

## “WE’RE MISSIONAL!” REALLY?

It’s an enlightening and truth-telling experience to realize that we are using a word to describe that for which the word was not originally intended. A word with an original meaning and intention, used over a long period of time, can take on a new meaning and become “domesticated” taking on what the user wants the word to mean, for the user’s purposes. Missional, as used among church many folk, is one of those words which has “morphed” into different meanings from that of its origin.

The “morphed” or “domesticated” meaning, distant from its original intention, is demonstrated when a well meaning person declares, “Our congregation is missional. We give generously and regularly to mission causes in our community and around the world. We have groups going to various places, near and far away, to do various kinds of mission work. We even have a Mission Committee in our church, along with a line item in our budget called ‘Mission’! We are a missional church.”

What that well meaning church person said may be true, is well and good, and for many, captures the “morphed” meaning of missional. That description, however, is a long way from what was intended when the term missional evolved into the life and vocabulary of the church. The concept of missional came into being when Lesslie Newbigin, an Anglican Church Bishop, returned to his native England following extended ministry as a missionary in India. While in India, he, like other missionaries, labored diligently to understand the culture—its core values, rituals, basic thinking patterns—all shaping Indian life, and, of utmost importance, the language with its meaning, and how it expressed the peoples’ ideas and relationships. Newbigin realized the futility of trying to make the Christian faith and the Gospel relevant to the Indian people *without* realizing the Western Christian church culture was different from and in contrast to the Indian cultural way of life. When the Bishop returned to England, he realized the cultural distance he had experienced between the church and Gospel and the general culture in India, prevailed in England, his home country! There was a clear disconnect between the culture of the English church, its language (what people meant by what they were saying), message, and core values, and those persons living in the changed culture in his home country, what they were hearing from the church, if they were listening at all. This differential manifested itself in churches being alarmingly empty, and becoming more so, as well as the Church being perceived as irrelevant to peoples’ lives. “Church” was absent from the vocabulary of a great number of the people. The English church culture was unaware that it had been “left behind” by the fast advancing national culture surrounding it, and in many ways, was at odds with it.

The concept of missional church was born out of this realization of the distance between the church culture and the fast changing culture of the people not a part of the church. A church that is missional is one that realizes that it now exists, and is called to witness, in a radically changing human culture, right in its neighborhood, parish, town, or city. Like ministering in India, it is called to and entrusted with the task of sharing and relating the gospel with that new and changing culture, learning its core values, its language, and its

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religious and spiritual expectations, if any. Missional describes a congregation that is diligently about the business of bringing together the gospel, the church, and its cultural environment, connecting them through ministry and mission.. Missional is descriptive of the task, preparation, and effectiveness *of taking* the good news of the gospel to those of differing core values and understanding what life is all about, who may profess to be spiritual but not religious, and for whom there is little or no space in their lives for church. The emphasis is upon being sent and taking the gospel out there, not expecting the people “out there” to be drawn into the church and its culture.

It has become obvious to most observers that a congregation continuing to do what it has always done, even doing it better than ever before, will not effectively transcend the “barrier” between its church culture and its environmental culture. Such describes a church that continues to organize, think, and act as if it were still in those years (325 to about 1950) we call Christendom (a church culture ministering to and within a church culture of like values and beliefs). We are now living in a post-Christendom time (a disenfranchised church culture energetically working to minister to and within an unchurched culture where differing values and beliefs prevail). The descriptions of those periods of time, and the contrast between the two, as critical as they are, are the subject for another article at another time.

What are some characteristics of a congregation intentionally wishing to be missional, as the concept and description was originally perceived as described above?

- 1/ A change from being the provider of religious services, a church of and for us, a place I attend, to being a mission outpost from which witness and service (mission) to the community evolves.
- 2/ A change from working hard to “get people into and at our place”, to developing new and innovative ways to develop relationship with folks “out there”.
- 2/ A change from assuming our story of faith is already known and ready to be accepted by others, to an understanding that ours is a story among many others competing to be heard.
- 3/ A change from the pastor being one who is the care-taker/chaplain of the church members to one who is the “leader missionary”, intentionally equipping the members for be “sent ones”, sharing the missionary ministry.
- 4/ A change from lay leaders being trustees and maintainers of our “life together”, to being models of missional leadership, personally engaging in such ministry while developing a spiritual passion to be in others to be missional.
- 5/ A change in member attitude from seeing him/herself as only one to be served, to a disciple who is called to be “sent out” to serve.
- 6/ A change of comprehensive mind-set from understanding mission as Christians only SENDING (money, clothing, food, etc.) to others, to understanding mission primarily as Christians BEING SENT into the community and culture around the location where their congregation gathers.

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Many have unconsciously domesticated the meaning of missional to fit their own understanding and expectation of the church’s calling. Jesus, however, beckons us to “come, follow me!” from the naves, classrooms, fellowship halls, and offices of our church facilities into the places, peoples, and cultures surrounding our churches. Bottom line? A missional church is one which pools its every resource to aggressively understand and passionately act upon being sent. “As God sent me (into the world), so *I send you*.” Missional churches are certainly different churches than we have been used to!

If you want more understanding of the original meaning of missional church, consider reading Darrell Guder’s (ed) Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America (Eerdman’s Publishing, Grand Rapids), inclusive of a rich bibliography of other missional church literature.

John Sharick (HR)