

Toward Becoming a Missional Church

Lots of church leaders are talking, sometimes even arguing, these days about what it means to be a “missional church.” Is “missional church” a code name for “cool,” “cutting edge,” “trendy,” and “emergent”? Is this just a clever phrase thrown into conversation by angry young leaders who don’t want to associate with a Boomer generation that, presumably, placed more emphasis on attracting a crowd than creating a missional movement? The missional church movement, to the contrary, is not tied to any one generation since it is nearly 2000 years old. What is more, becoming a missional church has nothing to do with being cool or clever but everything to do with being courageous and committed.

There is nothing glamorous about the missional church movement. The impact of such churches may never show up on a statistical report because most churches and denominations tend to track only those attendees who come into the church building and not those who go out in service to the community. Becoming a missional church means giving financial and volunteer resources away to the community, even if it means a lean budget for church-based programs. Furthermore, a church that begins to look outward to serve the needs of people beyond the walls of the church will experience an increased level of stress and strain due to the influx of people who flood the church for assistance in meeting felt needs. No, this move toward mission is not glamorous at all. Why, then, would any church decide to go missional? Because the word defines the character of the Father who sends the Son and the Spirit in order to send the Church out into the world to be ‘glocal’ (global and local) missionaries.

Think about it. The Trinitarian God did not stay in His holy huddle of three waiting for us to come to Him. The Father sent the Son onto our turf. The Son “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Not too long after that, the Father sends out the Spirit to a bunch of fearful Christian Jews who are congregated in another kind of huddle, disconnected from and fearful of people outside of the Christian faith. But when the Spirit comes the Church goes. In other words, beginning in Acts 2 the Early Church gets missional. They start serving the poor, feeding the hungry, liberating captives, and healing the hurting in the name of Jesus. The missional church movement is not some new and original trend; it’s as old as that first Pentecost.

Like the Early Church in Acts, the Wesleyan Church has its roots in the missional movement. John Wesley, like most of his contemporaries, spent lots of time in the church building and with the church-going elite of England. Wesley was disconnected from the desperate needs of people in his community. However, when the Spirit came to “warm” his heart, Wesley went out. He got missional! He began to go to the poor drunk masses of English society because they weren’t welcome in the church which, at the time, was run predominantly by rich Anglicans. Wesley took the stuff that makes the church the “church” to the streets. He got caught up in the *missio dei*, the “mission of God” in the world, and partnered with God to do what God has always been doing. “The word became flesh and dwelt among us” and any church that is truly “Christian” will incarnate the good news of Christ by venturing out of our safe and predictable holy huddle to dwell among broken people on their turf. “There is no holiness but social holiness,” wrote Wesley.

If you are still reading then you just might be crazy enough to roll up your sleeves and get missional. This is good! Now it’s time to consider some of the practical applications of our theological convictions. While your unique community context will determine the specifics, here are some starter steps toward becoming a missional church:

-Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is: Commit to spending at least as much money on the practical needs of people in your community as you do on your worship service. Monitors and new microphones are important. Cutting edge technology can, in my estimation, enhance the quality of a worship experience. However, a missional church decides that when push comes to shove they will pay the electric bill so that a family of five can have heat in January even if it means postponing the purchase of that much needed monitor. Other missional expenditures might include a food pantry, a clothing drive for the homeless, and an ongoing benevolence fund for people with financial emergencies.

-Volunteer Outside of the Church: Every church deals with the challenge of recruiting (or begging) enough volunteers to serve in church-based programs (usually the children's ministry!). So, the following advice may seem counter-intuitive. Volunteer a portion of your time through community service organizations that are meeting the real needs of people beyond the walls of your church. Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, Habitat for Humanity, Women's Resources, and soup kitchens are just a few of the volunteer possibilities that may exist in your community. Get involved in global issues too, such as fighting human trafficking in Thailand, offering disaster relief in Haiti, and providing clean water in Zambia. Our sacrificial service in the name of Jesus will proclaim, with even more power than our words, that Jesus Christ is Lord. Church leaders, remember to celebrate the service of those who volunteer their time and energy outside of the church as much as you appreciate those who serve in church-based ministries.

-Become a Hospitable Hospital: A low-cost but significant step toward becoming a missional church is opening your doors to share space with people meeting community needs. Many service organizations are experiencing a funding crunch due, in part, to our nation's economic struggles and political policy revisions. Why not invite these organizations to utilize your church building...for free! Invite recovery groups (Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Grief Recovery) and support groups (Cancer Survivors, Victims of Domestic Violence, Easter Seals) to utilize your church building. This, too, may seem counter-intuitive but it will go a long way in communicating that your church cares for the community. What is more, as people who don't attend your church show up for a recovery or support group they just might become so comfortable in the building that they venture into your weekend worship service.

The bottom line is that missional churches share their resources (money, people, facility) to meet the real needs of real people in the name of the real Jesus. The church I most recently served grew significantly, in terms of attendance, but that was not the goal. The goal was to be the church in the world by embodying the values of an eternal King who came onto our turf as a peasant Jew. People were attracted to our church not because of some marketing strategy, concert, or elaborate facility. God can use strategies, concerts, and facilities for His glorious purposes. The church I served, however, experienced increased vitality, momentum, and growth simply because we decided to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, and liberate the addicted and afflicted in the name of Jesus. So can your church!

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