



Mennonite
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Missio **Dei**

Exploring God's work in the world

With steadfast devotion

A vision of the church
in mission in "4 Ms"

BY JOSEPH C. L. SAWATZKY

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With steadfast devotion: A vision of the church in mission in "4 Ms"

Acts 11:19-30 (NRSV)

¹⁹Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. ²¹The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. ²²News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; ²⁴for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. ²⁵Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians.'

²⁷At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. ²⁹The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; ³⁰this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul."

Introduction

Acts 11:19-30, arguably more than any other text, is the origin story of the church. It tells of the formation of a new community in Syrian Antioch, the third-largest city in the Roman Empire — the place where “the disciples were first called ‘Christians’” (v. 26). Named after Jesus, the “Christ,” this community embodied certain characteristics that are still instructive for the church today. Through this text, this study will explore these “marks” of the church in terms of “4 Ms.” These 4 Ms describe a church that is fully engaged in God’s mission. These churches are:

- *Multiethnic*
- *Multiplied*
- *Maturing*
- Practicing *Mutuality*

Multiethnic

First, the church in Antioch was a *multiethnic* community, many “nations” — from the Greek *ethnos* — that were gathered as one body in Christ. As a multiethnic people, the church in Antioch reflected God’s vision for the redemption of the world — a vision that runs throughout Scripture. Indeed, this is apparent from Genesis to Revelation; from God’s promise to bless *all nations* through Abraham and his offspring (Genesis 12:3, 17:3-6, 22:17-18, 28:13-14; Galatians 3:6-14), to *all nations* praising “the Lamb that was slain,” who was Abraham’s faithful descendant (Revelation 5:6-14, 7:9-10), the Bible tells the story of God’s plan to “gather up *all things* in [Christ]” (Ephesians 1:9-10).

As a multiethnic people, the church in Antioch reflected God’s vision for the redemption of the world.

In the book of Acts, this gathering of the nations begins with Israel itself, which had long been a multiethnic people — a nation of nations. Thus, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples of Jesus on the day of Pentecost, “there were devout Jews from *every nation* under heaven living in Jerusalem” (Acts 2:5, emphasis added). And it was from the Jews who accepted Jesus as their “Lord and Messiah” (2:36) that the *ekklesia* (the church) was born. As this multiethnic fellowship grew, it became known for its unity, which its members expressed through generosity, so that “there was not a needy person among them” (4:34). Nevertheless, with growth came stress, and this Spirit-forged unity among people from many nations began to break



along major cultural lines. In Acts 6:1-7, “the Hellenists” — Jewish believers who spoke Greek, the common language of the Roman Empire — began to grumble against “the Hebrews” — Jewish believers who spoke Aramaic — “because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food” (v. 1). So that the cross-cultural fellowship of Pentecost would not be undone, the twelve apostles convened “the whole community of the disciples” to select “seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” to oversee this service of the table, an arrangement that “pleased the whole community” (vv. 2-5). As grumbling gave way to gratitude, growth ensued: “The word of God continued to spread; the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (v. 7). By righting a wrong done against the members of one of its subcultures, the community — far from ceding to separation — solidified its unity as a multiethnic people of God.

Having persevered through this internal threat to its cross-cultural fellowship, the church was faced with an external threat — “the persecution that took place over Stephen” (Acts 11:19). This persecution led to the scattering of believers from Jerusalem (Acts 8:1, 11:19). Yet, instead of destroying the church, this crisis extended the multiethnic fellowship to *even more* people. Going “as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch,” some of these disciples spoke about Jesus not only to their fellow Jews but also to the gentiles (Acts 11:19-20), people of “the nations” who had served “many gods and many lords” (1 Corinthians 8:5-6). In Antioch, because “a great number” of gentiles accepted Jesus as Lord, a new kind of community emerged, consisting of both Jewish and gentile members (Acts 11:21). As evidence of its hybrid nature, this fellowship of Jewish and gentile believers received a new name, for it was in this exceedingly multiethnic environment that “the disciples were first called ‘Christians’” (v. 26). Through the body of Christ, God’s promise to bless all nations through Abraham and his offspring was being fulfilled.

Multiplying

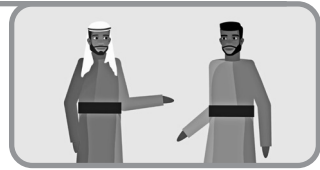
Second, the church in Antioch was a community that was *multiplying*. There are two phases of *quantitative* growth in Acts 11:19-30, and in each case the Lord is the agent of growth. The first phase came when the Jewish believers from Cyprus and Cyrene “spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus” (v. 20). Because “[t]he hand of the Lord was with them ... a great number became believers and turned to the Lord” (v. 21). Responding to the news of this growth, “the



church in Jerusalem ... sent Barnabas to Antioch” (v. 22). Barnabas’s arrival in Antioch fueled a second wave of numerical growth — not because of his own power but because he was “full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (v. 24). By this same Spirit, Barnabas encouraged the believers to “remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion” (v. 23). Because of this, “a great many people were brought to the Lord” (v. 24). And this “great many people” joined the “great number” of people who had “turned to the Lord” earlier in the text (vv. 24, 21). Drawing upon the language of the text, then, we can trace the movement and the agency of multiplication. By “[t]he hand of the Lord” (v. 21) and through faithfulness to the Lord (v. 23), “a great many people were brought to the Lord” (v. 24).

Maturing

Third, while the church in Antioch was multiplying, it was also *maturing* into what Ephesians 4:13 calls “the fullness of Christ” (NIV). Just as the arrival of Barnabas in Antioch ignited a wave of *quantitative* growth, Barnabas bringing in Saul from Tarsus fanned the flames of *qualitative* growth. The Antiochene church’s commitment to helping believers become more mature may be seen through its teaching ministry. According to Acts 11:26, Barnabas and Saul invested “an entire year,” meeting with “the church and [teaching] a great many people” — the same “great many people” who earlier “were brought to the Lord” (v. 24). Immediately following this, the text uses two words to describe those whom verse 21 had called “believers.” In verse 26, they are called *disciples* and *Christians*. In this context, both terms may point to the maturity



Disciples

Schooled

Trained

Disciplined



of believers. We have already seen how the title “Christians” implies the exceedingly multiethnic — Jew and gentile — nature of the church. Now, the name “Christian” may point to how the church has matured in the things of God and the mind of Christ. The appearance of the word “disciples” in this verse may point to the schooled, trained or disciplined character of these “believers.” They have come to be known to the world by “Christ,” because they are learning to live like Christ.

This relationship, between “believing” and “following,” also appears in Matthew 28:16-20, the Great Commission. In that text, Jesus’ command to “make disciples of all nations” involves two practices. The first is baptism, by which those who have come to believe *turn* to the Lord. The second is “teaching them to obey everything that [Jesus] commanded” (v. 20). In other words, discipleship is a process of turning and learning, of “the brought” becoming “the taught.” In the mission of God, multiplication and maturation go together.

Mutuality

Fourth, the church in Antioch practiced a spirit of *mutuality*. In Antioch, Barnabas set an example for the church, by sharing leadership. Instead of working alone, Barnabas brought Saul from Tarsus to Antioch to help instruct the growing number of believers in the way of the Lord (Acts 11:25-26). Writing on Acts in the *Africa Bible Commentary*, Paul Mumo Kisau observed:



“Barnabas did not want to continue the ministry at Antioch single-handed. He knew that Saul would enjoy ministering there, and so he went to Tarsus to look for him. Barnabas was not selfish but was willing to link others to his ministry. After finding Saul, he brought him to Antioch, where they both taught for an entire year.”¹

Even beyond the partnership of Barnabas and Saul, the sense of mutuality among believers pervades the story of the church in Antioch. In fact, the text could be seen as giving narrative expression to the words attributed to Saul (Paul) in Ephesians 4. In that passage, Paul names five spiritual gifts that the ascended Christ gave to his people for the purpose of “equip[ping]

¹ Paul Mumo Kisau, “Acts of the Apostles” in Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 1347.

The spirit of mutuality is the lifeblood of a maturing, multiplying and multiethnic body.

the saints for the work of ministry” and “building up the body of Christ” (4:12). These gifts were “that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers” (v. 11). Together, these gifts work *with* and *for* one another. Without this relationship of interdependence and mutuality, the body cannot grow into “the fullness of Christ” (v. 13, NIV). Since this spirit of mutuality is the lifeblood of a maturing, multiplying and multiethnic body, this concept requires

a more detailed description, showing how the giftings of Ephesians 4:11 work together in the context of Acts 11.

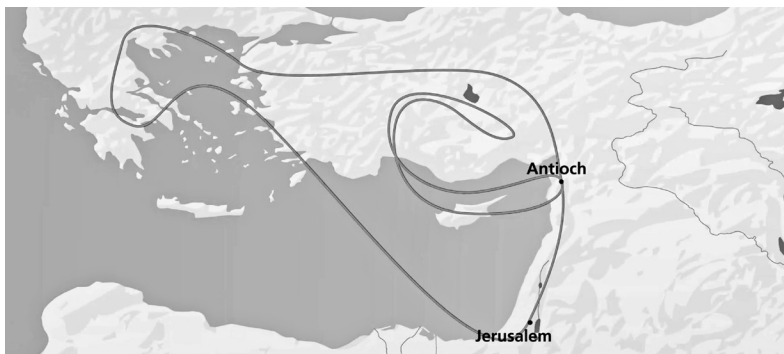
Five spiritual gifts



Apostles

Apostles, the first gifting listed in Ephesians 4:11, planted and watered the seed of the church in Antioch. To fully understand what this means, it is necessary to unpack what it means for someone to be an apostle.

In the New Testament, the term “apostle” carries two primary meanings: 1) Apostles are the authoritative eyewitnesses to Jesus; and 2) Apostles are the “sent ones.” First, the apostles had special access to Jesus during his ministry and, therefore, held special authority for the church. According to Luke 6:13, Jesus, after praying, “called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named *apostles*” (emphasis added). In this sense, apostles were synonymous with “the twelve,” the inner circle of those who followed Jesus. This association carries over to the book of Acts, the second volume in Luke’s history of the Jesus movement. There, after the betrayal and death of Judas, who was one of the twelve, the disciples proposed that another take his place “in this ministry and *apostleship*” (Acts 1:25, emphasis added). In the words of Peter, the main spokesperson for the twelve, the criterion for this role was someone who was with the disciples “during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us” (vv. 21-22). The purpose of this apostleship was to be a witness to Jesus’ resurrection (v. 22). After selecting Matthias to become the twelfth apostle, the twelve do precisely that on the day of Pentecost; Peter, “standing with the eleven” (2:14) *witnesses* to the resurrection of Jesus, which resulted in



the multiplication of disciples from “about one hundred twenty persons” (1:15) to “about three thousand” (2:14-41). Having responded to the *apostles’ testimony*, the believers in Jerusalem “devoted themselves to the *apostles’ teaching*” (2:42, emphasis added). The apostles, as authoritative eyewitnesses to Jesus, are distinct from the rest of the believing community throughout the book of Acts (see, 15:4, 22).

The narrative buildup to the planting of the church in Antioch is one of the places where the distinction between the apostles and the church may be seen. Acts 11:19-30 continues a storyline that began in Acts 8:1, during which the killing of Stephen led to the beginning of “a severe persecution ... against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria” (8:1). In this context, the apostles were clearly *not* among “those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen” (11:19). Rather, the term “the apostles” must refer to the twelve, who are the acknowledged leaders of the church in Jerusalem.

In the second sense, however, the apostles were instrumental in planting the church in Antioch, for the literal meaning of the term apostles (*apostoloi*) is “sent ones,” or “missionaries.” Before turning to the illustration of sending in Acts 11, however, it is helpful to note some applications of the term “apostle” beyond just the twelve in Acts and elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, in the account of their evangelistic activities in Iconium and Lystra, the text refers to Paul and Barnabas as “the apostles,” a clear indicator of the term’s elasticity, inclusive of any who are simply “sent” into the world as witnesses to Jesus Christ (14:4, 14). As further evidence of the term’s range, Paul, himself, though not one of the twelve, clearly understood his vocation as that of an apostle. He even introduced himself as such in most of his letters.² Even so, Paul always coupled true

² See Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1 Timothy 1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1; Titus 1:1.

apostleship with humble obedience and the willingness to suffer for the love of God, neighbor and enemy. Moreover, though the twelve were all men, Paul referred to Junia, a female disciple, as one “prominent among the apostles” and who was “in Christ before I was” (Romans 16:7). Incidentally, in that same passage, Paul commended “our sister Phoebe, a *deacon* of the church at Cenchreae” (Romans 16:1). This indicates that the seven “men of good standing” selected for *diakonia* (“service” or “ministry”) in Acts 6:1-7 does not represent a general, biblical restriction on that office of church leadership.

Considering the range of the evidence, therefore, we may conclude that the term “apostle” carries both *exclusive* and *inclusive* connotations in the New Testament, both of which contribute to a healthy sense of an apostolic calling today. On the one hand, it is true to say that the age of the apostles has passed; people today cannot simply claim the gift of apostleship, while denying with their words or by their behavior the apostles’ teachings about

Jesus to which the Scriptures testify and the church is “devoted” (Acts 2:42). On the other hand, even today, and until God’s kingdom comes “on earth as it is in heaven,” (Matthew 6:10) the Spirit anoints, sends and equips disciples of Jesus from every nation, men and women, to “make disciples of all nations” (28:19); thus, the age of mission is ongoing!

Paul always coupled true apostleship with humble obedience and the willingness to suffer for the love of God, neighbor and enemy.

Returning to the role of the apostles in Acts 11, we can see that “sending” is the primary activity of verses 11:19-30, providing a thread that runs from the beginning to the end of the text. A first sending takes place in the scattering of disciples beyond Jerusalem, albeit through persecution and not by the will of those who were scattered

(v. 19). A second sending occurs in relation to Barnabas, whom the church in Jerusalem *sent* to investigate the report that “a great number” of gentiles had “turned to the Lord” (vv. 21-22). Sending is also the last action of this text, when the disciples in Antioch — the fruits of those who were scattered and sent from Jerusalem — “*send* relief to the believers living in Judea” as their act of solidarity with brothers and sisters suffering famine (vv. 28-30). Antioch’s sending brings the story full circle, as the blessing of the previous acts of sending *from* Jerusalem returns *to* Jerusalem.

Acts 13:1-3 shows that Antioch had learned the lessons of Jerusalem in another way. In that passage, the church sends Barnabas and Saul to carry the good news of Jesus across the Mediterranean world, which causes Antioch to become a new hub of mission to which Barnabas and Saul would repeatedly

return and report.³ By taking the good news farther than it had been, Antioch participates in the promises of Jerusalem, since it was from Jerusalem that Jesus commissioned the apostles as his “witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Consequently, the text illustrates the relationship between the church in Jerusalem and the church in Antioch as one of interdependence and *mutuality*.⁴ In each assembly’s own way, they contributed to the existence, edification and extension of the other assembly within the mission of God.

Prophets

Prophets, the second gifting listed in Ephesians 4:11, also played their part in the edification of Christ’s body in Acts 11. Specifically, the text recounts that, during the year that the church hosted Barnabas and Saul in Antioch, “prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch” (v. 27). One of these prophets, a man named Agabus, “stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world,” a crisis which indeed “took place during the reign of Claudius” (v. 28). This prophetic word, spoken through Agabus, mobilized the church for the mission of compassion. As the text says, the disciples in Antioch “determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea,” and “this they did, sending it to the elders [of the Jerusalem church] by Barnabas and Saul” (vv. 29-30).

The prophetic word, spoken through Agabus, mobilized the church for the mission of compassion.

In addition to this mission of good works, the sending of aid from those who had enough to those who had need, prophets were also instrumental in the sending of the good word of the gospel. According to Acts 13:1-3, it was through the worship and fasting of *prophets* and teachers that the church commissioned Saul and Barnabas to share the message of God’s grace in Jesus Christ with those who had never heard it, sending them from Antioch to Cyprus and Asia Minor and back again. In these examples, prophets prodded the church toward a more just distribution of resources. They also provoked the church to proclaim the gospel of healing and hope beyond itself. And through this prodding and provoking, prophets played their part in building the church.

³ See Acts 14:26-28, 15:35-36, 18:22-23.

⁴ The “church” in vv. 22 and 26 comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*. In the first case, church is paired with Jerusalem; and in the second case, church refers to the community of disciples in Antioch. Verse 26 is the first place in the book of Acts in which a community outside of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee is called the church. Thus Antioch has become a new center for the spread of the gospel in and to “the ends of the earth,” which is the fourth geographic designation listed in Acts 1:8. Compare 1:8, 9:31, and 11:22, 26.



Evangelists

**Without the spirit
of the evangelists,
the church would
not exist.**

Without the gifts of the apostles and prophets working together, the church could not extend beyond itself. Without the spirit of the *evangelists*, the church would not exist. Of the people who were scattered from Jerusalem to Antioch — or sent in the providence of God — not all “proclaimed the Lord Jesus” to those who had never known the God of Israel; only the “men of Cyprus and Cyrene” (Acts 11:20) do this. With Greek as their mother tongue, these men inhabited two worlds. They shared in the culture of Greco-Roman gentiles, while also sharing the religion of the Palestinian Jews, the Galilean and Judean disciples of Jesus who spoke Aramaic. With a foot in both worlds, these men of Cyprus and Cyrene had beautiful feet like the messenger of Isaiah 52:7-10:

“How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’

Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.

Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;

for the Lord has comforted his people,
 he has redeemed Jerusalem.
 The Lord has bared his holy arm
 before the eyes of all the nations,
 and all the ends of the earth shall see
 the salvation of our God.”

Like that messenger, these evangelists announced the *euangelion* (good news) of God’s peace — not only for Zion (Jerusalem) but so that “all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.”

Pastors (*Shepherds*)

Building on the work of the evangelists, the text also features *pastors*, or those who shepherd the flock of God in the spirit of Jesus, “the good shepherd” (John 10:11). Indeed, the text describes Barnabas in precisely this way, as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24). As a good man, Barnabas was able to recognize the grace of God in others. Full of the Holy Spirit, Barnabas rejoiced in that grace. Full of faith, Barnabas urged others to “remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion” (v. 23). But just as Barnabas — whom the apostles had earlier named “the son of encouragement” (4:36) — encouraged the church in Antioch, he also advocated for Saul of Tarsus, a former enemy of the church.⁵ Barnabas first commended Saul when he “brought him to the apostles” in Jerusalem, testifying to the sincerity of Saul’s conversion (9:26-27). Then, he “brought him to Antioch,” presenting him to the church there (11:25-26). Later, Barnabas extended that same grace toward John Mark, a young co-worker, even when Saul — now referred to as “Paul” — was not so quick to forgive the “one who had deserted them” during their first missionary journey from Antioch (13:5, 13, 15:37-39). As an advocate for others, or a go-between, brimming with the Spirit who mediates God’s presence to the world, Barnabas played the part of *pastor*, *shepherding* the flock toward “the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ephesians 4:13).

Pastors are those who shepherd the flock of God in the spirit of Jesus, “the good shepherd.”

⁵The form of *parakaleō*, the Greek verb translated as “encouraged” or “exhorted” in Acts 11:23, is translated in its noun form, *paraklētos*, as “advocate,” who is referred to by Jesus as “the Spirit of truth,” in John 14:16-17.



Teachers

If Barnabas was first a pastor and then a *teacher*, the fifth gifting listed in Ephesians 4:11, then Saul, though also a pastor, was perhaps first a *teacher*. Acts 11 shows both Barnabas and Saul teaching the church in Antioch, yet that teaching ministry started in earnest with the arrival of Saul (vv. 25-26). In fact, Acts 14:12 identifies Paul as “the chief speaker” of the two. He was adept at explaining the mystery of the gospel to both Jews and Greeks alike. Consequently, Saul helped the church become what Barnabas had encouraged them to be — “faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion” (11:23). Barnabas knew that he needed Saul, even as Saul was indebted to Barnabas. Indeed, Saul’s teachings watered the seeds that Barnabas, and others before him, had planted. As Paul himself declares in 1 Corinthians 3:6, one plants, another waters, but God gives the growth!

Therefore, just as Jerusalem and Antioch exemplify reciprocity of mission or the interdependence of the church in Acts 11, so the relationship between these two leaders models the *mutuality* of the authentic life and mission of God.

Conclusion

Acts 11:19-30 projects a vision of the church fully engaged in God's mission. This vision can be described in 4 Ms — marks, characteristics or qualities that make the church the church.



First, because the name Christian originally described the first large-scale assembly of Jewish and gentile devotees of Jesus living life together, the church, is in its essence, a *multiethnic* body. Though not every local manifestation of the body of Christ may include the same degree of ethnic diversity, no church that is true to its name may completely align itself with any one ethnicity, nation, race or culture. Rather those who are in Christ, will seek the well-being of those who are far and those who are near (see Isaiah 57:19 and Ephesians 2:17). Even more, wherever disciples of Jesus from different cultures live justly and generously with one another, there “the kingdom of God has come near” (Luke 10:9; Romans 14:17)!

Second, Acts depicts a church that is *multiplying* by “the hand of the Lord” (Acts 11:21). Growth is a mysterious phenomenon; like the Spirit of God that produces it, we cannot say precisely “where it comes from or where it goes,” or when it may occur (John 3:8). Yet we can see a people who, when they heard “the word of truth, the gospel of [their] salvation” (Ephesians 1:13), fully “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Naturally, then, when some of these same believers were scattered from Jerusalem, their whole-hearted devotion to the Lord Jesus gathered a great number who remained “faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion” (11:23).⁶ In turn, “a great many people were brought to the Lord” (v. 24). Finally, it was this same church, born in mission, that sent missionaries throughout the Roman world, forming communities of disciples wherever they went (Acts 13:1-3, 14:21-28). Devotion breeds devotion. Mission spurs mission. Disciples make disciples!

No church that is true to its name may completely align itself with any one ethnicity, nation, race or culture.

⁶The Greek phrase that the NRSV translates as “steadfast devotion” literally means “a setting forth of the heart,” hence the NIV of Acts 11:23: “When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.” This, in turn, brings to mind the greatest commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart ... and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27; c.f. Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30).



Third, while the church was multiplying, it was also *maturing* into the likeness of Christ. Leaders prioritized the instruction of believers. They also modeled, through their own relationships, the humility that they hoped to see in others. Though the Scriptures show that Barnabas and Paul also had sharp disagreements⁷ — “speaking the truth in love” to one another is also a sign of maturity!⁸ — Acts 11 tells of their harmonious collaboration. Barnabas was a gifted leader, but he was not too proud to celebrate the gifts of others. Barnabas rejoiced when he saw the grace of God among believers in Antioch, a grace he also recognized in Saul, whom he brought there to teach (vv. 23-26). Saul consistently taught that same humility to the churches everywhere. In Romans 12:15-18, he says:

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

In short, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). This is the key to maturity.

⁷ Acts 15:37-39; Galatians 2:11-14.

⁸ Ephesians 4:15.

Fourth, Acts 11 shows a church that lived by a spirit of *mutuality*. It is apparent that it takes the gifts of many working together to build a church and launch a mission. Barnabas and Saul would have had no one to *shepherd* nor *teach* without the *evangelists* of Cyprus and Cyrene who recognized that the good news of Jesus was for the gentiles, too (vv. 19-21). Without *prophets* listening to the Holy Spirit, the disciples in Antioch may never have sent their love offering for believers suffering in Judea, nor commissioned *apostles* to lands beyond, which were still waiting to hear the gospel of peace (Acts 11:27-30; 13:1-3). In this way, the church at Antioch not only reciprocated the blessings of Jerusalem; they extended them to others whom they had not previously known.

Finally, by peering through the mirror of such mutuality, we may also glimpse the other marks of the church's identity. Antioch sending offerings to Jerusalem, like Jerusalem sending apostles to Antioch, was an expression of the church's oneness across cultures; "disciples of all nations" sensed that they belonged to one another (Matthew 28:19). The church is one, universal, *multiethnic* fellowship. This universality came into being through the *multiplying* work of the Spirit, as Jewish believers in Christ Jesus proclaimed him as Lord among the gentiles (Acts 11:20-21). As those who had turned to Christ from every nation were also taught in him, the church was *maturing* into "the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13, NIV). The church was becoming holy, as Christ is holy, set apart by God for good works (see Leviticus 19:2; Ephesians 2:10; Titus 2:14, 3:8; 1 Peter 1:15-16).

In the Nicene Creed, Christians confess their identity in four adjectives: "I believe in *one, holy, universal, apostolic church*." Through Acts 11:19-30, we might add texture to the words of this creed in this way: "I commit myself to a *mutual* (one), *maturing* (holy), *multiethnic* (universal) and *multiplying* (apostolic) church." So committed, we become a people fully engaged in God's mission, "faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion" (Acts 11:23).

The church was becoming holy, as Christ is holy, set apart by God for good works.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. *The Christian identity is multiethnic.* What is your response to this statement? When you hear the word “Christian,” do you think about the ethnic diversity of the church?
2. Where do you see Christians reaching across lines of ethnic, cultural and religious difference today?
3. What led to the birth and growth of the church in Antioch? What do you think are the key ingredients for the growth of the church today?
4. Do you know people who are good at communicating the message of Jesus Christ with others? What makes for this effective and winsome communication?
5. The church in Antioch seems to have prioritized the instruction of believers, as did Jesus in the Great Commission. Do you think of education as central to mission? Why might education be important for Christian witness?
6. How does your church work toward the maturation of believers? What practices or ministries have you found effective for nurturing growth in the likeness of Christ?
7. “One plants, another waters, but God gives the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:6, paraphrased). How are Paul’s words here illustrated in the story of Acts 11:19-30?
8. Where have you seen fruitful examples of mutuality in the leading and functioning of the church? What is needed for people to work well together?

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With steadfast devotion: A vision of the church in mission in “4 Ms”

The early church’s origins, detailed in Acts 11:19-30, tell the story of a community that embodied traits here called the “4 Ms.” The 4 Ms, *multiethnic*, *multiplying*, *maturing* and *mutuality*, describe a church body that is fully engaged in God’s mission. These traits make the church the church.

This booklet explores this passage and investigates how the early church in Syrian Antioch embodied each of these 4 Ms in its foundational years. Readers may find it helpful to discuss the lessons in this booklet in small groups, Bible study circles and congregational Sunday school settings.



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