



Missional Journal

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SEMINARY

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May 2011
Vol. 5 No. 2

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Where's the Beef?

This is an important question for the missional church. It's been more than a decade since some of us started down this road. The question needs to be faced: after more than a decade of analysis and discussion, how are we doing? What are the concrete results? Where are the churches that have successfully navigated the "missional turn"?

At a recent gathering of younger leaders, Anglican evangelical Todd Hunter summed up accurately the current state of affairs in the missional world: we are more aspiration than actuality; more talk than action; more sizzle than steak. The problem is real and needs to be addressed, but first we need to understand why our results have been less than stellar.

Before I propose a number of specific causes, let me get some things off the table. First, I don't think we should conclude that this movement is just a flash in the pan, another "buzz" that tickles the ear until the next new thing comes along. No, the missional turn is deeply biblical and theological in the best sense, and by pointing us back to Scripture and the very nature of God, it is much more than an exercise in trendiness or relevance.

Second, missional is not just a discussion for eggheads. True, there have been some pretty theoretical discussions in the literature, but the fact is that we needed (and still need) some intellectually heavy lifting to understand where we are in Western culture and how the Gospel speaks to us and to our world. My concern is not with the theoretical, but with the need for practical outcomes. I recognize that there is always some lag between theoretical and practical, but why are we having this difficulty with implementation?

A Hard Habit to Break

This memorable phrase was used by Duke University professor Stanley Hauerwas to describe Christendom or Constantinianism--the arrangement between church and state which developed following the conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity in 312 and the Edict of Milan in 313 which granted full tolerance to Christianity across the Roman Empire. Over the next centuries the church enjoyed increasingly favorable status that resulted in growing cultural power and privilege. But as its influence grew, the church in Christendom frequently lost its "edge" and was co-opted by the attitudes and values of the surrounding culture.

Although the cultural situation in much of North America may now be described as post-Christendom, many remnants of Christendom are still with us . . . not least in the thinking and practice of many Christians. Thus many of

us assume a building-centered approach to church, ministry, and evangelism. We assume that we can speak and act from a position of cultural favor and influence. And we remain deeply shaped by a clergy-laity distinction that was powerfully rooted and formed in Christendom (even though the beginning of the distinction predates Constantine).

The residual influences of Christendom are solidly imbedded in our churches, and they work against our efforts to follow Jesus in his mission. Even when we *want* to be on mission, the structures of the old paradigm are like the default settings on a computer. When we meet resistance, when the mission proves more challenging than we anticipated, we recalculate and reset the mental computer. The old ways worked, didn't they? Perhaps it is better not to take a new path.

But unless we reprogram the ecclesiastical computer, little will change for the Western church. Recently a number of evangelical leaders published a [Missional Manifesto](#). This document also recognizes the need for a fresh understanding of the church:

Missional represents a significant shift in the way we understand the church. As the people of a missionary God, we are entrusted to participate in the world the same way He does--by committing to be His ambassadors. Missional is the perspective to see people as God does and to engage in the activity of reaching them. The church on mission is the church as God intended.

How is such change to be accomplished? A couple thoughts. First, regular and repeated teaching around the themes like the mission of God, the gospel of the kingdom, and the sending of the church is essential for shaping vision and motivating for action. We must challenge the ways in which Christendom has restricted our reading of Scripture and limited our vision for the calling of the whole body of Christ to engage the mission of God.

Second, missional leaders need to find congregational allies--"early adopters" who will share the vision for mission and help them hold course in the face of opposition or discouragement. Any attempt to lead an entire congregation simultaneously through this transition will be an exercise in frustration. Further, missionally-minded churches and their leaders should reach out to other congregations on the same journey for wisdom, encouragement, and partnership.

The Importance of Models

For much of the first decade of the movement there has been an absence of models available to help churches think concretely about what it might look like follow Jesus into the world and how leaders could actually process congregations through this change. There has even been some resistance to providing such models. The gospel needs to be proclaimed and embodied in ways appropriate to particular cultural contexts. So the missional movement resists the suggestion that we can in some sense franchise the mission, that there is one right or best way that all churches should adopt. Congregations, it has been argued, need to engage deeply with Scripture, cultural context, and the Spirit to discern the call of God. We need "to keep God in the conversation," to use the words of Craig Van Gelder.

Now I agree with much of this sentiment, but there was a lack of realism about this approach. Most congregations and most busy pastors need more than theory. They need specific suggestions about what a missional congregation looks like, how it is organized, how change is accomplished, and a host of other practical details.

A recent publication that should prove very helpful in bridging the gap between theory and practice is *Launching Missional Communities* by Mike Breen and Alex Absalom.[1] Both authors have extensive experience with church planting in Europe and the United States. Their manual makes a case for valuing both attractional and missional dimensions within a congregation. Each has its place. The missional aspect of the church is best captured, they argue, by groups of twenty to fifty people who grow and serve together, not as an independently functioning church, but as part of a larger congregation. ***This guide provides a wealth of specific, tested recommendations for leaders who seek to transition congregations to stronger missional engagement.***

The Challenge of Formation

In 2007 the Willow Creek Association published the results of its *Reveal* study that highlighted the lack of spiritual transformation and discipleship in many attendees at Willow Creek and a number of other congregations that were part of the study. As a result we heard a fair bit of critique focused on mega-churches in particular and a lot of hand-wringing about the failure of the church in general to produce mature disciples. Much of this was to the point.

But we all realize that it is easier to critique failure than to improve upon it. In fact missionally focused churches face the same problems that other groups do: forming mature disciples is a tough row upstream. Alan Hirsch correctly notes that "...the church has largely been unsuccessful at prioritizing disciple making as the primary mission of the church." [2] Narcissism, individualism, materialism, and busyness--to name just a few of the challenges--have deeply impacted most of us, and they do not disappear simply by waving the missional wand.

Scott Boren warns us that living missionally is more than just adding a list of externally focused activities to already busy church schedules: "too easily we turn being missional into a project in which those of us inside the church perform some action for those outside the church." [3] ***Instead, we need to be formed for kingdom ministry.*** Boren urges us to develop habits or "rhythms" in our relationship to God (practices of the Presence), to one another (practices of Agape), and to the world (practices of Engaging the Neighborhood). He is particularly helpful in suggesting specific practices and "lessons" that missional small groups may employ as they seek to mature in the three basic rhythms.

Cultivating such habits inevitably challenges existing practices in our individual and corporate Christian experience. Consequently they cannot simply be added on. Missional is not just another program for busy people--it is a divine call to be a different kind of people, a people formed by the gospel to embody the gospel in the totality of their daily lives. That's where the beef is! And this is the challenge before us--it will require time, energy, wisdom, and focus to move the theoretical discussion to incarnational reality.



[1] Breen and Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities: A Field Guide* (Pawleys Island, S.C.: 3DM, 2010).

[2] Alan Hirsch and Debra Hirsch, *untamed: reactivating a missional form of discipleship* (Baker, 2010), p 109.

[3] M. Scott Boren, *Missional Small Groups* (Baker, 2010), p. 34.