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SO THAT THE BODY OF CHRIST MAY BE BUILT UP.”

EPHESIANS 4:12

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**LANCE FORD  
& BRAD BRISCO**



**THE  
MISSIONAL  
QUEST** **BECOMING  
A CHURCH OF  
THE LONG RUN**

  
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# ***Introduction***

*Before the First Step*



*The illiterate of the twenty-first century  
will not be those who cannot read and write,  
but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.*

ALVIN TOFFLER

**Whether** you have been on it for a while or this is your first venture into the missional conversation, welcome to the journey! While it is a road that many have been traveling for some time, others are just now getting their bearings and are beginning to discover why this is such an important topic for the church in North America. If you are fairly new to the discussion, a word of warning may be in order. Along the way you will experience times of frustration and bewilderment toward outdated and un-biblical ideas woven together with wonderful times of encouragement, discovery and adventure. Regardless of the bumps, however, you will discover this is one journey that must be taken.

If you are a veteran of the missional literature we hope you will find this book a resource that brings affirmation and additional clarity to your journey. Further we hope you discover *The Missional Quest* to be unique from other books in the missional genre in at least one way. We have written the book to provide very simple—but not always easy—steps to move an existing congregation in a missional direction.

Over the past several years we have worked with many dying and stagnant churches that have heard whispers from the missional dialogue. These churches' leaders may have read something from such authors as Alan Hirsch, Michael Frost, Hugh Halter, Neil Cole or others, but they just didn't know how to apply it in their local congregation. They knew there was profound truth in what was being written. They realized that the church growth methods on which their church was built were no longer sound or applicable. They acknowledged that there was a more theologically robust way of understanding mission and the church. And they knew their church must think differently about its place in the community and neighborhood.

But they wondered how to go about implementing the necessary change. What should be the first step? What church programs needed to be killed? And what new activities did the church need to engage? We believe this book will help you begin to answer those and many other questions you may be asking about leading your church on a missional quest.

The layout of the book is very intentional. The first section is titled "Fostering a Missional Mindset." And the first chapter is about how the church should think. It speaks to what we call the theological foundations. As a result of four decades of church growth thinking, most of us have deeply held assumptions about God, church and mission that must be challenged or realigned.

Without such realignment, we run the risk of simply attaching the word *missional* onto everything we are already doing and ignoring the significant changes necessary. A genuine missional movement is not about tweaking the way we do church. Instead, it is a complete and thorough recalibration of the way we understand God's mission in the world and how we are to participate in it.

The hearts and minds of the people in our congregations must be captured by a revolutionary way of thinking and living out the Christian life. And this simply will not happen if we don't begin the journey with serious theological reflection.

Before we ask what should we *do*—or what are the action steps—we must first ask *why*? Why does the religious landscape in America seem to be changing so quickly? Why don't the strategies and models for church growth from the past seem to “work” like they used to? And more importantly, why do we need to reconsider the nature and essence of the church? Why does the church in North America need to rethink mission? Why do we need to change the way we live our lives, individually and collectively as the body of Jesus? Addressing questions like these will prompt us to think both biblically and missiologically. We will begin to think like a missionary. Only today the mission field is not in a faraway land; it is in our own back yard.

The benefit to starting with theological reflection is that it is the only way to fully understand the practices we should be engaging. In other words, this must be a theological process and not just a pragmatic one. Without serious reflection on the missionary nature of the church, we will not completely grasp the fact that we are all missionaries sent into a local context. Without thinking well on the incarnation of Jesus, we will not totally comprehend the crucial posture of humility and sacrifice. Without seriously considering the doctrine of the *missio Dei*, we

will not recognize the importance of discovery and discernment throughout our missionary engagement.

With this in mind, we simply encourage you not to move to the rest of the book too quickly. Make sure you understand the implications of each of these theological perspectives. Moreover, make certain the people in your congregation are fully aware of the importance and magnitude of these foundational pieces. Without a clear understanding, the changes we make will simply not be sustainable. People will question why the church has started doing certain things and stopped doing others. Without unlearning and relearning, there is no underlying rationale for change. However, we have discovered that when people are captivated by the missionary nature of God and the church and they realize that they were created as a sent missionary people, they are energized to be active participants in God's mission.

The second section of the book is titled "Fostering a Missional Posture: What Steps Are Necessary?" In this portion of the book we take eight chapters to emphasize particular missionary principles and practices. Each of the chapters builds on the preceding chapter to create continuous momentum for equipping and releasing people into their local mission field. While we have made clear that we believe a rethinking of some core theological assumptions must take place, we also understand that we cannot simply think our way into a new way of acting. As important as chapter 1 is for moving a church in a missional direction, it is also true that people will never fully comprehend the concepts in the first chapter without stepping into mission as proposed in chapters 2 through 9. The good news is that as we struggle with the ideas from chapter 1 intellectually, at the same time we are engaging in mission in fresh new ways—and the learning curve for both increases significantly.

One additional aspect of the book that we hope you will find helpful are the sections we call “Steps on the Quest.” Here we provide to church leaders practical suggestions for both communicating missional values and instilling core practices in a local congregation. There is no silver bullet for turning an inwardly focused, self-centered church into one that is fully engaged in God’s redemptive purposes. But we believe “Steps on the Quest” will give you specific and concrete ideas for moving in the right direction.

Alan Hirsch is well known for saying to the church in America, “We are perfectly designed to achieve what we are currently achieving.” For anyone who has been paying close attention to the impact—or lack thereof—the church is having on the culture today, the achievement is clearly nothing to cheer about. The church must recapture its missionary identity and activate every Jesus follower to engage whole-heartedly in the ongoing mission of God. Our hope is that this book will give you the practical tools to lead the church in getting the job done.



- Section One -

# ***FOSTERING A MISSIONAL MINDSET***

**(How Should My Church Be Thinking?)**









# 1

## ***The Starting Line***

*Where the Missional Journey Begins*

**Brad Brisco**



*Mission is not  
primarily an activity of the church,  
but an attribute of God.*

**DAVID BOSCH**

*If mission defines who Christ is,  
and if Christ sends us as he was sent,  
then mission defines who we are.*

**ALBERT CURRY WINN**

*The mission is God's.  
The marvel is that God invites  
us to join in.*

**CHRISTOPHER WRIGHT**

***F***or nine years I taught a course on evangelism at a small Christian college. There was an exercise I would do every year to illustrate to the students just how inwardly focused most churches are. I would divide the white board into two large columns. I asked the class to list all of the programs and ministries that their church had for those inside the church. In other words, activities just for church members. They would quickly create a very long list of things like Sunday morning worship, Sunday school, small groups, prayer groups, men's ministry, women's ministry, children's ministry, sports leagues, special fellowships—you get the picture. Occasionally a student might argue that some of the activities were open to those outside the church, but inevitably they agreed that each of the activities was tailored with church people in mind.

The next step was to list the ministries that their church had exclusively for those outside the church family. Beyond that, I would ask them to consider any training that the church provided for members to equip them to engage those outside the church. The contrast was striking. In more than one case a student couldn't name a single activity that his or her church had for those outside the church walls. All of the church's planning, finances and energy were spent exclusively on church members.

The vast majority of churches in America are not missional. But despite this reality, some people believe using the phrase "missional church" is redundant. "Of course the church is missional," they quip. The truth is that it should be redundant, but it isn't. The church in North America, generally speaking, is clearly not missional. Both individually and collectively, it simply does not consistently live out of its missional identity. So please don't say that missional church language is redundant. It is not.

So how are we to best understand the language of missional church? Unfortunately the word *missional* today seems to be connected to just about everything in the church world. Missional leadership. Missional evangelism. Missional youth ministry. Missional parenting. Missional denominations. Even missional clothing! Moreover, people are using the word *missional* to describe “new” ways to think about church growth, outreach, social justice and discipleship. Lance likes to refer to this crazy use of terminology as “applying missional paint.” Buy a can of missional paint and brush it on to whatever the church is already doing. Just like that, it’s missional!

But if we reject this overuse, what then does the word *missional* mean? Moving forward, how are we to best understand it? I usually respond by saying that I have a short answer and a long answer to this question.

The short answer is that missional is simply the adjective form of the noun *missionary*. Therefore when we use the language of “missional church,” the word *missional* is used to describe the church as a missionary entity. The church doesn’t just send missionaries, the church *is* the missionary.

Now for the long answer.

When considering a more theologically rooted definition of the word *missional* we need to examine three chief distinctions.

***The church doesn’t just send missionaries, the church is the missionary.***

These are the theological foundations of a missional approach, which we believe must serve as the starting line to our journey. Each point deliberately confronts long-held assumptions most Christians have about God, the church and mission. Without serious attention to each of these three points, the missional journey will inevitably end prematurely.

### THE MISSIONARY NATURE OF GOD AND THE CHURCH

The first shift in thinking that must take place relates to our understanding of the missionary nature of God and the church. When we think of the attributes of God, we most often think of characteristics such as holiness, sovereignty, wisdom, justice, love and so on. Rarely do we think of God's missionary nature. But Scripture teaches that God is a missionary God—a sending God.

What's more, the Bible is a missionary book. Scripture is generated by and is all about God's mission activity. The word *mission* is derived from the Latin *missio*, meaning "sending." And it is the central theme describing God's activity throughout all of history to restore creation. While often overlooked, one remarkable illustration in Scripture of God's missionary nature is found in the "sending language" that is prominent throughout the Bible.

From God's sending of Abram in Genesis 12 to the sending of his angel in Revelation 22, there are literally hundreds of examples that portray God as a missionary, sending God. In the Old Testament God is presented as the sovereign Lord who sends in order to express and complete his redemptive mission. The Hebrew verb "to send," *shelach*, is found nearly eight hundred times. While it is most often used in a variety of non-theological sayings and phrases,<sup>1</sup> it is employed more than two hundred times with God as the subject of the verb.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is God who commissions and it is God who sends.

In the book of Exodus there is a fascinating dialogue surrounding God's prompting of Moses to confront Pharaoh. God is sending Moses to convince the king of Egypt to release the Israelites from bondage. In just six verses there are five references to sending. The Lord says:

“So now, go. I am *sending* you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have *sent* you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”

Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has *sent* me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has *sent* me to you.’”

God also said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has *sent* me to you.’” (Ex 3:10-15, emphasis added)

The prominence of sending language is not only seen in the books of Genesis and Exodus; throughout all of the historical books God is a sending God. Throughout the poetic books God is a sending God. Throughout the prophetic books God is a sending God. When you consider the books of prophecy in the Old Testament, it is easy to see that the prophets were first and foremost people sent by God.

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of sending in the Old Testament is found in Isaiah 6. In this passage we catch a glimpse of God’s sending nature: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I *send*? And who will go for us?’” To this Isaiah responds, “Here am I! *Send me!*” (Is 6:8, emphasis added).

Further, in the prophetic books it is interesting to note that the Old Testament ends with God promising through the words

of the prophet Malachi to send a special messenger as the forerunner of the Messiah: "I will send my messenger" (Mal 3:1). Then the New Testament begins with the arrival of that messenger in the person of John the Baptist, described in the Gospels as a man sent by God (Jn 1:6).

In the New Testament, sending language is found not only in the Gospels but also throughout the book of Acts and each of the Epistles. The most comprehensive collection of sending language, however, is found in the Gospel of John, where the word *send* or *sent* is used nearly sixty times. The majority of uses refer to the title of God as "one who sends" and of Jesus as the "one who is sent." All the way through John's Gospel we see God the Father sending the Son. God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit. And God the Father, Son and Spirit sending the church. In the final climactic sending passage in John's Gospel, Jesus makes clear that he is not only sent by the Father, but now he is the sender, as he sends the disciples: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (Jn 20:21).

With this sentence Jesus is doing much more than drawing a vague parallel between his mission and ours. Deliberately and precisely he is making his mission the model for ours. Our understanding of the church's mission must flow from our understanding of Jesus' mission as reflected in the Gospels. Geoffrey Harris states it this way:

The Gospels reflect the fact that mission is the essence of the Church's life and not just an aspect of it. The life of Jesus is invariably represented as being enacted in the world at large (and not in religious settings), among ordinary people of all sorts (and not just among believers) and, in particular, as reaching out to those beyond the normal scope and influence of the religious establishment. Jesus' early nickname,

“friend of sinners,” is transformed in the Gospels from a term of abuse into a badge of honour and respect.<sup>3</sup>

The sending language in Scripture not only emphasizes the missionary nature of God, but it also stresses the importance of understanding the church as a sent, missionary body. God is a missionary God who sends a missionary church. As Jesus was sent into the world, we too are sent into the world.

At the core of the missional conversation is the idea that a genuine missional posture is a sending rather than an attractional one. Our friend

***God is a missionary  
God who sends a  
missionary church.***

Linda Burgquist likes to point out that Jesus did not assign the seventy to become a core group that would function as a new “come-to” structure; he instead sent them out by twos to engage the surrounding towns and villages. Likewise, we should be sending the people in the church out among the people of the world rather than attempting to attract the people of the world in among the people of the church. This is a crucial distinction because most people in the church today do not think of their congregation in a sending, missionary manner.

In the book *Missional Essentials* we highlight the two most prominent ways people today understand church.<sup>4</sup> The first view is what some call the “Reformation heritage” perspective.<sup>5</sup> The point is that Protestants have inherited a particular view of church from the Reformers, which emphasizes the right preaching of the Word, the right administration of the ordinances and the proper exercise of church discipline. This view has left us with an understanding of the church as a place where certain things happen—a person goes to church to hear the Bible taught “correctly,” to participate in the Lord’s Supper and

baptism and, in some cases, to experience church discipline.

The second view is a slight variation on the “place where . . .” definition of the church. This “contemporary variation” view is perhaps the most prevalent way people in America understand the church today—that it is a vendor of religious goods and services. From this perspective, members are viewed as customers for whom religious goods and services are produced. Churchgoers expect the church to provide a wide range of religious services, such as great worship music, preaching, children’s programs, small groups, parenting seminars and so on. If you are not convinced that this is the prevailing vision that most churches operate from, read the words of George Hunsberger as he critiques the church built on this foundation:

Most of us value the use of many businesslike techniques and procedures in the life of the church but would be aghast at the suggestion that we fundamentally operate out of a model of the church as a business, a vendor of religious services. But consider the unconscious and unquestioned form of many of our carefully worded mission statements. It is amazing how many are cast something like this: “The mission of Anytown Community Church is to nurture its members in Christian faith and equip them for service and witness to Christ in the world.” What follows tends to detail the educational, worship, witness, and justice commitments of the church. But notice how the text reads. The mission of this *church* is to nurture its *members*. . . . The members are not conceived, in such a statement, as *being* the church and themselves *having* a mission on which they have been collectively sent. Instead, they are the customers, the regular consumers for whom the religious services and goods produced by the “church” are intended.<sup>6</sup>



One of the major issues with both of these views of defining the church is that the church is seen as an institution that exists for the benefit of its members. Or, as Hunsberger states above, many people believe the mission of the church is to “nurture its members.” But that is not the essence of the church! In fact, it is the exact opposite. In the words of Archbishop William Temple, the church is the only organization that exists for the sake of its nonmembers.

The alternative vision of the church is to see it as a people called and sent by God to participate in his redemptive mission for the world. The nature of the church—rooted in the very nature of God—is missionary. As William McAlpine puts it, “Rather than seeing ourselves primarily as a sending body, we must see ourselves as a body that is sent.”<sup>7</sup> The church still gathers, but the difference is that we gather not for our own sake but for the sake of others. Or better yet, for the sake of God’s mission. We come together regularly as a collective body to be equipped through teaching, prayer, worship, and study and then to be sent out into the world. The church is both a gathered and scattered people.

### ***STEPS ON THE QUEST***

*Create opportunities to teach on the missionary nature of God. Highlight the missionary, sending language of Scripture on Sunday mornings and small groups. Prominent sending passages include Genesis 12:1-3; Isaiah 6:1-9; 61:1-3; John 17:18; 20:21. Also refer to the Appendix for a complete survey of sending language in John’s Gospel.*

### INCARNATIONAL MISSION VERSUS EXTRACTIONAL MINISTRY

While the first theological distinction deals with the missionary nature of God and the “sentness” of the church, the second key concept has to do with how and where we are sent. The language of “incarnational mission” represents the embedding of our lives and the gospel into a local context. If the essence of missional living is sending, then the heart of incarnational mission is staying.

***The heart of  
incarnational mission  
is staying.***

The word *incarnation* comes from a Latin word that literally means “in the flesh.” It refers to the act whereby God took it upon himself to enter into the depths of our world so that the reconciliation between himself and humanity could be brought about. The incarnation is God’s ultimate missional participation in creation (Jn 3:16-17). When God entered into our world in and through the person of Jesus, he came to live among us (*eskenosen*—literally, “set up a tent”): “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (Jn 1:14, *The Message*).

As Alan Hirsch writes, “The Incarnation not only qualifies God’s acts in the world, but must also qualify ours. 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.”<sup>8</sup> However, not everyone believes that the incarnation should serve as a model for mission. Some believe that the phrase “incarnational mission” is misleading or even dangerous. They are afraid that the use of such language will diminish the theological integrity of the incarnation of Christ.

Acknowledging these concerns, we should note that there is absolutely no doubt that the incarnation of Jesus was a special, unrepeatable event. As we enter into the world of others, we cer-

tainly cannot take on another's identity in the way that Jesus did. He literally became one of us. Jesus was fully incarnated, taking on human flesh to rescue us from sin and death. But having said that, surely we can make a distinction between the incarnation and incarnational mission. As theologian Darrell Guder states, there may be a risk, but it is one clearly worth taking:

Just as any theological concept is susceptible to distortion, there are ways of misconstruing the linkage of Christian mission with the incarnation. It is possible to dilute the uniqueness and centrality of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ when his incarnation becomes a model for Christian behavior. A primary ethical or moralistic interpretation of the life of Jesus, such as was characteristic of nineteenth-century liberal theology, often downplays or dilutes the event-character of the gospel.

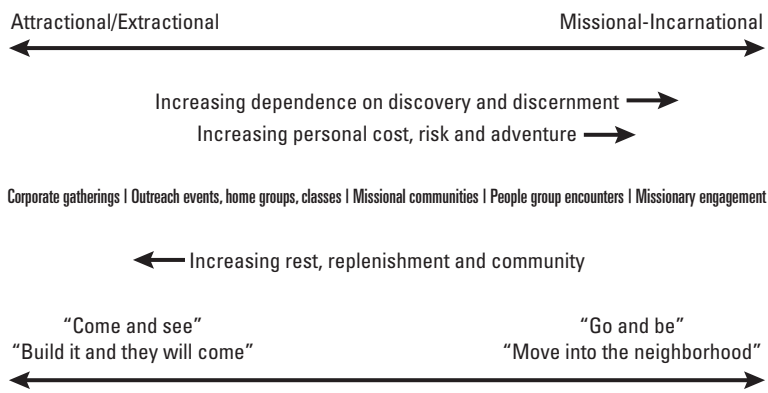
But it is that event character, the historical "happenedness" of Jesus' life that both enables and defines Christian witness. As we seek to explore the missional significance of the incarnation, we need to resist every temptation to dilute the centrality of the incarnation event. The risk represented by the concept of incarnational mission is worth taking, I think, especially as we are challenged to develop a viable mission theology for the Western world, which by common consent is now a very challenging mission field.<sup>9</sup>

There is much more that could be said concerning the use of incarnational language as a way to frame our understanding of mission. However, because there are several good resources that deal with the topic,<sup>10</sup> we want to move to the practical implications for existing congregations. If the incarnation provides a helpful way to understand how we should engage our local setting, then in what ways does this incarnational approach in-

tegrate with the principles of the church growth movement that has so greatly influenced the church in America over the past several decades?

Much of the discussion over the past several years has pitted two camps against one another. There are those in the missional-incarnational camp and those in the attractional, seeker-sensitive camp. But is it really an “either-or” discussion? Is there no room in our understanding of church and mission to see a “both-and” way of engaging our communities?

We have found the following diagram to be helpful in illustrating the necessity of a “both-and” approach to expressions of ecclesia—or church life.



**Figure 1.1.** Adapted from Drew Goodmanson’s “triperspectival ecclesiology” as described in “The Decline of the Western Church and the Call to Renew your Church’s Ecclesiology,” Goodmanson: Leadership, Church Web & Tech, Church Planting (blog), May 7, 2007, [www.goodmanson.com/church/the-decline-of-the-western-church-and-the-call-to-renew-your-churchs-ecclesiology](http://www.goodmanson.com/church/the-decline-of-the-western-church-and-the-call-to-renew-your-churchs-ecclesiology).

Although it is certainly not comprehensive, there are at least five different expressions of ecclesia that can be placed on a continuum. Those expressions toward the left side of the continuum are more attractional in nature, while those on the right side take on a much more missional-incarnational posture.

Now before we consider a description of each of the different expressions, a clarification of terminology may be necessary. When we use the word *attractional* we are speaking of an approach to church that pours a disproportionate amount of time and resources into the corporate worship service to create a place that nonbelievers will want to come and be exposed to the truth of Jesus. As discussed earlier, the church takes on the role of a vendor of religious goods and services.

Further, the term *attractional* describes our missionary stance in relation to our context. In other words, when we operate from an attractional paradigm, we are asking those outside the church to come to us rather than seeing ourselves as the missionary people of God who are sent to others. We are asking them to scale the cultural barriers that lie between where they live and where the church exists. In a very real sense, we are asking those outside the church to become the missionaries.

Now please do not confuse being attractional with being attractive. Our lives ought to be attractive to those around us because of what Jesus is doing in and through us. We should live lives that are alluring to others. People should be drawn to the church because it is made up of people whose lives are counter-intuitive to the normal ways of the world. They are attractive because their lives exude grace, mercy, justice and wisdom.

This bit of confusion has led some to use the term *extractional* rather than *attractional*.<sup>11</sup> Extractional refers to the way the church has historically extracted new believers from their local context. When someone comes to Christ, the church is notorious for quickly removing them from their relational connections to attend a church service and inadvertently teaches them that “church is something they go to rather than who they are in the places they inhabit. So the church pulls them out of the contexts in which they live and often disconnects their con-

tribution from their everyday context.”<sup>12</sup> This is what is meant by the term “attractional-extractional” to describe the far left end of the continuum.

The far right of the continuum is illustrated by the missional-incarnational posture. Missional speaks to our direction—we are sent—while incarnational speaks to the manner in which we are sent. Incarnational mission must involve living in proximity with others. We simply “cannot demonstrate Christlikeness at a distance from those whom we feel called to serve.”<sup>13</sup> Just as Jesus took on flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood, we must do likewise. This may require moving geographically to be closer to those to whom God has sent us. At the very least it will demand creating time and space to be directly and actively involved in the lives of people we are seeking to reach.

In addition to the idea of proximity, incarnational mission also involves the idea of presence. Presence moves beyond proximity to identification and surrender. Jesus identified with and advocated for those he was called to. As Philippians 2 makes clear, Jesus humbled himself. He literally emptied himself for the sake of others. This realization suggests an incarnational approach that calls us to relational identification with our neighbors that will lead to tangible acts of love and sacrifice.

Moreover, when considering the significance of an incarnational paradigm it is helpful to recognize that Jesus’ words from John 20:21, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you,” are most often used to emphasize the sending of the disciples and subsequently the church. But we must not neglect the first half of the passage. Jesus says, “As the Father has sent me.” The word translated “as” (or in some translations “just as”) means “like” or “in a similar manner.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, we need to be sent like Jesus was sent. To whom and in what manner was

Jesus sent? He was sent to the down-and-outers of society. He was with and for tax collectors, the oppressed, the poor and the diseased. Again, taking Jesus as our example, we are called to do likewise. R. Geoffrey Harris puts it this way:

In an incarnational model of mission, those who join with Jesus are those who reach out to the marginalized. They do not simply offer “spiritual” salvation—forgiveness of sin or experience of God—but associate themselves with those most in need of a friend—with the Christ who asks a loose woman for water, and speaks at length to her; who is on the side of the woman taken in adultery, and stays to talk to her. The incarnate Christ is the one who sweats and agonizes with the little ones of the earth, who bleeds for those who are victims of corruption and the brutal misuse of power. Those who follow such a Christ in the world are in solidarity with those he most obviously came to help—not the righteous, but the lost.<sup>15</sup>

Now that we’ve clarified the terminology of the two poles on the continuum, let’s consider five groupings that represent different forms and functions through which the church can express its identity.

*Corporate gatherings.* This would include weekly worship services as well as other larger gatherings where several smaller groups meet collectively for worship, teaching, prayer, fellowship and so on. Corporate gatherings for most churches are the clearest example of an attractional mindset. The church believes that if they provide high-quality programming in areas such as teaching, worship and children’s ministry, people will be “attracted” to attend.

*Outreach events, home groups, classes.* This would include events such as block parties that take place on church property

or in neighborhoods surrounding the church facility. This would also include other one-time outreach events such as concerts or plays. Other examples of outreach activities would include sports leagues, AWANA, vacation Bible school and so on.

Home groups are more traditional small groups or Bible studies organized around the need for greater community and discipleship for church members. Classes offered by the church would include topics addressing specific needs of the surrounding community. For example, a church may offer a marriage enrichment seminar or expertise on parenting.

While each of the examples from this expression of church involves some engagement outside the church walls—to conduct a class that is helpful you have to discover what the needs of the community are, for example—they still tend to lean more heavily on an attractional mindset. People still need to be persuaded to participate in what the church is offering.

*Missional communities.* The difference between a typical small group and a missional community is that most small groups are centered on the need to develop relationships. In fact, it can be argued that small group ministries were popularized decades ago by the need to “close the back door” of churches that were experiencing significant growth through the Sunday gathering but losing potential members just as quickly because these newcomers were not connecting with others in the church. Small groups became the primary way to assimilate people into the life of the church.

Also, traditional small groups attempt to focus on discipleship in the midst of group life. Most small groups engage in some type of Bible study or group curriculum. While one can certainly make the case that Bible study does not automatically lead to making disciples, for most small group ministries discipleship is at least the intent.



For missional communities, on the other hand, the starting point is mission. Missional communities are catalyzed by and organized around mission. Relational community is still cultivated and discipleship remains a top priority, but both happen (we believe best) in, through and around missional engagement. While we will discuss the topic of missional communities much more in chapter 7, the point for now is to recognize what differentiates them from typical groups in most churches.

*People group encounters.* These can involve a wide range of missional activities that involve identifying and engaging certain affinity groups. For example, there are many “tribes” formed around hobbies or special interests such as art, music or sports. A church might identify ways they can partner with a local group of artists, form a team to join a sports league or lean relationally into a group of civic leaders.

People groups can also include those who share a common geographical or vocational connection. A church might “adopt” teachers from a school in the local community. Some churches have come alongside school athletic programs, especially in impoverished areas of the community, to provide proper sports gear and pre-game meals.

In today’s mobile environment people group encounters will certainly involve engaging a community’s ethnic diversity. Nearly every city in the United States has pockets of ethnic groups made up of recent immigrants to the country as well as second and third generations that have grown up here. Each group provides unique cultural challenges in terms of relating to a local church.

Regardless of the type or size of the group, a missional-incarnational approach will prompt us to ask what it looks like to incarnate the gospel in this particular place, at this particular time, to this particular people group.

*Missionary engagement.* This last category addresses individual missionary activity. You will never have a missional church without missional people who engage the lives of others where they live, where they work and where they play. In other words, every church member must see themselves as missionaries living out their missional calling in their neighborhood, through their vocation and in social settings (third places) within the local community. We will speak much more on each of these topics in chapters 4 through 6.

Now imagine three arrows running from one end of the continuum to the other. The first arrow goes from the “corporate worship” category (on the attractional end of the continuum) to “missionary engagement” on the missional-incarnational end of the spectrum. This arrow represents the necessity of increasing dependence on discovery and discernment toward God’s activity. As we move in a missional-incarnational direction we must experience a heightened sensitivity to where and how God’s Spirit is moving.

Please do not hear what we are not saying. This does not mean that more attractional expressions of church are somehow void of God’s activity. We should be listening closely to God’s leading in every aspect of the life of the church. We are simply saying that as we move into areas that are less familiar, perhaps more “risky,” we will need to be more spiritually aware of our surroundings and how God is moving in the lives of the people there.

The troubling reality is that we have all seen too many cases where large gatherings are more about human ingenuity than about reliance on the Spirit. That simply cannot be the case when we are living out missionality in a local setting. We must rely on the Spirit to know when, where and how to participate in what the Spirit is already doing in the places we inhabit. Further, we will have neither the passion nor the strength to live

out an incarnational posture—for the sake of others—if we are not continually refreshed by the Spirit. We will expand on this topic in chapter 2.

The second arrow points in the same direction as the first, but it illustrates the increasing personal cost, risk and adventure associated with a missional-incarnational stance. As we move into the expressions of church toward the right of the continuum, the costs in our lives will undoubtedly increase. For most people the only “cost” associated with the majority of church meetings is mere attendance, simply taking the time to be there when the gathered church meets. However, living for and with those God has sent us to will involve much greater commitments of both our time and resources. The more closely we follow Jesus into the hard places, the more sacrificial our lives must become (Lk 9:23).

In addition to increased personal cost, moving into relational proximity with others will encompass risk. People are messy. And the closer we lean into the lives of those around us, the messier things will become. The further we step beyond the safety of the Christian bubble, the greater the risk we encounter.

However, we must also acknowledge that in the midst of missionary engagement we experience the greatest opportunities for adventure. On the fringes of missionary activity we have the best vantage point to see what God is doing. When we are personally engaged in God’s mission we experience firsthand how God is working. Therefore, this arrow highlights the necessity to move people from a passive, consumerist church mindset to missional engagement that involves both costs and great rewards.

The final arrow moves in the opposite direction. It starts on the right side of the continuum with “missionary engagement” and extends to “corporate worship” on the attractional side.

This arrow represents the increasing opportunities for rest and replenishment that are available as we participate in local faith communities. It emphasizes the need for all expressions of the church. There are times, especially in seasons of intense missionary engagement, that we need to be able to gather with other believers to be refreshed through worship, study, prayer and community.

Now that we've considered each category, let's address why it is important to frame the apparent tension between an attractional approach on the one end and a missional-incarnational position on the other. There are at least three significant observations to underscore.

First, the issue of missional-incarnational vs. attractional is not an "either-or" proposition. The central issue is where is the emphasis in the life of the church. If the majority of the church's resources are spent on creating an environment to attract people to church activities, it will be extremely difficult to equip and release people in the church to engage missionally. This consumerist mindset develops when the programming of the church is seen to exist primarily for the use of church members. When people are attracted to the church because it is a vendor of religious goods and services, it is nearly impossible to move them to become sacrificial, "for-the-sake-of-others" missionaries. What you win people with is what you win them to.

Let's be clear: there is nothing wrong with attracting people to attend various meetings or activities of the church. The problem arises when it becomes the primary focus of the church. As a result the church will most likely miss what God is doing in the community around it. We will address this topic more fully in chapter 3.

When evaluating church "success," we must move away from measuring numbers related to the large gathering. The tradi-

tional matrix of buildings, budgets and butts will no longer suffice. Instead the church must begin highlighting activities in the quadrants of missional communities, people group encounters and individual missionary engagement. New score-cards must be created in these areas to provide a better picture of how the church is engaging its community. We will address the need for developing new measurables in chapter 9.

When starting a new church, we must begin with missionary activity and not with the corporate gathering. Church planting over the past several decades has really been about planting a church service. Church planters have been encouraged to focus on the “launch,” which is code for Sunday morning worship service. As already noted, when the emphasis is on the large gathering, we by default lose focus on what God is doing in the surrounding context.

Furthermore, because people today are less and less interested in the programs and activities of the church, starting a church by attempting to attract people to attend the corporate gathering is proving to be increasingly futile. On the other hand, when starting a new church by instilling a missional-incarnational DNA from the very beginning, the church can grow into other expressions of church life over time or, at the very least, at the same time.

A wonderful picture of this “both-and” mentality is illustrated in the life of New City Church, a church plant in a suburb of Kansas City. Within just six months of starting its first Sunday morning worship service the church had over three hundred attending its corporate gatherings. However, the rapid growth in Sunday services was not because of some great attractional strategy. Instead it was the result of the core group immersing themselves into the life of the surrounding community.

New City had planned twenty-five community outreach

events prior to launching its Sunday service. Initially the purpose of these events was to raise awareness of the new church. However, as the church began to lean into the community through its various outreach activities, the needs of the people in the community began to capture the hearts of the church. As a result the church decided to push the launching of public worship services back to create more time to build relationships in the community. Matt Miller, pastor of New City, regularly reminds people that the weekend gathering is a time one day a week to celebrate how the church is serving the neighborhood every day of the week.

New City is a great example of how a church can be engaged in mission in every expression of church life. It has equipped and released dozens of “missionaries” into the surrounding neighborhoods. It has adopted various people groups in the community. It has started missional communities that each have their own mission focus. And it provides training in the church facility to address specific community needs.

Perhaps the best example of the “both-and” mentality of New City’s engagement can be seen in its relationship with an elementary school that is literally a few feet out the back door of the church’s meeting space. This particular school is what is referred to as a Title One school, meaning that nearly all of the students receive free or reduced-price lunches. The school district refers to the school as an urban school in a suburban setting. The vast majority of the students walk to school from the surrounding apartment complexes. The school as a whole and the students in particular are under constant financial strain. Families in the neighborhood that have the financial means to do so choose to home school, send their kids to private school or transfer to another elementary school outside the area.

After discovering these needs and discerning how God was

leading the church to be involved, New City decided to do all they could to bless the school. They “adopted” every teacher in the school and found dozens of ways to be a blessing to every student. And as the students captured the hearts of the church, the church’s involvement began to move beyond activities. Church families began moving into the community so their kids could be a part of the school. While others were moving out, New City was moving in.

Individual families and the church body as a whole discovered ways to engage every aspect of the life of the school. Here’s a wonderful example of just how important New City has become to the life and vitality of the school: After just six months, the school presented Matt with a “lifetime achievement award” for assisting the school in fulfilling its purpose in the lives of the students.

One final example that illustrates how the people of New City have incarnated their lives into the lives of students involves another staff member named Chris Moix. Chris was disposing of several bags of trash in the dumpster behind the church on the last day of school. Because it was during recess a few of the students noticed Chris through the chain link fence. The students began bringing their school yearbooks to the fence to have Chris sign their books. As students began to come to the fence with books and pens in hand, more students began to gather to request a signature. As Chris signed one book and handed it over the fence, another student would ask him to sign his or her book. For several minutes there was a constant exchanging of books, until everyone got Chris’ signature. Chris said he felt like a rock star.

When Chris first told me this story, I wanted to cry. Chris and the church had come to mean so much to these elementary kids that they wanted his signature. And all of this took place not

because New City has a great Sunday morning gathering but because the people of New City understand that they are the sent, missionary people of God.

### **STEPS ON THE QUEST**

*Take an assessment. In what categories of the diagram do the majority of your church's programs currently fall? What would it take to cultivate movement toward the other expressions of church? Create an opportunity to share the diagram with others in the church. What ideas do they have for other expressions of church?*

### **PARTICIPATING IN THE MISSIO DEI**

The third key theological foundation involves the concept of the *missio Dei*, or “mission of God.” It is God who has a mission to set things right in a broken world—to redeem and restore it to what was always intended. Therefore mission is not a program of the church. It is not something we invent. Mission is not something we initiate. Instead mission flows directly from the nature and purposes of a missionary God. It is not that the church has a mission; it is that God's mission has a church. In other words, it is God's mission, and the church is an instrument created by God to be sent into the world to join in his mission. This is a complete game-changer in at least two ways.

***It is not that the church has a mission; it is that God's mission has a church.***

First, a *missio Dei* perspective should challenge the church to re-think mission. Most congregations view missions as one activity among many other equally important func-



tions of the church. Therefore, the missions program is seen alongside that of worship, small groups, women's ministries, youth and children's ministry, and so on. When a church views missions in this way, the job of the missions committee is to determine where the missions budget should be spent rather than seeing that everything the church does is informed by God's mission.

When the church begins to define itself as an agent of God's mission, it will begin to organize every activity of the church around the *missio Dei*. Mission becomes the organizing principle, which means that mission goes beyond being some sort of optional activity for the church. Instead God's mission is seen as "the organizing axis of the church. The life of the church revolves around it. This is not to say that we don't do corporate worship, develop community, and make disciples, but that these are catalyzed by and organized around the mission function. Only in this way can we be truly missional. Merely adding serving events or special outreach days to our church schedules will not develop missional people nor make a missional church."<sup>16</sup>

### **STEPS ON THE QUEST**

*Begin asking how certain programs or activities of your church would change if informed by God's mission. How might small groups operate differently if shaped by God's mission? How would the corporate teaching of Scripture be different? How might worship change?*

Determining where and how we engage in God's mission is the second way a *missio Dei* theology influences our activity. If the mission is God's—and it is—then how do we step into it?

How do we truly participate in what God is doing? Author Geoffrey Harris provides these helpful words:

The average church member may be reassured to know that mission is instigated by the simple act of praying, and of listening to God, and following God's guidance. In such fundamental activities all Christians can participate. In addition, it is reassuring to know that God's Spirit is at work in the world prior to our engagement in any relationship or any work of mission. The presence of God in the world means that anyone embarking upon God's mission already has an ally and accomplice in the work. It becomes "mission alongside" rather than mission alone.<sup>17</sup>

In a small group curriculum titled *Missional Essentials*, I shared what I call the four D's of missional engagement. It was my attempt to give practical handles to the kind of thinking shared in Harris's words above. If it is about God's mission and not ours, then how do we know where, when and how to participate in what God is doing?

**Discover.** The first step is to listen. Individually and collectively we must cultivate our ability to listen well on three fronts—to God, to the local community and to each other. It is simply impossible to ascertain the movement of God without carving out significant time to listen to his voice through prayer and Scripture as well as the voices of those we desire to serve. The first question we ask: Where is God actively at work in my community?

**Discern.** In addition to listening, participating in God's mission involves the difficult task of discernment. Not only will we need to discern what God is already doing, but we will also need to ask a follow-up question: "In light of my (our) gifts and resources, how does God want me to participate in

what he is doing?” The fact is we can’t do it all, which is true for both individual followers of Jesus and local congregations. But it is also true that God has gifted us all to do something! The point of discernment is to determine where and how to participate in God’s mission.

*Do.* This may seem obvious, but the process of discernment is useless if we do not obey what God is calling us to do. When God prompts us to participate in what he is doing in the lives of others, we must be obedient to respond.

***The point of discernment is to determine where and how to participate in God’s mission.***

*Debrief.* Throughout the process of engaging God’s mission we must create opportunities to reflect on our missional involvement. Sometimes this simply means we need individual down time to reflect on our activities. We may need to ask God to affirm our involvement or to ask for clarity of direction. But it will also involve carving out time to reflect with others in our faith community. We need to hear what others are seeing and sensing concerning God’s activities and to hear the stories of how others are engaging God’s mission.

The four D’s help to put the emphasis on the place God has sent us and on how God has already been working in that place long before we ever arrived. The starting point must involve an attitude of listening and learning. Mark Van Steenwyk offers this added encouragement:

Don’t start doing things until you understand the ethos of the neighborhood. Let the spirit of the place make its impression. Fall in love with the little things. Get to know the people. If you start “doing your thing” before you are familiar with the place, then you’re forcing things too much. Ministry should fit with how God is already working

in a place. If you start pushing your agenda before you start making friends with the neighbors and finding out about their lives, then you're a salesman, not a minister of reconciliation. And throughout it all, pray. Pray for spiritual eyesight. It is the Spirit's job to reveal Christ . . . not just to "them" but also to "you." Pray that you can see Christ's fingerprints in your neighborhood. Pray to see the face of Christ in the face of those who live around you. Pray for the Spirit to show you what is wrong in your area, and also what is right. Seek to understand.<sup>18</sup>

This chapter has been about laying the proper theological foundation for the missional conversation—or perhaps the missional conversion. For many in the church there is a conversion of thought and practice that must take place. For most, it will not be an easy journey. Reordering our lives and the life of the church around a missional-incarnational calling will seem too risky for some. They will prefer to remain on the sidelines, while others venture into the unfamiliar. But be assured on one thing. God is already there.