

## Practices for a Missional Church Planting Order

**What practices can sustain missional practice and spiritual vitality among church planters? Taking cues from Ignatius of Loyola, who gains authority by virtue of the missionary order he founded, as well as contemporary missional practitioners, this article proposes a rule of life for a church planting order that addresses the need for a foundational vision of God’s love and invitation to mission, structures life-giving fellowship with others and regards further spiritual practices and particular missional activities as best determined in community and targeted to the growth needs of the individual and the character of the ministry context.**

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### Ordering a Missional Spirituality?

Church planters, as Ed Stetzer has noted, are threatened with a devastating occupational hazard—losing their soul.[\[1\]](#) While Stetzer recommends church planters give attention to their own spiritual renewal and theological reflection in order to mitigate this risk, this essay invites church planting networks to employ a proven method for nurturing the spiritual vitality of its members. Drawing from historical and contemporary Christian writers, this essay makes a

concrete proposal toward the formation of a missional order and rule of life for 21st century church planters in Western contexts.

A religious order, though it may conjure up images of brown habits, rituals performed in dimly lit rooms, or even bloody self-flagellation, is simply a group of people who have chosen to enter into a set of religiously motivated vows and commitments and a set of related practices. Orders have historically sprung up around influential founders and have sought to capture and codify the way of life and principles the founders embodied.<sup>[2]</sup> In other words, the function of an order is to formalize a spirituality that is regarded by a group as particularly life-giving or holy. In addition, creation of an order clarifies the parameters of membership both through a process of initiation and a through articulating the set of commitments incumbent upon them.

A missional order is one that is committed not only to the spiritual vitality of its members but, through its members, to participating in the *missio Dei* through pluriform means, including serving the needy, working for justice, and preaching the gospel. Given that an order is a formal, shared spirituality, the essential questions that must be addressed are: *What kind of spirituality could engender and sustain the work of church planting, and how might this spirituality be codified in a rule of life?* It is these questions that will be taken up in the following sections.

### **Exploring a Missional Spirituality**

In effort to answer the first of the two questions—*what kind of spirituality could vitalize the work of church planting?*—the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola, as the one responsible for, arguably, the most successful missionary order of all time, is an ideal place to begin. According to George Ganss, S.J., Ignatian spirituality is best described as one ‘ordered toward both personal spiritual growth and energetic apostolic endeavor.’<sup>[3]</sup> This dual commitment to contemplation and action is united, for Ignatius, under a single end—that of bringing God the greatest glory. As Margaret Silf points out, Ignatian spirituality is guided by a vision of God as One who invites intimate human partnership in the work of redemption.<sup>[4]</sup> In this vision of God, Ignatius saw himself as God’s partner in mission, united closely with Christ and his work.

The missional identity which Ignatius experienced and passed on to the Jesuits was made possible by nature of what we might call Ignatius’ “Godview”. To state it briefly, Ignatius’ view of God was both thoroughly Christocentric and Trinitarian. The Trinitarian nature of Ignatius’ Godview is evidenced by his practice of daily prayer to each of the three persons separately, and the fact that many of his mystical visions were of the Trinity. The Christocentric nature of Ignatius’ vision of God resulted, in part, from the role of Ludolph’s *Life of Christ* (which constituted Ignatius’ knowledge of Scripture until his later studies) and is born out and was passed on to others through the *Spiritual Exercises*. One of the key effects of the *Exercises* is to lead one into a Christocentric vision of God as a forgiving, loving, and active deity through imaginative and immersive meditation on one’s sins and the scenes of Christ’s life.

More recent authors have stressed the foundational importance of one’s view of God to spiritual vitality. James Bryan Smith, a rising voice in Evangelical spiritual formation circles, suggests that the root issue underlying most failures of human flourishing are distorted

narratives about God, and thus gears the first volume in his trilogy, *The Apprentice Series*, to introducing people to *The Good and Beautiful God* that Jesus knows.<sup>[5]</sup> Henri Nouwen, pinpoints the affect of a lacking Godview as ‘self-rejection,’ which he calls ‘the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the “Beloved.”’<sup>[6]</sup> According to Nouwen, an unfulfilled need to know that we are the “Beloved” drives us to a panicked search for fulfillment helter skelter in ‘this book, idea, trip, job, country, or relationship.’<sup>[7]</sup> Nouwen links this compulsive pursuit with a loss-of-soul: ‘This is the way to spiritual exhaustion and burn-out. This is the way to spiritual death.’<sup>[8]</sup> And it all stems from a poor view of God, one that imagines God as a distant, critical deity, which the Ignatian approach attempts to correct.

David Bosch identifies this issue as of particular relevance to missionaries, and I propose equal relevance to church planters. According to Bosch, missionaries are often ‘misfits at home and unable to accept themselves’ and therefore, are drawn to the mission field in pursuit of an ideal environment for Christian living<sup>[9]</sup> and in order to prove how great a sacrifice one is willing to make for God.<sup>[10]</sup> Church planters often contend with this as well: they want to be heroic, to sacrifice, to overcome obstacles, all to prove to God and the world their worth. As a result, they require a spirituality that cultivates missional identity but also addresses the mirage of ideal community and the negative views of God that can drive them to “succeed” at great feats of courage as a means of proving strength and value. Ignatius, himself, was early on driven by this pseudo-heroism. By his own account, the young Ignatius was consumed by ‘a great and foolish desire to win fame.’<sup>[11]</sup> When his young faith was born, it manifested first as a desire to be an ‘outstanding knight of Christ’ and even in maturity we might say that he was still driven by immature insecurity revealed in acts of heroic sacrifice.<sup>[12]</sup> This should give hope to church-planters and others who unearth these motives as they excavate their own reasons for entering the ministry.

Bosch concludes *A Spirituality of the Road* by asserting that missionaries, and I suggest church-planters, can not survive unless they hear Christ offering both the acceptance and the commissioning found in his words: ‘You did not choose me; I chose you. I appointed you to go on and bear fruit, fruit that shall last (John 15:16).’<sup>[13]</sup> This speculation about the spiritual condition of a good number of church planters has one straight-forward implication: the spirituality they need must ground them in a vision of a loving God who is to be found everywhere and invites people to intimate cooperation in redemptive mission. It was this vision that was the wellspring of both Ignatius’ tears and his ministry.

Ignatian spirituality has two specific practices that have proven capable of cultivating aspects of this vision. The first, which I have already mentioned, is the *Spiritual Exercises*. Serving both as an initiatory experience and an everyday tool of ministry, the *Exercises* ground Jesuits, and bring them repeatedly back to a rich vision of a loving God who seeks intimacy and partnership. The second practice, the *Prayer of Examen*, invites participants to review the day, drawing attention to experiences of God’s perceived presence or absence. This attention to God’s presence can reinforce the belief in God’s goodness, as blessings and encouragements are recalled, and is potent for developing missional acuity—the ability to notice God’s missionary activity in everyday circumstances.<sup>[14]</sup>

## **Toward a Missional Rule of Life**

In order to convert the preceding conclusions regarding the features of a missional spirituality to the specifics of a rule of life for a missional order, I will consider two recent North American proposals toward this end, and the example of The Order of Mission (TOM), a global missional order based in the UK.

In October of 2007, David Fitch, Professor of Evangelical Theology at Northern Seminary and popular speaker on missional church planting, proposed a missional order he dubbed 'The Rule of St. Fiarce' after the patron saint of gardeners (and cab drivers).<sup>[15]</sup> The Order never gained members, but its long list of commitments is interesting and instructive. Farcians were to commit: to plant Christian communities as gardens not supermarkets; to simplicity of lifestyle; to put down roots in a specific local community; to minister the gospel to those in pain and need; to foster resistance to consumerism, materialism, and the commodification of religion; to consider community and ministry aspects of vocation; to see career as a secondary calling; to live hospitably; to band with eight or more other Fiarcian's locally; to regularly practice spiritual formation and communal worship; and to an annual gathering of all members of the Order. Additionally, Fitch proposed specific practices which might be seen as constitutive of the rule of life for this Order including: 1) a *weekly meeting in groups of three* for Scripture, prayer, silence, submission, confession, repentance and reconciliation, story sharing and benediction; and 2) a *regular time of communal worship* of God that includes silence, confession, submission to Christ's Mission, affirmation of Our Story, the reading and hearing of the Word, the Lord's Table, corporate prayer, thanksgiving and benediction.

In 2009, Alan Roxburgh's *Missional Mapmaking* proposed that churches move toward becoming missional by having a small group of the willing from among the congregation adopt a simple missional rule of life. The practices of this rule include: the daily offices of prayer, a monthly experience of hosting a stranger for dinner, intentional development of friendships with the poor, serious learning engagement with the Biblical story, and a weekly meeting to discuss experiences with the other practitioners.<sup>[16]</sup>

Among the missional orders that have popped up recently, The Order of Mission (TOM), a UK-based global order formally inaugurated in 2003, is perhaps the most widely known. Members of TOM make vows of simplicity, purity, and accountability and commit to a rule of life expressed in eight "Lifeshapes," each of which represents an aspect of a healthy life of discipleship. These include: (1) listening to God's voice and responding obediently, (2) balanced and deep relationships, (3) Kingdom-oriented rhythms of life around rest and work, (4) multiplying the life of Jesus into the lives of others, (5) personal calling, (6) prayer, (7) organic health, and (8) relational mission.<sup>[17]</sup> Rather prescribing specific practices, TOM entrusts discernment about the concrete ways these concepts will be practiced, to members in accountable relationships with other members, reflecting their 'low control, high accountability' approach.

It is important to note that while the three different rules outlined above are expressions of spirituality, they each reject the individualistic connotations that have come to be associated with the word. Explicitly, they call for significant relationships as an aspect of spiritual practice, but more importantly their implicit logic presumes that Christian spirituality, rightly understood, is

a social practice. Thus, while each of these rules seeks expression in different types of social bodies—Roxburgh's practices are suggested for a *small group* within an existing congregation,<sup>[18]</sup> TOM's rule is for *persons* worldwide in accountable relationships with other TOM members, and Fitch's rule is for an order of church planting *teams*—they share the basic view expressed by Roxburgh in his first keynote in this journal.<sup>[19]</sup> That is, the practices that make up these rules are not offered as activities that individuals can select in the formation of their individualized spirituality, but as culture-producing practices that can make a society that one may become a part of and be formed by. Similarly, the various social bodies these rules are addressed to are not presented as support groups for individuals wanting the help of a community in their personal spiritual pursuits—something Roxburgh understands as a framing of Christian practice that has accommodated to non-Christian narratives. Instead, these societies are both created by the commitments to shared practice and are a focus of personal spiritual formation. These communities-of-practice form missional persons-in-community. (The very same is descriptive of the proper relationship between the church and the Christian.) Thus, it is not the practices themselves so much as the practice-formed and culture-performing societies that are able to form missional persons.

The rule I propose below intends to reflect this basic understanding. The society it seeks to form bears resemblance to both that which Fitch intended and that of TOM. Like Fitch's rule, it is specifically oriented toward the formation of a society capable of thriving amid the spiritual and psychological challenges unique to church planters. Like TOM's rule, it is not constrained to groups in geographical proximity, but is open to any in relationship with other Order members.

Turning now to specific practices for a missional order of church planters, it is helpful to recall the conclusion of the previous section that church planters require a spirituality (and social practices) that powerfully and regularly re-centers them on the reality of their belovedness through cultivating vision of a loving God seeking intimate partnership. As already suggested, the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* and *Prayer of Examen* provide valuable models. While some of the language and imagery of the *Spiritual Exercises* make its direct application less than ideal, adaptation or development of a similarly Christocentric, immersive and prayerful tool for the formation of new members of the Order could prove to lay a solid foundation for church planters. Moreover, regular use of the tool as a means of discipling and forming others would anchor these pioneers to its fundamental vision. Similarly, daily practice of an adapted prayer of Examen, with questions regarding not only experiences of desolation and consolation but also invitations to partnership in mission, would develop the missional acuity of church planters as well as confirm them in the knowledge of God's ever-present love.

Beyond these foundational practices, a church planting Order could gain wisdom from the proposals of Fitch and Roxburgh by including a social practice of weekly connections with a limited number of others in the Order for: encounter with Scripture, encouragement, confession, prayer, benediction, and, I would add, celebratory meal-sharing when possible. This fellowship is something early solitary Jesuits could not enjoy, except via letters, but that, given advances in technology such as Skype, contemporary church planters in the West should not have to do without. In keeping with the freedom Ignatius gave Jesuits and TOM's 'low control, high accountability' approach, planters should, in consultation and accountable relationship with others in the Order, adopt additional spiritual formation practices such as fasting, silence,

memorization etc. to address their specific areas of needed growth. In particular, these practices ought to address what Ignatius refers to as the need for detachment (for which he prescribes mortification and self-abnegation) as well as what Fitch describes as fostering resistance to anti-gospel cultural realities. Simplicity of lifestyle, something stressed by Ignatius, Fitch, and TOM, is an important baseline in this arena.

Given that church planters will, by nature of their work, undoubtedly be engaged in diverse forms of missional activity, I do not think it is necessary to be overly proscriptive when it comes to expressing this in the rule of life, even by including such fine practices as Roxburgh's proposed monthly dinner-hosting experience. As with personal spiritual practices, planters ought to engage in the forms of hospitality and service, that they—within their accountable relationships—discern to be most appropriate to the context. It is important, however, for all in the Order not to omit practices of hospitality toward those outside of the church, a particular temptation if the number of participants in the church community grows.

## **Conclusion**

Formation of a missional order is a key way that church planting organizations can support the spiritual vitality of their workers. By taking cues from Ignatius of Loyola, who gains authority by virtue of the missionary Order he founded, as well as contemporary missional practitioners, I have proposed a rule of life for an Order of Western church planters. This rule addresses the need for a foundational vision of God's love and invitation to mission through the Ignatian Exercises and Examen, structures life-giving fellowship with others in the Order and, following Ignatian wisdom, regards further spiritual practices and particular missional activities as best determined in community and targeted to the growth needs of the individual and the character of the ministry context.

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[1]Website: <http://www.edstetzer.com/2009/01/starting-a-church-without-losi.html>

[2]Nicki Verploegen provides a brief overview of Catholic schools of spirituality and orders, stressing how they derive from the genius of the founders. Verploegen, Nicki, *Legacy of the Founders: From Monks to Missionaries*. (Lutterworth Press, 2012).

[3]George Ganss, S.J. Ed., *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (Paulist Press, 1991), 9.

[4] Margaret Silf, *Companions of Christ: Ignatian Spirituality for Everyday Living* (Eerdmans, 2005).

[5] James B. Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*. . Smith, James. B. (IVP Books: 2009).

[6] Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*, (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 33.

[7] *ibid* 35.

[8] *ibid* 36.

[9] Luther Smith Jr. found a similar motive among participants in Christian intentional communities. See *Intimacy and Mission: Intentional Community and Crucible for Radical Discipleship* (Herald Press, 1994), Ch. 3.

[10] David Bosch, *A Spirituality of the Road* (Wipf and Stock, 2001), 49.

[11]Ganss, 68.

[12]Ganss, 16. Ignatius memorably exchanged clothing with a beggar and ran away early in his life of renewed faith. By suggesting that Ignatius faith matured beyond redirected heroism, I may be a bit out on a limb, though his later criticism of ambition, praise of humility and driving desire for intimacy with Christ (Ganss, 75) seem to support my claim.

[13]Bosch, 90.

[14]Missional acuity—the spiritual ability to perceive God’s missional presence, action and invitation—is a concept I have developed in “Missional Acuity: 20th Century Insights Toward a Redemptive Way of Seeing,” *Witness: The Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education*, 2012.

[15]Website: <http://www.reclaimingthemission.com/the-missional-order-of-st-fiacre-at-life-on-the-vine/>

[16]Alan Roxburgh, *Missional Mapmaking: Skills for Leading in Times of Transition*(Jossey-Bass, 2009), Ch. 9.



[17] Website: <http://www.missionorder.org/tom-life/rule-of-life/>

[18] Indeed, in a 2007 talk, Fitch asserted that *the* way to plant churches after Christendom is through missional orders, or teams that share a set of commitments, invest long-term in a local community and find outside means of income. Video: <http://vimeo.com/2740622>

[19] Roxburgh, Alan, "Practices of Christian Life: Forming and Performing a Culture," *Journal of Missional Practice* 1, (Fall 2012), <http://themissionalnetwork.com/index.php/practices-of-christian-life-forming-and-performing-a-culture>.