

# The Missional Church

*More than just an academic phrase, this term clarifies the role of the Church in Western society and challenges basic assumptions about its nature and purpose.*

by Alan J. Roxburgh

## Introduction and Background

Words insinuate themselves into the vocabulary of a culture when a group uses new language to articulate something that is felt and needs to find expression. This has happened with the phrase "missional church" over the past half dozen years.

In 1998 Eerdmans published a book with the title *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. It was written in the most unlikely manner by a team of missiologists, theologians and practitioners who met for three years to compose the book. The book's genesis lay in the convergence of various people inside a new network called the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN). Comprised of people from a variety of church backgrounds (Methodist, Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist and Anabaptist), GOCN coalesced around the writings of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, a missionary in India for over 30 years.

Newbigin, upon his retirement in the late 60's, returned to his native England to discover that the Christian culture he had left some 30 years earlier had all but disappeared. Having a keen missionary sensibility, Newbigin recognized that by the latter part of the 20th century the mission field for the Gospel had shifted dramatically. The greatest challenge to Christian mission was now those very nations that had once sent missionaries out around the world. It was the people of Europe, shaped by the Western tradition, that were rapidly losing their identity as Christian.

In one memorable epithet Newbigin asked the question: Can the West be converted? That question captured the imagination of many church leaders in the UK and Europe. It represented one of the fundamental issues that had to be addressed by the Church but had not been articulated clearly until that point.

The challenge facing the Western churches was the re-conversion of its own people. Newbigin wrote voluminously on this subject, addressing underlying issues and outlining the missiological challenge such a situation presented to the Church.

This European and UK conversation found its way into North America. Newbigin came to America on numerous occasions to lecture and teach on the themes of a missionary engagement with Western society. His writing and conversations caught the attention of academic missiologists and theologians on this side of the Atlantic where numerous leaders were themselves struggling with similar questions about the nature of Christian witness in Western societies at the close of the millennium.

It was out of these stirrings and conversations that a small group of such leaders began to have more intentional conversations with one another, and eventually formed a network that became GOCN. Through its gatherings and conversations, it became clear that there was a significant amount of work to be done in addressing issues of Gospel faithfulness in North American culture. It was against this background that the Pew Charitable Trust provided generous funding to form the team that wrote *Missional Church*.

## The missional language

The "missional language" found expression as the book took form over that three-year period, and thus became its title. It has now become a part of the *lingua franca* of the Church in North America. Almost everywhere one goes today the word "missional" or the

phrase "missional church" is used to describe everything from evangelism to re-organization plans for denominations, to how we make coffee in church basements and denominational meeting rooms. In a very brief period of time a new form of language entered the common conversation of the Church and diffused itself across all forms of church life. At the same time, it is still not understood by the vast majority of people in either leadership or the pew. This is a stunning accomplishment: from obscurity to banality in eight short years and people still don't know what it means.

These facts suggest something of the flux, stirrings and search for points of reference that are now shaping the Church in North America. The missional language would have died and disappeared like so many other words and movements of the Church if there wasn't already present an underlying sense that something is amiss about the Christian life and identity at this point in time.

Anyone with a passing familiarity with the movements that have shaped the Church on this continent over the past half-century is aware that this has been a period of massive change and upheaval. It was into this context that the missional language came and was received as a hopeful sign of how we could talk again about the challenges facing Christian identity. But at the same time, it is a testimony to the absorbing power of modernity that the missional language could become so meaningless so quickly.

Each of these sides—the readiness of the Church to receive missional language in the midst of tremendous flux and change, as well as the capacity of modernity to absorb and neutralize it, must be part of our discussion.

What is happening behind these dynamics? What are the implications of the missional language today in the life of the Church?

### **Missional church: what does it mean?**

In conferences, teaching sessions or simply dialogue with other leaders, the question is still continually asked: What do you mean by "missional church"? The non-clergy are the most confused by, and suspect of the word "missional."

They perceive it to be another unnecessary piece of esoteric language invented by clergy and seminary professors. Thus there is suspicion of the language and not a lot of trust that it means more than a fancy idea about evangelism or mission. There is a need for clarity and explanation. Where do we start in a description of what it means? There are multiple levels to an adequate response which is what makes the problem of meaning significant.

If the language of "missional church" is to become a helpful way of forming communities of God's people in a radically changing culture, then we have to spend the time and energy to understand what is at stake in the language we are using. Simple sentence definitions are not adequate.

What follows is a brief overview of how we might approach the issue of describing what is meant by "missional church." Each of the points developed below should be unpacked, understood, appreciated and engaged within the church in a context of dialogue. The missional church conversation is far more than finding new words for old ideas. It is not about putting new paint over the cracked and chipped frames of an established way of thinking. The missional church conversation challenges some of the most basic assumptions

we have about the nature and purpose of the church. Implicit in this conversation is the need to challenge and change some of our assumptions concerning the practice of church life in North America. What then are some of the characteristics of this missional conversation?

### **Missional church: characteristics and meaning**

*1. Western society as mission field:* As indicated in the introduction, the language of "missional church" has to do with the recognition that somehow the Western societies are now themselves a mission field. This is saying something more than simply needing new evangelism tactics. To a large extent modern evangelism was practiced from within a context in which people generally took it for granted that the Christian story was a normative, regulative part of the cultural backdrop within which they lived. Put simply, most folks knew the basic story in one form or another. Evangelism was about understanding why they no longer accepted or lived in the story, developing a form of presentation or apologetic which addressed those issues and pressing for commitment. Evangelism assumed an environment of prior Christian understanding or background.

The use of missional language is to suggest that this memory of the Christian story as the essential background to evangelism is, in most Western societies, essentially lost and can no longer be taken for granted. In this sense, most Western societies are post-Christian and are mission fields.

We can no longer assume that the Gospel story is part of the cultural narrative of people. Now this is more-or-less the situation. Certainly, in Europe and England it is the case that the Christian story is all but a faint and vague memory that has no shaping power in people's lives except among increasingly small minorities. In 2002 a major British tabloid published a front-page interview with a Catholic bishop in that country. The headline quote was: "Christianity has almost expired in the UK!" Stark language but not inaccurate. The same comment could be made for most of Western Europe.

The majority of the emerging generation in Canada is growing into adulthood with no memory of the Christian narrative. What must be emphasized here is that 25 years ago this was not the case in Canada. The corrosive forces of change that had been building up for decades under the surface of popular culture suddenly reached the tipping point and rapidly transformed the culture. The dislodging of Christian life in Canada from the mainstream to the margins has been astoundingly rapid. Canada is not unlike America where the same kind of thing can and will happen. Thus, the missional language was created in order to emphasize that we are confronted with a radically new challenge in the West.

We are not in a situation that requires minor adjustments and course corrections. We're not in a place where simply planting thousands more churches or changing existing congregations to seeker-driven outlets or developing methodologies for natural church growth, is going to address the massive changes now transforming the landscape of the West. We need to fundamentally rethink the frameworks and paradigms that have shaped the Church over the last half-century. The basic stance of denominations and congregations must be transformed to that of missionaries in their own culture. This requires far more than adjustment. It calls for a radically new kind of church.

*2. Mission is about the missio dei:* Latin phrases may not be the most appropriate form of communication in the 21st century, but this one does capture a theme central to the missional conversation.

If the West, including North America, is once again a mission field within which the central narratives of the Gospel have been either lost or profoundly compromised by other values and stories, then the focus of this mission is the God who has encountered us in Jesus Christ—the One whom we confess in the Trinitarian confession of Father, Son and Spirit. This may seem like such an obvious statement that it needs no comment; however, this is not the case.

The missional conversation is convinced that throughout Western societies, and most especially in North America, there has occurred a fundamental shift in the locus of the understanding and practice of the Christian story. It is no longer about God and what God is about in the world; it is about how God serves and meets human need. More specifically, the God who encounters us in Jesus Christ has become the spiritual food court for the personal, private, inner needs of expressive individuals. The result is a debased, compromised, Gnostic form of Christianity which is not the Gospel at all.

The biblical narratives are about God's mission in, through and for the sake of the world. The focus of attention is toward God not the other way around. The *missio dei* is about a theocentric rather than anthropocentric understanding of Jesus' life, death and resurrection which itself, as the apocalyptic engagement of God with the world, breaks into creation in order to call forth that which was promised from the beginning—that in this Jesus all things will be brought back together and made new. The focus of this movement is doxological. It is not about, in the modern, Western, expressive individualist sense, meeting my needs. The personal pronoun is not the subject of the narrative; God is the subject.

This is a fundamental element in the missional conversation. Enough has been written about this issue of the locus and intention of the Gospel and its debasement to an individualistic, needs-centered story in North America that it doesn't require further expansion in this brief essay.

But whenever this part of the conversation takes place, it creates consternation and confusion among both clergy and laity alike. If, they ask, the Gospel isn't about the individualistic, personal-need-focus of expressive individuals in North America, then what is the nature of the Gospel? The question reveals the level at which our framework must be radically changed in order for the people in North America to hear and practice the Christian narrative once again. There can be no minimizing the level of the change required for the Gospel to be heard again in the West. The language of "missional" was coined in order to capture and express

- the locus of the Gospel on God and God's actions,
- the depth of the compromise that has overtaken Christian life and
- the extent of the challenge we face in addressing this situation.

*3. Missional church is about the nature and purpose of the Church:* The church is an essential part of the missional conversation. The question which the authors of the book *Missional Church* set out to address was the nature of the Church in North America as the agency of God's mission in the world. That part of the discussion focused attention on two critical areas of dialogue

- the nature of the culture in which we currently are located as North Americans and
- the purposes of God in the world as revealed by Jesus Christ and His Gospel. In terms of the former, the Church is no longer at the center of the culture.

This raises fundamental questions about the relationship between Christian life and the pluralistic culture in which we now live.

In terms of the latter, the message of Jesus was about the in-breaking of the reign of God into the world. Therefore, on the basis of both these motifs, the Church is the *called out community of God* in the midst of the specificity of a culture. The genitive in that phrase (the *of God*) is not an objective but a subjective genitive. In other words, the Church is called out for the sake of *God*; this is what God has done in Jesus Christ in order to call into being a new society whose life and focus is God.

The Church is, therefore, an *ecclesia*, a called out assembly whose public life is a sign, witness, foretaste and instrument to which God is inviting all creation in Jesus Christ. The Church, in its life together and witness in the world, proclaims the destiny and future of all creation. In this sense, local congregations are embodiments of where God is calling all creation.

The Church anticipates the eschatological future of all created things through the power of the Spirit. This is why Lesslie Newbigin gave so much energy in his early writing to understanding the nature of election in the biblical narratives of the reign of God. Election is not the rescue of human beings from some future damnation. It is the call of men and women (in the mystery of God's purposes) to submit their lives to the God who encounters us in Jesus Christ for the sake of the world.

Again, to put that into the context of the Church in North America (which is largely middle class and suburban) the call of God is to a vocation for the sake of the world, not one's own personal needs. In this context (and not any other in this conversation) the Church is not a gathering of those who are finding their needs met in Jesus. This is a terrible debasement of the announcement of the reign of God. The God we meet in Jesus calls men and women in exactly the opposite direction—to participate in a community that no longer lives for itself and its own needs but as a contrast society whose very life together manifests God's reign. How the North American Church could take this story, especially one focused around the One who, according to Philippians 2 emptied Himself by giving up all His rights in obedience to the Father, into a story about God wanting to meet my needs, is a question that makes abundantly clear the Church's own need for radical conversion to the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ.

4. As a *contrast society*, the Church is formed around a set of beliefs and practices that continually school and form it in a way of life that cannot be derived from the particular culture in which it is found, but must be embodied in translatable forms within a particular culture.

Our North American culture is commonly designated as a modern or a postmodern one in which individual rights are paramount. We live in a context where it is simply assumed that in this tolerant and open society personal rights, feelings and desires are to be affirmed. As a *contrast society* the Church is formed around a set of beliefs and practices that continually shape it in a way of life that cannot be derived from the particular culture in which it is found but must be embodied in translatable forms within a culture. Therefore, missional church is about what Catholic missiologists call "ressourcement" meaning a return to the sources. Missional church is not about the modern mantra that we must reject the insular, conforming demands of the past with their so-called cultural captivities, for some new future that is all about meeting the needs of middle-class expressive individuals.

Missional church, like the biblical texts of Jeremiah and Isaiah, is convinced that God has brought the Western Church into an experience of liminality within its own cultural world, a place of marginalization, in order that through its loss, anxiety and chaos, it might hear again the Word of God. This was the experience of the exile in Babylon.

The missional church conversation does not claim a parallel between our situation and that of Judah after 587 BC. The language of exile is alien to the North American imagination. People look at churches full of people and it seems to them that these are signs that all is well in the land. Indeed, the assumption is that if there is a problem with a specific congregation or denomination, in terms of dwindling membership or finances, it is because that particular group has wedded itself to outdated methodologies. All that needs to be done is to figure out the correct methodology for the moment and recalibrate the system for success just like those other church groups that seem to be thriving.

This is precisely the lie that the religious leaders of Jerusalem used against Jeremiah prior to the exile. It was all a matter of finding the right tactics; God was, after all, on their side and nothing could change that reality. Therefore, a little change here, a little tweaking there and all would be well. This is the situation today.

But the formation of a missional church is going to be a very costly matter. It calls for a people who are willing to conform their lives to practices and habits of Christian life which, at their root, are about the willingness to give up one's personal needs and rights. This is a terrifying, archaic, almost anti-human thing for most contemporary people to imagine. Human life is not about my needs and me!

The humanity that God calls into being in Jesus Christ is one shaped by obedience and conformity to habits and practices learned by God's people in the Old Testament through the Torah and in the early Church through the development of catechesis, offices and practices. Therefore, the missional church is about a way of life that cuts across the grain not only of the culture but the pastoral models of therapeutics or management and control.

Missional church is about the formation of a people in the particularity and materiality of real contexts in neighborhoods and communities. Therefore, missional leadership is more about the rediscovery of the ancient work of the abbot among a people. This is terrifyingly hard work for contemporary pastors because nothing in their training or habit of life has prepared them for such a vocation.

The missional church conversation calls for leaders themselves to become novices; but novices who return to ancient practices and novices who choose to live under the authority of Scripture among a community of people where the I is replaced by the We.

### **The work of a missional ecclesiology**

A major critique of the missional church conversation is that it's primarily an academic discussion among intellectuals and academics which, while interesting and important, does not lend itself to practical application in congregations and denominations.

It is fair to say that has been true. From its beginnings the conversation, shaped to a large degree by the Gospel and Our Culture movement, has been the academic and intellectual work of missiologists, theologians and biblical scholars seeking to bring theological and sociological resources to the question of the church's missional engagement with our own

culture. The numerous books written by members of the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) reflect that engagement. This has been an appropriate focus of work and energy. There was a need to frame the issues the Church must address in our context first, from a missiological, theological and biblical perspective. The importance of this focus was that it made clear that the missional church conversation was not just one more tactic for church growth or other pragmatic means of success.

The work of these academics underlined the extent and depth of the issues that face the churches of the West. Therefore, the critique of the movement is accurate and yet fails to be cognizant of the monumental shift in biblical and theological imagination required of the Church. The Church must return to its sources not by copying some past time but by discerning the shape of a faithful Christian witness today.

A second element of the "too theological, too academic" critique from pastors and denominational leaders is the reality that in North America the churches and schools in the 20th century often failed to cultivate leaders with the intellectual capacities to understand or teach theology.

Theology is sometimes considered an abstract discipline with little real relevance for the practical work of pastoral ministry. There is a critical need for theologically informed leaders capable of engaging their people in a very different kind of reflection on what is happening in their lives and in the Church at this moment in time. It is only a church that re-enters the power of its rich theological and biblical traditions that will have any chance of missionally engaging the culture.

Having said all that is not to deny that the missional church conversation has, to a very large extent, failed to address the issues of translation. It has remained a relatively theoretic and abstract academic conversation about the Church. Its books and ideas have been shaped more by internal conversations within the missiological academy than attentiveness to the needs of the churches.

Unless this critical issue is addressed, the missional movement will die because it has failed to create an environment which can nourish its life in the churches.

The answer here is not the creation of more missional books. Commentaries and hermeneutics on missional issues relative to scriptural interpretation is an important work for academics which will, over the long term, bear fruit for the Church. But the pressing need of the moment is for three things.

- First, translation of materials and resources that make available to pastors and leaders the rich resources have already been developed within the missional conversation. This work has yet to be done with any seriousness.
- Second, there is a critical need to understand how people learn, how they enter into dialogue as communities of learners that results in change. Paulo Friere in Latin America understood that change is not simply a matter of transmitting information, but requires a whole new way of thinking about how people learn for themselves. The missional church movement must address this issue of pedagogy and change if this critical conversation is to diffuse into the churches in ways that bring about a deep shift in understanding and action.
- Third, there is a need to develop tools and resources that congregational and denominational leaders can use in the work of missional transformation. Within certain

elements of the missional church conversation there has existed a resistance, perhaps disdain, for this kind of practical work.

But the nature of the case is that most of us learn by doing—by involving ourselves in processes of missional action that enable us to see an alternative way of being the Church. The majority of us do not first learn a set of abstract ideas and then put them into practice. Without well-developed tools, processes and resources for innovating and cultivating missional church, the movement is dead at birth. To this point a few of those within the missional conversation have focused their attention on addressing this issue. People like Craig Van Gelder, Pat Keifert and myself from within the missional church movement have made available such tools for the practical application of missional church in congregations and denominational systems.

In conclusion, the missional church conversation is one of the most hopeful movements to emerge in the last decade. This is partly why the term quickly became popular throughout the church. It is an indication of the church's searching for ways to understand its current malaise and discover a faithful and fruitful future under the reign of Christ.

*Alan Roxburgh, D. Min., is president of the Missional Leadership Institute. His most recent book is [Crossing the Bridge: Leadership in a Time of Change](#) (Percept, 2000). He is one of the authors of [Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America](#) (Eerdmans, 1998).*

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