

Study Guide for Treasures in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness

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Introduction

As the back cover description indicates, this book is a companion to *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. The latter provided a sort of theology of the missional church but lacked the practical application church leaders long for. *Clay Jars* provides the application through descriptions of actual churches engaged on the missional journey.

Ways to Use This Book

There are at least four settings for which *Clay Jars* may be appropriate:

- As a resource for a sermon series
- Discussion in a small-group setting
- Wednesday evening Bible study/discussion
- Leadership or congregational retreat (on-site or away)

The suggestions provided in this facilitation guide provide a number of specific ideas but are still flexible, provide a number of options, and are general enough to be used in any of the latter three settings. The process suggested focuses largely around a Socratic method, that is, posing questions to stimulate thoughtful reflection and group discussion. For any of the last three settings suggested, each participant should have a personal copy of the book.

Possible Structure for Study

A group study of *Clay Jars* in any setting may be spread over several sessions where one chapter is discussed in each, or it may be condensed into fewer sessions, necessitating combining material from two or more chapters. In the latter case, chapters 2 and 3 may be combined (especially if assignments are made to profile project churches as suggested below). The last two chapters may also be combined, though you will want to allow ample time to conclude the study with a synthesis of ideas gained. It will be easier to combine chapters if two-hour blocks are available for each session.

If the book is to be discussed in a retreat setting, consider securing copies at least two months in advance and form groups around the churches profiled in the book. (Groups may be two, three, or more people). Groups would read the book and meet once or twice to discuss the church they were assigned. The focus of the retreat would be the eight concepts, and groups would provide details about how their church embodied each principle.

As an alternative, if the group is anticipated to be small, consider assigning specific churches to individuals to profile during retreat discussions.

Preparation

It will help if the facilitator reads *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* prior to beginning this study, though it is not essential. Reading this foundational book will help the facilitator more clearly grasp the concepts of the missional church.

Few materials are needed for the study beyond books for participants. Give attention to the physical setting for the study since for optimal learning conditions for adults and youth require a well-lighted area, free from distraction (created by noise and visual clutter) and equipped with comfortable chairs. Tables have the advantage of providing a writing surface. A disadvantage is that tables may create psychological distance between participants and may impede discussion.

Note the scorecard mentioned in the first session and have these prepared in advance. Also note where assignments are suggested and be prepared to enlist persons for these assignments at least one week in advance.

If time allows, consider making advance assignments to group participants prior to session 2. Assign one of the patterns of the missional church to each person and ask each one to be prepared to overview the pattern in session 2. If group size permits, assign patterns to pairs of individuals. More detailed material about the patterns is found in the appendix to *Clay Jars*.

Create a scorecard for each participant which lists each of the missional church patterns (see pp. xii-xiv). Title the card “Missional Church Scorecard.” Beside each pattern create a scale as illustrated:

Pattern 1: Missional Vocation 1 2 3 4 5
Pattern 2: (etc.)

Create a poster from your computer and printer for each pattern that includes, in bold print, the pattern description which begins each chapter starting on page 33. Or posters may also be made using a felt-tip marker and newsprint. Attach the appropriate poster to the wall at the beginning each session.

So We Do Not Lose Heart

Introduction

Explain that *Clay Jars* is one in a series of three books on the missional church. Emphasize that while a number of congregations are profiled, these churches are not held up as “models” per se, but as examples of churches who are becoming missional (p. ix).

Write on a chalk or whiteboard the words “Missional Church.” Ask group members to give thought to a definition. After at least thirty seconds of reflection, repeat the question if necessary and record responses. As an alternative, ask for words that might be included

in a definition. After several suggestions have been offered, ask the group to form these words into a definition.

Note the comment in the last sentence of page ix: “The church does not exist for itself, but for participation in God’s mission of reconciliation.” Pause and ask someone to read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

Continue by reading the following two sentences from the top of page x: “Mission is not just an activity carried out by special people in faraway places. Mission is the character of the church in whatever context it exists.”

Write the last sentence above on the board as the author’s definition of missional church. Ask the group to compare their definition with this one. What are the similarities? Differences?

Use the first full paragraph on page x to explain Christendom, a concept elaborated upon in the book that preceded Clay Jars entitled *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. If you have this book, you may consult it for more information on Christendom.

Call attention to the definition on the board again, then refer participants to the middle paragraph on page x beginning, “A missional church is a church that is shaped by participating in God’s mission.” This paragraph provides a description of the missional church as an elaboration of the definition above. Take time to discuss these characteristics in the group.

The Structure of the Book

Using the material on pages x–xi, overview the project and its purpose, which led to Clay Jars. Briefly, the book overviews eight patterns of the missional church and provides church examples of what these may look like as embodied in congregations.

Note the comment on page xi pertaining to prayer as a characteristic of the congregations studied. Particularly note the comment that “perhaps because of this, these congregations were not afraid to take risks.” Ask, “What is the relationship between prayer and risk taking?”

Overview the “Patterns of the Missional Church,” pages xii–xiv. More information may be found in the appendix, pages 154–72. Recall the alternative suggestion under the “Preparation” section of the Introduction for doing the overview through advance assignment to individuals or pairs.

Distribute the Missional Church Scorecards. Explain that group members will use these cards to evaluate how their church is doing in relation to each pattern as it is explored throughout the study.

Congregational Sketches

A week in advance, make assignments to group participants. Assign each of the congregations profiled on pages 1–32 to individuals or pairs. Ask them to familiarize themselves with these congregations and be prepared to provide a five-minute overview for the entire group when you meet again. This will aid those studying particular congregations, as well as the whole group, to feel comfortable in reviewing how their assigned congregation embodies each of the patterns as they are discussed in detail. Some of these congregations have Web sites which may be found via Google or another search engine.

During session 2 ask for reports from those who were assigned to overview the congregations in the project.

Pay particular attention to the Impact Cluster, pages 12–15. Note especially the six learning objectives articulated by the cluster of congregations. Ask: “To what extent do these articulate what we desire to learn from this study and our engagement with the missional journey?”

As the Impact Cluster is profiled, call attention to the line at the end of the middle paragraph on page 14: “We have asked the hard questions about the ‘nets’ that we need to leave behind.” Discuss this concept. Are there nets we may need to abandon? Vocations? Current priorities? Lifestyles? Our sense of security?

Note the last sentence on page 14: “We have begun to recognize how insidiously the culture has entwined itself in our belief systems, ecclesial understanding and our polity.” Ask the group if they can think of examples of this statement.

As Spring Garden Church (p. 22) is profiled, call attention to the comment at the bottom of page 22 about ideas falling on good ground. Ask for thoughts on this sentence.

Note the “six levels of communication in the transformation process” listed on page 24. Observe that only one of these levels has a cognitive component. Otherwise it appears to be an emotional process. Ask the group to discuss this idea.

After congregational profiles are shared, ask how comfortable the group feels with these congregations and which, at this point, they seem to identify with the closest. Explain that in the next session the group will begin to consider each of the patterns of a missional church in detail.

Pattern 1: Discerning Missional Vocation

Begin by asking someone to read Romans 8:28. What does it mean to be called according to God’s purpose?

Put up the poster containing pattern 1. Ask participants to read the pattern aloud together. Explain that group members should feel free to offer ideas throughout the discussion of each pattern as to how the congregation they studied illustrates the pattern.

As facilitator, be alert to any person of group that tends to dominate or over respond.

Ask: “What is the difference between vocation and occupation? Is it possible to be engaged in an occupation but have no sense of vocation?”

Call attention to the last part of the first paragraph, under the heading “The Vocation of the Congregation,” on page 36, beginning with “Being a missional church is all about a sense of identify.” Ask for comments on the degree to which most congregations are “on the same page” in terms of their church’s sense of identify.

Pose these questions: “If you ask five members of our church, ‘Who are we?’ what responses do you think you would get? What does it mean for vocation to be ‘called into being’ as discussed on page 38 (middle paragraph)?”

The authors claim that the missional congregations they studied gave attention to the where, when, who, and why questions. Ask, “What do these questions have to do with a sense of identity?”

Discuss the idea of “catalytic moment” from pages 42–44. Ask: “What have been some of our church’s catalytic moments? Or are we still waiting for ours to occur? What is the role of conscious reflection, as discussed on pages 46–48. How can a congregation encourage this kind of reflection?”

Charism may not be a familiar word to some of your group. Ask someone to explain the concept, adding your own comments as necessary. Then ask, “What are the charisms of our church?”

Close by asking members to take out their scorecard and rate your church on pattern 1. Allow a few minutes for discussion and sharing, being aware of any tendency to be overly negative.

Pattern 2: Biblical Formation and Discipleship

Begin by asking someone to read Romans 12:2. Ask: “What does it mean to be renewed? It may seem like a funny thought, but is it possible to get younger on the inside even as you get older on the outside? Could this a part of the meaning of ‘be renewed’?”

Put up the poster containing pattern 2 and ask participants to read it aloud with you.

Ask, “What has happened in your life this week?” Allow time for reflection and brief sharing. Then ask, “What does Scripture have to say in light your experience?” Do not be surprised if group members seem a bit puzzled or if responses are few. This question is

prelude to the following questions: Do we interpret life through the lens of Scripture? Or do we interpret Scripture through the lenses of life experience?

Ask what is meant by the section heading on page 60, “Not all Bible study is missional formation.” How is it possible “to study the Scriptures in such a way that its central emphasis upon formation for mission is missed” (middle, p. 60)?

Discuss the Dallas Willard comment at the bottom of page 60, that our churches are full of converts who do not intend to become disciples. What does he mean?

Using the material from pages 62–66, discuss how we may move toward biblical formation. Include a discussion of cultural influences on the church and on personal discipleship. For example, the author comments that the church is seen as a “free-time activity” (p. 63). Just how optional is church involvement in terms of true discipleship?

On page 65 the author comments that “many Christians . . . are put off by the biblical challenge to become a truly missional church.” He suggests that many Christians are selective in the scriptural teachings they emphasize. Is it possible that this depends, in part, on whether they live out of the Old Testament primarily (and thus emphasize judgment) or the New Testament (emphasizing, for example, the Great Commission of the Sermon on the Mount). Discuss this idea.

Ask, “What would it mean for discipleship to become the assumed norm of our congregation?” (See the first full paragraph on page 66.)

Guder’s Missional Church (the companion to this study) includes a diagram (an arrow or wedge) illustrating his concept of “bounded sets.” If the book is available, find this diagram and draw it on the board or newsprint. Discuss this concept as a model for congregational life.

Note the comment on page 68 that “biblical learning is the basic curriculum of children’s and youth work—the congregation does not rely on formal educational curricula.” Note that a number of the churches profiled likely are not connected to denominational resource providers and must rely on their own ability to develop Bible study resources. What are the dangers inherent in such an approach? What advantages does your church have through its connections to resource providers? Who makes the decisions in your church regarding curriculum? How can a church maintain control over its curriculum while using professionally prepared resources from publishers? (Hint: a curriculum team consisting of schoolteachers or gifted Bible teachers who select curriculum which is developmentally appropriate, built on sound educational theory and practice.)

Include in the above discussion the reference on page 71 to “compassionate entrepreneurship.” What is this? How open are we to such a concept?

Create a scale on the board or newsprint based on the material on pages 69–71. Include items such as the following:

Our congregation is open to being challenged, to looking hard at our deeply ingrained attitudes and expectations.

Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High

We are aware that biblical formation means change, and often conversion.

Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High

We are aware that our discipling will require repentance and that our way of being church will have to change.

Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High

In our approach to scriptural formation, our leaders and members expect to be challenged and unsettled.

Low 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 High

Add other items from this section as appropriate. Note the comment on page 72, “Thus the biblical process more and more pervades the life of the community” and following sentences. Add this to the above scale or discuss this assertion concerning churches that are becoming missional. Are we “learning to risk hearing (scripture) and doing it, knowing that it might mean serious change?”

Close with a brief discussion of group members’ scorecards on this pattern.

Pattern 3: Taking Risks as a Contrast Community

Begin by rereading Romans 2:2, and ask: “What does it mean to be transformed? What would transformation look like as contrasted to being ‘conformed to this world’?”

Post the newsprint or sign containing pattern 3 and read it together aloud.

Note the comment from the middle of page 75 that “these congregations [those in the project] seem to be living by a set of rules different from that of the dominant culture.” The next three paragraphs indicate that these congregations were learning to “think theologically” about what it means to be a missional church. Lead the group to discuss ways and possible settings in which your church could begin to spend more time in this sort of theological thinking.

James Forbes, the well-known African-American preacher has said that no one gets into heaven without a letter of reference from the poor. It has also been said that we will experience the power of God in our own lives in proportion to our involvement in the lives of hurting people. Ask the group for their responses to these statements. In what ways is your church involved with the poor and/or with issues of poverty?

Ask, “What would it mean for us to live truly ‘counter-culture’?” Allow ample time for discussion and supplement the conversation with material from the chapter.

Note especially the material on page 81, under the heading “Sharing in the Suffering of Christ.” A member of Boulder Mennonite Church said, “If we are faithful Christians, we will be out of step with the culture.” Ask: “In what ways might this be true? Might it also include being out of step with accepted church culture? Someone has said the church often resembles a country club. Is this being overly critical? Is there any truth to the statement?”

Close with a discussion of your scorecards related to this pattern.

Pattern 4: Practices that Demonstrate God’s Intent for the World

Read aloud the Scripture at the beginning of the chapter. If available, read the passage from The Message. Ask the group to reflect on what this verse communicates about the nature of Christian fellowship.

Post pattern 4 and read it together.

This chapter is about how missional congregations practice being missional with one another. What is the purpose of practicing something?

Use this illustration. In Louisville, Kentucky Fried Chicken has a training center complete with a professionally outfitted commercial kitchen. In this demonstration kitchen cooks learn to prepare the “secret recipe” and prepare meals according to the menu that you and I use when ordering at our favorite KFC. The end of the training is not the demonstration itself or the training. The end is delivery of products and service to customers like us. They practice “in house” so they can get it right “out there.”

Just prior to the section headed “Listening to One Another” on page 86, several practices are enumerated (and later elaborated): listening, active helpfulness, bearing with one another, and crossing boundaries. Ask, “What do these practices look like, feel like, and taste like, when we practice them?”

Allow members to share how their assigned churches embodied these practices.

Discuss the characteristic of individualism, page 89. Where do you see examples of this attitude locally?

Discuss the story of Anne Pilsbury as related on page 91. (The member/s assigned to Transfiguration Parish may want to share this story.) Are there any local examples of persons like Anne that we can cite?

Allow members to share how their assigned churches crossed barriers in order to be missional. Ask: “What boundaries exist in and around our community? How can we address these boundaries?”

See the discussion of “Before the Watching World,” pages 95–99. Particularly relate the example given on page 97. Ask, “What does our community see in our congregation?”

Close by discussing score cards on this pattern.

Pattern 5: The Public Witness of Worship

Begin by reading the Scripture at the beginning of the chapter (2 Cor. 4:5–6). Ask, “What does this Scripture say about our worship?”

Post pattern 5 and read it together aloud.

Call attention to the comment at the top of page 101, “Often, traditional congregations with a developing missional vision struggle to create fresh and attractive worship forms in order to draw in new members, while at the same time keep traditionalists happy—a difficult agenda.” Ask for responses to this statement. Why is this so hard?

Recall a recent news story of the Hollywood church split over worship styles. (to access this story, <http://www.suntimes.com/output/religion/cst-nws-holly20.html>) Why is worship style so important to some people?

Note that the project discovered that “style of worship or style of music or even quality of music did not seem to be important at all in terms of the missional character of the congregations [in the project]” (p. 101).

Discuss Schattaureur’s idea of the relationship of worship to mission (pp. 102–3).

Read Acts 2:42 and the discussion of this passage on page 105. Ask: “What does this passage say resulted in the growth of the congregation? In what ways was this being missional?”

Consider doing a Greek word study in line with the discussion, page 105, of ekklesia and kerygma. You might make assignments in advance for members to research these words. (Learning will be more meaningful if they do the research than if they hear your description.).

Ask for reports from the members on how their various assigned congregations worshipped. Emphasize how worship in each of these congregations was missional.

Conclude by discussing your scorecards, particularly asking, “To what extent can we say our worship is missional?”

Pattern 6: Dependence on the Holy Spirit

Begin by sharing from your own experience an answer to prayer from this week or last. Ask for testimonies from the group to answered prayer.

Post pattern 6 on the wall or board and read it together.

Page 118 contains a discussion of the background of the word prayer. Lead a discussion of these two paragraphs. Ask, “Is the author being too cynical in his assessment?”

What is the relationship between prayer and the Holy Spirit? Help the group think theologically on this question, continuing to probe until there is a realization that when we talk about the Holy Spirit we are talking about the personification of God Himself, to whom we pray and from whom we expect a response.

Ask group members assigned the three churches profiled on pages 120–22 to talk about their churches’ projects as related here. Ask: “What was the effect of their prayers? Was it merely to build their own confidence?”

Call attention to the prayer of Bro. Charles on page 123. How practical in our day is this prayer? What if our whole congregation prayed that prayer? What if 50 percent of the congregation did? What if just the people in this room prayed Bro. Charles’ prayer? What do our answers to these questions say about the depth of our faith?

Talk about a time when the prayers of your church corporately were answered.

Ask, “What is the danger of our trying to become a missional church without prayer?”

Conclude by discussing group members’ scorecards in relation to pattern 6.

Pattern 7: Pointing toward the Reign of God

Begin by asking: “How would you contrast something that is static versus something that is dynamic? What is the relationship between static and dynamic?” Dynamic suggests change; it suggests movement.

Ask someone to read Psalm 84:5 from the NIV. What does the word “pilgrim” mean? What does it mean to be “on pilgrimage”? (If you want to pursue the question, “Pilgrimage toward what?” read further. Psalm 84:5 and following suggests a pilgrimage toward “Zion,” the presence of God. So we are on a pilgrimage toward the presence of God.)

Post pattern 7 on the wall or board and read it aloud together.

Note that “the reign of God” is not familiar language to most of us. In fact, the authors hint that learning to live under the reign of God is not particularly familiar to most churches. Explore the meaning of “reign of God.” Call attention to this statement at the top of page 128: “One of the hallmarks of a missional congregation would be its recognition that the church itself is an incomplete expression of the reign of God. We

agreed that, in such congregations, there would be a widely held perception that this church was moving toward a more faithfully lived life under the reign of God.”

Notice the references to “movement” and the implied dynamic nature of the journey. What is scariest about this whole notion? (Hint: it means giving up control, relinquishing complete control to God.)

Particularly in our culture we are “bottom line” people, not comfortable with the unknown, unseen, unpredictable. What does living under the reign of God have to do with faith?

Ask the group to research the differences and similarities between the churches profiled on pages 129–32. How did these churches interpret the reign of God for themselves?

Note that the material on pages 134–38 attempts to move the discussion beyond the local setting to the global by discussing the project churches’ relationship to their denominational bodies.

Ask: “How important is it to be connected to other churches through a fellowship or consortium of some sort? In what ways does such connection help us see ourselves as a part of God’s larger plan?”

Close by examining scorecards in relationship to pattern 7.

Pattern 8: Missional Authority

This pattern may be difficult for some to grasp since certain “free church” traditions struggle with the idea of authority. Members may intellectually affirm statements like this at the bottom of page 140, “Jesus Christ is the head of the church by God’s authority, not because church members voted him in.” However, in our culture we are emotionally wedded to democracy. Here is an example:

A small church in Virginia was to vote on building a new fellowship hall. On the night the vote was to be taken, one influential woman was ill and unable to attend. She asked her sister to cast her vote for her and actually gave her power of attorney to do so. When challenged by a fellow church member at the meeting, the sister commented, “It’s legal. I have her power of attorney.” Discuss this actual event. Is there a problem with this sister’s theology of church? Do they appear to be on a missional journey?

Write 2 Corinthians 4:5 on the board or newsprint and read it together. What does this verse say about authority? (Jesus Christ is Lord.)

Post pattern 8 and read it together.

Recall the definition of missional vocation from page 37: “For the church to understand itself to be missional (‘sent’) is to discern its vocation (‘calling’). To be called by God is

to be taken into a way of life and mission.” Ask, “How has your understanding of being called in order to be sent changed over the course of our study?”

Examine the brief example of Spring Garden Church, pages 143–44). Ask: “Is ours a permission-giving structure? How do we prevent ‘letting things go wild?’” (Hint: through control?)

Most literature on leadership emphasizes operating from strengths. Note the contradiction to this on page 143: “Leaders have chosen to operate out of their weaknesses and to become vulnerable one with another. They realize that in order to pursue the purpose of God for them, they would need to be vulnerable and committed.” What does humility have to do with leadership? (Acknowledging the authority of Christ.)

Discuss the author’s treatment of accountability, page 144–46. How is accountability operative in our congregation? How can we hold one another accountable in a loving manner?

Call attention to the quote at the end of the chapter, taken from Missional Church. Discuss how leadership is primarily by (missional) example. If the point has not been made, mention that a part of accountability is being sure our actions (example) are consistent with our language.

Rate your church on the scorecard in light of pattern 8.

Conclusion—Embodying and Proclaiming the Gospel

Begin this section with the question, “Which is more important, outreach to our community or taking care of the fellowship of our church?” Someone will likely respond that it is a “both/and.” Push this response for explanation, with an emphasis on how we find balance.

Call attention to the statement at the top of page 151, “The missional church both proclaims the gospel and embodies the gospel. It proclaims Jesus Christ to more and more people—and it makes the life of Jesus visible in itself.” A little later the author writes, “To be missional is a matter of the character of the church.” Ask, “What does he mean by these two statements?” Probe for the realization that living out the missional character of our calling actually results in caring for the fellowship, perhaps even subconsciously. It means operating from a position of love, concern, and care for one another as we are on mission.

Again on page 151 the statement is made that “mission describes the nature of the church.” What does this mean? Talk briefly about the scientific phenomena of DNA. What do we know about DNA? How is it used? It is the essence of an individual and ties us to our family of origin. Any piece of human tissue carries DNA.

Use this illustration: Archeologists in historic Jamestown Settlement have discovered the skeleton of a person whom they believe to be an English soldier, and they believe they know his identity. In order to confirm their theory, they have received permission to dig beneath a church in England where the soldier's ancestors are buried. Comparing the DNA of a relative buried in England may confirm the identity of the soldier buried outside Jamestown Fort.

This is what the author means when he says, "Participation in God's mission in the world will permeate the whole life of the congregation" (p. 151). Mission will be a part of the church's DNA.

Retell (or ask the members assigned to Rockridge Church to retell) the story on page 152, emphasizing the author's observation of congruence (page 153).

Ask, "How do we achieve congruence between our inner conviction and commitment and our outward demonstration of our convictions and commitment?" Spend as much time on this discussion as necessary, for it gets to the heart of truly becoming missional!

End by discussing your completed scorecards and the degree to which your church may truly be said to be on the missional journey. Take time to begin addressing the issue of where we go next on our journey.

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