



## Preview Summary

The following article seeks to answer the question, “What is meant by *missional church*?” Missional church is both a movement and a concept. The movement is rooted in a rethinking of theology regarding both mission and the church, and a reflection on the church’s history in light of this theology.

As a practitioner, the author shares from her experience as a pastor and church consultant in attempting to bring about renewal in the church, given the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

As a concept, a *missional church* is defined as one seeking to be involved in God’s mission in the world. The people of God are seen as those sent on a mission versus those who send others. All of church life is a participation in this calling. The mission belongs to God. The church is created to be a sign and instrument pointing to God’s activity on behalf of the world. God’s activity in the world concerns both the personal salvation of individuals, and a care for all of creation.

Appendix A: Glossary of key terms, which are indicated in the article by an asterisk\*

Appendix B: Quotes regarding Missional church from the literature.

Appendix C: Questions for use in group dialogue.





# Cultivate Mission

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## What is Missional Church?

*"I hate coming into the church office, and seeing the conference room white board covered with numbers! The numbers of new church members we want for this year. The numbers of new giving pledges. The church shouldn't be about numbers! The church should be about mission!"*

This comment was made by a long time church member where I served as associate pastor. I understood his frustration. The messy white board covered with numbers was our way of trying to articulate ministry goals and bring them to fruition in the midst of challenging realities. But to others it did not motivate, and worse detracted from the true purpose of the church. Many moments like these sent me on a journey of asking myself: "What does it mean to be the church in the midst of a changing world?" This question has led me to various learning communities and streams of thought, one of which is *missional* church.

### Missional Church as Movement

Missional church is at the same time a concept and a movement. I will illuminate both, showing how the concept emerges from the movement. The purpose of this paper is not to outline how to become a missional church, but simply what is meant by the concept of missional church. I examine what it means to be a missional church, not what missional churches do. One must first think about being, before doing. I find that's a hard thing for people. So I ask that as you read you put off the thought of... "What do missional churches *do*?" for a while and enter into thinking with me about... "What *is* a missional church?"

As a movement, many things have come together to create a new longing on the part of the church to rethink what it means to *be* the church. First it is the convergence of thought about missions and the nature of the church within diverse streams of the worldwide church (such as the Roman Catholic Church, World Council of Churches, Orthodox Church, Pentecostal Church,

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and various ecumenical mission conferences throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century).<sup>1</sup> This convergence led to a conclusion that mission belongs to the very nature of being the church. One international council articulated it this way: “There is no participation in Christ, without participation in his mission to the world.”<sup>2</sup> One of the writers in this movement, Lesslie Newbigin, was a British missionary for many years in India. Upon returning to Britain his writings initiated a discussion of what it meant to share the gospel within the increasingly secular society of Europe and North America.<sup>3</sup> There was a strong sense that the mission field didn’t mean crossing a body of salt water, but existed outside the doors of the church found in any land, and especially the land of North America.

Secondly, it is a movement influenced by the pressures the church in North America is feeling about declining membership and influence in our wider society. Many approaches and movements have arisen in an attempt to deal with this crisis. The Church Growth, Church Health, and Church Effectiveness movements would be three examples. These movements, as well as missional church, are all trying to get at the question—*What outcome are we aiming for?* Is it numerically *growing* churches? Is it *healthy* churches? Is it *effective* churches? Other adjectives could be *thriving* and *vital*. These movements are in dialogue with each other, for example—“Our goal should be to build healthy churches, because part of the definition of a healthy church is that it would be growing.” Thus *missional* church is one adjective to consider in the dialogue regarding what are we really after when we talk about leading change in the church.

The missional movement would claim that numerically growing, healthy, or thriving churches are all positive images, but don’t get at the heart of the matter. God didn’t create the church to be healthy, although health is a key aspect of living out God’s call for the church. God created the church to live as a demonstration of God’s kingdom in the world.

Another critique of these movements is that while they provide methods and programs that are helpful, some assert that the church needs more than a methodological fix—one that gets at the root of the church’s self understanding.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the starting place for church transformation is not “how-to’s,” or adopting methods of “successful” church models, but a radical rethinking regarding *why the church exists*.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 33-34. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Rev. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 8-11.

<sup>2</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Rev. Ed., 1. Newbigin quotes this line from the Willigen Conference of the International Missionary Council (1952).

<sup>3</sup> Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 3. See <http://www.gocn.org> (Gospel and Our Culture Network)

<sup>4</sup> Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 10; Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, 20-23.

## Points of Personal Connection

This rethinking of “how-to’s” led me to explore the missional church movement. As an associate pastor, I had worked hard to reinvigorate an aging mainline Presbyterian church. Focusing on best practices and new methods were insufficient by themselves. When I tried to focus people on reversing our decline, church members thought that I (and other staff members) just wanted a bigger church to stroke our egos. When I tried to add contemporary music so we could “attract the young people,” it caused anger in people who couldn’t see why young people didn’t like their music.

When I de-emphasized the goal of “attracting young people” and began to ask more about why the church exists and how the gospel could/should be translated into the heart language of people outside our walls—I got less resistance. Now as a consultant when I dialogue with church leaders, I see the need to focus not on methods and functions of the church *as a starting place*, but on the biblical call to be a church, and where that fits within our shared history.

Two other issues have led me to the missional movement. First is a deep longing to bring together in the church a witness of both words and deeds. I see the need for a faith in action that both communicates the gospel message and demonstrates God’s justice in the world. I’ve longed to bring together a focus on evangelism with a concern for the total person, physical and psychological. I’ve longed for the church to care not just for the individual person and their needs, but also for issues of justice, poverty, and stewardship of the earth which God created. Thus, I have found in the missional movement a compelling paradigm that articulates the church’s role in both evangelism and social justice.

Second, in my experience as a pastor I sometimes felt like a salesperson of “religious goods and services.”<sup>5</sup> As I struggled to involve new people in the church and its programs, I wondered about the ultimate purpose of all this toil. When I considered the adults who brought their children to the church children’s choir so they could see their adorable cherubs dressed in Christmas garb singing in front of the church, I wondered what would ever transform these adults into disciples of Jesus? Was this the starting place of discipleship for these adults, or were we colluding with a watering down of the gospel that says—church is a place where people come to get specific needs met...like providing a religious education for children. I struggled with whether bringing more people into these programs would ever mean that the church was fulfilling its calling within the local community where God had placed us.

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<sup>5</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, 83-90.

As I dialogue with church leaders from both large and small congregations, I find this is a question many are asking.<sup>6</sup> Are we just focused on having a bigger church with more successful programs on our church campus, or are we focused on something more deeply connected to God's purposes for the world?

## Missional Church as Concept

That tells you a bit about the movement, and some personal reasons for why I am drawn to it, but what about the concept? What is meant by *missional church*?

Most churches seeking to become a missional church would not claim to *be* a missional church. It is more of a journey than a destination. It is a paradigm through which to frame the journey of church transformation. Appendix B offers multiple definitions and key quotes regarding missional church from the literature. For the purposes of this paper, I highlight this one from *Treasure in Clay Jars*:

*"A missional church is a church that is shaped by participating in God's mission, which is to set things right in a broken, sinful world, to redeem it, and to restore it to what God has always intended for the world. Missional churches see themselves not so much sending, as being sent. A missional congregation lets God's mission permeate everything that the congregation does—from worship to witness to training members for discipleship. It bridges the gap between outreach and congregational life, since, in its life together, the church is to embody God's mission."*<sup>7</sup>

Expanding this definition, I'll highlight three things:

### I. God as Acting Subject

*"A missional church is a church that is shaped by participating in God's mission, which is to set things right in a broken, sinful world, to redeem it, and to restore it to what God has always intended for the world."* –Treasure in Clay Jars

The acting subject of mission is not the church but God. God has a mission, in which the church participates. The location of God's mission is not primarily the church, but the world. God is active in the world that God created—redeeming and sustaining it. The church has a commission to participate in God's activity on behalf of all of creation. This is in contrast to the *church* as the acting subject of mission. Does the church have a mission to take God to the world? (That's not quite it.) Or is God already at work in the world and in people's individual lives? (Yes,

<sup>6</sup> *Treasure in Clay Jars* records a study of both large and small congregations who are on a journey of transformation toward missional church.

<sup>7</sup> Lois Y. Barrett, ed., *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), x.

that's it!) God is already at work in the world, and we are joining God in what God is already doing. God is always at work, not just in the world, but in individual people's lives. God is concerned for human life in all its complexity.

For example, when a child is struggling to learn how to read because she has dyslexia, God cares that this girl learns to read so that she may have fullness in her life. God is with her in her struggle. If I were to tutor this girl with dyslexia, I would be participating in what God is doing in her life. If I were to tutor this girl because the love of Christ has led me to do so, my work would be a living expression that God is with this girl and cares about this girl, including whether or not she learns to read.

So the concept IS:

*God's mission is to restore creation to wholeness.  
The church participates as a sign and instrument in God's mission.*

AND IS NOT

*The church's mission is to bring God's love to the world.  
God helps the church in living out its mission.*

This might be considered so much semantics, but the distinction is important. This means that what we do within the church walls is not the totality of God's work, but preparing God's people for God's work in the world. It shifts our focus from institutional thriving, or surviving, to looking for God's activity inside AND outside our institutional walls. It shifts our focus from not just asking how we can bring people to God through ministries on a church campus to also asking what God is already doing in our community and how we can be a part of it.

One way of articulating that God is the acting subject of mission is the term *missio Dei*.<sup>\*</sup> This Latin phrase appears often in the Missional literature and is translated "God's mission." God's mission is linked to both God as Trinity (three in one) and the kingdom of God.<sup>8</sup> God created the world so that all of creation could experience wholeness and relationship with God. Sin entered the world and with it individual and corporate brokenness. (In other words, we sin as individual people, and when we organize into groups and societies—a sin synergy takes effect.) God the Father sent Jesus into the world to redeem it. Jesus came announcing the kingdom of God (or what many now call the redemptive reign of God).

As the Father sent the Son, so the Son sent the Spirit into the world. The Spirit created the church and sends the church into the world to participate with God in redeeming all of creation. The church is meant to proclaim the kingdom of God and experience in its own life the presence of this kingdom, characterized by God's justice, love, and mercy.<sup>9</sup> When we care for each other

<sup>8</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 18-19.

<sup>9</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Rev. Ed., 48-49.

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we are experiencing a delightful foretaste of this kingdom, in which love is the way of being together. When we build houses with Habitat for Humanity, our actions proclaim the kingdom of God, where all are provided for. Thus, the internal and external ministries of a congregation both point to the kingdom of God. The internal congregational life takes on new meaning when it is focused on preparing the people of God for participating with God's activity on behalf of the world.

This distinction frees us from seeing our efforts as so much church-building, institutional-maintaining, or numbers-increasing work. It refocuses the way we articulate outcomes for ministry. It's not about how many bodies are in the building or attending the programs; it is about how people are equipped, formed, and led to participate in God's mission in the world. Such a focus recognizes that the church points to the kingdom of God. Thus the church is not the ultimate end, but a means toward the ultimate end—which is the kingdom of God. In other words, we're not as much about building the church as an institution, per se, as we are about living as a sign of God's kingdom.

Large and small churches can seek to be “missional.” There is no one right model for being the church. Each church will seek to be on this journey toward a missional rethinking within their context,\* i.e. the place God has placed them.

## II. Rethinking History...

*“Missional churches see themselves not so much sending, as being sent.”* –Treasure in Clay Jars

This definition also points to a move away from seeing the church in the U.S. as predominately a sending body of missionaries and other areas of the world as the recipient of those sent. The missional movement seeks to rethink the challenge facing 21<sup>st</sup> Century congregations in terms of the cultural shifts that have occurred in Western civilization since the 1950's (i.e. the secularization of society and the changes in culture like the advent of pop music, mass media and technological advances). In addition, and even more importantly, the missional movement seeks to rethink our challenges within the entire sweep of church history.

When Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313 AD, the church went from primarily a missionary movement to an established, state-protected institution. With the rise of Islam, contact with other areas of the world was cut off from remaining missionary movements of the Western church. These two changes combined to create a church whose ways of thinking and doing were developed in the state-protected era known as “Christendom.”<sup>10\*</sup> It was assumed that the people living in Europe were Christians, if not in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 3-7. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, 5-6.

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genuine faith, at least in cultural adherence. Being cut off from missionary expansion, the main focus of the church became caring for the church's membership within its parish area.

When world travel opened up again, the church in Europe initiated a time of missionary expansion, which also combined with the rise of colonialism. Things have come full circle and many are recognizing that the "mission field" is now the secular West (Europe and North America). The mission field is no longer somewhere else, it is here. The present day church is unprepared for this shift, due to how our church life is geared toward an assumption that most people are nominally Christian. The way we prepare pastors, plant churches; how we conduct worship and form disciples have been developed around the assumption of a church culture in our society. For example, seminary training focuses on preparing clergy for roles of maintaining established churches and caring for existing members—like preaching sermons for the faithful, visiting the sick in hospitals, counseling church members, conducting weddings, etc. Our seminaries do not focus on preparing clergy for roles such as determining how to connect the gospel with the local context,\* or dialoguing about faith across diverse groups such as Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, or initiating new ministries/churches.

The Western church now finds itself in a diverse world of many religions and world views living side by side. Since mission activities were formally accompanied by a colonial expansion (which I'm not saying is good) and the support of Christendom, we need to rethink what it means to share faith in this new context.

We no longer share faith from a position of established strength, but from a position of weakness. The church in the U.S. has experienced waves of disestablishment.\* (See Glossary). The result of this is that the church is no longer the center of society. The church is at the fringe of society, much like the early church was in the book of Acts. The missional movement calls for a response of mourning and accepting this disestablishment, and then embracing the change as a new opportunity for sharing the gospel from a place of marginalization rather than status. This reflects the way of Jesus, who conducted his ministry from the margins rather than from a place of privileged power.

Another aspect of our common history that the missional church movement has tried to address is healing the division of evangelism versus social justice that has plagued the church in the West for a greater part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In his book, *The Open Secret*, Lesslie Newbigin points to a tendency for a division between those who see mission primarily as actions for God's justice, and those who see mission primarily as faith sharing toward personal conversion.<sup>11</sup> Like many, Newbigin calls for healing the division so that acts of justice and faith sharing are both linked to the local congregation as signs of Christ's presence in the world.

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<sup>11</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Rev. Ed., 10-11.

### III. Mission as the Essential Nature of the Church

*“A missional congregation lets God’s mission permeate everything that the congregation does—from worship to witness to training members for discipleship. It bridges the gap between outreach and congregational life, since, in its life together, the church is to embody God’s mission.”* –Treasure in Clay Jars

Mission is no longer just *one function* of the church, but its *purpose* for existing.<sup>12</sup> Mission as *just one function of the church* can be seen in the way many churches have a “Missions” committee, which usually oversees the money and personnel sent to foreign lands, or an “Outreach/Evangelism” committee, which usually oversees some kind of philanthropic or evangelistic work in the local community. In contrast, mission is essential to the very nature of the church. This means that everything a church does, from worship to spiritual formation to governance is with the purpose of equipping the people of God to participate in God’s mission in the world.

Worship, governance (the work of the church’s board), and spiritual formation of adults and children (discipleship\*) all take on new meaning. These aspects of our gathered church life do not cease; in fact they become all the more important. We live the rhythm of gathered and sent like breathing in and breathing out. We gather in worship, classes, and small groups to develop our own faith, discern our calling, and plan together how we will live out that calling in our community and our individual spheres of influence. Governing is primarily asking how the congregation can live out their purpose in the rhythm of gathering and sending. This changes the conversations we have around the board table. Instead of just asking, “Is the budget balanced?” we might also ask “Does the budget reflect our purpose/mission as a congregation?”

A missional church is one that seeks to live as a sign of God’s presence in the world through all of its internal and external activities. The internal activities and practices such as worship, bible study, children/youth ministries, and care of each other are all important ministries of the church, which take on deeper meaning. The focus of these gathering activities is on helping people develop their faith, and identify their call/gifting for service; a service which is lived out in ministries on the church campus, and beyond.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas G. Bandy, *Kicking Habits: Welcome Relief for Addicted Churches* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 74, 102. Bandy contrasts two church systems. *Declining*: members are welcomed-in, kept, enrolled, informed, nominated to office and supervised. *Thriving*: people are changed, gifted, called, equipped and sent.

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In missional church, the role of clergy is imaged as coach for the people of God who do the works of ministry, both in the church and in the world. Worship and bible study in the missional church are for gathering and nourishing God's people to hear God's call and be prepared live out this call. This changes how we approach the bible. A typical question we ask of scripture is—*“What can I get out of this today that helps me live my life?”*<sup>14</sup> In missional church we allow another question to form us—*“How does this shape our understanding of **our role** in God's purpose for the world?”* In other words, the focus of spiritual growth is not just enriching my life. The focus of spiritual growth is also to prepare us for participating with God in the larger horizon of the world.

*How does this bible passage shape our understanding of our role in God's purpose for the world?*

The focus becomes discipleship, along with an understanding of being which leads to doing. Someone said to me in response to missional church ideas—*“A couple with young children who both work full time jobs are not going to want to come to church if the church tells them that now they have to add to their hectic lives doing service in the community.”* To which I admit—you're right, they probably wouldn't! Two issues emerge in this example.

The first has to do with an understanding of discipleship. This couple is welcome to come and experience church as a place to be spiritually renewed and have their children formed in the Christian faith. Grace accepts people where they are and welcomes them into the fold. In fact, we recognize that they may not come with much more than a vague sense of wanting something spiritual for their lives. We don't assume they come ready or able to serve—perhaps they come needing years of learning about the faith. That is discipleship.\* One part of discipleship is learning about God's purpose for the church—the reason the church was created to exist. It exists for more than spiritual enrichment and education of children. This couple may or may not ever come to that realization. They are welcome regardless.

The second issue that emerges in the example of the busy couple is the assumption that missional church equals service in the community. Yes, living out the call to participate in God's mission *may* involve service to the community. But it's not identical with that. We are looking at the purpose for which a church exists as the guiding rubric for our lives, not an exact program that we all should do. What would it look like to **be** a Christian in the world? For some that may involve **doing** works of service in the community. For some it may involve **doing** things like

<sup>14</sup> Barrett, ed., *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, 69.

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mentoring youth in the church (and also the friends they bring with them to church!) For all Christians it involves *being* Christ's person in every area of our life.

For the young couple, Christ's call for them in this stage of life may involve being the people of God in their jobs and in their new role as parents. Their words and deeds in the workplace point others to the reality we Christians affirm—that there's more to life than what we see here. There is a God at work in the world. For this couple, it is the witness they have among other parents, as they are naturally thrown into a community of parents through the schools their children attend and the activities in which their children participate.

In this example, the idea of God as the acting subject is important. This couple enters their networks of other parents and co-workers expecting that God is already at work in people's lives and in the community. The point at which they become friends and associates with these people in their sphere is not the beginning of God working in the lives of these people. If we believe God is at work in the world, and in people's lives, then we go into our spheres of activity in the world with the expectation that God is already at work. How can we open our eyes to see it? And in seeing it, therefore participate in it?

For example, when I was flying a few years ago with my son, the passenger in the seat next to me was a man who was reading a book with "God" in the title. We had just finished a layover in Texas, so I thought, "Oh no, must be a Texas-bible-belt guy who will try and tell me women shouldn't be pastors. Note to self—don't strike up a conversation!" (Ok, so I'm a little jaded, but it's happened before!)

We sat through the whole flight not talking, reading our respective books, with my son bouncing in and out of my attention. At the end of the flight, this man next to me started a conversation. He didn't find out much, but it felt like he knew everything about me. I felt like the Samaritan woman when she encountered Jesus. It turns out he was a Roman Catholic monk, on his way to a retreat in San Jose. At the end of the conversation he said to me, "I can see that your son loves you very much." His words struck me like a thunder bolt delivering a powerful healing salve. I was in the midst a few very hard years with my son. This man discerned that God was at work in this area of my life, and he participated in this work of God by speaking words I needed to hear. He had a profound impact on my life. It's like he entered the plane wondering, "What is God doing on this plane today?"...and..."How can I be a part of it?"

Thus, discipleship draws us into practices of prayer, reading scripture, and discernment which equips us to be God's people in the world . . . or on an airplane!

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Mission as essential to the nature of the church, rather than as one activity of the church, is a hard switch to make. Churches are experimenting with language to give expression to this shift. Some leaders have found that the term *missional* church inspires people's imaginations. Some leaders have discovered quite the opposite. They have been captivated by the ideas of the missional church movement, but do not care for the language. They assert that "missional" is too confusing for use in the congregation and this may often be true, given our historical understanding of "missions."

The language one uses is optional; language is our limited way of describing something much deeper. One church articulates their commitment to missional transformation by saying "We are rooted in Christ and reaching out in love." Others have tried to give voice to this by setting a goal to be "internally strong, externally focused." Others have adopted a phrase originally written by German pastor and WWII martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer—a church "for others."<sup>15</sup> Others describe it as the need to have a balance of internal and external ministries. Some use biblical language like "blessed to be a blessing" (Gen. 12:103) or "the sent people of God" (John 20:21).

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As a church, we are in an exciting yet anxious time. It's much like the Israelites wandering through the wilderness. They weren't quite sure what life would look like on the other side of the Sinai Peninsula, but knew they couldn't go back to Egypt. For us, we're not sure what the church will look like, but we know we can't go back to the way things were in the past. Many in the missional church movement look to the book of Acts for guidance. Here we see a snapshot of the church at its birth and initial development. We remember how the church was created by the Spirit of God and led by God's Spirit through persecution, conflict, and confusion.<sup>16</sup> That encourages me to trust the Spirit's leading as we wander through our own struggles as God's mission is birthed anew.

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<sup>15</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan Publishing 1971), 382.

"The church is only the church when it exists *for others*." (Emphasis mine)

<sup>16</sup> Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*.

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## Appendix A

### Glossary

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The following are terms that appear regularly in the literature on the missional church, and therefore are helpful to know. (The terms appear in alphabetical order)

**Context/Contextual:** The local community in which a particular congregation exists.

What does it mean to be the church in this community? The question, “Who is my neighbor?” in Alice Mann and Gil Rendle’s book, *Holy Conversations*, is pointing to the immediate context of a local congregation.<sup>17</sup> Context also refers to culture. Each congregation is the expression of the body of Christ developed within a specific culture of its location. When a congregation is formed and continues to evolve, the gospel is translated in a way that makes sense to people in that context.

For example, a restaurant is a common type of organization in American life. Can you think of some that are more “contextual” than others? In other words, a restaurant that is unique and developed just for the context of a particular location? I think of Dakota Bar and Grill in the Twin City area of Minnesota. It combined the best of Minnesota fresh ingredients, with the ambiance of the great theater/art/culture I had grown to appreciate in the Twin Cities. Those who started this restaurant read their context well and translated the organizational form “restaurant” into Twin City culture. (My favorite meal there was the duck, with a side dish of wild rice, fresh corn and blueberries!) Contrast this to the restaurant chain, “Chili’s.” There was probably an original Chili’s in which the menu and ambience were first developed. From the Mexican tile embedded in the table tops, and the focus on Southwestern cuisine, we might guess it was somewhere in the Southwest. But now you can walk into places all over the world, and everyone has the same exact “Chili’s” experience. There is no attempt to “contextualize” Chili’s restaurant to the unique culture of Minnesota or Florida. It’s all the same.

Context refers to both the immediate context, the local community, but also the larger context of the region, country, and time in history in which a congregation exists. Thus we may speak of a congregation in the context of Sunnyvale (my town), which is flavored by the culture of Silicon Valley, the San Francisco Bay area, California, the United States of America, etc. We may speak of a congregation’s context also including the denomination of which they are a part. We may also speak of context in terms of time—it means something different to be the church in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America than it did to be the church in mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century America.

**Christendom:** The establishment of the Christian church as the moral, cultural and spiritual center of Western society.

A system in which the Christian religion enjoyed a protected and privileged place in society, exemplified in simple things like major public school holidays being organized around the Christian celebration of Christmas and Easter. Christendom began when Christianity was

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<sup>17</sup> Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (Herndon: Alban Institute Publications, 2003), 5.

designated the official religion of the Roman Empire by Constantine in 313 AD. This state-religious partnership was reinforced even through the Protestant challenge to the primacy and unity of the Roman Catholic Church. The “Peace of Augsburg” of 1555 determined that each ruler decided the religion for their region (Catholic, Lutheran or Calvinism). Even when the legal structures of Christendom were removed in North America, the traditions and social structures remained around Christianity, creating a “functional Christendom” in the U.S.<sup>18</sup>

**Discipleship:** The process of forming, equipping and leading the people of God to live as a sign of the kingdom of God.

A disciple is a learner, and comes from the gospels, in which Jesus’ followers were known as disciples, which meant pupils of a certain teacher. (Jesus was one of many religions leaders who had disciples, Mk 2:18 mentions the disciples of the Pharisees). Members of the early church were referred to as disciples as well (Acts 6:1). The phrase “discipleship” is most often thought of in terms of Jesus’ “Great Commission”, “*Go and make disciple of all nations...*” (Matt 28:18) Some today refer to discipleship as “spiritual formation,” to describe the process whereby followers of Christ are formed into his image. (See Gal 4:19, Paul writes, “*My dear children, for whom I am in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.*”) Around the 1950’s to 1970’s churches called this “Christian Education.” Most seminaries no longer call it “Christian Education” but offer classes in “Christian Formation and Discipleship.” The reason for the shift in language is that the goal of this area of church life is not better educated Christians filled with bible knowledge, but people formed into the likeness of Christ.

In his book, *Transforming Congregational Culture*, Anthony Robinson has an interesting way of describing the discipleship process needed in churches today, given the radical shift in the U.S. away from being a church culture. He claims that churches often “assume the goods”—meaning we expect that most people who come to church have some knowledge of the Christian faith and its practice. Therefore we “plunk people on a committee” as a way of trying to get them involved. Instead, churches need to “deliver the goods”—meaning that churches intentionally make disciples through worship, teaching and community as three aspects of Christian formation.<sup>19</sup> Robinson is one, like other authors, who assert that churches have envisioned the process of adult ministry more in terms of membership than discipleship or spiritual formation, and this has been to our detriment.<sup>20</sup> Rather than focusing on enrolling, assimilating and nominating members to church committees, churches are encouraged to see their life together as forming active disciples who seek lifelong growth and service in their faith. Or to put it another way, the process of membership and new member assimilation becomes a more intentional process of helping people who may know absolutely nothing to begin the Christian faith journey and continue in growth throughout their lives.

<sup>18</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, 4-6.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 39-41. E. Stanley Ott, *Twelve Dynamic Shifts for Transforming Your Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002). Ott makes a similar argument to Robinson on this point.

<sup>20</sup> Bandy, *Kicking Habits: Welcome Relief for Addicted Churches*.

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**Disestablishment of the Church:** Periods of time in which the established place of Protestant Christianity was displaced as the center of American society.

Historians point to three periods of disestablishment. The *first disestablishment* was the separation of church and state at the founding of the country in 1789. This act forbade the government from establishing and supporting a state church. The *second disestablishment* was brought about by the immigration of Roman Catholics, Jews and Orthodox Christians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Accommodating this increased religious diversity challenged the primacy of Protestant Christianity, and led the way toward a more inclusive “Judeo-Christian” heritage as the civil religion in American society. The *third disestablishment* came about in the 1960’s and is still under way—with the rise of individualism, post-modernism and a second wave of immigration bringing increased diversity representative of world religions. The net result of these waves of disestablishment has been an erosion of church culture for over 200 years: “Notions of shared public morals gave way to personal decisions of expediency, pleasure or private judgment. Expectations (by the church) of privileged position gave way to irrelevance and marginalization.”<sup>21</sup>

**Ecclesiology:** The study of the theological understanding of the Christian church. Specific areas of concern include the church's role in salvation, its origin, its discipline, its destiny, and its leadership. Ecclesiology is, therefore, the study of the church as a thing in itself. (from Greek *ekklēsiā*, "congregation, church"; and *-logia* “study”)<sup>22</sup>

**Missio Dei:** Latin for “God’s mission” and is always written italicized: *missio Dei*

God has a mission for the world. This mission started in creation, finds its continuation in redemption, and comes to fulfillment in God’s ultimate purpose of restoring all of creation. It was at the 1952 meeting of the International Missionary Council in Willingen, Germany that the thinking began to shift from the church having a mission, to God having a mission in which the church participates. *Missio Dei* is rooted in the Trinity (the God who creates, redeems and sustains creation). The Father sent the Son, who announced that the kingdom of God was at hand. The Son sent the Spirit who formed the church and sends the church to continue Jesus’ work of proclaiming through word and deed that the kingdom of God is at hand. Thus, the Triune God is the acting subject of mission, rather than the church.<sup>23</sup>

**Missiology:** The study of the theological understanding of mission in the Christian church. Missiology is a multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural focus on theology, anthropology, history, geography, theories and methods of communication, comparative religion, Christian apologetics, methodology, and interdenominational relations.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, 54. Missional Church has an excellent summary of the history of disestablishment, p50-55, as does Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imaging a New Old Church* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2004), 23-33.

<sup>22</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecclesiology>. Accessed 10.10.08

<sup>23</sup> Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 18, 183.

<sup>24</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missiology>. Accessed 10.10.08

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## Appendix B

### Definitions of Missional Church

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These definitions (or key quotes) are from various streams of the literature, and appear in chronological order.

“All the old established churches of the Western world have been brought to a new recognition that mission belongs to the very being of the church. ‘Mission,’ of course, is not a new word, but it is being used in a new way. All of the churches of the Western Christendom—Catholic and Protestant—have been familiar with missions. But missions were enterprises that belonged to the exterior of church life. . . .(These churches) recognize that, with the radical secularization of Western culture, the churches are in a missionary situation that was once Christendom. This is a new situation and is full of promise . . . (the hope is to) release new energies for the contemporary mission of the church, not only in its global dimensions, but also in its application to the tough new paganism of the contemporary Western world.”<sup>25</sup>

Lesslie Newbigin, 1978

“We have to distinguish between *mission* (singular) and *missions* (plural). The first refers primarily to the *missio Dei* (God’s mission), that is, God’s self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God’s involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate. *Missio Dei* enunciates the good news that God is a God-for-people. *Missions* (the missionary ventures of the church) refer to particular forms, related to specific times, places or needs, of participation in the *missio Dei*.”<sup>26</sup>

David Bosch, 1991

“We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation. ‘Mission’ means ‘sending,’ and it is the central biblical theme describing the purpose of God’s action in human history. . . .We have learned to speak of God as a ‘missionary God.’ Thus we have learned to understand the church as a ‘sent people.’ ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ (John 20:21)”<sup>27</sup>

Darrell Guder et al., 1998

“The church, as the people of God in the world, is inherently a missionary church. It is to participate fully in the Son’s redemptive work as the Spirit creates, leads, and teaches the church to live as the distinctive people of God. With this understanding, mission shifts from naming a *function* of the church, to describing its *essential* nature. . . .Ecclesiology and missiology are not separate theological disciplines, but are in fact, interrelated and complementary. . . .They speak of the same reality—the church is to participate fully in God’s mission to all of creation.”<sup>28</sup>

Craig Van Gelder, 2000

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<sup>25</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. Rev. Ed., 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 10.

<sup>27</sup> Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*.

<sup>28</sup> Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, 31.

“The North American church is suffering from severe mission amnesia. It has forgotten why it exists. The church was created to be the people of God to join him in his redemptive mission in the world. The church was never intended to exist for itself. It was and is the chosen instrument of God to expand his kingdom. . . Jesus does not teach his disciples to pray, ‘Thy church come.’ The kingdom is the destination. In its institutional preoccupation the church has abandoned its real identity and reason for existence.”<sup>29</sup>

Reggie McNeal, 2003

“A missional church is a church that is shaped by participating in God’s mission, which is to set things right in a broken, sinful world, to redeem it, and to restore it to what God has always intended for the world. Missional churches see themselves not so much sending, as being sent. A missional congregation lets God’s mission permeate everything that the congregation does—from worship to witness to training members for discipleship. It bridges the gap between outreach and congregational life, since, in its life together, the church is to embody God’s mission.”<sup>30</sup>

Lois Barrett et al., 2004

“There is in the world today a new kind of church forming. It is a church that reclaims its New Testament role with authenticity and energy and is not limited by denomination or location. . . I advocate for this missional church: a reproducing community of authentic disciples, being equipped as missionaries sent by God, to live and proclaim His Kingdom in their world.”<sup>31</sup>

Milfred Minatrea, 2004

“The congregation comprises the people of God, called to be formed into a unique social community whose life together is a sign, witness and foretaste of what God is doing in and for all of creation.”<sup>32</sup>

Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, 2006

“Congregations are central to God’s work in the world. They have a dual nature of being both holy and human, which makes them unique. They are called, formed and sent to participate in God’s mission of reconciliation within their local contexts. They do this by enacting the reconciliation that God makes available through Christ both within their life as a congregation and in relation to the larger community they seek to serve. The challenge that is always before them is how to respond to changed local contexts.”<sup>33</sup>

Rick Rouse and Craig Van Gelder, 2008

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<sup>29</sup> McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, 15-16.

<sup>30</sup> Barrett, ed., *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, x.

<sup>31</sup> Milfred Minatrea, *Shaped by God's Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), xvi.

<sup>32</sup> Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2006), 14.

<sup>33</sup> Rick Rouse and Craig Van Gelder, *A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 40-41.

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## Appendix C

### Questions for Group Dialogue

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1. After reading this article I felt \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.  
Choose the option(s) that most apply.
 

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Surprised</li> <li>➤ Angry</li> <li>➤ Sad</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Inspired</li> <li>➤ Overwhelmed</li> <li>➤ Anxious</li> </ul>
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2. The author claims that the church no longer has a respected or central place in society.
  - Do you agree with this assertion...why or why not?
  - What are contributing factors to this shift in culture away from church participation?
  
3. The author writes: *The missional movement calls for a response of mourning and accepting this disestablishment (of the church), and then embracing the change as a new opportunity for sharing the gospel from a place of marginalization rather than status. This reflects the way of Jesus, who conducted his ministry from the margins rather than from a place of privileged power.*
  - What saddens you, if anything, about the disestablishment of the church?
  - What do you think the author means by “sharing the gospel from a place of marginalization rather than status”?
  
4. Regarding the situation of the church, the author wrote: *The consensus emerged that the church needed more than a methodological fix, but one that hit at the root of church’s self understanding. In other words, the starting place for church transformation is not “how-to’s,” or adopting methods of “successful” church models, but a radical rethinking regarding why the church exists.*
  - What is difficult about a radical rethinking regarding why the church exists?
  
5. At the end of the article, the author likened our present time as a church to the Israelites’ wandering in the wilderness.
  - How is our time similar or dissimilar to the wilderness wandering?
  - Is there another bible story/time that describes the present situation of the church?

## References

A review of the following books can be found on my website: [www.cultivatemission.org](http://www.cultivatemission.org) (Books Page, see also “Download Book List” on left margin for a PDF version to download.)

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