



## A SHORT COURSE ON WORLD MISSION

# Session 1. Is Everything Mission?

Aim: to explore the notion of 'missio dei'

### **Contents**

Page 2	Worship
Page 2	Starting out
Page 3	Thinking it through
Page 6	What about the Bible?
Page 9	In practical terms
Page 10	Putting it together
Page 12	Sending out

### **List of PowerPoint/OHP slides:**

Opening prayers A and B  
Questions on Starting Out  
Three Statements about Mission  
SPG seal  
Matthew 28:16-20  
Acts 16: 6-10  
The Five Marks of Mission  
Closing Prayer

### **Handouts to accompany this session:**

Opening prayer A  
Opening prayer B  
The Five Marks of Mission  
Closing Prayer

## **Worship**

The session starts with a prayer. One of the following may be suitable.

*Opening Prayer A:*

The field of mission:

**Is the holy ground of God.**

We tread the way with awe:

**In the mystery of grace.**

For walk we must, even in the silences:

**Following the call of Christ.**

*Dorothy McRae-McMahon, Liturgies for the Journey of Life, SPCK*

*Opening Prayer B:*

The God of heaven is present on earth

**Christ dwells among us and is one with us**

Highest in all Creation, living among the least

**Christ journeys with the rejected and welcomes the weary**

Come now all who thirst

**And drink the water of life**

Come now all who hunger

**And be filled with good things**

Come now all who seek

**And be warmed by the fire of love**

From north and south, east and west, we meet in the presence of God

**And we do not meet alone**

With the angels of heaven

**We gather to worship the Lord**

With the saints of every age

**We gather to worship the Lord**

With the church throughout the world

**We gather to worship the Lord**

*From the St Andrew's Tide Leaflet 2004, Partnership for World Mission*

## **Starting Out**

Collect responses to the following questions, without comment at this stage:

- Why did you decide to come to this course on 'mission'?
- When you hear the word 'mission' what does it make you think about?

## Thinking it through

Look at these three statements about mission:

- As a fire exists by burning, so the church exists by mission (Emil Brunner)
- Mission is not a population drive for heaven (DT Niles)
- Fundamentally, mission is the work of God (Bishop John V Taylor)

What do they suggest to us? Perhaps:

- There is a relationship between mission and the church – though perhaps not exactly what we might have expected.
- That mission may include helping other people to become Christians (followers of Jesus Christ) – what is often called ‘evangelism’ – but that is not the whole of what Christian mission is.
- That mission ultimately belongs to and starts with God, and is linked to God’s desire and purpose is for the whole of Creation.

As we shall see during this short course, all of these things are true to the understanding of mission shared by many Anglican Christians today – and affirmed by USPG.

## The Changing Understanding of Mission

The story of how we got to this point is interesting and from it we can learn much about the nature of mission. Perhaps a good place to start is when USPG – or rather one of its parent bodies – SPG (the **Society for the Propagation of the Gospel**) began in 1701. (In the next session we will take the story back to New Testament times.)

The full name of the Society when it started in 1701 was ‘The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts’. The Society began because the Bishop of London was concerned about the lack of provision for Anglican ministry and pastoral care for the American settlers in New England. He sent the clergyman Thomas Bray (no relation to the infamous Vicar of Bray!) to make an exploratory visit. As a result of Bray’s report – two Societies were established – SPG and SPCK (Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, which had a special emphasis on Christian education). SPG sent a number of clergy from England to work with the American settlers (who were of course already at least nominally Christian). The original seal of SPG shows a group of people standing on the shore of North America, greeting a person sailing towards them in a boat, with words from Acts 16:9: ‘Come over and help us.’ This biblical text has always been important for SPG’s (and now USPG’s) understanding about the nature of mission.

Because of the situation they found themselves in, these SPG ‘missionaries’ to North America ended up also ministering to indigenous North American people – and in many cases presenting to them the story of Jesus for the first time.

So the work of SPG did not begin with a great theological theory about what mission is – but as a response to a very practical and concrete need. The theology had to catch up with the practice. That is a very Anglican way of doing things.

The story continues through the eighteenth century with the work of SPG expanding into a number of areas in Africa and Asia where British people were beginning to settle, either for trade or for political reasons, with the developing British Empire. Working on behalf of the Church of England, SPG sent clergy to minister to these settlers, but also to minister in wider contexts among the local people, most of whom were not yet Christians. So increasingly the word ‘mission’ began to be used to describe the sending of people as ‘missionaries’ to a foreign part of the world, where their task was to

preach the gospel and convert people to the Christian faith. By the end of the eighteenth century, when the **Church Missionary Society** (CMS) was founded, this had become the regular meaning of the word 'mission'. It is still how it is understood in much of popular culture today.

USPG is made up of three parent bodies. We have mentioned SPG, the other two parents arrived on the scene in the middle of the nineteenth century. The **Universities' Mission to Central Africa** (UMCA) was founded as a result of the appeal by David Livingstone to combat the slave trade in Central and East Africa. Livingstone's cry in 1857 was for the spread of 'commerce and Christianity'. He suggested that by 'guiding our missionary labours so as to benefit our own country, we shall thereby more effectually [sic] and permanently benefit the heathen'. The **Cambridge Mission to Delhi** (CMD) - established slightly later - encouraged, among other things, intellectual engagement and discussion with leading Indians who were members of the Hindu and Buddhist faiths.

So these two parents illustrate two other aspects of how Anglicans view 'mission': a concern for justice and the improvement of life for groups in 'foreign parts' who were clearly mistreated or suffering, as well as serious but respectful engagement with other world faiths. Of course, as Livingstone's words make clear, the backcloth to all this endeavour was still very much the British Empire. SPG itself also continued to expand throughout the nineteenth century as the British Empire grew 'wider still and wider'. However, it would not be fair simply to dismiss this missionary expansion as simply the religious face of colonialism - the story was far more complex, even though sometimes ambiguous or even contradictory.

The following reflection on the role of SPG/USPG in the history of mission is drawn from an article in the *Church Times* which appeared at the time of USPG's 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2001:

Many people, of course, were perfectly capable of distinguishing between the gospel and the flawed imperial vessel in which it came to them; and some, converts such as Krishna Mohan Banerjea in Bengal, combined devout Christian faith, as a priest on SPG's missionary list, with ardent nationalism...

SPG's role was richly diverse. Mission among indigenous peoples was too often contemptuous of their culture, but it could involve great sensitivity, as in Melanesia, or rest upon profound study of language, as in Tirunelveli in South India. This made for strongly rooted and still thriving missionary-minded Churches.

Education, to which SPG was massively committed, with literally hundreds of schools feeding into large numbers of colleges, had a critical role for women and men in rapidly changing societies. A school like Minaki, set up as a 'school of the prophets' and educating most of the East African clergy, also gave a start to many of the political leaders of the region.

Girls' schools in, for example, China and Japan, gave many women, as well as the Christian faith, an opportunity. Similarly, the Society pioneered medical work, for example among women in Delhi.

At the Society's [SPG's] 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary [in 1951], *The Times Literary Supplement* recognised the Society's history as the record of 'a great religious and social movement'. Likewise, one of its associates, the Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hwei, the Anglican Church in China, about to start its own long march through the upheavals of revolutionary China, greeted SPG as a "movement of liberation".

Perhaps that is a useful way to see the Society: as a movement, bogged down and compromised from time to time, undoubtedly, but also, because it hangs on to the mystery of the Gospel, recurringly creative and liberative. [Issue 7194; 5 Jan 2001]

By the beginning of the twentieth century, developing questions about the nature of mission could not be ignored. An important landmark for the development of thinking about mission was the great **World Missionary Conference** held in Edinburgh in 1910 – whose centenary is being marked by another conference which will take place in Edinburgh in 2010 (with linked events being held also around the world). The purpose of the conference was defined as ‘The Evangelisation of the World in This Generation’, encouraging a sense of urgency about the missionary endeavour. But the Conference was not a one off: rather it gave birth to a continuation process, which eventually became the **International Missionary Council** (and this in turn now forms part of the work of the World Council of Churches).

However, in the decades following Edinburgh 1910, some of those involved with the International Missionary Council came to understand that mission could not be limited to ‘evangelisation’ – nor was it simply the initiative of the church. Rather, mission was ‘the work of God’ – to fulfil God’s purposes for the whole of Creation; purposes in which God graciously invited the Churches to share. So the term ‘mission of God’ (*missio dei*) began to be used – and the term could be linked to a whole range of goals – health, education, reconciliation, justice, the well-being of Creation – many of which might not appear on the surface to be specifically ‘religious’. In fact the phrase ‘mission of God’ began to be used so widely that it even became problematic. As Bishop John V Taylor put it: ‘There is an inherent, if not deliberate, vagueness in the term “Mission of God” which lays it open to abuse. It can be made to include anything under the sun that anyone considers A Good Thing.’

Whether this understanding of ‘mission’ is specifically Christian, and why churches should be involved in it began increasingly to be discussed and explored. After all, when this wider understanding of mission is taken to what might be a logical conclusion, mission does not seem to be very different from ‘world development’. Even the **Five Marks of Mission** of the Anglican Communion have been criticised for not being focused enough on evangelisation and the specific role of the church. And when mission is understood in such an all encompassing way, what is the particular role of a ‘mission agency’ such as USPG?

However – as thoughtful recent theologians of mission have come to realise – when you start talking about the mission of God it becomes important to reflect on the nature of the God whose mission this is. There is an increasing realisation that our Christian understanding of God as Trinity is essential for a proper understanding of the nature of God’s mission. The inter-relationship and ‘communion’ between the various persons of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and the way that the mutual love between them somehow spills over to catch up and include Creation within the scope of the divine love offers a pattern and a model for mission. This is a much richer understanding of what the mission of God can mean. (This is discussed in more detail in Session 3.)

## What about the Bible?

Over the following three sessions we will be looking at a range of biblical texts to help us with our exploration of mission. In this first session we introduce two New Testament passages. The first of these is regarded by many Christians as the primary biblical warrant for mission and evangelisation. The second passage has been important in USPG's history and self-understanding. Even if these two passages are printed out for members of the group, it will still be helpful for people to have Bibles to look at. This will help them explore the passages in a wider context.

The first passage, **Matthew 28:16-20**, is often referred to as The Great Commission. Until fairly recently it has been perhaps the most widely used biblical mandate – at least in western Christianity – to justify the 'missionary movement' of the church. Words very similar to Matthew's Great Commission were engraved on the front of Partnership House in London – CMS's headquarters, which USPG shared for 20 years until 2007. But interestingly this text only became associated with the church's missionary activity at the close of the seventeenth century. The way the passage has often been understood, rightly or wrongly, as a command affects our understanding of mission. Some people have suggested that it can lead to mission being depersonalised and the command itself as the marching order of a Christian militia, engaged in a holy war.

Encourage people to read through these verses from Matthew and note what it is that the apostles are being instructed to do. 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.'

There is no doubt that mission expressed in these terms is focused on Jesus Christ. As Bishop John V Taylor once commented in a small book called *The Uncancelled Mandate* (the name of the book is deliberately linked to Jesus' mandate in Matthew 28): 'The primary aim of all Christian mission in all its varied activities is to present the person of Jesus Christ, to make him visible, to lift him up, as he truly was and is, so that he rather than anything else we bring may draw all to himself.' Matthew would have agreed with this view – and his model of mission as 'disciple-making' is in many ways a challenge to some recent understandings of mission.

However, if we take a close look both at Matthew 28:16-20, and other parts of the Gospel of Matthew, we discover that Matthew's understanding of mission is broad and generous in scope. It is a mistake to think that Matthew simply equates mission with a narrow proselytism and it can certainly be argued that much interpretation of Matthew 28:16-20 has been over simplistic.

First of all, consider that mission is entrusted to a group which includes those who doubt (28:17). 'Christians are called to mission as people who confess Jesus as Son of God and King, but who also experience crises in their faith, doubts about the central Christological affirmation of their faith, Christians who are not always so sure that eventually God's power and kingdom will break through and make the impossible possible' (Jacques Matthey). In the Gospel of John it is Thomas's doubts that eventually lead him to make the supreme Christological confession of the New Testament: 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:28). Is Matthew perhaps suggesting to us that Christ's mission can be better accomplished when those who engage in it are not completely sure they have all the answers?

But we also need to realise that the most important verb in Jesus' command is 'making disciples' (in Greek, *matheteuin*). 'Baptising' and 'teaching' are grammatically dependent upon it – and in Matthew's understanding they are both part of what disciple-making is all about. And if these new disciples are to be taught 'all that I have commanded you' it then becomes significant to realise that the most explicit commandment that Jesus

has given in this Gospel is the command to love God and one's neighbour, which Jesus describes as a summary of the Law, and which is set out in Matthew 22:37-40. So Matthew is telling us that the most important part of becoming a disciple of Jesus is not belief in a particular credal statement about Jesus, but a learning of the radical nature of love. 'According to Matthew's "Great Commission", it is not possible to make disciples without telling them to practise God's call of justice for the poor. The love commandment, which is the basis for the church's involvement in politics, is an integral part of the mission commandment' (Jacques Matthey).

And how should 'missionaries', sent out by the risen Jesus, go about sharing his commandment to love? Once again Matthew offers us an unexpected challenge. Somehow the setting of this Great Commission on a mountain-top predisposes us to think of mission in top-down terms. And it is true that there have been times and places in the history of Christian mission where such an approach has been typical.

But it is not quite as clear-cut as that. Matthew, of course, is interested in mountains throughout his Gospel. It is probably linked to his desire to compare (and contrast) Jesus with Moses and the law-giving at Sinai. It has been pointed out that there are particularly close verbal links between this mountain-top experience at the end of the Gospel and Jesus' first mountain-top experience in the temptations (Matthew 4:1-11). Words such as 'worship', 'all' and 'power/authority' appear in both passages. It is a clue that we are supposed to read these two passages together. Matthew is suggesting that there are two alternative models of mission, the first being Satan's at the time of the temptations, when Satan proposes that Jesus compel obedience by his earthly power. By contrast, the Jesus who eventually commissions his disciples, although clearly a figure of great authority, has gone through the Cross and is 'with' and 'among' his disciples rather than 'up above' them, challenging many of our established ideas of what authority is and how it should be exercised.

And this insight is reinforced by Jesus' pledge in the final verse of the Gospel: 'I am with you till the end of the age.' For 'I am with you' at the end of the Gospel deliberately echoes the name 'Emmanuel', 'God with us', given to Jesus at its beginning (1:23). So the whole of the Gospel is shot through and embraced in the vision of a God who is 'with us' rather than far away 'above us'. 'Because God has chosen this way to be incarnated, to be present among people, to reign, he will only reach all Gentile nations if disciples reach them and if Christian communities live there in clear reference to the Nazarene and his teaching... But he will only reach the nations if the bearers of the Gospel of the kingdom, the evangelising disciples, come as poor, exposed, defenceless men and women, living with and not above those to whom they bring healing' (Jacques Matthey).

But, finally, if Jesus, 'Emmanuel', promises to be *with* his disciples throughout all time, where can we find and see him today? Matthew himself directly and explicitly provides the startling – and possibly shocking – answer. It is a radical and unexpected twist that challenges any easy understanding of mission. For in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25:31-46 we discover that we are being offered the opportunity to see Jesus in some very unlikely places – in the faces of the sick, the strangers, the hungry and thirsty, the imprisoned whom the disciples of Jesus may choose – or refuse – to honour or minister to. 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, or naked, or a stranger or in prison?' 'Truly, I tell you, just as you did to the least of my brothers and sisters – so you did it to me.'

Note: This reflection on Matthew 28:16-20 draws considerably on the important article by Jacques Matthey, The Great Commission according to Matthew, International Review of Mission, 1980.

Now to the second passage. As we noted above, words very close to the text of Matthew 28.16-20 were carved on the entrance of Partnership House in London – formerly the shared home of USPG and CMS. However alongside the impetus of ‘sending out’ by the Risen Lord that is strongly there in Matthew 28, USPG has also looked towards another New Testament text as inspiration for its work. That is **Acts 16:9** – the passage quoted on the original seal of SPG. In this passage Paul has a vision of a man of Macedonia pleading with him to ‘Come over and help us’ – by bringing the news about Jesus and the Christian faith from Asia to Europe (where Macedonia was located). The focus in Matthew 28 is on being ‘sent out’; whereas in Acts 16:9 it is on being ‘invited in’ by people already living in the region. USPG always takes seriously the role of the local Anglican Church and will only work in places where it has been invited.

## **In practical terms**

The following reflection about what mission means in practical terms for each of us is written by the Revd Canon Chris Chivers, who works at Blackburn Cathedral and who is also a Trustee of USPG. It first appeared in USPG's publication *Transmission*, under the title 'Mission means participating in what God is already doing'.

As a trustee of USPG I am often asked to define mission or give a thumb-nail sketch of it.

I think back to the Lenten collection boxes I used to fill as a child – you remember, the blue boxes made to look like a safari truck, with a missionary staring out at you from behind the wheel.

I try faithfully to recall the teaching that went with these. But it's at this point that I falter a bit since – beyond 'being nice to those less fortunate than myself' and a mistaken sense that Jesus had somehow given all the pink on the map to me, a white, English Christian to look after – I have to say my theology of mission was pretty under-developed.

Maybe the fault was with me. Perhaps I read too many of those picture-books about missionary adventures in 'far-off' lands for my own good. But it wasn't until I went to India and Africa that I learned a very different theology of mission.

In the first instance, I realised that mission wasn't something white English people did for or to brown or black 'foreigners'. Why? Because these countries were already holy ground: places where good things were happening, where God was already working through indigenous culture and religion. Mission, I realised, was a matter of joining in what God was already doing in the world.

This didn't mean agreeing with everything people believed, but rather having a conversation. It was about seeing how people's giftedness reflected the creativity of God. I realised that this missionary creativity is defined by the incarnation: by a God who, in Jesus Christ, undertook our most fundamental mission, which is to discover what it means to become fully human. And, in so doing, Jesus left a pattern for us to follow.

That was all quite a revelation to me. It meant I had to ditch a lot of bad colonial baggage – stop pretending I had all the answers – and ask my neighbours what they believed their problems to be; I was called to engage in the business of listening to God, self and neighbour.

Sometimes I was prompted to do things I didn't much want to do – wash the clothes of lepers in Calcutta and bag up the soiled nappies of AIDS babies in Cape Town. I had to learn the truth of Maundy Thursday and its feet washing.

Sometimes I had to accept that I couldn't do anything. I had to learn the weakness of Good Friday,

Often in prayer, through study of the Bible or the breaking of bread, I was made to listen and wait, to understand that God can't be rushed. This stretched my patience as I experienced the shut-in puzzlement of Holy Saturday.

Once, in Sao Paulo, I got to feel a shaft of Easter light when a street child, who I'd listened to for hours, drew me a picture that showed me our talking had helped his healing.

But even then I realised I wasn't quite getting it: it wasn't about me and what I felt. It really was about God and what he was busy doing to Easter the world. At this point the divine penny at last began to drop. I remembered that the heart of the gospel lay in that little Greek word 'kenosis', referring to the 'self-emptying' nature of a God who saves the world by serving it. I also recalled that this work of selfless listening was precisely what Anglicans were doing through USPG – and God was calling me to join in.

## Putting it together

*See handout of the Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion.*

In telling the story of mission we have already referred to the Five Marks of Mission. This is a short statement about the Anglican understanding of mission, originally agreed by meetings of the Anglican Consultative Council between 1984 and 1990, which has won widespread acceptance around the Anglican Communion (and is also used as a framework for thinking about mission by many other Christians).

It is worthwhile encouraging people to get to know these Five Marks of Mission. Apart from their importance in helping us to think about worldwide mission, many local churches in Britain, Ireland and elsewhere have begun to draw on them in reflecting on their own mission in their local contexts. Indeed, properly understood, the Five Marks help us to draw out links between the global and the local.

There are a couple of particular topics connected to the Five Marks of Mission that you might like to discuss. (*See also in Questions for Discussion below.*)

1. There are two different ways that the relationship between the First Mark of Mission and the other four Marks can be understood. One way is to see this First Mark 'To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom', as a sort of heading or summary for the other four, showing that the other Four Marks also express important aspects of the 'good news of the kingdom'. The other way is to see the First Mark in its own right, focusing on direct evangelism and the importance of bringing non-Christians to share in an explicit faith in Christ, and raising the question of its relationship to the others.

2. There has been discussion in recent years (see the Mission section of the Anglican Communion website at <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/mission/fivemarks.cfm>) as to whether one or more additional Marks need to be added to the statement. At the last meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council in Jamaica in 2009 there was a provisional agreement that a Mark that referred to work on 'reconciliation' would be added. The precise wording is still being worked out and the new Mark will be incorporated when the Anglican Consultative Council meets again in 2012.

The following **Questions for Discussion** are linked to one or more of the sections above, or invite you to draw connections between them. There are probably more questions than you will have the time to explore – but the selection below allows a group to take off in a variety of different directions. It may be that you want to hold over some of the questions for a later session in this course – or perhaps revisit them again, particularly during Sessions 3 and 4.

## Questions for Discussion:

1. What do you think about the different understandings of mission that are expressed in Matthew 28 and Acts 16? Which do you think is more important and why? Is there a way of drawing on insights from both passages?
2. If the First Mark is specifically about evangelism, does this make it more important than the other marks of mission? Are the other Marks lesser kinds of mission, or, as some say, do they only become mission when done as part of evangelism?
3. Do you think the Five Marks of Mission express all there is to say about mission? Is there any aspect that you feel is missing or under-represented? If you were to add an extra Mark what do you think it should be?
4. What do you think about the current suggestion to add a 'Mark' that focuses on reconciliation?
5. Looking back, a commentator wrote that the history of USPG shows that the 'Society as a movement, bogged down and compromised from time to time, undoubtedly, but also, because it hangs on to the mystery of the Gospel, recurringly creative and liberative'. When you reflect on the history of USPG and other mission agencies, particularly during the colonial period, what strikes you most strongly – the sense of being 'compromised' or sharing a 'creative and liberative' gospel?
6. Canon Chris Chivers remarks, 'God... in Jesus Christ, undertook our most fundamental mission, which is to discover what it means to become fully human. And, in so doing, Jesus left a pattern for us to follow.' Is this a description of, and a pattern for, mission with which you can identify? Is there anything about this definition that you find problematic? How does this pattern link to the insight given in Matthew 28 that is Jesus 'Emmanuel' – God with us till the end of time – who directs his disciples in mission?
7. In looking at Matthew 28 we noticed that some of those whom Jesus commissioned for mission doubted. In his reflection, Canon Chris Chivers commented: 'Sometimes I had to accept that I couldn't do anything. I had to learn the weakness of Good Friday.' How can our own weakness and vulnerability be beneficial to enable us to engage more effectively in mission? Can Christ's mission be *better* accomplished when those who engage in it are not completely sure they have all the answers? What insights might this offer to mission agencies and to the church as a whole?
8. How can we hold on to the important insight that mission is the work of God (*missio dei*) alongside acknowledging that there is a need for distinctive Christian and church contribution to this work? Do you think that Bishop John Taylor's warning about the 'vagueness' of the concept of *missio dei* is justified?
9. What do you think is the relationship between mission and evangelism (evangelisation)? Does the interpretation of Matthew 28 offered above give us any new insights in relation to this?

## **Sending out**

Go back and look at the comments about 'mission' that people made in the 'Starting Out' section above. Look at them now in the light of what you have discovered since.

What implications does what you have learned have for your own Christian life, and the life of your church?

*Closing prayer:*

Almighty God,  
who called your Church to witness  
that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself:  
help us to proclaim the good news of your love,  
that all who hear it may be drawn to you;  
through him who was lifted up on the cross,  
and reigns with you  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever.

*Amen*

*Common Worship*