

The *Missio Dei* Embodied in Local Community Ministry in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER EXAMINES *MISSIO Dei* in a local community context, interpreting the Blue Horizon Youth Charity, Aberdeen, Scotland, in light of a missiology of listening, diagnosing, and discerning. John 5:9 is read in conversation with Terese Okure to clarify an

abiding in mission. Luke 10:1–11 is read in conversation with Alan Roxburgh to develop a contextual particularity in the naming of God's activity in the world. A local missional ecclesiology is developed with the *missio Dei* understood as practices of neighborhood listening, diagnosing local narratives, and discerning God and the gospel. The result is a theology of local community ministry as action-reflection on what the Father is doing by paying attention to vulnerable voices, particularly of youth in the community and so partnering with non-church actors in ways inclusive and gospel affirming. Missiology is returned to the local church as the *missio Dei* is embodied in the practices of local community mission.

INTRODUCTION

AN EXAMINATION OF MISSIOLOGY in the West requires an interrogation of local church ministry praxis. Historic understanding of mission suggest that mission occurs at distance, “over there,” in exotic locations. Certain individuals, uniquely called and gifted are sent. Local church involvement is reduced to activities like prayer, financial giving and sending care packages (complete with used tea bags!). When mission is entwined with colonization, attitudes of racial superiority suggest missionaries are givers to “native” peoples. These historic attitudes risk distorting how the contemporary church might inhabit local mission. In reality, the practice of mission in the West today needs to begin with the conversion of attitudes within the local church.

In theory, the *missio Dei* provides conceptual frames to enable these conversions. God is understood as a missionary God at work in the world. Mission is viewed as having a concrete form, as neither program nor abstraction but as living history, “the active knowledge of Jesus Christ [being and becoming] established in the world” (Flett 2010, 293). However, the shape of local church participation remains problematic, both in theory and practice. Some applications of *missio Dei* have sought to exclude the church, considering that God can articulate Godself without the need for missionary activity (Bosch 1991, 392). At other times, *missio Dei*

language has been accused of being abstract and generalized, an intellectual preoccupation of the “seminary” class.

This paper seeks to ground the *missio Dei* in the local context of community ministry and teaching of ministry agents, both lay and ordinands. The birthing of a local community context, the Blue Horizon Youth Charity in Aberdeen, Scotland, is examined. In seeking to rightly locate the local church in relation to the *missio Dei*, we apply three frames—neighborhood listening, diagnosing local narratives and discerning God, and the gospel—to a case study of the development of a local community ministry. The result is tools and practices, interpreted missiologically, for the local church.

MISSIO DEI INTRODUCED

Our paper works with the assumption that the *missio Dei* is axiomatic for missional ecclesiology. *Missio Dei* understands God as a missionary God at work in the world. *Missio Dei* is considered one of the most essential theological (re-)discoveries of the twentieth century. Emerging in the post-war traumas of Europe, *missio Dei* has found “widespread acceptance in East and West among most churches and international networks” (Kim 2007, 52). Arising from the International Missionary Conference in Willingen, Germany, mission was affirmed as sourced and located not with the church, but with God.

Missio Dei has been examined in relation to Western society, in particular through the missional church conversation. A starting point was the challenges presented by missionary Leslie Newbigin, returning to England, who diagnosed a post-Christian society.¹ *Missio Dei* reshapes the trajectories of churches within western European culture (Guder 1998, 4). Mission is God’s good news for the world. As a result of God’s initiative, the church becomes a missionary church in its own Western societies, the cultures in which it finds itself. Western church theologies and structures are

1. In particular, Newbigin 1995.

revealed as shaped by the legacy of Christendom. The church is challenged to see itself as an instrument and witness to the gospel, not the endpoint of the gospel. Hence the church is not static, provincial, or bureaucratic. Instead, through the intentional cultivation of ecclesial practices, a community of people is called forth to participate in the new creation (Guder 1998, 152–53). These practices are listed as baptism, breaking bread, reconciliation, discernment, and hospitality. The result is not “one mission theology, but many, with all these theologies serving to equip the saints in all their cultural settings for the common missionary vocation” (Guder 2015, 43).

At the same time, *missio Dei* has undergone critique. Some scholars note how *missio Dei* emerged from minds formed by Western worldviews and who were engaged with mission as enacted during colonial expansion (Kim 2007, 52). For Rodriguez (2018, 33), these authors worked within Enlightenment critiques of revealed religion and perpetuated “a modernist foundationalist epistemology.” Carmen Rae Lansdowne laments the capture of *missio Dei* by worldviews and theological perspectives of American and European theologians. However, rather than dismiss *missio Dei*, she argues from an indigenous perspective that *missio Dei* needs to be understood as “grounded in right action—towards the earth, towards each other, towards our histories, stories, cultures and values” (Lansdowne 2016, 220). For Wieland, this is a “valuable corrective” (Wieland 2020, 104) and invites further research not into theology and polity but into analysis of actions and practices as enacted among local churches.

A focus on actions and practices generates a set of tensions. First, a tension of agency: If *missio Dei* understands God as missionary, then what does it mean to locate mission primarily in God rather than in local church activity. This has particular tensions in the West, where local churches often face decline and embrace mission as a program to raise attendance. Second, a tension of revelation: If *missio Dei* locates mission not in the church’s activity but the being and nature of God, then how might mission exist as spiritual practices? Can Christian ways of being in the world

embody patterns of listening and discerning God's acting and revealing? Third, a tension of particularity: What does it mean to talk of *missio Dei* not in generalized principles, but local contexts, in ways that assert that God is active in particular times and places? Can the assertion that God is active be not only a universal affirmation but a local embodiment? Tensions can be generative. This paper embraces these tensions, examining tools and practices of listening, diagnosing, and discerning in the local.

Our interest is in one particular stream, Scottish Presbyterian mission theology, historically exported to Aotearoa, now seeking expression in an interplay between contemporary Scotland and Aotearoa New Zealand. This stream has historically demonstrated many of these tensions, shaped by the Scottish Enlightenment and values of rational, intellectual and civilizing activity.

LISTENING, DIAGNOSING, AND DISCERNING

In seeking to understand what it might mean to embody God's mission locally, we find two Biblical texts instructive. In this section, we read John 5:19 in conversation with a missiologist from the majority world (Teresa Okure). We then read Luke 10:1–11 in conversation with a missiologist from the Western world (Alan Roxburgh).²

Teresa Okure argues that mission has historically tended to focus on commission. The result is “a complacency on the part of first-world Christians, a complacency that has led in many cases to the loss of faith itself among Christians in this first world” (2003, 314). This becomes a challenge to local churches in the West, who need to understand their local communities in relation to missiological practices. Okure examines John's Gospel, arguing that mission is primarily about abiding not sending. For Okure (1988, 140), John 4:34 is a central verse, significant for the entire Gospel.

2. Sadly, the literature on missional hermeneutics is dominated by white male voices (Dewerse and Hine 2020). In response to this significant weakness, we have structured our literature review as a dialogue with an African female and a white male.

The Father is the “the owner and initiator of the mission” (1988, 142), actively present in the unfolding of the mission. Jesus abides in this Divine mission, participating in the Father’s active presence. This is a profoundly relational and participatory understanding of mission, centered in God, the Trinity as “the real laborers at work in the missionary enterprise” (Okure 1988, 286). The church abides as a participant: “If Jesus himself is sent, is dependent, and does not own the mission, then neither do the disciples” (Okure 1988, 143). Human agency is necessary but as a derivative agency resulting from abiding in God. This suggests that every local church can participate in God’s mission, able to abide by listening for what God is initiating and discerning what the Father is completing through human participation.³

Mission as abiding is evident not only in Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4 but also in Mary’s post-Resurrection encounter with Jesus. Jesus uses the Greek word *zetien* (intense search) to question Mary in John 20:15. It is the same word used for the search of the two disciples for Jesus in John 1:38 and how God seeks humanity in John 4:23–24. Okure considers this Divine search for relationships as the “evangelistic sense in the gospel” (2003, 316). For Okure, the “my Father and your Father, my God and your God” formulation of John 20:17 fulfils John 1:12–13, in which children find themselves in parental relationships (2003, 318). Mission is an intense seeking to abide like a child in Christ, who is like a child abiding in God. For Okure, Mary is the first apostle, entrusted with a unique message about the significance of Jesus’ resurrection—“their common parenthood in and brotherhood/sisterhood in Christ” (2003, 321). This

3. More recently, Michael Gorman (2018) has engaged with Teresa Okure, drawing on her monograph (2003) multiple times. Gorman affirms her argument that “the true missionary is Jesus, and the disciples are instruments for effecting that mission” (Gorman 2018, 186). Like us, although in a more limited way, Gorman turns to embodiment, engaging with specific local communities (191–99) as “part of the process of participating in, discerning, and further participating in the *missio Dei*” (189). We believe we are extending Gorman, by focusing in depth on one particular community in order to enact missional hermeneutics of embrace and self-involvement.

helps us locate practices of listening, diagnosing, and discerning as part of the intense search to abide in what God is completing through us in our local communities. Further, given the “my Father and your Father, my God and your God” formulation, these missional practices configure all disciples as children abiding in God. This provides a way to understand how the relationship between ordained and lay leadership can be understood in mission as a common brotherhood/sisterhood in Christ. Missional practices that enable the formation of leaders and the participation of the whole people of God as abiding listeners in local community mission are needed.

We draw on these insights from Okure as we read John 5:19. God is the primary agent, and the Son can only do what the Father does. This requires a set of practices to cultivate attention. Where is the Father actively abiding, where is Jesus uniquely participating, where is the Spirit breathing peace? Mission is listening, diagnosing, and discerning. Being is work, a participating in God’s activity.

Turning from John to Luke, from Teresa Okure to Alan Roxburgh, in Luke 10:1–11, Jesus sends the disciples. Listening and discernment in local “towns and villages” are essential to mission, evident as the disciples witness acts of healing and, in response, name the particularity of the Kingdom. In *Reaching a New Generation*, Alan Roxburgh examined contextualization in Western cultures. Roxburgh defined contextualization as understanding “the particularity of specific contexts so that the gospel might be addressed into the situation” (1993, 68). Hence Roxburgh reflected on his local ministry, pastoring a growing church and witnessing the launch of a health-food store (the Carrot Common in downtown Toronto). “The contextualizing congregation must learn to “listen” and “see” where God is at work in the midst of secularism, pluralism and technological transformation . . . a dynamic *interaction* in which both sides are changed through dialogue” (Roxburgh 1993, 69). Four theological moves are present. First, Divine agency (“God is at work”). Second, a gaze directed toward culture (“secularism, pluralism and technological transformation”). Third, the

conversion of the church (“dynamic *interaction*”). Fourth, listening with perseverance and commitment.

Contextualization cannot be used as simply another of the latest trends in evangelism, to be worn like a coat and discarded when the next trend arrives. It is an ongoing process, a spiraling dialogue requiring a commitment to change and constant rereading of Scripture. Congregations willing to risk such a life will be at the forefront of mission in the midst of our culture. (Roxburgh 1993, 73)

For Roxburgh (1993, 70), context can include the broad, macro-context, for example, “the secularized pluralism of modernity.” It can also include specific contexts, for example the Carrot Common. Roxburgh diagrams “An Evangelism that Listens” (1993, 72), listening to the popularity of this health-food cooperative, discerning a gospel in dialogue with ecology, community, and the experiential. This diagram appears again in Roxburgh’s *Introducing the Missional Church*. Jesus is presented as a contextual theologian, located in neighborhood stories (Roxburgh and Boren 2009, 94–95). Again, there is listening that attends to the value and meanings that underlie the neighborhood’s surface activities (Roxburgh and Boren 2009, 89–90). This is shaped by a theology of *missio Dei* (Roxburgh and Boren 2009, 91–100), asking what is God up to in this neighborhood?

For Roxburgh (2011, 147), Luke 10:1–12 is a “critical” text for this listening in mission and understanding what God is up to in the world. Missional practices emerge. These include the locating of conversations not in the church but in the neighborhood (Entering houses), at the table of others (Eating and drinking what is placed before us), and in personal human dialogue (The Church in the public square). It comes through speaking peace and announcing the Kingdom of God (2011, 133–62).

This suggests that every local church is participating in the mission of God, seeking to abide by listening for what God is initiating and discerning where the Father is inviting us to participate in the completing work of the new creation.

Our research considers what this might look like in a local Scottish housing estate. It seeks to clarify *missio Dei* in the development of a local community ministry by applying three frames—neighborhood listening, diagnosing local narratives, and discerning God and the gospel.

- Neighborhood listening—Are we intentionally present and listening in the neighborhood, what is going on here, what are we noticing? The reference is to Luke 10:7, in particular, go into every town and place, remain, eat.
- Diagnosing local narratives—What is going on behind what we notice and see and hear happening here? The reference is to Luke 10:5, 8, in particular what kind of town and home is this, what is going on in the people here?
- Discerning God and the gospel—Where is God coming through? What is Good News for this place and time? The reference is to Luke 10:9, in particular, where is the Kingdom coming near, what healing is needed here?

LISTENING, DIAGNOSING, AND DISCERNING IN LOCAL MINISTRY FORMATION

To be consistent with Okure's abiding and Roxburgh's localizing, we seek to ground *missio Dei* in local community ministry and the teaching of ministry agents, including ordinands and congregational members. This emerged from our location, as faculty at Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, which exists to deepen ministry and grow leadership in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. Together we co-taught Mission in Communities, a paper intended to prepare ordinands for leading local churches in mission. We need ways to engage *missio Dei* not in the abstract but the local. Our Faculty roles required us to develop grassroots resources that took the local church context seriously. It also expected us to help ordinands understand how the relationship between ordained and non-ordained leadership was

outworked in mission, as the participation of the whole people of God in local community mission. Both of us have been involved in missional church planting, Mark in Scotland, and Steve in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Blue Horizon: Listening, Diagnosing, and Discerning Local

Our teaching began with local, drawing on the birthing of the Blue Horizon Youth Charity in Aberdeen, Scotland, as a grassroots mission experience. In 2003, Mark began work with a Church of Scotland church plant in Cove, Aberdeen. One of his tasks was to engage with the locality and consider ways the new nascent church community might respond to the Spirit's leading in the ordinary and everyday circumstances of these neighborhoods. What would be "good news" for this particular part of the city, and how might this be heard and known?

The local story of the birthing of the Blue Horizon Youth Charity involved developing ongoing relationships with schools, community workers, residents' associations, and local police. Partnering with a neighboring established parish and minister with deeply embedded relationships in the area catalyzed a listening and diagnostic process. Together Mark and his colleague spent months listening to local residents, school teachers, local business and industry, interviewing council and police workers, and relating to teenagers in the street and local parks. At the same time, they were both living as local residents in their respective neighborhoods. They listened intently and wondered as they walked the streets each day, bumped into parents, talked with people in their front gardens, met community leaders, and conducted school chaplaincy roles. A shared high school catchment across the church plant area and the neighboring parish spoke to a common thread as stories emerged. Teenage issues and anti-social behavior troubled the community and had done for some time. Schools, parents, and residents felt helpless to turn the situation around. Hard drugs, gang fights, pre-teen drinking, self-harm behaviors, and desperate responses raised alarm bells.

A group of people invested in diagnosing these learnings began to talk about what they were hearing. Some suggested similar solutions to those of some residents and community leaders. Tighten policing, get the worst teenagers off the street, and bring back the church youth group. Open up a church hall and run games. However, Mark and his colleague could see these approaches would attend to outcomes and visible behaviours, rather than prior causes.

Amidst the stories being heard, something else emerged. This involved discerning the unraveling social fabric in families as men served offshore on oil rigs for months on end. Their extended absences disrupted households. Parents and schools lost belief in young people's potential and struggled with a lack of social support and overwhelming behavioral issues. At the same time, listening to young people suggested they felt abandoned, treated as pariahs, ignored, or criminalized and propelled out of sight.

This caused a pause. Mark and those listening drew an iceberg. This helped them name stories and issues above and below the waterline. Another drawing, of a bridge over a river, allowed a naming of the "debris" flowing beneath, but then a reflection on what was upstream, what might be breaking apart or washing away. This brought to mind the estranged and frustrated young people, and what they were saying, how they had become objects, defined as problems, and not fitting into their community.

The result was a realization that there was more than one set of stories in this community. Mission required listening to all the stories and seeking to discern more in-depth perspectives. So began Blue Horizon focusing on teenage potential and coaching parents. Mark and his colleague never got to run a "youth group" as such. There was too much else happening.

Embedded in this story of mission practice are important insights regarding *missio Dei* in the local church. Hence this case study from Scotland has been utilized in seeking to form local church leaders in mission in Aotearoa. We now turn to explore this, paying attention to mission practices evident in the Scotland case study, in light of Okure's abiding and Roxburgh's localizing.

“Listening in Mission”

“Listening in Mission” began as part of an existing course taught at KCML to Presbyterian ordinands. The class was titled Mission in Communities and invited participants to work on *missio Dei* in their local context. This included the use of video conferencing to enable participants to think about mission, not in the context of a classroom, but in their local contexts.

The online course was then made available to the broader church. Participants, usually ordained clergy, were given tools, equipped with readings and invited to invite others in their local church community to go on a journey with them of listening and discerning for the Spirit of God in their neighborhoods. Leaders met (online) for five sessions with the KCML Faculty to experience the tools. During this time, local leaders gathered their own group (face-to-face) to listen and discern locally. The five KCML led sessions encouraged action, facilitated reflection, and offered just-in-time learning as local leaders shared stories and discussed missiologically with peers.

One of the five sessions focused on integrating the learning in a concrete local context. The Blue Horizon project provided useful because it was grounded in real life, yet removed in geography and time. In preparation, participants were asked to bring to this session colored highlighters, of three different colors. A one-page description of the Blue Horizon initiative was provided (similar to what is outlined in the previous section). Participants asked clarifying questions and then critically reflected on the case study, using the three highlighter colors to consider the three frames of neighborhood listening, diagnosing local narratives and discerning God and the gospel.

Neighborhood listening is evident in an activating presence that sought immersive relationships of curiosity and proximity. These behaviours were evident in several places in the Blue Horizon case study. Mark and his colleague “met with many community leaders” in the first six months of establishing the project. They bump “into parents outside the church gate” and talk “with

people in their front gardens.” These activities locate listening beyond the church, made possible through their deliberate actions of connecting with local schools and walking the streets of the community. Alongside the randomness of walking, there was deliberate listening in the meeting with the community leaders (residents association, school teachers, local business, community groups, police, and council workers). Listening was also evident, as Mark and others “listened to young people.” This breadth of listening resulted in the realization of the value of hearing “something else.”

Listening is followed by diagnosing. This is a process requiring the participation of lay and ordained, evident as “a group of people began to talk about what we were hearing.” Words like “common thread” suggest the search for synthesis. Diagnosing is enhanced by the visual metaphors of icebergs and bridges. These make visible the stories and issues “below the waterline” and “upstream.” Listening and diagnosing a community risk being a mirror, reflecting what those listening want to hear. In this case study, existing perceptions are challenged through the use of visual metaphors and the engaging of diverse voices, particularly “the estranged and frustrated young people.”

Discerning God and the gospel is evident in the formation of Blue Horizon, focused “on teenage potential and coaching parents.” This is the most challenging part of the process, both to enact as a local church in mission and to teach in ways that form the whole people of God around abiding and localizing. First, it involved the laying aside of preconceptions. As the case study notes, “We never got to run a youth group as such. There was too much else happening.” Solutions that stay on the surface and resemble something already familiar—in this case, “youth group and the church hall opened up for youth activities again”—can hamper the diagnosing and discerning. Second, it required, following Roxburgh, a localizing of the gospel. As the *missio Dei* moves into the particularity of the neighborhood, what is the unique work that the Son is seeing the Father doing?

To develop the missional practice of discerning God and the gospel, we have focused on the dynamics in Luke 10:1–11 around

the naming of the Kingdom near. We provide a set of “Jesus action” cards. A range of actions by Jesus in the Gospels is distilled and presented in the form of a deck of cards. For example

- Jesus is the compassionate, good shepherd who seeks and embraces the lost, least and the last (Matt 9:5–38; Luke 15:1–7; John 10:11–16; Ezek 34:11–31)
- Jesus refuses to achieve ends through wielding worldly authority, power and might (Mark 14:60–65; 15:29–32; Luke 4:1–13)
- Jesus loves enemies, resists revenge, and the cycle of violence (Matt 5:8–48; 26:51–56; Luke 23:32–43)
- Jesus creates a new reconciling, healing and diverse community (Luke 5:27–32; 6:12–16)
- Jesus meets needs from God’s abundance, rather than our story of scarcity (Matt 14:13–21)
- Jesus exposes evil and exploitation (Matt 12:33–37; Luke 19:45–48)
- Jesus gives life in all its fullness (John 10:10; 20:31)
- Jesus challenges and redefines one’s neighbor (Matt 5:43–48; Luke 10:25–37).⁴

People are invited to assign cards alongside what has been diagnosed. Invariably, new possibilities are triggered. What random act of kindness might embody Jesus’ abundance in this community? What is the evil that needs to be resisted, not by violence but through love of enemy? The diagnosing of God and the gospel in the particularity of the local invites a new imagination.

Note what is happening, both in local leadership and in abiding and localizing missiology. Concerning leadership, the skills required include taking time (many months), multiple conversations (community leaders, parents, residents), ensuring diverse voices (particularly young people), the skilled use of visual metaphors (icebergs and bridges), and particularity (this time and place).

4. For a complete set of twenty-six actions, contact the authors.

An imagination which prioritizes the activity of God is cultivated. God is not brought to a local neighborhood. Rather, God's future is being imagined within a particular time and place.

Concerning missiology, the actions of diagnosing and discerning are located in the local and amongst the whole people of God. Leaders are theologically educated for mission, learning through the "Jesus action" cards how to discern God and gospel. The result is a local contextualization (diagnosing as per Roxburgh), located in abiding (listening and discerning as per Okure). This all occurs in the context of the local church, not the seminary classroom.

Interpreting Blue Horizon: Discerning Local Shape to Christ Patterned Action

The Blue Horizon case study is illustrative, both for ministry participants and for this paper. Discerning the Kingdom of God as near and the local shape of Christ patterned action is clarified through two "Jesus actions." One is Jesus, the compassionate, good shepherd who seeks and embraces the lost and least. Another is Jesus who gives life in all its fullness

These Jesus' actions were discerned in conversation with reflections on youth development by Rowan Williams (pers. comm). "What concerns me most is the feeling that for teenagers, there is a pressure to live in a rather small world. The world of the next exam, the next party, the next what-ever: and keeping the horizon open, the whole big world in front of people is quite a challenge." Given these insights about the fragmenting of intergenerational relationships between teenagers, their parents and a local community, the actions of Jesus as the good shepherd, seeking the well-being of this local community (John 10:11-16) are good news. God's action in being a shepherd who seeks out those feeling lost provide a "horizon" and an invitation to life to the full beyond "the next what-ever." Hence Blue Horizon articulated values that connected the diagnosing of (youth) culture with local Christ

patterned actions.⁵ Four values are particularly relevant, those of seeing worth, building confidence, expanding horizons and realizing potential. If Jesus sought all people, then young people had worth and needed to be listened to. Given the shepherd cared, so extra care needed to be invested in those who might lack the initial confidence to speak. As Jesus sought the lost and least, so every young person had potential to be more than “the next whatever.” If Christ offered life to the full, then young people should not be reduced the confines of the social horizons of their upbringing but instead invited to experience expanding horizons.

The connecting of local diagnosis and discerning Christ patterned actions was evident in the way Blue Horizon, as a registered British charity, was established. It had five aims. The first was that Christian beliefs shape what is done and said.⁶ It was important from the outset that the local mission leaders and churches owned the process they were invested in and acknowledged their Christian imagination and motivations. At the same time, Blue Horizon sought to locate itself beyond church-centric and bureaucratic solutions to social issues and instead innovate through a mix of community, commercial, and church investment. This meant articulating the distinctive ethos of Blue Horizon and how Christian beliefs informed the actions and words of the project in secular spaces. In other words, how this community ministry was faith-based.

Community ministry was empowered by discerning the *missio Dei* in this specific local context. These aspirational statements, shaped by the “Jesus actions,” were embodied in Blue Horizon’s distinct beliefs and values. The beliefs included the worth of self-honesty, transformation, and hope. The values included; naming Christ’s model of compassion and acting consistently with the values and practices of Christian faith—hospitality, sacrificial service,

5. Based on Blue Horizon documents, which outline the ethos, beliefs, values, and practices. These are available from the authors.

6. The other four are that adolescent young people are not a problem to be solved but persons with the potential to be released; a focus on prevention; that volunteers matter and the strategic worth of partnership with other agencies and groups.

unconditional regard, perseverance, forgiveness and reconciliation, social justice, and life-affirming moral standards. Difficult realities could be approached through the power of Christian faith. Church involvement contributed to the social capital of communities. Relationships and resources could be shared in common for the flourishing of the wider community.

This gave voice to the reality, as agents of mission, that whatever responses Blue Horizon developed would involve God's good news for this particular community. Hence the Kingdom of God was coming near, grounded in the particularity of Good news. In Luke 10:9, the sick are healed. Only then is the Kingdom of God named in proclamation. We interpret these healings as specific, unique to the towns and particular homes which the seventy-two entered. Hence the proclamation of the Kingdom of God is a response to the particularity of every healing. Hence community ministry is an engagement in the particularity of what God is doing (John 5:19), not in general terms, but as participation in Jesus patterned acts in local settings.

Blue Horizon was abiding in the local neighborhood, through participating in spiritual practices of listening and discerning. This was a long way from the pre-existing imagination of "a youth group and the church hall opened up for youth activities." Nevertheless, it was a participation in the *missio Dei* for this oil economy-enriched, socially fragmenting local community in this particular period. Different times and places will offer different discerning and diagnosis. Such is the particularity of *missio Dei* in every community.

LOCAL MISSION LEARNINGS

Our concern is to rightly locate the local church in relation to the *missio Dei*. We have used the Blue Horizon case study, first to articulate a local theology of what *missio Dei* looks like in a local community ministry. Second, to examine how leaders, called to western European cultures, might be formed in the *missio Dei* freed from Christendom legacies. What are the implications for the

tensions around God's agency in contexts of ecclesial decline, mission as being here rather than doing there, and local embodiment?

Practices of listening, diagnosing and discerning, locate mission firmly in the agency of God. Doing what the Father does pays attention to vulnerable voices in the community and enable partnerships with non-church actors in ways that are inclusive while affirming gospel values. In the context of church decline, programs that worked in another church are often presented as "silver-bullet" solutions. However, listening demands a different imagination. If God does not speak, then listening is in vain. If the Kingdom of God is not coming, then discerning remains a human activity. If God is not abiding with local agents, then this discernment is not possible. In contrast to approaches from secular agencies, the discernment of the actions of God provides distinctly God-filled ethos, beliefs, values, and practices. This is consistent with Newbiggin's (1989, 227) belief that in a post-Christian West, "the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it."

Practices of listening, diagnosing and discerning ensure individual embodiment and provide local color. The focus is the local community ("the estranged and frustrated young people and what they had said, and how they had become objects, defined as problems and not fitting into their community"). Practices of listening and discerning honor the particularity of God's activity in every local context. Action is being, and being is action. This is consistent with mission *ad-intra*, an inward mission that involves "rethinking things and rereading the Bible and tradition to cultivate coherence between speaking and doing" (Tamez 2017, 87). Formation of the whole people of God occurs as abiding in the local is foregrounded.

Finally, practices of listening, diagnosing and discerning understand God as active in particular times and places amongst specific people. The Blue Horizon case study was removed geographically and in time from the "Listening in Mission" courses in Aotearoa New Zealand. This reduced the temptation to photocopy a program. Mission cannot be replicated. Instead, formation of

leaders requires their own listening, diagnosing and discerning. Further, the practices undertaken are indeed the work of the whole people of God, evident both in Blue Horizon and the structuring of the KCML “Listening in Mission” course. What results is consistent with Bevans understanding of the church as “the community of the converted . . . a place where conversion is developed and fostered” (2018, 142–43). Such are the possibilities for *missio Dei* when through neighborhood listening, diagnosing local narratives and discerning God and the gospel, it is located in the local church.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined *missio Dei* in a local community context. An understanding of the *missio Dei* has been developed, first as abiding by reading John 5:19 in conversation with Terese Okure, second as local by reading Luke 10:1–11 in conversation with Alan Roxburgh. Missiology is returned to the local church through practices of neighborhood listening, diagnosing local narratives, and discerning God and the gospel. This is evident in Blue Horizon and as a “Listening in Mission” case study with ordinands at Knox Centre for Mission and Leadership and among local congregations. Listening involves activating presence and seeking immersive relationships of curiosity and proximity. Diagnosing occurs through visual tools, utilizing metaphors of icebergs and bridges. Diagnosing enables discerning “Jesus actions” in the particularity of specific contexts. These become practices by which local peoples of God might abide in the *missio Dei*, experiencing their own conversion through abiding and localizing.

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