



Missional Journal

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A New Imagination for the Church

In the last issue of the *Journal* I suggested that the challenge for Christians in the West is re-imagining the shape of the church and its ministry in a post-Christendom environment where it must function on the margins of (worldly) power. What will such churches look like? Are there any obvious patterns that will characterize their structure and function?

At this point we see only the leading edge of the missional transformation. A variety of experiments are currently under way and more will follow if churches successfully navigate the transition period. While I am hesitant to prophesy about the future, I think it is probably safe to anticipate a number of distinctives.

1. Missional is not McChurch

Since the 1990s the term "McChurch" has referred to a consumer-oriented Christianity which pursues church growth by offering more and better spiritual goods and services. Sometimes the notion of franchising is even included, i.e. the practice of marketing to the larger Christian community the programs, practices, or strategies of churches regarded as particularly successful.

The popularity of the franchise approach is understandable. Church leaders passionate about reaching their culture are looking for help but don't know what to do in a time of cultural

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upheaval. Buying a program off the shelf, or looking for an external prescription that produces results when applied faithfully, is a strong temptation.

The problem with this approach is that it is not missiologically sound. It doesn't take into consideration the fact that the medium and the way the message is presented will vary, at least in emphasis, from one local context to the next. Most Christians recognize the need for missionaries to translate or contextualize the gospel in appropriate ways to specific cultures--our churches need to do the same.

Missional practitioners recognize that the principle of contextualization applies equally to churches in the West.

From region to region, city to city, neighborhood to neighborhood, we see a kaleidoscope of cultures. One size will not fit all. Franchising is usually unsuccessful. Missional therefore means a local, culturally-specific application of the message.

2. Evangelistic/attractational → missional/incarnational

At this point I am borrowing the language of Alan Hirsch to distinguish two basic approaches to communicating the gospel. By evangelistic/attractational Hirsch means the traditional approach of the Western church in the culture of Christendom. In this context a church may grow largely on the basis of attraction--a nice building in a good neighborhood, with a charismatic leader and/or good programming, can bring in non-Christians to be evangelized (presented with the message of salvation).

By contrast Hirsch advocates a missional/incarnational pattern. It is **missional** because it is "an outwardly bound movement from one community or individual to another. It is the outward thrust rooted in God's mission that compels the church to reach a lost world. Therefore, a genuine missional impulse is a *sending* rather than an *attractational* one. The NT pattern of mission is centrifugal rather than centripetal" (*The Forgotten Ways* [Brazos, 2006], pp. 129-30).

It is **incarnational** because it understands God's action in Christ as the model for the life of the church. "If God's central way of reaching his world was to incarnate himself in

Jesus, then our way of reaching the world should likewise be *incarnational*. To act incarnationally therefore will mean in part that in our mission to those outside the faith we will need to exercise a genuine identification and affinity with those we are attempting to reach" (*Forgotten Ways*, p. 133).

Incarnation requires a church's presence in the community. Missional leaders commonly speak of "moving back into the neighborhood," of learning to listen and build relationships and create a context in which the gospel may flourish in word and deed. In the words of Bryan Stone: "The reign of God proclaimed by Jesus and embodied in his person becomes a concrete possibility in the world when a space is created for it through the Spirit's formation of persons into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (and thus into his 'body')" (*Evangelism after Christendom* [Brazos, 2007], p. 108). **As the church confronts wide-spread cynicism about the Christian message, the gospel displayed will give credence to the gospel declared.**

I don't want to argue for missional to the exclusion of all attractional aspects of current church practice. Many people are drawn to the church by good preaching, good programs, and fine facilities. The problem is that 1) many of those attracted (not all) will be disgruntled members of other churches and 2) the percentage of the population who can be reached in this way is rapidly shrinking.

3. Cultivating spiritual discernment

In the culture of late modernity many churches adopted a corporate model for leadership, decision-making, and planning. Pastors became CEOs, elders (or deacons) transformed themselves into corporation directors, and top-down, vision-driven planning became the order of the day.

It is a sign of biblical-theological health that this paradigm is being questioned in the missional church movement.

Here is a good place to begin "re-imagining" the nature and function of the church for a post-Christian and postmodern era. What is there about the decision-making and planning process of the church that makes (or should make) it distinctively Christian? Or, to ask the question differently, what is missing from the older model?

The short answer is sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit. Or, in the words of Craig Van Gelder, "An essential dimension that Christian leaders must attend to in the midst of a discernment and decision-making process is how to keep God in the conversation" (*The Ministry of the Missional Church* [Baker, 2007], p. 99).

One can hardly read the narrative of Acts and fail to note the level to which God is "in the conversation." From Pentecost onward the Holy Spirit is repeatedly identified as the directing and empowering force in the expanding mission of the church. Individuals like Philip, Peter, and Paul experience the direct leading of the Spirit at missionally strategic points (Acts 8:29; 11:11-12; 16:6-7).

However, there are also critical points at which the gathered body discerns the leading of the Lord. Luke tells us (Acts. 13:1-3) that the commissioning of Barnabas and Paul for the expanded mission to the Gentiles was the result of the Antioch believers hearing from the Holy Spirit during a period of worship and fasting (likely focused on discerning "next steps" in God's purposes for the congregation). The Jerusalem Council is another example of communal listening for the voice of the Spirit which allows the apostles and elders to speak with (for us!) surprising assurance: "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . ." (Acts 15:28). Luke also records the warning given to Paul by the Spirit through the community of disciples at Tyre, which Paul ignored to his own detriment--and perhaps that of the mission (Acts. 21:4)

The point is that missional churches need to cultivate what for many of us is a forgotten art--the ability to discern what God is up to in our world (or neighborhood). This is best accomplished in a community of believers who are able to listen prayerfully for what the Spirit is saying in Scripture, in and through the voice of the congregation, and in the specific context where the church is located.

From a practical standpoint, it is important to realize that good listening/discerning is often dependant on asking good questions. So perhaps I should close by listing a few questions that can help churches and leaders who desire the Spirit's guidance toward a new day of missional engagement.

For instance, consider a retreat for your church in which small groups wrestled with these questions:

- What means or activities in the history of our church have proven most effective in introducing **non-Christians** to the gospel? (This is not the same question as what activities have been most effective in adding members/attendees to the congregation.) What can we learn from this that might guide our present efforts?
- Jesus taught us to pray "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven." If the kingdom were to come today, what things would be different in our neighborhood? How might the answers to this question guide the participation of our church in the mission of God?
- The Abrahamic covenant promises that Abraham's descendants will be blessed in order that they may be a blessing (Gen. 12:2-3). How is our church a blessing to our community? How would our neighbors answer this question?

Now imagine a congregation posing such questions, listening carefully to the answers, and with prayer (and fasting?!) asking for the Spirit to guide them toward one small missional experiment. And, perhaps six months later, another missional experiment. And then . . . well, just *imagine!*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Dave' written in a cursive style.