

## **Defining Missional Church**

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### **Introduction**

Missional ministry originates from the Holy Spirit calling a local community of believers to engage their local community of unbelievers, the unchurched, and the unreached as an incarnational witness. Like a sailboat tacking back and forth, following the wind of the Spirit, missional ministry sets off in unchartered waters. The journey follows no map but rather the voice of the Spirit as He calls, "This way. Now, this way. Over here. This way." Reaching the land of new opportunity across the street from the church, the Spirit-led community pitches a tent among the people of the community and lives the life of Christ authentically before them. This community of the called and sent engages in dual dialogue with God and the culture to convey God's message of the Kingdom of God. This word picture provides a brief overview of missional ministry, but the information that follows reflects my attempt to describe the missional church based on my current understanding. This picture, I am sure, will develop continuously and become clearer with time.

### **Missional History and Definition**

In the 1990s, a team comprised of Lois Barrett, Inagrace T. Dietterich, Darrel L. Guder, George R. Hunsberger, Alan J. Roxburgh, and Craig Van Gelder wrote *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* to clarify the words "mission," "church," and "missional," and to invite people to consider

a new way of being the church.<sup>1</sup> Francis DuBose, in his 1983 book, *God Who Sends*, was the first missiologist to use the term "missional" in its modern understanding. By the 1990s, the term began to appear in the works of theologian Lesslie Newbigin.<sup>2</sup> An Internet search of the word "missional" renders more than a million Web sites, which indicates the current formation and conceptualization of the term by many authors and church leaders.

Leaders in the missional movement resist the use of definitions, models, approaches, and clear, logical descriptions because, once defined as a movement, reductionism replaces the imagery and essence of the concept. Missional is more discovered than defined and has been shaped by being more like the Kingdom of God than any one label, such as church growth, can describe. Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren picture the missional church as a river shaped by the confluence of three powerful currents: mystery, memory, and mission.<sup>3</sup> Mystery gives missional its emphasis on God's choosing to act beyond any explanation other than Him, while memory provides the continuous story still alive to be retold and relived. Mission then, in missional terms, results from God choosing to act in a community of believers within His continuous story that He wants relived. At the same time, He calls into being and shapes the believers in this transformational journey as His missionary people. Missional is more about being the church from

mystery, memory, and mission than doing church activities.

The original intent of the word “missional” was to create a new way of thinking about what God wants to do in and through the church, but the word now has become the banner for all that a church does in activity—from evangelism to missions and outreach. Many books, journal articles, Internet articles, and blogs use the word *not* in describing missional in an effort to keep missional from becoming the label for any and all church programs and emphases. Roxburgh and Boren provide eight trends in regard to what they do *not* mean when talking about missional church:

1. “*Missional church* is not a label to describe churches that emphasize cross-cultural missions.
2. *Missional church* is not a label used to describe churches that are using outreach programs to be *externally focused*.
3. *Missional church* is not another label for church growth and church effectiveness.
4. *Missional church* is not a label for churches that are effective at evangelism.
5. *Missional church* is not a label to describe churches that have developed a clear mission statement with a vision and a purpose for their existence.
6. *Missional church* is not a way of turning around ineffective and outdated church forms so that they can display relevance in the wider culture.

7. *Missional church* is not a label that points to a primitive or ancient way of being the church.

8. *Missional* is not a label describing new formats of church that reach people who have no interest in traditional churches.”<sup>4</sup>

Another list, provided by [friendofmissional.org](http://friendofmissional.org), uses *not* in trying to keep the fluid definition of missional from obscurity and becoming another tag of the new and trendy:

- “The missional church is not a dispenser of religious goods and services or a place where people come for their weekly spiritual fix.
- The missional church is not a place where mature Christians come to be fed and have their needs met.
- The missional church is not a place where ‘professionals’ are hired to do all the work of the church.
- The missional church is not a place where the ‘professionals’ teach the children and youth about God to the exclusion of parental responsibility.
- The missional church is not a church with a ‘good missions program.’ The people are the missions program and includes going to ‘Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’
- The missional church is not about a new strategy for evangelism.
- The missional church is not missional just because it is contemporary, young, hip,

postmodern-sensitive, seeker-sensitive or even traditional.

- The missional church is not about big programs and organizations to accomplish God’s missionary purpose. This does not imply no program or organization, but that they will not drive mission. They will be used in support of people on mission.
- The missional church is not involved in political party activism, either on the right or left. As Brian McLaren wrote, we need ‘purple peoplehood’ — people who don’t want to be defined as red or blue, but have elements of both.’’<sup>5</sup>

### **Missional Theology**

Missional, in theology, begins with God rather than the church; missional is more about who God is than what the church does. According to the Apostle John, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).<sup>6</sup> Jesus, as the Word, lived (and still lives) in the ordinary world of daily living and gives the picture of a Missionary God who comes to save, heal, and deliver in the local context; He did not wait on people to come to Him, but rather went to the people. Darrell L. Guder says, “The historical experience of God is the surprising result of God’s initiation, God’s desire to speak and be heard.”<sup>7</sup> The Missionary God invites people to join Him in what He is doing in this time and in this place. Roxburgh and Boren call this waking up in order to ask: Where are we? What time is it? What are these smells and tastes and sounds? What might God be up to in the midst of all this life and energy?<sup>8</sup> Theologically speaking, missional

continuously points to God and what He is doing locally. The tactical strategy of the missional church flows from the understanding gained from knowing Him.

The second major stream of theology informing and forming the missional church stems from the Latin phrase *missio Dei*, mission of God. God is up to something in this world and when humans are the object of church and all that the church does, the church’s theology is reduced to little more than a self-help center with the goal of a more blessed, prosperous, best self one can be at the expense of God’s mission. This major shift in thinking and believing—how one serves God’s mission not how God serves one’s own needs—for missional church proponents, sets the distinctive of what is at the heart of what being missional is all about. Craig Van Gelder asks two missional questions focused on *mission Dei*; “What is God doing in this world? What does God want to do in our world?”<sup>9</sup> Answering these questions begins from the foundational conviction of God’s mission, not God’s work in individual Christians. All practical participation in church, from a missional standpoint, then, is about God and His involvement in the local context. Eugene Peterson captures this essence in his paraphrase of John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (The Message).<sup>10</sup>

### **Missional Contextualization of Neighborhood**

The term “neighborhood” portrays two contrasting approaches for the church’s focus. One philosophical approach to doing church says people are looking for a church to belong to, connect with, and participate with its services. Leaders with this understanding seek to create the best attractional church and then invite the neighborhood to them. The attractional

approach turns people into spiritual consumers and churches into competitors in the neighborhood. The missional philosophical approach recognizes that God is already at work in the neighborhood, and the church must turn its focus toward the neighborhood. As the church identifies what is happening among the people of the neighborhood, it can then focus its resources outside itself and its internal focus.

Missional understanding of the church in the neighborhood comes from the public assembly emphasized by the Greek word used for “church” in the Bible. Roxburgh and Boren build on the public assembly concept of church in the neighborhood and assert that local churches should live as a contrast society right in the middle of their neighborhoods—as a sign, witness, and foretaste of where God is inviting all creation in Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup> Early Christian communities understood themselves to be witnesses to what God was doing, as Guder points out:

The concept of witness provides a common missiological thread through all the New Testament language that expounds the church’s mission. It serves as an overarching term drawing together proclamation (*kerygma*), community (*koinonia*), and service (*diakonia*).<sup>12</sup>

How this shapes what missional churches participate in practically as a witness in their communities is still being formed uniquely in each context. Missional churches, which seek to recover an emphasis on the local community and choose to become externally focused, differ from the needs-centered, seeker-sensitive driven approach of an attractional church with events and programs trying to draw the community to its location.

The initial assignment of the missional church in the neighborhood is listening. Attractional churches begin with the assumption that they have something to say, a good news message worthy of being listened to by the community. Missional churches have accepted the changing context of a pluralistic society that no longer wants easy answers to complex lives. Dialogue begins with listening; missional churches approach their communities without easy answers and without religious language, but with honest, open interest in the people and story of the community. Entering the community to engage them in dialogue, the missional church seeks to contextualize the language of the gospel.

Skilled listening provides the ministry strategies for the church in the neighborhood. According to Roxburgh and Boren, this kind of missional listening has two parts:

First, the church becomes attentive to what is happening through direct involvement with the people in that location. The best way to do this is by entering the neighborhood and hanging out with people, joining community organizations, connecting with people across the street or at the local coffee shop, and taking walks and initiating conversations—doing a thousand little human things that make life rich. A second element of listening has to do with attending to the values and meanings that underlie the surface activities of the neighborhood. This listening is not a technique—it requires time, presence, and a passion for people and place.<sup>13</sup>

That listening is not a technique cannot be overstated because missional ministry requires entering into the community with the investment of time, presence, and

compassion in order to gain the traces of what the Spirit is doing in the community.

Listening to the wind is more than a missional metaphor; listening, as working with the wind, becomes the change model for the missional church. If listening to the Spirit is like sailing with the wind, then the greatest challenge becomes the counterintuitive skill of tacking—moving away from a destination in order to move toward it does not make sense.<sup>14</sup> In simple language, listening and discerning form the practices of a missional church; however, these concepts are not undervalued in producing what is radically different from what the Church has known in the West. The prominent attractional model creates, recruits, leads, and controls strategies, events, and programs and with a conviction of being led by the Holy Spirit, but by the leadership only. Missional leadership empowers everyone to discern and develop responses to the Holy Spirit's leading in answer to the dual missional questions: "What is God up to in this neighborhood, and how do we need to change in order to engage the people who no longer consider church a part of their lives?"<sup>15</sup> Missional leadership accepts the task of making known how change works in the missional model and how people under the missional model can join the change process and work with the change.

#### Missionary People as Missional Discipleship

The missional emphasis of listening to the community and to what the Holy Spirit is doing in the community positions the church as a missionary people. In the Western understanding of the word, missionary denotes a cross-cultural experience for trained professionals. However, the West, as a mission field, a commonly accepted concept, shifts the missional mindset of churches to practice a missionary lifestyle in

the local community without crossing culture, language, and often racial boundaries. Paul taught Early Christians to practice a missionary lifestyle in his epistles:

Be a community of those who glorify God by showing forth his nature and works and by making manifest the reconciliation and redemption God has wrought through the death, resurrection, and reign of Christ . . . [The church] is involved with the world, which means that it is missionary.<sup>16</sup>

The church, as a missionary people, moves into the culture of its own context, as it would in a foreign land, to dialogue and listen, to be a witness of God's grace and healing, to translate it into the community, and to discern what God is doing and wanting to do.

Translating the gospel is missionary work and the current changes being experienced in the West—the introduction of postmodernism, economic instability, the church's conformity to the culture, and the increased threat to security—has forged the West as a new mission field again.

Missional church rejects the current translation work of the church, how the church interprets and lives out the gospel locally, and offers a new formation of a mission community—a body of believers in a particular place, empowered by the Holy Spirit to be a witness and do the work of translation again in North America.

According to Guder, the missionary task, in this changed situation, is, "learning to speak the languages of the cultures in which we find ourselves, risking translation, and moving in trust toward the shape of the church which is to come."<sup>17</sup> This new translation of the gospel in the new mission field of the West can only take place through the Holy Spirit's empowering of the missionary community. Anything less

results in reproducing the competitive market of a different model—thereby moving the church in the same direction of business as usual, which the West already knows.

The contemporary usefulness of the Missional Church Movement in the North American church begins with its obvious contrast to the attractional, personality-driven, platform centered, broadly evangelical church. Modernity affected church practitioners by approaching the success of the church with a pragmatic business, professional model of bottom line measurements to produce quantity growth in attendance and finances. Missional churches seek to restore the sense of to whom the church belongs and what He wants from His church at this place and at this time. The missional concept seeks to restore the sense of the divine at work—seeking God, His will, reflecting on His mission, and depending on the Holy Spirit for strategy.

How the Missional Church Movement practices discipleship is another contemporary useful perspective for the church at large. It shifts the focus from an individual, consumer-oriented mentality to discerning the work of God in the community and in the local body of believers as a working fellowship. Missional discipleship gravitates toward listening deeply to the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures with the eyes of the community and figuring out how to be the feet and hands of Jesus in the neighborhood. Guder uses Karl Barth's threefold validity test for converting to discipleship in community:

First, their particular ministry must be based “on divine gifts and endowments received in concert, and not on the arbitrariness and self-will of common whims and impressions.” Second, their ministry should take place “within the

‘communion of the Holy Ghost,’” and not disrupt it. Finally, they should be genuine working fellowships whose purpose is not to meet the needs of their members, but “to achieve in closer fellowship the ministry and witness of the community in the world.”<sup>18</sup>

Discipleship emerges, then, in the context of the missionary life of the congregation with a shared responsibility for listening, discerning, and engaging the community.

The Missional Church Movement's contemporary usefulness restores the sacred sense of the mystical in the narrative of the gospel. Missional stands as an affront to the formula-generating, strategic/methodological, social science analysis in the late season of the church growth era of modernity and rationalism. Mystery speaks of pictures and images, of metaphors and similes, and is “more like going through the wardrobe than like getting the right definition.”<sup>19</sup> Missional encourages a body of believers to enter into the mystery of the Kingdom of God as an ongoing story—God's story of redemption—which is much bigger than self, and establishes a renewed imagination about being God's people. The mystical intrigue invites people to consider this discovery of joy and truth in celebratory life.

## Conclusion

Describing the missional church can be challenging, as the formative shape is still reacting and fashioning, resisting attempts to become a brand label. Missional, described as the favored approach to church, stands up in line with all that missional opposes in reducing it to another in a long line of humanistic inventions of doing church. I like what J. R. Woodward posts when he quotes Johannes Nissen:

A missiological relevant reading of the Bible will not lead to any universal missiology but (as in the New Testament itself) to a variety of missiological perspectives. Different theologies of mission do not necessarily exclude each other, “they form a multicolored mosaic of complementary and mutually enriching as well as mutually

challenging frames of reference.” Instead of trying to formulate one uniform view of mission we should rather attempt to chart the contours of a pluriverse of missiology in a universe of mission.<sup>20</sup>

So if I was asked, “So, what’s this missional church deal all about?” This essay would be my best answer.

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<sup>1</sup>Alan J. Roxburgh and Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 31-32.

<sup>2</sup>“Etymology of Missional,” Friend of Missional, <http://www.friendofmissional.org> (accessed August 8, 2010).

<sup>3</sup>Roxburgh and Boren, 39.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 31-33.

<sup>5</sup>“What the Missional Church Is Not,” Friend of Missional, <http://www.friendofmissional.org/> (accessed August 9, 2010).

<sup>6</sup>All Scripture references are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

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<sup>7</sup>Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 29.

<sup>8</sup>Roxburgh and Boren, 96.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>10</sup>Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002).

<sup>11</sup>Roxburgh and Boren, 71.

<sup>12</sup>Guder, 53.

<sup>13</sup>Roxburgh and Boren, 88-89.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 134.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 130.

<sup>16</sup>Guder, 58.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 184.

<sup>19</sup>Roxburgh and Boren, 37.

<sup>20</sup>J. R. Woodward, "A Primer on Today's Missional Church," J. R. Woodward, *A Dream Awakener*, <http://jrwoodward.net/2008/11/a-primer-on-todays-missional-church/> (accessed August 9, 2010).