

What Makes a Church Missional?

Once they become popular, movements and their descriptive titles face the danger of losing their cutting edge. Like brand names, such as *Kleenex*, the term *missional church* may have already become generic, referring to any activity deemed by a church as outreach. To ensure that the Missional Church Learning Experience provides participating churches with training in multiple facets of mission practice, we developed a working definition of missional church that includes six primary characteristics. While, as with any mental model, no single image incorporates the full essence of what it is to be the church, such a working definition provides learners with guidelines for practicing holistic mission, while allowing for creative expressions of Christian service. The overarching definition of missional church we work with is as follows:

A missional church is an authentic faith community whose primary focus is serving outward, on mission with God, bringing Christ's love alive in its neighborhood and beyond.

An Authentic Community of Faith

Missional churches are *authentic communities* in that their relationships with people, within and outside the church, are not superficial. These communities seek to create safe environments, characterized by acceptance, forgiveness, healing, and hope, where people can live lives of honesty (not perfection) and where practices are congruent with the verbal professions of faith. As a *community of faith*, the church is a living response to the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Faith here is not primarily a statement or doctrinal position *about* God, but a response *to* God's invitation to follow Christ into God's mission in community with others.

Outward Ministry Focus

Missional churches take seriously the call of Jesus to "Seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteous-

ness." That mission is the church's primary purpose and function, meaning that the church exists for the well-being of others and of creation, rather than for self-serving purposes. Missional churches recognize that they exist in a missionary environment and are willing to risk themselves for the purpose of engagement in God's kingdom work on earth. They direct their activities outward toward the context in which the church is located and beyond to the broader world.

Characteristics of a Missional Church

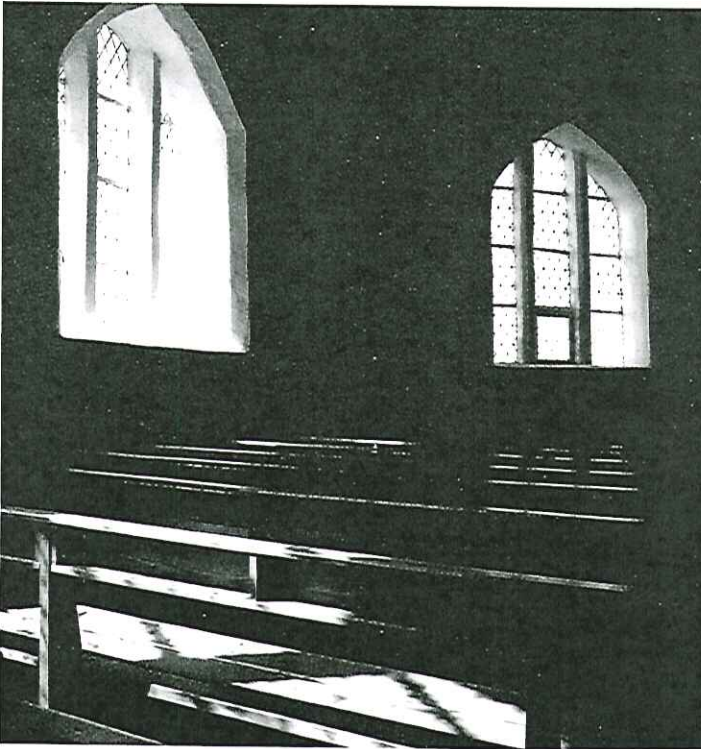
The six primary characteristics, or "Missional DNA Markers," that we've identified are as follows:

1. *The missional church treats its own context as a fluid, constantly changing mission-field:* Missional churches recognize that, while 50 years ago, eight out of 10 Americans got up on Sunday morning and went to Christian worship, fewer than two out of 10 people do so today. They realize that for communication to be effective between the church and the community, they need to study surrounding culture and adjust "church language" to make the gospel message understandable beyond the church walls. Missional churches understand that engagement in social concerns in their immediate communities is as significant as the social engagement traditionally supported in overseas missions. Such engagement includes building relationships and acting as advocates for those who are marginalized by the dominant culture.

2. *The missional church is both active in and supportive of mission:* The intention of the missional church movement is to move churches beyond financial support and short-term mission projects into a lifestyle of direct mission engagement. While missional churches do not minimize the importance of cooperative missional efforts and financial support of missions, they grow to understand support of mission to include encouragement, training, and accountability of those participating in mission. Likewise, without devaluing participation in

short-term mission projects, they recognize the need for members to become directly involved in ongoing mission efforts within their communities and in the broader world.

3. *The missional church recognizes its mission includes both the "Great Commission" (making new disciples) and the "Great Commandments" (loving God and loving others as oneself):* The missional church recognizes the significance of the "evangelistic mandate" of Matthew 28:17ff and also the significance of the "social mandate" of Matthew 22:37ff, which calls us into acts that demonstrate the love of God by every available means. Evangelism is seen as inseparable from missional discipleship rather than as a means to grow the local congregation. Therefore, missional churches actively invite people of other beliefs and of no religious belief into partnership with them in the work of mission in the community. The social mandate of Matthew 22 is lived out by missional churches through social service (giving a cup of water in Jesus' name) and social action (seeking to transform unjust systems and powers that deprive people of that water).



4. *The missional church recognizes all people as both the "subject" and "object" of God's mission:* Being cognizant of the temptation to limit mission activities to serving rather than engaging—and thus objectifying people—missional churches develop relationships with those they seek to serve. They also recognize the gifts and abilities of the recipients and, following Jesus' model of inviting the people he served to be actively engaged in God's mission, welcome those they serve as

agents of mission. Missional churches demonstrate willingness to, like Jesus, be vulnerable enough to accept service from others.

5. *The missional church is engaged in transformation of persons, churches, systems, and culture:*

Missional churches anticipate and assume constant and often discontinuous change and seek rapid responses to changes. They allow for the initiation of new endeavors and the discontinuation of those efforts that no longer fill their purpose. Because missional churches focus on their host communities, they serve as catalysts of change in community systems. Knowing that transition precipitates conflict, missional churches learn and practice conflict-management skills that allow for conflict to be used as a positive tool for transformation. They also use these skills to help bring reconciliation and partnership among people and systems outside the church that may otherwise be competitive or even hostile toward each other.

6. *The missional church multiplies faith communities, disciples, and mission:* Multiplication is part of the original intention of missional churches. Since they see themselves as existing in the cross-cultural setting of a mission field, they embrace the formation of new missional faith communities. They avoid cloning themselves and attempt instead to initiate communities that differ from them in cultural expressions of worship and community service. Missional churches also form multiple mission teams as participants respond to their interests and God's call to service. Moreover, they seek to multiply their mission through recruitment and empowerment of those being served and by entering into partnerships with those outside the church who share common concerns.

It is unlikely that any singular congregation models all six characteristics. The intent of introducing churches to a missional understanding is to help them develop ministries of outreach that connect them with their host communities, where they address real needs through mission teams that experiment with ways of living this missional understanding. The hope is to see small churches in small communities discover a connecting point, in which they meaningfully serve their host communities. The dream is that participating churches will experience the missional church model enough to "taste and see that it is good," and then choose to continue this transformative journey.

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