

What is a missional church?

We all know churches which are considered “mission-minded.” By that we mean that they give a lot of money to mission and they regularly have missionary speakers and the women’s association is strong in support of mission.

Now we are beginning to hear the term “missional church.” What does it mean? Is this just another fancy way of changing a noun into an adjective to make it sound like something new and different? What is the difference between a “mission-minded church” and a “missional church?”

Background: First of all, fifty years ago when someone said “mission” folks usually assumed that we were talking about sending missionaries overseas to a pagan land. Churches that supported these efforts were “mission-minded.”

We have known for a long time that mission is not simply something “done across salt water.” Years ago the Presbyterian Church had a Board of Foreign Missions and a Board of National Missions. In fact, more money was given through the Board of National Missions. That is how the Presbyterian Church expanded onto the frontiers of this country. But still, when missions were mentioned, it usually meant “foreign missions.”

Lesslie Newbigin was a British Presbyterian missionary sent to India in 1936. He served at a time when Indian Christians were gaining independence from the European and American mission boards. They were realizing the goals of self-support, self-governance, and self-propagation (sending their own missionaries) for which many western missionaries had been working for a hundred years.

As these younger churches of India were coming to maturity, they realized that all of these Christian denominations that were sending missionaries like Lesslie Newbigin had these denominational differences for reasons that might make sense in the West, but were irrelevant in India. Why should an Indian Christian be a Presbyterian rather than a Methodist? So the Indian Christians (with missionary support) decided to form a “united church.” In 1947 the Church of South India was formed and Newbigin was made a bishop in that church. So there have been such things as “Presbyterian bishops!”

All of this background on Lesslie Newbigin is to say that he spent a significant part of his life as a missionary evangelist, pastor, teacher, and bishop in India. When he retired to England in 1974 he continued his ministry for many productive years until his death in 1998. It was this period of his life that has had the greatest impact on the church in England and America. Even though Newbigin had never been out of touch with the western church, he was still shocked at the decline that he discovered.

Newbigin wrote a book (*The Other Side of 1984* - referring to the world described by George Orwell) in which he asked the profound question, "Can the West be converted?" He concluded that Europe and North America were now the most difficult and intransigent mission fields because of the rampant secularism that was consuming them. It was no longer possible to think of mission as something to be done in a foreign country...it had to be done right here too. Pagan beliefs were controlling the way we in the West were living.

Newbigin's writing and speaking resulted in the initiation of the "Gospel and Our Culture Network." Those participating in this project have tried to foster a "missionary encounter" of the Gospel with North American culture. They have been asking, "What should the church be doing to bring to bear the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ on our culture?" A church concerned about this matter might be called a "missional church."

Christendom: Before a further definition of the "missional church," I need to mention two important points which Newbigin made about our situation in America and how it has changed. This requires a brief history.

For the first three centuries after Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers were not well received by those in authority in the Roman Empire. Declaring that "Jesus is Lord" made some earthly lords nervous. Then, in the fourth century (312 AD), Emperor Constantine became a Christian and after him Emperor Theodosius (reigned from 379 – 395 AD) made Christianity the religion of the empire. That gave Christians official recognition and status and power. In the West we have enjoyed that standing (even with separation of church and state in the United States) up until the 20th century when it began a serious decline. That period of power for the church is referred to as Christendom.

This decline in Christendom has been very obvious, even in our own lifetimes. Sunday morning and Wednesday evening use to be reserved for the church, now there are soccer games and all sorts of other competitors. Until recently stores were closed on Sunday, now it is a major shopping day. When many of us were growing up, television would never have challenged Christian values, now the ways of Christ are regularly mocked. You can easily name many other examples of how Christendom has been in decline. In 2003 the Pope declared that Scotland was now a "mission field." He no longer considers it an evangelized nation.

Newbigin's point is that because of the decline of Christendom, we are no longer (if we ever were) a Christian nation. So the followers of Christ must now treat their own community as they did a pagan culture in Africa or Asia just a few years ago. We have a missionary obligation to reach this pagan world. Therefore, we must understand ourselves as a "missional church."

Enlightenment: Understanding the meaning of the Enlightenment is another important aspect for defining "missional church." We sometimes speak of the

Middle Ages as the “Dark Ages,” even though describing them simply as “dark” is as inaccurate as describing what followed, the Enlightenment (beginning c. 1600), as “light.” Some secular people prefer this misrepresentation, implying that the darkness of religion (especially Roman Catholic religion) in the Middle Ages was overcome by the era of science. As Rodney Stark demonstrates (*For the Glory of God*, pp. 123, 166ff), actually “*Christian theology was essential for the rise of science.*”

Be that as it may, most of us have lived in a world that wants to see science and religion as in conflict. In that popular view, people of faith are seen as hopelessly superstitious and out of touch with modern thinking about how the world came into being. Up-to-date thinking sees the idea of God as necessary only for those who can not face reality without some supernatural crutch. They are the enlightened ones. They live in the modern world.

However, today we speak of the “post-modern” world because much of this “modern” and “enlightenment” view of the world has been discredited by the unprecedented violence of the 20th century. Serious thinking people today recognize that science is not our savior. In fact, it is simply another means to greater and more destructive sin by fallen humanity. “Faith in God” had simply been replaced by “faith in science” and the results have been frightening. We are now in a “post-enlightenment” world. This does not mean that we return to pre-scientific superstition, but we must move beyond a simplistic science which thinks that it is free of the God who created the world.

Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch write convincingly about this situation in which Christians find themselves. Newbigin asks (as noted earlier in this essay), “Can the West (wed as it is to the Enlightenment) be converted (to belief in God)? We find ourselves challenged to ask the question, “What is the witness of the Gospel to *our* culture?” We had thought that we were living in Christendom, where the culture and the church were part of the same reality. Christendom was the air that we breathed. But now that has all been discredited and we must try to understand the critical reading that the Gospel of Jesus Christ makes of our culture, just as it has of the cultures of Asia and Africa.

We are therefore called to become a “missional church.” It is like being in a missionary compound as a band of frontier missionaries in “darkest” Africa. Only we are “being sent” out into the world of “darkest” Europe and North America, which Newbigin called “the most difficult and intransigent mission field in the world today.” The church today is in an entirely different situation. We are a missionary people being sent into a world hostile to God and his reign which has been announced by Jesus Christ through his life, death and resurrection.

Definition: So then, how might we describe a missional church?

- In a missional church there is a basic understanding that the church family exists to be sent on a mission by God. We are called out of the world to worship God so that we might be sent into the world to invite others to worship God. The meaning of the word “mission” is “sent.”
- Caring for the members of a church is important and exhibits the nature of the coming reign of God, but it is not enough. The church is not simply a cheap form of psychotherapy. The missional church is more than a chapel dispensing religious goods and services to its members. It exists not simply for itself, but to be sent into the world.
- Mission is not a program of the church like all other programs. It is not like the educational program or music program or a building improvement program. All of those are important to a missional church, but you can “do programs” without ever “being sent.” We can do a lot of nice things for the church members and anyone else who wanders in off the street to visit or to become a member, but that doesn’t make us a missional church.
- A missional church reads the Bible as a missionary document. The Bible tells us that the Father sends the Son; the Father and Son send the Spirit; the Father, Son, and Spirit (Trinity) send the church into the world.
- Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. It is not our mission, but God’s mission (*missio dei*).
- Our God is a missionary God. Mission is a movement from God into the world and the Church is an instrument that God has chosen for that movement.
- This movement announces the coming reign of God. The missional church is sent into the world to announce how God wants it to be. It is God’s world and he intends that his rule be established.
- The missional church understands that it is encountering a pagan culture...not a secular or somehow neutral culture, but a pagan culture...one that resists the coming reign of God.
- That does not mean that we despise the world and stand against the world. No, we serve a God who loves the world and created its magnificent tapestry of cultures.
- Instead of being against the world, we stand as a contrast community (see Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, *Resident Aliens*) to the values of this world. We are not a counter-culture. We are for the world as the Creator is for the world.
- As the sent people of God, we must live as a sign, symbol, and foretaste of the coming reign of God. We must be the interpretation or illustration of how God means the world to be.

So if “missional church” is just another slogan or fancy way of saying nothing, then it is of no use. But sometimes common words get so worn and familiar that we need to find a way to give them a new voice so that they will get heard in a fresh way. There is really nothing new about the concept of a “missional church”

that we have not heard before, but now that Christendom has declined so radically, this may be a helpful way to reclaim something very old.

The fact is, a church that is not “missional” is not really a “church.” Emil Brunner is famous for saying that, “A church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning.” If your church does not see itself as a community of believers sent into the world, then you are no longer, by definition, a church. It has also been said that if you are not doing mission you will soon become a “mission field.” Going out into the world as witnesses for Jesus Christ is essential to being a church.

Does this mean that mission is the only important thing that a church does? No, Brunner’s words might also be applied to worship. Surely worship is an essential characteristic of a church. John Piper (*Let the Nations Be Glad*) suggest that the ultimate purpose of the church is worship and that mission is what we do until “...every knee shall bow...and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...” (Philippians 2:10)

A final comment (addressed in more detail elsewhere)...this emphasis on the “gospel and our culture” does not excuse us from involvement in “foreign mission.” Jesus told his disciples that they were to be his “...witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) So all of the earth is God’s domain and the place to which his people are sent.

For further reading see the websites of Church Innovations, the Center for Parish Development and Allelon. Also read material by Lesslie Newbigin, Darrell Guder and George Hunsburger.