

Organisational Guidelines for Christian Distinctiveness [6 FEBRUARY 2013]

"...whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus..."
(Colossians 4:17)

What is Christian Distinctiveness?

Christians perform an array of different vocations across all realms of society and face similar challenges as they learn how their faith shapes their work. Given that we are called to live differently in everything, it is essential to understand what distinctiveness looks like in our vocational lives. To begin with, it is important to be clear on what Christian distinctiveness is and is not. Christian distinctiveness may simply be defined as being *what marks the difference in the lives of those who are followers of Christ*. Scripture teaches that God's central purpose for his Church is *to reflect his character and nature to the world, so that he is glorified*. Christ himself came and demonstrated what it is to be fully human by expressing the characteristics of the Father, leaving an example for his disciples to follow (Matthew 5:48). In simple terms, the more God's people come to reflect Christ in their lives, the more they can be said to demonstrate a "Christian distinctive".

As Christians seek to fulfil their God-given vocations in society they are called to demonstrate Christ-likeness. Obviously, we cannot speak about the nature of specific vocations in society as being "Christian" as such. The practical nature of the tasks that Christians perform, and the resulting impact, can in many ways be no different than if performed by unbelievers. However, the means and motivation behind the work will be completely different because it is done through Christ and for Christ. Christians endeavour to do all things as for the Lord, carrying out their work with excellence, and seeking to positively influence society in Jesus name. Moreover, the actual character of the people doing the work should be different. Regardless of the specific roles and tasks being performed, the central call is to glorify God by reflecting Christ's image to others.

If we make "results" the ultimate purpose of our work, our central focus can shift from faithfulness to Christ to being "successful" in our temporal work in this present age. If our primary focus is not our distinctiveness then we are overlooking God's central purpose for his Church, and what we demonstrate to the world becomes no different than what they demonstrate to us. Unbelievers can carry out the same practical service with excellence; so "good works" in themselves do not necessarily demonstrate a Christian distinctive or glorify God. Furthermore, given that unbelievers perform the same practical activities in society as believers, the actual results of the work Christians do does not necessarily lead to the transformation of the world in a redemptive sense. Like all common work in this present age it is always done for the purpose of stewarding God's temporal order (Genesis 2:15-16; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12). In the same way Christ came to inaugurate the Kingdom, he will return to redeem creation and to consummate God's eternal kingdom (Romans 8:18-25; 1 Corinthians 15:24-28; 2 Peter 3:4-13). Until then, the call for Christians is to do their work as service to God, in obedience to his will, knowing that their "faithful presence" in society will be a witness to the coming kingdom of God.

In summary, the central call on the Church is to do what no other organization can do, i.e. to worship Christ and reflect his image to the world. The distinct activity of local churches is to help people to become more like Christ, enabling them to live out their faith in all realms of society to the glory of God. *This is the only thing that makes the Church's mission counter-cultural and different from other organizations.* It is essential that organisations who work with the Church recognize where the Church's ultimate distinctiveness lies and not do anything that draws the Church away from this, i.e. making common practical tasks that God has determined for all human beings to perform in this present age central to the Church's mission. Christian organizations may focus on specific types of services, and the local church will support its people as they fulfil a variety of different roles within society at large. However, in the midst of all of the functional diversity in our own temporal vocations, the universal calling is for Christians to reflect Christ to the world, to the glory of God.

Principles for Good Practice

What follows are some biblical principles on the subject of Christian distinctiveness. The purpose of outlining these principles is the following:

- *to define clear marks of Christian distinctiveness, i.e. marks that relate only to the local church and to Christians in society*
- *to provide an understanding of how Christians can help guard against placing a central focus on that which is not distinctly Christian*
- *to express characteristics of a Christian organization/local church that is demonstrating a balanced and integral approach to Christian life and mission*

If we are being hindered from aligning with these principles then it is a sign that we are compromising our Christian distinctiveness in some way. Projects with a focus on a specific area of work may feel that some of these principles are not relevant. If so, for an integral approach to be demonstrated they would then need to be working closely alongside other expressions of the Church.

1. We are intentional in being Christ-centred and biblically faithful in everything

Christian distinctiveness depends upon us knowing Christ and following his lead in everything we do (John 10:3-5). We desire for God to be central to our decision-making process and are always open for him to guide us. We recognize that there are numerous and diverse ways by which he is able to speak to us and acknowledge that different influences need to be carefully observed, weighed and tested. As a starting point, a solid understanding of what scripture clearly teaches is the basis for all that we believe and practice (2 Timothy 3:16).

2. Our central purpose is to worship God and reflect Christ to the community

God's will and purpose is for the Church to model Christ-likeness, displaying God's glory to the world as a witness and a sign of his coming kingdom (Rom 8:28-29; Colossians 3:17). The central and distinctive call for Christians is to glorify God. Principally, we do this by reflecting the

character of Christ to others.

3. The central focus of our mission is leading others to worship God and reflect his image

The core of a distinctly Christian mission is helping people grow to be more like Christ so that their lives glorify God (Galatians 4:19). Human beings can only become fully human when they are liberated from sin and able to live out their faith in the midst of their distinct vocations in society. It is only a relationship with Christ that will enable people to come to a position of being able to experience holistic and sustainable transformation (Matthew 6:33).

4. There are sufficient means in place to safeguard and authenticate our Christian distinctiveness

There needs to be proper means, from both within and outside the organization, to help us to be aligned with a distinctly Christian mission (Acts 18:24-28; Galatians 2:1-2). Christ has commissioned his Church and given it authority. Therefore, if we are seeking to further the distinct mission of the Church we have to be under the governance of a local church or denominational structure, and receive ongoing input and support from those who have a theological and pastoral background.

5. Our mission occurs through Christians and is primarily dependent upon resources from Christians

Given that the Church's distinct and primary mission is to reflect the glory of Christ to the world, it can only be served by those who walk with Christ (Romans 15:25-33, Philippians 4:10-20). Obviously, non-believers cannot contribute towards the central goal of Christian mission. Unbelievers have no reason to contribute to a mission that is uncompromisingly Christian and therefore contrary to their worldview. We do not compromise our Christian distinctiveness in exchange for having impact that is simply aligned with goals of secular organizations. Without all the necessary resources from Christians (i.e. skills, knowledge, financial resources, etc) we are restricted in being able to focus on a distinctly Christian approach.

6. We are faithful stewards of all the resources that we have been entrusted with

Wise stewardship is central to effective Christian ministry (1 Corinthians 4:1-2; 1 Peter 4:10-11). It is important for us to use all that we have rightly, in a way that glorifies God. God can entrust us with more responsibility when we act as wise stewards over what we have already been given (Luke 12:41-48).

7. We have leadership with sufficient theological/ministerial training

It is helpful for those in leadership positions to have a suitable level of training in order to be able to most effectively lead God's people in service and ministry (1 Timothy 2:1; Titus 1:9).

Without sufficiently qualified personnel to lead, it is more difficult for us to help others to grow as disciples and servants of Christ.

8. Leadership demonstrate Christian maturity and blameless behaviour to others

It is the responsibility of leadership to be a godly example to those they are leading (1 Peter 5:3). It is not enough for leadership to teach scripture accurately, they also have to live it out, so that others can learn what true Christian behaviour is from their example.

9. Leadership seek to raise up other people to lead within the organization/local church

It is vital for leadership to help train and raise up future leaders (2 Timothy 2:1-2). Ministry is not simply a platform for leaders to exercise their own giftings, they need to delegate appropriate responsibilities and empower others so that they can develop.

10. We are effective in planting, establishing and supporting sustainable Christian communities where there are none

It is important that we seek to develop and support new local churches in order to make disciples in other regions (Acts 15:36-41). This means having people with sufficient knowledge, experience and skills to plant churches, and to provide the appropriate support to new leaders and teams who are planting disciple-making communities.

11. We are consistently experiencing growth in our church(es)

A sign of a healthy local church is that it is growing in numbers (Acts 2:41,47). Having a growth in numbers means that more and more people are coming into contact with a Christ-centred community and have the opportunity to grow as disciples of Christ. This does not necessarily mean that we need to have large congregations and big gatherings, only that we are seeing signs of new people coming to faith through the witness of the Church.

12. Our outreach leads to many opportunities to build good relationships with unbelievers

It is important to build strong relationships with the community that we serve in. The motivation for practical service is always unconditional love; this does not mean that our service is done as a means to an end. Practical service in the community can provide an effective opportunity for us to be able to connect with people and share the gospel.

13. We are effective in giving those we serve opportunities to encounter and follow Christ

Evangelism is central to the mission of the Church. Jesus commanded his Church to make disciples; this begins with being able to give sufficient opportunities for people to come to faith in him (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). In some circumstances, just doing practical service can be a

way of avoiding the need to share our faith. Doing good works will always appear most virtuous and loving in the eyes of society, yet sometimes this can be easier and less sacrificial than evangelism because there is no cultural resistance to it.

14. We recognize the need to share Christ, even if it hinders our practical service or brings persecution

Practical service is meant to support, rather than detract from, our distinct call to help others grow as disciples. Human beings are created to worship and give glory to God, so we share Christ in order that others are given an opportunity to come to salvation, and to live lives that glorify God (Isaiah 43:6-7). We follow appropriate methods of evangelism for our context; methods which will enable discipleship to occur in the most effective way, as opposed to being primarily driven by cultural pressure or the desire to safeguard our service within the community. A sign of being in God's will is persecution of some kind or another (Matthew 5:10; Acts 13:48-50).

15. We have people who are able to preach and teach scripture faithfully and effectively

Scripture tells us to "preach the word" without compromise (2 Timothy 4:1-2). It is vital to have people who are able to model biblical teaching, i.e. who properly and responsibly interpret scripture and communicate truths to others in a clear, balanced and applicable way (1 Timothy 4:16, 5:17; 2 Timothy 2:24). As well as leadership being effective in preaching the Bible faithfully, they need to be able to help people teach and share the word of God with one another.

16. We lead people toward appropriate educational resources to help them grow as disciples

Alongside teaching and preaching there are various other ways through which people are able to grow in their knowledge of scripture. It is important for biblical teaching to be widely available through a variety of different mediums (2 Timothy 4:13). As well as having access to content, we need the discernment to know if it aligns with what scripture clearly teaches.

17. We seek to help others to develop behaviours that are consistent with biblical values

The mark of spiritual vibrancy in a person's life is their behaviour increasingly coming to be aligned with biblical teaching. Therefore, we need to support people as they seek to develop Christ-like behaviours (Galatians 5:22-23). New behaviours are developed as a result of people habitually adopting spiritual practices within the context of the Christian community.

18. We seek to help people to grow in their love for Christ

The Christian life is grounded in a relationship with the living God. It is not enough that we help people grow in a proper knowledge and understanding of God, or to simply encourage them to

display “good works” in serving others. At the core of the Christian faith, driving everything else, is the need to cultivate deep affections for Christ (Matthew 7:21-23). Therefore, it is important that we help people to come to a personal knowledge of Christ, and continue to help them to grow deeper in their desire to know and love him.

19. We seek to help people grow in their understanding of scripture so that they may build new belief systems

What people truly believe determines their actions. Therefore, it is important that their understanding and way of thinking aligns with scriptural teaching (Romans 12:2; 1 Timothy 4:6, 6:3). We have to help people to come to a greater knowledge and understanding of scripture, so that they develop a worldview which is increasingly consistent with biblical values. This means it is important for us to teach doctrine alongside practical application so that people are growing in their understanding of orthodox Christian beliefs.

20. We seek to help people to develop healthy relationships with family, church and community, and give them opportunities to serve others.

In order to provide an appropriate environment for people to grow as disciples it is important that we lead them into Christ-centred relationships, this involves creating opportunities for Christ-centred community to occur in ways appropriate for our context. A transformed life is authenticated when people are sacrificially serving one another and living in harmonious relationships (John 13:34-35; 15:13; Romans 12:9-21). Service enables people to grow closer to Christ, and is done both in the context of the “gathered church” (i.e. Christians meeting together regularly) and through Christians serving in all spheres of society (Galatians 6:10). Christian service involves showing God’s mercy and unconditional love towards everyone, especially the poor, vulnerable and marginalized.

21. We seek to help people to become good stewards of all of their God-given gifts and resources

Ministry is something which is carried out by all believers. Leaders are there to enable this to happen, so that the whole Body of Christ is edified and grows together in maturity (Ephesians 4:11-16). It is the responsibility of those in leadership to help others to flourish with the gifts that God has given to them so that the local church and wider community can benefit.

APPENDIX: Self-Assessment Tool

The following self-assessment tool seeks to help you to evaluate how effective your church/church based organization is at expressing a Christian distinctive, and to identify areas where you may like more resources and support.

Together, the principles outline a broad and holistic approach to understanding Christian distinctiveness. In order to help you to reflect on how effective you are in aligning with each principle questions have been provided below. You do not need to use all these questions; select ones that are most helpful. When you have done this you could give yourself a mark on a scale of 1-10 for each principle [10 being “fully agree” and 1 being “fully disagree”].

If you manage a project that focuses in a specific area of work you may feel that some of these principles are not directly relevant. If so, reflect on the other expressions of Church that your project is working alongside. This would help to determine whether those who benefit from your work are being exposed to a holistic expression of Church.

1. We are intentional in being Christ-centred and biblically faithful in everything

- Is God always central to our decision making processes?
- Do we take sufficient time to discern what God is leading us to do?
- Are all of our all strategies, plans and objectives consistent with a Christian worldview?
- Is passionately following Christ is the heart of what motivates and energizes all we do?

2. Our central purpose is to worship God and reflect Christ to the community

- Is everything we do primarily done as a means of worshipping and serving Christ?
- Is our central focus always on the need to demonstrate Christ-likeness to others?
- Is a distinctly Christian witness clearly evident to those whom we serve?

3. The central focus of our mission is leading others to worship God and reflect his image

- Is there anything that detracts us from this central focus?
- How are we seeking to help people to live lives that glorify Christ?
- What does the New Testament say about how transformation occurs in people’s lives?

4. There are sufficient means in place to safeguard and authenticate our Christian distinctiveness

- Do we have people with the appropriate theological background and pastoral experience inputting into our work?

- Do we have measures in place for the spiritual accountability of the organization, e.g. operating under the governance of a local church/denominational structure of some kind?
- Do we have good relationships with a wide variety of groups and networks across the evangelical world?

5. Our mission occurs through Christians and is primarily dependent upon resources from Christians

- Can unbelievers participate in a mission that exists to glorify Christ?
- Do we ever feel restricted in what we can do because of a lack of resources from Christians?
- Are we restricted in being more distinctive based upon some of our funding sources or recruitment procedures?
- Do we ever compromise our Christian distinctiveness in exchange for having more societal impact that is similar to that of secular organizations?

6. We are faithful stewards of all the resources that we have been entrusted with

- What does it mean to be wise and faithful stewards?
- Do we use all our God given resources appropriately?
- Is God increasingly entrusting us with more resources and greater responsibility?
- How could we be more faithful in using what we have been given?

7. We have leadership with sufficient theological/ministerial training

- Do our leadership have a suitable level of Christian training?
- What are the dangers of leadership not having sufficient training?
- What kind of ongoing training could leadership benefit from?

8. Leadership demonstrate Christian maturity and blameless behaviour to others

- Do leaders model Christian maturity in a way that is evident to all?
- Are leaders intentional in spending time in disciplines that help them to grow in their own spiritual lives (i.e. prayer, Bible reading, etc.)?
- Do we provide an appropriate level of spiritual oversight, care and support for staff?
- Are leaders being fully accountable to others?

9. Leadership seek to raise up other people to lead within the organization/local church

- Are leadership actively seeking to train and raise up future leaders?
- If so, what are the ways they are doing this?
- What are the dangers of not developing new leaders?

10. We are effective in planting, establishing and supporting sustainable Christian communities where there are none

- Are we actively seeking to plant new churches?
- Do we have people with the sufficient knowledge, experience and skills to plant churches?
- How effective are we in training/supporting new leaders and teams for church planting?
- What more could we do in this area?

11. We are consistently experiencing growth in our church(es)

- Why is numeric growth important in local churches?
- What kind of numeric growth are we experiencing in our church(es)?
- Are we seeing new people coming to faith through the witness of the Church?
- What could the reasons be for the growth/lack of growth we experience?

12. Our outreach leads to many opportunities to build good relationships with unbelievers

- Are we demonstrating unconditional love if we only serve as a means to an end (i.e. not focusing on building relationships that would lead to opportunities to share the gospel)?
- Are we able to build strong relationships with the community we serve in?
- What more could we do to strengthen relationships in the community we serve?

13. We are effective in giving those we serve opportunities to encounter and follow Christ

- Are there sufficient opportunities for people to come to faith through our work?
- Does scripture mention any “illegitimate” ways of sharing the gospel?
- In what situations would doing “good works” alone be unloving and less sacrificial than sharing Christ?
- What are the most effective ways we can share the gospel in our context?

14. We recognize the need to share Christ, even if it hinders our practical service or brings persecution

- Does our practical service always support rather than detract from our call to witness to Christ?
- Are we primarily driven by the need to disciple others in the most effective way or by a need to avoid persecution and safeguard our service in the community?
- How do we move from being driven by the fear of cultural resistance to the gospel to contextualizing the gospel (i.e. sharing it in appropriate ways for our context)?

15. We have people who are able to preach and teach scripture faithfully and effectively

- Do we have people who are able to properly interpret and communicate the scriptures to others in a clear and applicable way?
- Do we present a balanced view of what scripture teaches rather than highlighting certain areas and ignoring other areas which may be uncomfortable and challenging?
- In what ways do leaders help their church members to teach and share the word of God with each other?

16. We lead people toward appropriate educational resources to help them grow in discipleship

- Are we able to provide (or lead people to) resources that can help them to grow in discipleship?
- What are the various ways we are able to learn and grow?
- Is biblical teaching widely available through a variety of different mediums?

17. We seek to help others to develop behaviours that are consistent with biblical values

- Do we place sufficient focus on helping people to develop Christ-like character?
- How could we be more effective in helping people express behaviours which align with biblical teaching?
- What are some of the ways we may hinder this from taking place?

18. We seek to help people to grow in their love for Christ

- Do we place sufficient focus on helping people to know Christ and grow to love him more?
- What are the ways in which we can help people to do this?
- What are the implications of encouraging people to do “good works” without them growing their knowledge of Christ?

19. We seek to help people grow in their understanding of scripture so that they may build new belief systems

- How do belief systems affect the way in which people live?
- Why is it important that people grow in their understanding of scripture and think biblically?
- How do we help people to value the importance of biblical beliefs and doctrine?
- Are we effective in helping people to come to a greater understanding of scripture and to develop a worldview which is consistent with biblical values?

20. We seek to help people to develop healthy relationships with family, church and community, and give them opportunities to serve others.

- Do we create opportunities for Christ-centred community to occur in a variety of ways appropriate for our context?
- Are Christ-centred values increasingly evident in the way our people relate to one other?
- Do we provide opportunities for people to serve so that they can grow as disciples?
- Are we effective in helping people to flourish in their family lives?

21. We seek to help people to become good stewards of all of their God-given gifts and resources

- Are we effective in helping people to flourish with the gifts that God has given them?
- Do our leaders help to empower others to exercise their ministry within the church?
- Are we effective in equipping others to live out their faith as they carry out their own distinct vocational callings in all spheres of society?