

Defining the Contour and Edges of the Missional Church

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As I drove home from the gym this morning, it was still dark and had started snowing. The flakes were large and dense, making the road slippery as well as making it hard to see. In an effort to improve visibility, I turned my lights on high beam. The contours and edges of the road instantly disappeared in a whirling glare of white. Immediately, I slowed down and hit the low beams. The road reappeared, although still somewhat obscured by the winter storm.

This experience initiated my thinking about another type of storm. I am referring to the winds of change currently sweeping through the American church and, in my context, the Assemblies of God. As the Fellowship approaches its centennial, leaders are buffeted by disorienting flurries, including post-Christendom and globalization. These stressors radically impact the way pastors do church, in general, and how they conduct God's mission to the nations in this second decade of the twenty-first century.

A number of authors and practitioners suggest that adopting a missional approach to ministry will enable the church to withstand and even benefit from the force of these changes. From personal observation, however, many church leaders believe this suggestion is tantamount to hitting the "high beams." A substantial amount of confusion and misunderstanding surrounds the whole subject of what it means to be missional. The scope of this article precludes an exhaustive response, but will endeavor to bring definition to one aspect of the

missional church by setting forth what I believe to be a salient point in order for the church to stay the course outlined by the Father when He told Abram, "Through you shall all nations be blessed" (Gen. 12:3, NIV).

Current Reality

The world of my childhood has vanished. Human history has reached a stage marked by a compression of space and time due to technological advancement and the advent of affordable air travel and world migration. The world has morphed into a global jungle where many church leaders are struggling to grasp a new reality in which the current way of thinking is inadequate.¹ The term "globalization" is the shorthand word used to describe this phenomenon.

Concurrent with globalization, America has entered a period of history in which Christianity is no longer a centerpiece of society. Although difficult for many people to admit, America is fast becoming post-Christian. For instance, as recent as the 1960s, public schools recognized Sunday as a day of worship and Wednesdays as a family church night. Christians were accustomed to operating from the center; they were, in fact, the mainstream. People built churches employing an "attractional" model of ministry where people were essentially encouraged to gather together to receive religious goods and services.² Most people of the world viewed America as a Christian nation, but over the past few

decades a decisive shift has occurred. Since the church is no longer operating from the center, but from the margins of society, the way of conducting church (ecclesiology) must change. If not, the day will come when people will walk through church buildings like they do the cathedrals of Europe and hear stories of what was, instead of what is!

Definition of Terms

Since the mid-twentieth century, the church has experienced a positive and decisive shift toward understanding mission as God's mission.³ During the preceding centuries, the use of the word "missions" described the missionary activity of the church, whether foreign or home. Over the past fifty years, a clear distinction developed between the singular form of the word "mission" or *missio Dei* and the plural form, "missions." In the singular, it refers to everything God the Father, Son, and Spirit desires to do in the world.⁴ The plural form describes the participation of the church in the *missio Dei*, as worked out in specific places and times.⁵ As an adjective, "missional" refers to people and churches that embrace the mission of God and desire to put it at the center of who they are and what they are all about.⁶

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch speak to the heart of the growing interest in the missional nature of the church: "God is a sending God, with a desire to see humankind and creation reconciled, redeemed, and healed. The missional church, then, is a sent church. It is sent to bring healing to a broken world."⁷ Speaking of a broken world, Bosch states that since God's concern is for the entire world, this should also be the scope of *missio Dei*. Furthermore, mission is, primarily and ultimately, the work of the Triune God for the sake of the world, a ministry in which the church is privileged to participate.⁸

In essence, the missional approach to ministry is a call for local congregations to adopt a missionary stance, both within their own culture and cross-culturally. Every believer should be motivated and equipped to take his or her role in impacting the world for Christ. This can happen even though the church operates in a globalized world from the margins of society.⁹ Who can possibly argue with a shift that calls for the church to embrace God's original intent for believers to be the sent people of God?

Unintended Consequences

Anyone who grew up in snow country, driving on icy roads, understands that an overreaction, such as over-steering or changing speed, can lead to unintended consequences. It can be as minor as slipping off the road or it can result in a major auto accident. In the same way, an overreaction in the way leaders conduct church has its own set of consequences.

My concern relates to the tendency of missional churches to forget that God's concern is for the entire world. Just as over-steering on an icy road can lead to tragedy, so redirecting attention away from the whole world to one's local context can be dangerous. One pastor admitted his difficulty in lifting his eyes to the nations of the world where the winds of the Spirit are blowing so powerfully while the American church seem to be losing spiritual ground.

The other overreaction that can cause trouble on icy roads is a sudden change in speed. One church that moved to a missional mode of ministry sent a letter to their missionaries stating that, as a congregation, they were entering a different phase of ministry and their new redemption plan did not include monthly support for missionaries.

Staying the Course

When the Early Church wanted to move beyond its own borders, they prayed, and the Holy Spirit told them to send out a missionary team comprised of two men: Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3). “This model is paradigmatic for the relationship between ‘come’ and ‘go’ structures.¹⁰ God clearly intended for the church to have both structures in order to facilitate His mission to the whole world.

More than 200 years after the Reformation, God’s mission came into focus for the Protestant tradition.¹¹ The eighteenth-century Church thought only in terms of a parish ministry; they were not equipped or capable of advancing the mission of God beyond their local context. Conducting world missions was out of the question. Andrew Walls points out, “Church structures could only do what they had always done; a new concept needed a new

instrument.”¹² A “go” structure, such as the missionary society, a concept birthed by William Carey, was needed. This voluntary association of Christians banded together to achieve the fulfillment of Christ’s global mandate.

Conclusion

History teaches that “if unsatisfactory methods are adopted, sooner or later a heavy price will have to be paid for their adoption.”¹³ In the church’s effort to negotiate globalization’s disorienting flurries and the marginalization of the church in society, leaders must not forget that God’s redemptive mission includes both “come” and “go” structures capable of sending pioneers to the unreached peoples of our world. If leaders and believers forget, they will fail to carry out Christ’s directive to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

¹Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 16.

²Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), Kindle e-book, location 225.

³David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 389.

⁴Alan R. Johnson, *Apostolic Function in 21st Century Missions* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 169.

⁵Ibid, 170.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 18.

⁸Ibid, 392.

⁹Richard Tiplady, ed., *One World or Many? The Impact of Globalization on Mission* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2003), vi.

¹⁰Daryl Balia and Kirsteen Kim, ed. *Witnessing to Christ Today*, vol. II (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010), 121.

¹¹Boyd S. Powers, *An Interdependence Model for Mission: Alliance between the Oregon Ministry Network and the Malawi Assemblies of God*, EMS Dissertation Series (Pasadena, CA: William Carey International University Press, 2008), 70.

¹²Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 243.

¹³Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, rev. 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 346.