

Becoming
a
Future
Church

What is a Missional Congregation?

Part 3 of a 4 part series looking at the Church and how we can face
the future.

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A red ribbon graphic with a white border, containing the text "Becoming a Future Church".

Becoming a Future Church

What is a Missional Congregation?

Thinking around the Church as a “Missional” Church began as early as 1952, when at the conference of the International Missionary Council (IMC), Wilhelm Anderson, proposed (building on Karl Barth’s Theology) that the Church and Mission both be taken up into the *Missio Dei* (The Mission of God). “Missions” are not just a function of the Church. And the Church is not just the outcome of missions. Rather, both are grounded in a Triune God on mission in the world.

The Anglican missionary, Lesslie Newbigin, who spent almost a lifetime of service in India, was also writing on the Church and the *Missio Dei* in the 1950s and 60s, returned from India to Britain in the seventies and found not only a post-Christian society, but also a church that failed to distinguish itself from society. In the 1980s and 90s, Newbigin increasingly called for a critical re-evaluation of the church and its relationship to Western pluralistic and postmodern culture.

In 1991, the South African, Dawid Bosch, published his ground breaking book, *Transforming Mission*, which changed the way people thought about Mission and the way the academic study of Missiology is approached. The overwhelming picture is that God is and always has been on a mission in the world and it is the privilege of every believer, of every congregation to join and participate with God in accomplishing God’s Mission. The Mission is ultimately to bring all things together in and for Christ (Ephesians 1: 10).

In 1998, Darrell Guder and his Church and our culture network, published the book, *Missional Church. A vision for the sending of the Church in North America*. This publication is largely responsible for the rapid spread of the use of the term Missional Church in the English speaking West.

Missional Church in the UPCS

The UPCS belongs to the Council for World Mission, a worldwide partnership of Christian churches. The 31 members are committed to sharing their resources of money, people, skills and insights globally to carry out God’s mission locally. CWM was created in 1977 and

incorporates the London Missionary Society (1795), the Commonwealth Missionary Society (1836) and the (English) Presbyterian Board of Missions (1847).

The UPCSA first came into contact with the term “Missional Church” through CWM and our sister denominations in this family. The term became a vehicle through which congregations could be encouraged to see their mission and purpose as far more than simply maintaining the institution of Church. The role of the Church as opposing the structures of empire was accentuated and subsequently, the Church was envisioned as not simply a force responding to living in an unjust world but a messenger expressing God’s desire for all people to experience “fullness of life”. It was recognised that this term included all that Jesus embodied (See Luke 4: 18 *ff* and Isaiah 61) and was therefore an urgent call to the Churches to follow Him.

The UPCSA therefore adopted the development of “Missional congregations” into its Mission Statement as a priority.

The Call of Jesus to the Church

The God of the scriptures who is the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, is a calling God. Abraham, Joseph, Moses and David were called to participate in a great Mission. On the shore of Galilee, Jesus called Andrew and Simon, James and John to become “fishers of men”. Jesus calls all of us to be his disciples too. When we respond, we are enlisted to participate in something truly amazing – the transformation of the world.

In Matthew 28, in a portion of scripture often called “The Great Commission”, Jesus sends or commissions his disciples to this same task. The Church, which Paul calls “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1: 23) has a calling to bless the world and to work with God to transform it.

What a Missional Church is not

In a presentation given to the General Assembly of the UPCSA in Polokwane in July 2014, Prof. Nelus Niemandt, Professor in Missiology at the University of Pretoria, cautioned about defining a Missional Church in too narrow a fashion:

“A Missional church is not...

- all about only mission work across cultural barriers;
- simply about doing short term outreaches;
- a new name for church growth and effectiveness (leading to musical chairs);
- a label for churches with a good strategic plan and clear mission statements alone;
- to help old and mainline churches to become relevant and contemporary;

- the rediscovery of old truths that helped the church in the first 3 centuries;
- another word for Emerging churches.”

There is always a temptation to find an easily replicable quick fix solution and then “plug it in” wherever the church is struggling or in decline. Sadly, the situation the Church finds itself in in the twenty first century is going to require a total new strategy.

Our Own definition

In 2016, the UPCSAs committee on Mission and Discipleship, produced a definition of a Missional Congregation so as to assist the denomination in unpacking, analysing and implementing our Mission priority. The definition is as follows:

A **Missional Church** is a **sent** church, which understands its primary work as **witnessing** to Christ and **servicing** God **in the world**.

A **Missional Church** is **shaped** by God for the **community** into which God has placed it.

A **Missional Church** is **focussed** on those who don't yet know Jesus.

A Missional Church, **empowered** by the Holy Spirit, is focussed on working with God in **bringing fullness of life** (involving justice, healing, wholeness and reconciliation) to all the people of the world.

Significant features include:

1. It is important to see the contrast between the Great Commission, given to the first disciples but also, we believe, to succeeding generations of disciples of Jesus, and the status quo in the church today. We are called, invited, instructed to “Go into all the world”. By and large, we have given ourselves to build buildings, establish a local community of faith, and then we have “stayed”, consolidating and building the institution.

As a Missional Congregation, we must redirect our efforts toward witnessing to Christ and servicing God in the world.

2. The prevailing view among Protestants, even if it is unarticulated, is that the purpose of the Church is to grow a small congregation into a large one. And then, if by chance, an opportunity arises to plant another congregation, it should be a straight replication of the parent – a little big Church. Anyone who has had the privilege of having and raising children will know that our children are not clones of us. There are similarities but they are quite different in temperament, gifts, talents and even looks. Every congregation is uniquely shaped by God for the community into which God has placed

it. It is endowed with all the resources necessary to accomplish God's purposes there.

As a Missional Congregation, we must go out and minister in our local community. We can expect God to shape us as an instrument for the transformation of our local space.

3. As the Church develops from movement to institution, it becomes more and more self absorbed. It turns its attention to comfort, providing buildings, comfortable furnishings and programmes designed for its own members. The Missional Church, however, is reminded that the purpose of the Church is to make disciples, to train active witnesses and ambassadors and then to move out, beyond the fences and property lines of the Church into the cities, townships and suburbs where the people live. We are reminded that it is the world, Christ died to save (John 3: 16).

The Missional Church must be outward focussed. Its prayers, meetings and programmes are focussed on those who don't yet know Christ.

4. The Institutional Church runs the risk of being a social club or a human institution. When we make decisions, do they rely on human expertise and common sense or do they experience what it means to ride God's powerful wave of faith? Do we depend on God even for our daily existence as a Church? The Missional Church seeks the constant fellowship and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. And the Missional Church is a messenger and purveyor of fullness of life.

The Missional Church, as an active part of its community, emboldened and empowered by God's Spirit, stands against all life denying forces that seek to kill or destroy God's people and God's earth. The Missional Church is a justice Church, it works in practical ways to make life better for God's people and supports initiatives which bring fullness of life to all the people of the world.

Alan Hirsch puts it like this:

A community of God's people that defines itself, and organizes its life around, it's real purpose of being an agent of God's mission to the world. (Hirsch 2006:82)

How can you be a Missional Church?

The longer I am a minister, the more I realise that the transforming of a life or a community or even an institution is not going to happen with the passing on of information. This, I believe is one of the fundamental flaws with the Protestant version of Christianity. To persuade someone on the basis of facts will go some distance but changing the practices will change the person. This is discussed in the book, "You are what you love. The Spiritual

power of habit”, by James K A Smith. My contention is that if we are to sustain a large scale change in the shape of the Church from institutional to missional, we will have to teach some new habits.

1. Individual habits

In another series of pamphlets, in which I reviewed Michael Frost’s book, *Surprise the world. The five habits of highly missional people*, I outlined five things we could do to become more missional in our own lives.

- Bless – make opportunities to bless others. A prayer, a kind word, a gift.
- Eat – invite people to meals, simple or elaborate, just like Jesus did.
- Listen – to God and to the people of your neighbourhood.
- Learn – more about who Jesus is and what he can do for your neighbourhood.
- Sent – identify yourself as a missionary. Think and Act like one. And record what God does.

2. Corporate habits

Individual congregations may have to change their habits too. Here is a list of five possible habits to try:

- Pray for the city (Jeremiah 29: 7). Each Christian community should start by praying for the city into which God has placed them.
- Listen to the city. We might also find out more about the city/township/suburb. Get a map, ask about its needs, who are the people who live there?
- Serve the city. Try one project. It doesn’t have to be a worship service. Choose based on your listening. Just serve without wondering what will happen in return.
- Each “member” needs to become a disciple. Change your Christian Education from entertainment based to “equipping”. Train and enlist members to serve, not the church but the community.
- Spend money on outreach. Consider every outreach a combination of social action and an opportunity to form a new worshipping community.

Questions:

1. What is the difference between being a SENT Church or being a Church that STAYS?
How will this affect the Church’s shape?

2. What habits can your Church practice and learn to change that shape?
3. How are you presently engaged in your community? What further possibilities exist?

Further reading:

David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*. Orbis Books, New York © 1991.

Darrell Guder (ed.), *Missional Church. A vision for the Sending Church in North America*, Eerdmans © 1998.

Lesslie Newbigin. *The Gospel in a pluralist society*. SPCK © 1989

Tim Keller, Centre Church. *Doing balanced, Gospel centred ministry in your city*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids © 2012

1. Lesslie Newbigin: "The Gospel in a pluralistic society" (1989) and "Foolishness to the Greeks" (1986)



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