

A BOOK REPORT

“A PUBLIC MISSIOLOGY (How Local Churches Witness To a Complex World)”

Title/Name of Book: “A Public Missiology/How Local Churches Witness To a Complex World”

Author: Gregg Okesson (PhD, University of Leeds) who is Dean of the E. Stanley Jones School of World Missions and Evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary and the Ira Gallaway and D.M. Beeson Professor of Leadership Development, Mission and Evangelism, and who previously served in East Africa as a church planter, educator and administrator, and worked at Wheaton College. He is also the author of *Re-imagining Modernity* and is the co-author of *Advocating for Justice*”.

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First Impressions: This book is a very difficult book for me to evaluate. On the one hand I am inclined to say that a reader will be greatly disappointed in this book if he or she takes the time to wade through it. On the other hand, I am afraid that a negative evaluation of this book by me will cause a serious reader, who is more intelligent than I am to fail to read a book which contains valuable information about the need for local church congregations to witness to their communities, and about how they might go about doing so. In trying to be objective in stating my opinions about the book, those opinions are (and these are my personal opinions, not necessarily the opinions which other more intelligent and learned than I am might hold):

1) This book is difficult to absorb and understand. While the individual parts of the book are generally clear and are cogently stated, the book, from one part/chapter to the next, and in its entirety does not seem to hang together in any manner which I can find.

2) While the author, in the concluding chapters of the book, describes three local church congregations, which are located at very diverse geographical locations (Africa, Montreal, Canada, and Nashville, Tennessee) and while these descriptions and examples of these congregations help to provide some advice as to how local congregations might “witness to their surrounding ‘publics’ (the author’s terminology), they don’t provide much practical advice to congregational pastors and church leaders as to how their congregations might “witness to these surrounding ‘publics’”, at least in my view.

3) Candidly (and this is simply my personal opinion, which others might find to be wrong) I don’t think that this book advises us of much which we do not already know, at least intuitively, and the author spends a great deal of time and words in telling us (or at least reinforcing us) about that which we already know, while it provides little, if any, practical advice about how to apply such knowledge in the real world.

So I just cannot recommend this book. I think that its potential readers, who would be pastors and leaders of local church congregations who already have huge demands on their time, will not find that reading this book will provide for a worthwhile expenditure of already over-

burdened time. I apologize to the author for this negative recommendation. The author, is obviously a very intelligent, learned man, and is obviously a very devout, strong Christian with a wonderful background by which he has been exposed to local congregations in very diverse geographic locations (including Africa) and he has obviously spent a lot of time and hard work in writing this book in order to impart to local congregation pastors and leaders that which he considers to be essential to the mission of the Church universal (and of each of its local congregations) in this era of complex social environments. I commend his passion. I just cannot recommend his book. Perhaps wrongfully pridefully, I have concluded that I am a serious reader and am not unintelligent, and that I am willing to do hard work in order to get the benefit of a book, and that, if I cannot get a good grasp on this book then it is likely that over-burdened pastors and leaders will have the same difficulty in grasping whatever it is that the author so obviously believes that it is important that they understand.

Overall Description of the Book's Contents/What is the Author Doing With What the Author is Saying: At this point I am going to try to set forth my summary of the contents of this book. Setting forth this summary is not an easy task to accomplish because the contents of this book are quite complex (actually unnecessarily complex, in my opinion). In order to make at least a feeble attempt to arrive at such a summary, I must first try to describe some terms which the author uses, although the author does not define or describe these terms with very much definitive specificity. These terms are as follows and some of what I perceive the author's use of same is as follows:

1) "Publics": The author starts out with a statement to the effect that "Publics" are not easily defined, and that the term is ambiguous at best (not all that helpful in my view since a lot of this book hinges on the need to "witness to 'publics'"). The author then goes on to state that: "For purposes of this book I will define 'publics' as common spaces of togetherness where people participate with one another in life and form opinions through circulation of different texts." As I understand the author's descriptions of "publics" they exist both physically, as physical places (i.e. governmental buildings, churches, coffee shops, parks, athletic venues, etc.) and notionally, in the mental, emotional and thought processes of groupings of people (i.e. political ideology, political parties, politics in general, faith, religious dogma, etc.) and in the circumstances in which people live and to which they are exposed (i.e. poverty, racism, suffering, good times, hard times, oppression, etc.). Of the very essence of the author's basic views, "publics" are very complex. They are far from simple. They represent a constant "weaving" (the author's terminology) movement in and out, back and forth of virtually everything which impacts the way in which people see the world, and see their lives and seek to understand the world and how to live in it. "At its core, public life is defined as the space where humans collectively build their life-worlds by searching for and by creating imagined orders...and then drawing meaning from these, including their sense of meaning of life, their faith, and their awareness of God...".

2) "Thick": The author keeps using this term, "thick", as opposed to "thin", but really does not do much to clearly describe "thick". As I understand his use of the term "thick" it is intended to be both a qualitative and quantitative term. For example, when it refers to the

congregation of a local church it means that such congregation is a “public”, the make up of which is exceedingly complex as the people of that congregation come to the church from and with a host of “publics” as described in 1) above. That congregation represents a tapestry of a weaving of numerous “publics”, and, hence, it, itself, as a public is very complex, meaning “thick.” The same would be said of the “publics” of the community or locality in which the congregation’s facilities are located, and of the communities and localities and groups which are encountered by the people of the congregation, outside of the church, which they encounter in their daily lives. All of these “publics”, meaning those of a congregation as a whole, and of its individual congregants, and of its community and locality, and of the communities, localities and groups which its congregants encounter during the week are, in the author’s view, “thick”, meaning very complex and becoming increasingly so.

3) “Thin”: “Thin” is the opposite of “Thick” as described in 2) above.

4) “Missional” or “Missional Church”: Unfortunately, in my view, the author does little to identify the term “missional” or to refer to the “missional church movement”. I don’t think that the reader can get much of a grip on the essential message of this book without having at least some modest background with these terms. I have to assume that the book is directed to pastors, leaders and theologians of the “Missional” movement, and that he assumes that they will be familiar with his terminology. He uses a good deal of terminology which I would attach to the “Missional Movement.” He also makes a number of references to Lesslie Newbigin, who is one of the most foremost advocates for the Missional Movement, and to the writings of, and quotations from the writings of Lesslie Newbigin. Additionally, the author has a strong background in Missions, particularly in East Africa, and his credentials, which are set forth above show a strong attachment to the Missional Movement. Space and time allowed for this Review do not allow me to provide any sort of complete statement (or attempted complete statement) of the Missional Movement, in which a so-called “Missional Church” congregation, as opposed to what we might think of as a more traditional congregation that is focused on Evangelism, seeks to emphasize the *Missio Dei*, God’s Mission for the redemption of His creation, or the performance of Good Works as required by the so called *Social Gospel*, as opposed to the performance of evangelism as required by the *Great Commission*. I don’t want to get into the discussion about what the proper nature or proper ecclesiology of the church or a congregation should be, or about what the appropriate missiology of the church or a congregation (i.e. its mission) should be. For our purposes it is likely sufficient for me to state (possibly painting with a brush that is too broad) that those who advocate for the Missional Movement and for Missional Churches would strongly declare that the ecclesiology of a church and its mission should be that of the *Missio Dei*, emphasizing the so called “*Social Gospel*” over that of the *Great Commission*. I have concluded that the author is an advocate for the Missional Movement, and for the position that, while the evangelizing function of a local church is an important one, it provides but a “thin witness” to its congregation and to the thick (i.e. very complex) publics of its surrounding community, and that a local congregation has an obligation, as a part of the *Missio Dei* to witness to, and to bring God’s redemptive plans to such publics and community.

5) “Gathered” and “Scattered”: The author uses these terms, but without much of an explanation as to the meanings which are attached to same. It appears to me that, again, these

terms are being used by the author in the same way in which they are used by someone who looks at a local church, and seeks to understand its ecclesiology (its nature) and its missiology (its mission). A “Gathered Church” would be one which has a central campus where all of its staff works and where all of its functions (e.g. worship, weddings, funerals, classes for Christian maturity, etc.) are performed. In the case of a Scattered Church, that church might have a central campus where worship occurs, and weddings and funerals and other ceremonial functions are performed, but is a church in which its members or congregants are expected (if not outright required) to be members of and working participants in various working groups which perform the “missional” or “Social Gospel”, or *Missio Dei* functions of the church. Such working groups might include groups which are to concentrate on a prison ministry or upon the community’s health care needs or the needs of the community’s homeless people. In such a Scattered Church the most important functions of the Church are performed by these working groups, and, hence, the members of the Church and work of the Church are “Scattered” throughout the community.

6) “Movement”: This term, “Movement” is used by the author and forms a very important part of his conclusions. However, it is not easy to understand exactly what the author means when he refers to “Movement”, leaving it to the reader and to me to try to do one’s best to understand what the author intends to mean by this term. He seems to mean that there is a constant “movement” or “weaving” (another term which he uses) back and forth and back and forth in all of the “publics” of every congregation, and in all of the “publics” in which its congregants live and in all of the “publics” of its surrounding locale or community. These publics are constantly interacting with each other, and are “moving”/“weaving” back and forth between each other, and are constantly changing, with these changes in each “public” constantly moving/weaving back and forth and back and forth. The relationships between individuals and publics are moving/weaving, back and forth, constantly.

7) “The Trinity”: It is going to seem to be very weird to include some definition or explanation of the “Trinity” in this summary, but it is necessary to do so. The author views the Trinity in a manner which differs from any other manner in which I have seen it to be referred to or described. In fact, the theological basis or grounding for the author’s declarations that local congregations must “witness thickly to its surrounding publics” is the Trinity, and the back and forth “movements” between and among the individual persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and movements back and forth between the divine community of the Trinity and mankind. To quote the author: “Here we find the theological basis for local congregations, who witness in the public realm through the movements of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” The author finds that “....movement within the Trinity involves something taking place *between* the persons” (i.e. the three persons of the Trinity), and that “All (such) persons mutually permeate one another, though in so doing they do not cease to be distinct persons.” There is, according to the author, movement between the persons of the Trinity, and movement by which the divine community (i.e. the Trinity) acts externally upon mankind in human history. “Movement internally within the divine community goes out externally into the entire world. ‘Publicness’ arises fundamentally from the internality of the persons of the Trinity.” Furthermore, the Trinity not only gives and receives internally between and among its individual persons, but it also acts

externally sending and receiving, with the Father sending the Son, and the Father and the Son sending the Holy Spirit, and with each of the “sent” persons of the divine community returning to the divine community, where the persons of that community interact with each other, internally. There is a constant weaving and movement, back and forth, within the divine community and between the divine community and the external world, which provides the theological basis/model for the local congregation to witness, thickly, to its public or community.

“Congregations can thicken their witness (i.e. their public witness to their ‘publics’) by mirroring the movement of the persons of the Trinity.” The three persons of the Trinity retain their individuality, but they are unified as the divine community. They give and receive, internally, between and among themselves and the divine community gives to and receives from the world, creation and mankind. There is a constant back and forth “movement”, a giving and receiving, within the persons of the Trinity and to and from the divine community, the Trinity. The Church and the local congregation are formed in the image of the Trinity. While the individual members retain their individuality, their diverse individualities, they are unified as a community. They give and receive, internally, among themselves, and the unified community gives to and receives from its surrounding “publics” and communities. As is the case with the Trinity, there is, in the case of a local congregation, a constant movement of giving and receiving among the members of the congregation, thereby forming an internal (to the church) “thick public”, and a constant giving and receiving, to and from the community of the congregation and its locale, its surrounding publics and its community.

8) “Enlightenment”: I know that each of us has an understanding of the Enlightenment, but the author attaches a good deal of importance to the effects of the Enlightenment’s philosophy on theology and what he refers to as “the public witness of the church”. The Enlightenment began in the 17th century, and continued with the rise of Modernity and modern thought into at least the early twentieth century, and still exists, in some form, today. The Enlightenment and Modernity placed huge confidence in human reason and science for uncovering “truth”. In order for something to be “true” it had to be capable of being objectively demonstrated or shown as such by the physical senses, or science. In the author’s view, in the early days of the church, theology was tightly connected with wisdom and was thus inseparable from public life, but the Enlightenment changed all of this and created a dichotomy between theology and the spiritual (what went on inside the church) and the secular, what went on in public life. Theology, and in many respects, the church and local congregations retreated from the public or secular. The church and its local congregations became less and less involved in the public sphere, and ceased to seek to witness to the public and its complex publics.

9) “Thin Gospel” versus “Thick Gospel”: In the author’s view, many congregations, if not in fact most of them, emphasize but one aspect of the Gospel, that being salvation. This is a “thin Gospel.” However, if a church emphasizes the entire narrative of Scripture, and what it teaches about God’s working with mankind, and in particular emphasizes movement across the “entirety of Christ”, including the incarnation, the life and teachings of Christ, and His death and resurrection, and it also emphasizes the “Trinity” as described in 7) above, then it will expose its

members to the entirety of the Gospel, a “Thick Gospel”. As its members bring into the church their particular “publics” (including concerns of poverty, social justice, economics, politics, racism, etc.) those publics will be exposed to the Thickness of the Gospel and will be transformed by the Gospel, thereby forming a “thick public” from the congregation, which is centered on Christ, enabling the individual members to “witness” to other individuals, but more importantly enabling the congregation to witness “thickly” to its complex/thick publics, meaning those of its locale and community and even to the world at large. These social concerns or “publics” should be specifically mentioned and dealt with as a part of the Doxology of the church, as they are exposed to the Thick Gospel and the power of the Trinity and to the Movement across the entire incarnation, life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus.

I acknowledge that I have over explained the author’s use of the terminologies set forth in the above numbered paragraphs. Admittedly, my doing so shows how I have wrestled with this book and what I perceive that the author is trying to do with what he is saying. Candidly, I hope that the reader, who is, hopefully, more theologically skilled than I am can make more sense of these matters than I have been able to do. About all I can do is to attempt, probably inadequately, to briefly state (keeping in mind the remarks about the terminology set forth in the above numbered paragraphs) what I perceive that the author is saying or trying to say. As I perceive some of his important points, they are as follows:

a) The Public realm in which each Local Congregation is situated (locale being very important, highly important) consists of a host of “publics” as described above. Those publics are exceedingly complex, meaning “thick”, as described above. Local Congregations, under the continuing influence of the Enlightenment tend to “witness” to these thick publics, if at all, in a very “thin fashion”, whereas thickness of witness is required.

b) Each Local Congregation is, itself, made up of a large number of the individual “publics” of its members. It is, therefore, a highly complex public.

c) Each Local Congregation is, in effect, a mirror of the Trinity, the divine community as described above. Hence, there is an internal movement across and among its members, a giving and receiving across and among them, and there should be (as the image of the Trinity compels) a movement, a giving and receiving movement, back and forth between the congregation and its public realm, which is made up of complex publics as described above.

d) The church and each of its local congregations is charged with seeking to further the *Missio Dei* as described above, and as a part of that *Missio Dei* it is to work with God, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, for the redemption of the public realm, and in particular its surrounding publics.

e) Theology has become far too divorced from the public realm and the lives in the public realm of its members.

f) “Public Missiology” is required of each Local Congregation. It must participate in the complex lives of its members (and their publics) and in the complex publics which surround it, in seeking to cause same to be centered on Christ, as only Christ and the Trinity can hold together complex publics.

g) The more diverse a congregation is, the more complex its publics are, and the more that congregation can witness to its surrounding publics, which, hopefully, are demographically mirrored by the demographics of its congregation.

h) Both gathering and scattering are essential to a public witness by a congregation. The members must gather, in order that their individual natures and the publics from which they come can be weaved together by an internal movement, a back and forth giving and receiving, and all “publics” can be exposed to the power of the Trinity and to the full life of Jesus and the Thick Gospel. The congregation can, thereby, form a “thick public” and, therefore be more readily equipped to deal with the thick publics of its locale and community. In that respect, the congregants are “scattered” through the community and the congregation, itself, is “scattered” into and brings the power of the Holy Spirit and the full power of the “thick Gospel” to its locale.

i) In the “gathering” all of the aspects of the publics of its congregants should be woven into the “Doxology” by meaning mentioned, and exposed to the Trinity and the Thick Gospel. Pastors should not shy away from bringing into the message and worship negative aspects of the publics of the members, such as poverty, racism, social injustice, etc. These aspects of the surrounding publics must be exposed to the Trinity and the Thick Gospel.

These are just some of the author’s points. The author goes on, at the conclusion of his book to describe “how to study a congregation” in order to identify both its *explicit* theology (that which it publicly represents itself to be by its mission statements, etc.), and its *implicit* theology, what it actually does or how it, in practice, shows what its theology is and what its mission is. He then gives detailed descriptions of his studies of three separate congregations, once in East Africa, one in Montreal, Canada, and one in Nashville, Tennessee (a very ethnically diverse congregation). The detailed descriptions of these congregations are somewhat helpful in achieving an understanding about how they have individually witnessed to the publics of their congregations and to the publics of their surrounding communities. So these descriptions provide some help, much needed help I might add, in trying to understand just what the author is trying to say.

What Is The Intended Readership or Audience For This Book: Candidly, I am not sure. I know that the intended readership is not the day to day Christian (if that is a proper terminology) who sits in the pew. I assume that it is made up of Pastors and Church Leaders who are interested in trying to understand, and broaden the missiology, the mission of their individual congregations in order that those congregations might be more involved in the *Missio Dei* for the redemption or reformation of the *publics* of their locales.

How To Read This Book: Respectfully (and this is simply my personal opinion) unless you find something truly new in the outlines of the book’s contents which is set forth above, it would be my suggestion that you not invest the time it will take to read this book in trying to understand it. I fear that you will wrestle with it as much as I have, and then come away with a question: “Why

did I read this book?” If you are inclined to consider reading it, then read the Introduction and the concluding “Appendix”, and then read the Conclusion at the end of each Chapter. You should then be able to form a conclusion as to whether you want to read the entire book.

Can This Book Be Used in a TEI or ECLI Class?: In my opinion, NO. It is too complex and seems to me, in admittedly my personal opinion, to be far too complex, and to impart far too little practical information, advice or counsel.

Personal Thoughts: I apologize for my negative conclusions about this book. Perhaps those conclusions evidence the fact that I am not properly equipped, theologically or otherwise, to understand what the author is saying. That said, as I look at my outline of the book’s contents, which appears above, I am unable to conclude that I have learned anything from this book that I did not already know, even though I wrestled with trying to understand the book by reading it, and then going back and re-reading substantial parts of it, and then trying to outline it. The remarks of the Reviewers which appear on the book’s back cover led me to believe that I would find in the book some earth shattering information which would help to resolve/settle the age old debates about whether the true ecclesiology or missiology of a congregation is to be found in the so called Social Gospel or in the Great Commission. I did not find anything new in the book. I did not find that it provided any practical information, or perhaps any information about how a congregation should relate to its locale and the people therein or its community. Don’t we all know, at least intuitively, that a congregation, as God’s Church, is to be a community within its surrounding community and that it has a God given mandate to seek to work for the good of its surrounding community? So, with apologies to our obviously intelligent, strongly Christian, very good man author, I cannot recommend this book.