on God's acting first—preveniently. As Wesley put it, "The Holy Spirit is active in our lives even before we are aware of this activity, drawing us to God." Wesley links together divine initiative and human



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responsibility, which is referred to as “co-operant grace” or “responsible grace.”

Divine-human synergism—in which God acts first and we can freely respond—is central to Wesleyan theology and the practice of Christian higher education. First, it reminds us as teachers that we are created co-creators with God in the redemption of humanity and all creation. God is already working, seeking to restore our students and all of creation. Regardless of a person’s religious background or heritage, God is at work, drawing and calling each person to truth and goodness.



Secondly, a Wesleyan view of prevenient grace has implications for the mission of the Church of the Nazarene’s colleges and universities. Because God’s Spirit is at work everywhere in the world, Nazarene educators can be assured that the Spirit is already present before their teaching begins. Moreover, God’s presence in every human life gives each person infinite value as the object of God’s caring. Thus, prevenient grace initiates the possibility of crossing borders, to know the other on their terms. God’s gracious initiatives provoke us into shouldering the responsibility to engage others where they live, to understand their world view, and to engage others much like the Creator entered creation through the incarnation with all of its inherent risk and expectant hope.

Third, it reminds us that those outside of Christian faith may also have the ability to pursue and engage knowledge, truth, beauty, and goodness. Human existence is not separated between the sacred and secular. This robust approach reflects a Wesleyan perspective that is Trinitarian rather than exclusively Christological. The Spirit is wider-ranging than the human being’s explicit knowledge of God through Christ and goes where Christ is yet to be known. But the Spirit is not independent of Christ. The God who acts through the Spirit is the God whom Christ reveals as loving, who seeks out human beings wherever they are. This reality poses an educational responsibility to translate and interpret spiritual truth for those not yet aware of its presence or power.

Finally, Nazarene colleges and universities are communities of grace as they participate in the “means of grace.” Learning becomes a mark of mediated grace as the spiritual disciplines are engaged mutually within the context of community. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we participate in a wide range of intentional corporate and individual practices such as communion, worship, Bible study, prayer, and acts of mercy and compassion, all of which enable faithful discipleship and missional engagement. As faculty and students participate in the means of grace together, they are being formed and shaped into missional disciples. Nazarene colleges and universities can be a means of grace—sacramental centers—through community engagement in mission that includes service through acts of mercy and justice. Nazarene colleges and universities recognize they do not replace participation in the local church for worship, formation, and community, but rather, assist and support the local church in the development of missional disciples. As Nazarene colleges and universities teach and equip students for engagement in God’s mission in the world, they bring the Kingdom of God nearer to fruition, fulfilling the prayer of Jesus, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). ■

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ENDNOTES

- ¹⁰ “All of creation” means that God’s intent is that all creatures (human and non-human) be redeemed and, in the final consummation of time, all of God’s creation will be fully restored.
- ¹¹ “Means of grace” is a term used by John Wesley to convey the channels or avenues by which we receive grace from God. Wesley states, “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained by God, and appointed for this end—to be ordinary channels whereby he (God) might convey to men [sic] preventing, justifying, and sanctifying grace.” These “means” include a variety of practices such as prayer, Bible study, small groups, communion, fasting, acts of mercy and justice. (See also the final paragraph of Mark Mann’s essay.)
- ¹² John Wesley’s “optimism of grace” counters an Augustinian view of original sin, which is more negative, with optimism about the possibilities of God’s loving grace in human experience and society. Wesley believed that the very nature of God is love and that grace is God’s loving action reflecting God’s holy, loving character.

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