

What is Missional?

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 a wonderful book titled *God Who Sends* published in 1983.

How We Church

Despite the fact that missional language 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 it many times results in confusion. Some view missional as the latest church growth strategy, or a better way of doing church evangelism. Others see missional as a means to mobilize church members to do missions more effectively. While still others believe missional is simply the latest Christian fad that will soon pass when the next trendy topic comes along.

I would argue that those who believe missional is merely an add-on to current church activities, or perhaps even a passing craze prevalent only among church leaders, have simply not fully grasped the magnitude of the missional conversation. While it may sound like hyperbole; the move towards missional involves no less than a complete and thorough recalibration of the form and function of the church of Jesus.

But if an accurate and faithful understanding of missional is that significant to the life of the church, then how are we to best define the word? In other words, are there core characteristics that should inform the way we understand the missional concept? I believe there are at least three major theological distinctions that help to undergird the missional conversation. Without such a foundation we run the risk of simply attaching the word “missional” onto everything the church is already doing, and therefore ignoring the necessary paradigmatic shift.



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

Those in the missional movement recognize both God and the church are intrinsically and principally “missionary” in nature. God is a missionary God who sends a missionary church. In fact, a survey of the term “sending” in its various forms in Scripture reveals the missionary nature of the Triune God, as well as the very essence of the church. The redemptive activity of God, his relationship to the world, and his dealing with mankind is described in Scripture by the word “sending.” The word “sending” is the “sum and substance of God’s creativity and activity” (Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God*, 9).

Scripture is replete with sending 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, nearly forty times we read about Jesus being sent – either from the evangelist or from Jesus’ own lips. 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).

It is important to make clear that the church is a vital part of the missional conversation. However, the church must not be seen simply as an entity that sends missionaries; as admirable as sending and supporting missionary activity might be. Instead, we must recognize that the purpose of the church is derived from the very nature of a sending, missionary God, which in turn compels it to be sent as a missionary people, both individually and collectively.



THE MISSION OF GOD

Exploring God's Plan to Save the World

2. Missional Church is about incarnational ministry (versus attractional/extractional) in a post-Christendom context.

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. Some have described this missional-attractional distinction as a challenge to “go and be” as opposed to “come and see.”

The attractional model, which has dominated the church in the West for the past several decades, seeks to reach out to the culture and draw people into the church. However, this approach only works when there are no significant cultural barriers to overcome when making the required move from outside to inside the church. “And as Western culture has become increasingly post-Christian, the attractional model has lost its effectiveness. The West looks more like a cross-cultural missionary context in which attractional church models are self-defeating. Furthermore, the process of extracting people from the culture and assimilating them into the church diminishes their ability to speak to those outside.” (Alan Hirsch, *Defining Missional*, Christianity Today)

On the other hand, 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. Alan Hirsch speaks of the “missional-incarnational impulse,” where the word “missional” expresses the sending nature of the church, while “incarnational” represents the “embedding” of the gospel into a local context. In other words, “missional” speaks to our direction – we are sent; while being “incarnational” is more about *how* we go, and *what* we do as we go. 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.”

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– John 1:14, *The Message*



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 key 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. God's mission must form and inform everything we do. All activities of the church must be catalyzed by and organized around the *missio Dei*.

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 that calls the church into existence. In other words, we can no longer see the church as the starting point when thinking about mission. Instead, the church must be seen as the result of God's mission. 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." Or stated in a slightly different manner; "it is not so much that God has a mission for his church in the world, but that God has a church for his mission in the world" (Christopher Wright 2006, 62).

MISSIO DEI

JOINING GOD IN HIS MISSION

