

*Blue River-Kansas City Baptist Association*

# Transitioning from Traditional to Missional

What it will take for a church to  
foster a missional posture?

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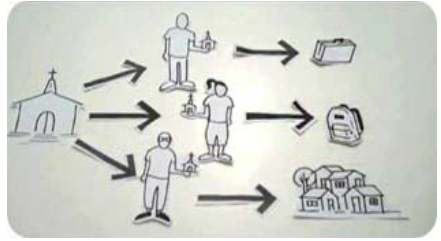


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# Missional: More Than a Buzz Word



The term “missional” has become a popular buzz word over the past couple of years. Because of its frequent use, some people have assumed that “missional” is a new word. However, the term was used by Dr. Francis DuBose, former professor at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, in his book *God Who Sends* published in 1983.

Despite the fact that missional terminology has been in use for at least a quarter of a century, it is being applied today in such a wide variety of ways that many times it results in confusion. Therefore, I want to share three theological distinctions that I hope will bring some clarity and explanation to the use of the word “missional.” Without such theological considerations we run the risk of simply attaching the word “missional” onto everything the church is already doing rather than gaining a fresh perspective to see more clearly what the missional church is all about. Afterwards, we will examine ten practical steps to foster a missional posture within a new or existing faith community.

## 1. Missional Church is about the missionary nature of God and His Church.

The church is a vital part of the missional conversation. However, the church must not be seen as “a place where religious goods and services are provided,” but instead it should be understood as the “gathered and *sent* people of God.”

Scripture is replete with language that speaks to the missionary nature of a Triune God. God the Father *sends* the Son, and God the Father and the Son *sends* the Spirit, and God the Father and the Son and the Spirit *sends* the church. In the Gospel of John alone, Jesus describes Himself more than thirty times as “one sent.” In the final climatic sending passage in John’s Gospel, Jesus sees himself not only as one sent but also as one who is sending: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21).

The Missional Church recognizes that the purpose of the church is derived from the very nature of God, which in turn compels it to be *sent* as a missionary people, individually and collectively.

## 2. Missional Church is about the church being incarnational rather than attractational.

Those with a missional perspective no longer see the church service as the primary connecting point for those outside the church. While there is nothing wrong with attracting people to participate in various meetings of the church, the missional

church is more concerned about sending the people in the church out among the people of the world, rather than getting the people of the world in among the people of the church. Others have described this distinction as a challenge to “go and be” as opposed to “come and see.” Moreover, when the corporate church service becomes the primary focus, the church will often miss what the Spirit is up to in the world.

Missional churches see their primary function as one of actively moving into a community to embody and en flesh the word, deed, and life of Jesus into every nook and cranny. Eugene Peterson’s “incarnational” rendering of John 1:14 in the Message paraphrase illustrates this well when it states, “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.”

### **3. Missional Church is about actively participating in the *missio Dei*, or mission of God.**

Many times we wrongly assume that the primary activity of God is in the church, rather than recognizing that God’s primary activity is in the world, and the church is God’s instrument sent into the world to participate in His redemptive mission.

This distinction clarifies the difference between a church with a missions program and a missional church. A church with a missions program usually sees missions as one activity alongside many other equally important programs of the church. A missional church, on the other hand, focuses all of its activities around its participation in God’s agenda for the world.

As the sent, missionary people of God, the missional church understands its fundamental purpose as being rooted in God’s mission to restore and heal creation and to call people into a reconciled relationship with Himself. It is God’s mission, or *missio Dei*, that calls the church into existence. Or in the words of South African missiologist David Bosch: “It is not the church which undertakes mission; it is the *missio Dei* which constitutes the church.”

## **Transitioning From Traditional to Missional**

### **Fostering a Missional Posture**

What will it take for the church to foster a missional posture? We must first begin with deep reflections and dialogue surrounding the three theological distinctions mentioned above. Beyond these three points, there are at least ten practical, yet no less important considerations.

#### **1. Start with Spiritual Formation**

God calls the church to be a sent community of people who no longer live for themselves but instead live to participate with Him in His redemptive purposes. However, people will have neither the passion nor the strength to live as a counter-cultural society for the sake of others if they are not transformed by the way of Jesus. If the church is to “go and be,” rather than “come and see,” then we must

make certain that we are a Spirit-formed community that has the spiritual capacity to impact the lives of others. In other words, being missional is about *who* we are, not just what we do.

This means the church must take seriously its responsibility to cultivate spiritual transformation that does not allow believers to remain as adolescents in their spiritual maturity. Such spiritual formation will involve much greater relational, or communal underpinnings, and considerable engagement with a multitude of spiritual disciplines.

One such discipline will involve dwelling in the word, whereby the church learns to regard Scripture as the living voice of God that exists to guide people into His mission. If we believe the mission is truly God's mission, then we must learn to discern where He is working; and further discern, in light of our gifts and resources, how He desires a church to participate in what He is doing in a local context. Furthermore, we must strive to cultivate spiritual rhythms that help us "make room" for the Kingdom of God in our lives. These rhythms will involve daily, weekly and monthly times of slowing down to reflect, talk with one another, and listen to God.

In the excellent book, *Subversive Spirituality: Transforming Mission Through the Collapse of Space and Time*, Paul Jensen rightly contends, "that empowered inward spirituality — expressed in creating time and space for God through solitary and communal spiritual practices — correlates with transforming outward mission — expressed in word and deed."

## **2. Cultivate a Missional Leadership Approach**

The second most important transition in fostering a missional posture in a local congregation is rethinking church leadership models that have been accepted as the status quo. This will require the development of a missional leadership approach that has a special emphasis on the apostolic function of church leadership, which was marginalized during the time of Christendom in favor of the pastor/teacher function.

This missional leadership approach will involve creating an apostolic environment throughout the life of the church. The leader must encourage pioneering activity that pushes the church into new territory. However, because not all in the church will embrace such risk, the best approach will involve creating a sort of "R&D" or "skunk works" department in the church for those who are innovators and early adopters.

A culture of experimentation must be cultivated where attempting new initiatives is expected, even if they don't all succeed. As pioneering activities bear fruit, and the stories of life change begin to bubble up within the church, an increasing number of people will begin to learn new habits and skills of being God's missionary people.

## **3. Emphasize the Deployment of Local Missionaries (Priesthood of All Believers)**

Martin Luther's idea of the priesthood of all believers was that all Christians were

called to carry out their vocational ministries in every area of life. Every believer must fully understand how their vocation plays a central part in God's redemptive Kingdom.

I think it was Rick Warren who made popular the phrase "every member is a minister." While this phrase is a helpful slogan to move people to understand their responsibility in the life of the church, God's purpose for His church would be better served if we encouraged people to recognize that "every member is a missionary." This missionary activity will include not just being sent to far away places, but to local work places, schools and neighborhoods. Therefore, the church must constantly be affirming and "commissioning" every member to engage their local mission field.

#### **4. Focus Attention on the Local Community**

As individual members begin to see themselves as missionaries sent into their local context, the congregation will begin to shift from a "community-for-me" mentality, to a "me-for-the-community" mentality. The church must begin to develop a theology of the city that sees the church as an agent of transformation for the good of the city (Jeremiah 29:7).

It is important to recognize that each community and city is made up of different domains, or "channels of influence." We must realize that community transformation will not take place if the differing domains – such as education, business, government, arts, healthcare, family, and of course churches and other non-profit organizations – are not kingdom influenced. It will be necessary to exegete each segment of the city to understand the local needs, identify with people, and discover unique opportunities for the church to share the good news of Jesus.

#### **5. Don't Do It Alone**

Missional activity that leads to significant community transformation takes a lot of work and no church can afford to work alone. Missional churches must learn to create partnerships with other churches as well as already existing ministries that care about the community.

In Eric Swanson's very practical book *To Transform a City*, he argues that collaboration for the sake of the city is not only the best use of resources, but it also creates strategic relational opportunities when he writes: "Churches are finding there is tremendous leverage when they discover they can partner with most any organization or entity that is morally positive and spiritually neutral. Working with those outside our normal spheres puts us in face to face and shoulder to shoulder relationships that spawn a thousand unlikely conversations through which people come to faith."

#### **6. Create New Means of Measuring Success**

The church must move beyond measuring success by the traditional indicators of attendance, buildings and cash. Instead we must create new scorecards to measure

ministry effectiveness. These new scorecards will include measurements that point to the church's impact on community transformation rather than measuring what is happening among church members inside the church walls. For the missional church it is no longer about the number of people active *in the church* but instead the number of people active *in the community*. It is no longer about the amount of money *received* but it is about the amount of money *given away*.

A missional church may ask how many hours has the church spent praying for community issues? How many hours have church members spent with unbelievers? How many of those unbelievers are making significant movement towards Jesus? How many community groups use the facilities of the church? How many people are healthier because of the clinic the church operates? How many people are in new jobs because of free job training offered by the church? What is the number of school children who are getting better grades because of after school tutoring the church provides. Or how many times do community leaders call the church asking for advice?

Until the church reconsiders the definition of ministry success and creates new scorecards to appropriately measure that success, it will continue to allocate vital resources in misguided directions.

## **7. Search for Third Places**

In a post-Christendom culture where more and more people are less and less interested in activities of the church, it is increasingly important to connect with people in places of neutrality, or common "hang outs." In the book *The Great Good Place* author Ray Oldenburg identifies these places of common ground as "third places."

According to Oldenburg, third places are those environments in which people meet to interact with others and develop friendships. In Oldenburg's thinking our first place is the home and the people with whom we live. The second place is where we work and the place we spend the majority of our waking hours. But the third place is an informal setting where people relax and have the opportunity to know and be known by others.

Third places might include the local coffee shop, hair salon, restaurant, mall, or fitness center. These places of common ground must take a position of greater importance in the overall ministry of the church as individuals begin to recognize themselves as missionaries sent into the local context to serve and share.

## **8. Practice Biblical Hospitality**

In addition to connecting with people in the third places present in our local communities, we need to rediscover the topic of hospitality whereby our own homes become a place of common ground. The Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenia*, which is a combination of two words; love and stranger. Biblical hospitality therefore, is much more than simply entertaining others in our homes. Instead, genuine hospitality involves inviting people into our lives, learning to listen, and cultivating an environment of mercy and justice, whether our interactions occur in third places or within our own homes, we must learn to welcome and love the stranger.

## **9. Tap into the Power of Stories**

Instead of trying to define what it means to be missional, it is helpful to describe missional living through stories and images. Stories create new possibilities and energize people to do things they had not previously imagined. We can capture the “missional imagination” by sharing what other faith communities are doing and illustrate what it looks like to connect with people in third places, cultivate rapport with local schools, and build life transforming relationships with neighbors.

Moreover, we can reflect deeply on biblical images of mission, service and hospitality by spending time on passages such as Genesis 12:2, Isaiah 61:1-3, Matthew 5:43; 10:40; 22:39; 25:35; and Luke 10:25-37.

## **10. Promote Patience**

The greatest challenge facing the church in the West is the “re-conversion” of its own members. We need to be converted away from an internally-focused, Constantinean mode of church, and converted towards an externally-focused, missional-incarnational movement that is a true reflection of the missionary God we follow.

However, this conversion will not be easy. The gravitational pull to focus all of our resources on ourselves is very strong. Because Christendom still maintains a stranglehold on the church in North America – even though the culture is fully aware of the death of Christendom – the transition towards a missional posture will take great patience; both with those inside and outside the church. Many inside the church will need considerable time to learn how to reconstruct church life for the sake of others. While at the same time, the church will need to patiently love on people, and whole communities, that have become increasingly skeptical of the church.

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