
Features of the Missional Church: Some Directions and Pathways

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Along with many others, I have come to use the language of “missional church” to describe the manner of church life and identity necessary for the churches of North America as we move into the uncharted waters of a post-Christian and postmodern world. This is not without a certain potential for ambiguity. The term “missional” picks up the freight of all the ways people have become accustomed to thinking about “missions” or about “missionaries.” To many, the mere hint of the word carries them off to distant places and cultures, or if the reference point is closer to home, to distinctly “other” ethnic groups than their own or to people in deprived economic circumstances. To most, the word connects immediately with activities, projects, or programs in which the church goes out to those arenas and does something.

But in the way I use the phrase, it has to do with something more at the heart of what it means to be the church. It is not about what ventures the church sends out, but about how the church itself is a “sent” community. It is not about mission as activities, but about mission as the essential character of the church.

This is the vision expressed in the book written by six of us in the Gospel and Our Culture Network and entitled *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*.¹ In it, we suggest that the church’s long history of either legal or functional Christendom in Western societies has somehow left it without a sufficient memory of its missional identity. Instead, the church came to be conceived as a “chapel” providing religious chaplaincy services for what was assumed to be an essentially Christianized society. As we in today’s North American churches take a closer look at ourselves, we discover further that the contemporary form of that heritage is to assume that a church is basically a vendor of religious goods and services in a competitive religious marketplace. Members and non-members alike are viewed as religious consumers and church staff and governance structures are assumed to be responsible for producing programs and offering services that supply what the body of consumers wants or needs. In these circumstances, it is harder and harder for “members” to live together as a called and sent community.

But that is exactly what we discover we are when we allow the gospel of the coming of the reign of God in Jesus Christ to read us and define us. And if ever we needed to recover a sense of this missional identity and live out such a missional

vocation, we must do so now when we inhabit a social environment in which the church's chaplaincy is over and the territory is distinctly missional.

There is a growing ferment among people in a wide spectrum of churches who are drawn to this vision. And when they see the implications of the new challenges before the church and catch something of the dream to live and witness as a body of people sent into God's own mission, the next question becomes a crucial one: What would such a missional church look like? To be sure, this question is sometimes asked in a dismissive way: "If you cannot show me exactly how to go and do this, the vision you propose is invalidated." But it is also asked over and over as a genuine request for help for taking first steps into a new direction. Are there examples? Are there pictures of the difference it would make to live this way? How can we begin to grasp something of the tangible way a church would act if this vision were to become a lived reality?

Answering the crucial question is hard. We are moving into new territory. Our history leaves us with too few memories. Our heavy investment in the vendor model of recruiting and retaining members gives us little to go on. But the question demands an answer, however preliminary. What follows is my attempt to offer what I believe to be among the most important marks of a genuinely missional church in our present context. They are offered here in the hope of stirring Christian communities to put flesh on these bones as they live in a missional way.

1. *The action of God in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus functions as the charter story for the missional church's life together.* That story is not merely treated as doctrinal affirmation or creed. It is the controlling vision by which everything in the life of the community is measured. The missional church is one that knows that its life is always undergoing renovation and is willing to receive the impact of its founding story over and over again. It actively receives the account of God's action in Jesus as the orienting story which gives the church its reason for existing. It remembers, re-tells, and rehearses that story as its life code.

Elsewhere I have argued that the church sits on both sides of what Lesslie Newbigin has called the "missionary encounter of the gospel with our Western culture."² That is to say, the church must recognize that it sits on the culture side, as fully participant in its own culture's ways of seeing, thinking, knowing, feeling, and acting and therefore as a community that experiences firsthand all the ways the gospel's account of things challenges and re-patterns those cultural assumptions. Only then does it become the community that sits on the gospel side in the encounter, as a community whose character has been made to show the dynamic message of the gospel in living form and thus is that gospel's vivid incarnation among companions who share the same culture.

The result of this posture is that the church possesses a spirit of ongoing, continuing conversion. Newbigin spoke often about this as the inner, internal dialogic

in which the church must always be engaged as the prerequisite for its outer dialogue with companions in the world. This happens when the community has the habit of welcoming the Scriptures into its hearing and being engaged by their disturbing and liberating influence. This is different from Bible study that feels more like engaging the Bible than being engaged by it. The key question is, who is in charge in the encounter? Is it we who determine the meaning of the text and decide how it applies to us? Or is it God, who through the Bible determines our meaning and decides how the script for our life will read? Reading the Bible with the recognition that it is reading us turns the tables on the normal patterns of reading it at arm's length, with objective distance. It lets the reign of God come in the act of reading.

Paul Hiebert has said that our culture is not what we think *about*, but what we think *with*.³ In a missional church, the Bible grows to have that quality for the church. It is not what we think or talk *about*, but what we think and talk *with*! Instead of interpreting the Bible through the lens we bring to the text, we interpret ourselves and our world through the lens of the Bible.

Nowhere is this inner dialogue more critical today than when we ask how the most central features of the gospel must affect the shape of our life together. How does Jesus' death and resurrection come into living form in a particular church? How do we wear that as the fabric that defines us? How are we properly a people of the cross? How are suffering and crucifixion received as the style of our life over against our cultural tendencies to be governed by success and achievement? Douglas John Hall has said that in Christendom the church grew accustomed to telling its story as a success story. Now, as Christendom dissolves, we must learn again a theology of the cross to shape our way.⁴ This is what it will mean for the gospel to be the church's charter story.

2. *The missional church gives priority to its formation by the Spirit as a community of mutual discipleship and corporate discernment.* What is most important for churches today is not producing programs—however fine and necessary they appear—but being formed to be a community, a distinctly Christian community. In American religious perception, Christian discipleship has been taken to be an individual matter, a matter of one's own "personal relationship" with God. Being together with other disciples is important to encourage the growth of one's own discipleship. But all of this operates out of the strong American value placed on the individual self as an essentially autonomous unit of reasoning, choosing, and acting. The gospel speaks otherwise and shows salvation as something experienced and borne corporately.

The work of the Holy Spirit is primarily community formation. The very word "church" has reference to a "called out people," a community marked and shaped by God. Because a missional church knows itself to be church in this sense, it gives priority to its formation as a community by the Spirit.

This is not the case with the chaplain or vendor models of church. In such churches, the assembled body of believers (to use the most generous corporate language) is gathered so that each may take advantage of or profit from what is, for example, offered in the worship service, the program of nurture, the emotional care, and the service project. These models are disembodiment, dismembering, by their essential affirmation of the individuality of persons who come to find help in their own relationship with God and circumstance in life.

But the issue of discipleship is as much corporate as it is personal. A missional church asks, How must *we* follow Jesus? It knows itself to be a "corporate disciple," not merely a collectivity of individual disciples. Each one's personal commitments in following Christ are important to that, but are understood to be part of a larger whole. Thus, the issue of communal discernment, grasping together the will of God for this particular Christian community and the path it follows, becomes an essential practice.

The role of leadership is also affected by this priority on community formation. Current models require pastors to be first program generators and managers and second, attractive sales persons for those programs. But in the missional church, the pastoral leadership's foremost task is the cultivation of what it means for this company of people to be, in all their life together, a distinctly Christian community.

3. *The missional church participates together in gathering and offering its worship to God in full view of the world for which Christ has sent it.* Saying it this way involves a subtle but important shift from what is normally true in both so-called traditional and so-called contemporary church worship. Both operate from the unquestioned assumption that it is the task of the pastor and/or other staff "to offer the body of believers the opportunity to worship and glorify God together." (The phrase is from the purpose statement of a famous mega-church.) There are problems with that notion, even when there is proper recognition that worship is not about *us* but about *God*, not about what *we* get out of it but what *God* gets out of it. What is still lacking is a sense that the church, the missional people of God, is a community which gathers and presents its corporate worship to God, not the recipient of worship as something offered for it to attend. The people are not the ones gathered for worship (as though they are pawns for the program). Rather, the people gather their worship together. People are the subject, not the object.

This has important consequences. It means that the work of designing particular occasions of worship (including the weekly worship) belongs to the whole community. Those with the appropriate gifts of the Spirit will work to gather and give expression to the praises and yearnings of the people. They will not ask, How can we plan a service people will get something out of? Rather, they will ask, How can the worship of this whole community best be offered to God?

This leads to a far deeper kind of participation in worship than is usually imagined when the gathered people are invited to "participate." Normally the participation

envisioned is only slight, and mostly expected to happen internally and privately in each person, albeit in the company of others. Participation means sing when the leader says sing, read in unison when the bulletin says read, recite the creed or the prayer, and give an offering when the time comes. By contrast, in the missional church each person is deeply invested in the shape and content of worship, for it is giving expression to the praise of God that arises from life together.

4. *There is harmony between the missional church's gathered moments (for worship, discernment, and action) and its dispersed life within the wider social fabric.* There is a serious divide in contemporary church life between the things that happen in church and those that happen outside. Things in church include churchly kinds of activities for the spiritual and social purposes of the organization. Things outside include much of family life, many hours in the working world, and extended social networks of friends and associates. One of the great stressors felt in the pew is the large gap between what is done and said in church and what happens the rest of the week. How about my work world? How about my social and leisure world? How about my home world? Is there any connection (besides personal advice for coping with the pressures and for maintaining personal morality and integrity) between my church world and these others? I am Humpty Dumpty, and I have had a great fall. Can anyone (God?) put me back together again?

In this situation, a seven-day-a-week church is a bad idea! At least that is so in terms of the frequently commended vendor model. Seven days of church programs and services (a full-service bank!) represents its epitome and is in sharp contrast to what it means to be a missional church. The seven-day-a-week idea would be a good one only if it meant that the church is fundamentally a body of people (not a set of services), and that that body exists as a community not only when visibly gathered on Sunday morning (or Tuesday evening), but seven days a week—while scattered and dispersed into numerous work worlds and social webs.

The interesting language in the opening sentence of 1 Peter illumines this point. Most literally, it begins: “. . . to the called out ones, aliens, dispersed in Pontus, Galatia. . . .” The dynamic of being at once called out of the world's social orbits and pressed into them is the incarnational character of the missional church. The placement of the community not on the edge but squarely in the midst of the work and play of the world is what the missional character of the church implies. The daily life and workplace is where its missional vocation is most vividly lived out. That is, it displays the gospel it believes no less when it is enmeshed in the struggles and pursuits everybody shares, than when it gathers. The missional church is best imaged not only as one distilled out, extracted from, precipitated from its surrounding social setting, but also pressed and kneaded into that dough, woven into that fabric, dissolved into that solution.

In most churches, the topic of peoples' work worlds hardly arises. Yet here is the missional frontier. In the missional church, vocation is not only a topic engaged in its gatherings but the recognized location of its collective missional calling. Gatherings of the church are designed to be supportive of, not competitive with that calling.

5. *The public presence of the missional church's life together in mutual forgiveness, accountability, and love displays the qualities of God's reign.* People today are not looking for a better argument that God exists and that the gospel is true. Rather, they are looking for a demonstration that life can be lived this way. Can you show me what this would look like in living color? Is it possible to live this way in today's kind of world? Is it imaginable that I could put all my eggs in this basket and survive? Who is doing that and how? Show me. In other words, the church's mission includes playing out in public view a community that lives by the patterns of the alternate regime called the reign of God. Jesus made the presence of that reign vivid by living in and under and by it, and the church is sent to do the same.

Perhaps the most critical features which beg for public display have to do with forgiveness and restitution. Has it become true that, just like American politicians who never dare admit failure or wrong-doing, church members can never say "I failed," or "I was wrong" or "I sinned"? Safe space for public confession of sin (at whatever level is appropriate) and communal support for granting one another the same forgiveness we so badly need from God must be built. Such safety never comes naturally, and today few even remember that it ought to be true of the church's mutual life. When forgiveness is not a part of mutual life, real love is hardly finding a place there. Love that exceeds sentimentality implies mutual accountability, expecting from one another the treatment we also intend to give. We need that love precisely at those points where we are most vulnerable and most in need of the assurance of God's mercy. The missional church demonstrates the gospel of God's mercy by being a mercy-full community.

6. *The missional church acts according to God's passion for justice, peace, and the wholeness of creation, whether it has promise of success or not.* It is not possible for a church genuinely gripped and constantly being changed by the gospel of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to live in general isolation from the pain and brokenness of the world, or worse, in some aloof refusal to be responsive. Not if it knows the God of the Bible who comes to reign with grace and to reconcile human affairs to the justice, peace, and joy that are God's own qualities.

To be God's sent people means to be so caught up into God's mission to bring wholeness and healing to the world that it can do nothing else than seek those things itself. As Abraham Heschel has put it, the heart of what it means to be a prophet is to share the pathos of God, to care about what God cares about, to feel the things that God feels, and to be drawn by those things that motivate God's own action.

The missional church must act in ways shaped by the horizon of the coming reign of God, and that action must be clear and precise in the political and economic arenas. Especially important today is to recognize how much the heritage of Christendom led the church to see such action primarily in terms of intended and expected success. Living in a democratic society such as the United States has accentuated the sense that the shape of the future lies in the church's hands, just as is the case for all citizens. But equally, it has become increasingly evident that in a pluralist society, the majority rules may not be Christian ones. A missional church knows that it will not always win when it makes an effort to be clear about the directions of God's justice and the forms of God's peace. The church's representation of these features and action in those directions is not only a calling when there is promise of successful transformation of the society. It is also a calling when success is doubtful, when failure is likely, and when the consequence is suffering.

7. The missional church risks the expansion of its circle by heralding the coming reign of God and welcoming those who respond by receiving and entering it.

There is something very overt about a missional church that is neither brash nor coercive. It has joy in speaking about the central story that forms its life. It knows how to talk to people about the Jesus it follows so that it is clear to people that in Jesus they are meeting the good news of God's action on behalf of the world's healing—and their own! It wants to illumine the meaning of the world's life with the light of this good news.

One could say that the missional church "preaches the gospel." But today the word "preach" is used almost exclusively of the Sunday morning sermon. In the New Testament, however, the Greek verb behind the English "to preach" never has that meaning. It always means "to herald" or "to announce" and is used to describe the heralding in life's public arenas the news that in Jesus Christ God is reconciling the world. It is a word about evangelism, not about sermonic exhortation or instruction.

In our setting "to preach" suggests an attitude or posture in which some people are telling others how to live. Our pluralist social environment responds with negatives: "Quit preaching at me," or "Stop being so preachy." This also is foreign to the New Testament term. The good news is heralded in the interests of the benefit and well-being of the hearers. It is heralded in humility because this is news from God who is the sole authority for its announcement.

The fact that there is risk when a community welcomes "new believers" into its company explains why, in so many of our churches, it is hard for genuine evangelism to take place. I suspect that deep down, we are reluctant because we instinctively know that if ever someone from outside our circle, someone without our history of Christian identity, someone from a different economic or cultural style, were to hear our gospel, believe it, and join our company, it would alter the equation. That person's newborn appreciation of the gospel and sense of its implications would become part of the

conversation. Old assumptions in the community would need to be renegotiated, and the equilibrium inevitably disturbed. A missional church is open to the changes the gospel brings!

This becomes tangible in the small group tradition that whenever the group meets there is always an extra chair in the circle as a reminder—an assertion!—that it is expected that another person will be welcome to join the circle. Adding a person after relationships have formed and a sense of community has developed is always a disruption. To absorb a new person takes effort and demands the willingness to let go of the configuration in place in order to build a new one. But it is precisely this attitude of giving the gospel away that a missional church possesses. It embraces its calling to evangelic risk!

8. *The qualities of peace, joy, and hope so pervade the missional church's life together that life and hope are presented as tangible options for people around it.*

Here is the bottom line. Peace, joy, and hope are the fruit of a church that is missional in all the ways indicated above. But it is also true that the missional church longs to be a community pregnant with such things as the byproduct of its first order intention to belong to God, heart and soul.

While these are God's gifts, not the church's self-achievements, their presence does imply conscious effort by its leadership to ensure that there are spaces for the peace, joy, and hope of the congregation to be expressed in ways that make them genuinely visible and accessible to all who come around. These qualities are so natural to the life of a missional church that they need no fabrication. Peace and joy are evident because life and hope are its daily experience. The missional church has received the healing of God in its own identification with the suffering and death of its Messiah, and has received its nourishment from the resurrected life of its Lord. And that healing becomes infectious. Tasted and experienced in the life of the community, it makes life and hope believable options.

I submit that a missional church is known by the presence of these eight features, and that churches earnestly seeking to recover their missional character or to be founded on it will find them to be the important directions and pathways to travel. Although the specific forms of life that serve these ends will vary, certain choices are likely to recur. For example, a pattern of small groups in a church is likely to be the most important structure for being engaged by the Scriptures, for forming community, and for living in mutual accountability and forgiveness. Lay teams for the design and leadership of worship will help shift from staff providing worship for the community toward a gathering of the community's worship together. Local context will influence which structures make sense in a particular place.

In any case, the church's present circumstances in North America and the calling of God as we know it through the Scriptures converge on this point: the church is

missional by its very nature; it is the way we are made by the Spirit! As the church moves into a new era, we have no more exciting challenge than to pursue the tangible expression of that vocation in every way we know.

ENDNOTES

¹Darrell L. Guder (ed.), Lois Barrett, Inagrace T. Dietterich, George R. Hunsberger, Alan J. Roxburgh, and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

²George R. Hunsberger, "Acquiring the Posture of a Missionary Church," in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, eds. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 289-297.

³Paul G. Hiebert, "The Gospel in Our Culture: Methods of Social and Cultural Analysis," in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 142.

⁴Douglas John Hall, *Has the Church a Future?* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980).

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