

NFConnection, June 2007  
Dear Dad: An Introduction  
to the Missional Church  
by Ray Bystrom

Dear Dad,

It was good to get your recent letter. I always thank God for you and I'm happy to know you continue to enjoy good health - at the young age of 89!

In your letter, you indicated that your pastor is using a new term in the pulpit, the term "missional." You implied that his usage is different from what you have heard in the past. I can appreciate your confusion - the word is not even in Webster's Dictionary! It's ambiguous too, carrying a lot of positive & negative baggage from the good & bad ways people have spoken about missions and missionaries.

I confess that your pastor and I are probably reading the same books and attending the same conferences (of course, I'd like to believe we are also reading the same Bible). The Gospel and Our Culture Network (a coalition of North Americans committed to the church – [www.gocn.org](http://www.gocn.org)) began using the term in the early 90's and the book *The Missional Church* (Eerdmans, 1998) popularized it.

Well, enough about the recent background of this term. You ask, "What is a 'missional' church?" Well, let me take a poke at your question but let's agree in advance to continue the conversation. One letter cannot unpack the richness of the expression "missional church."

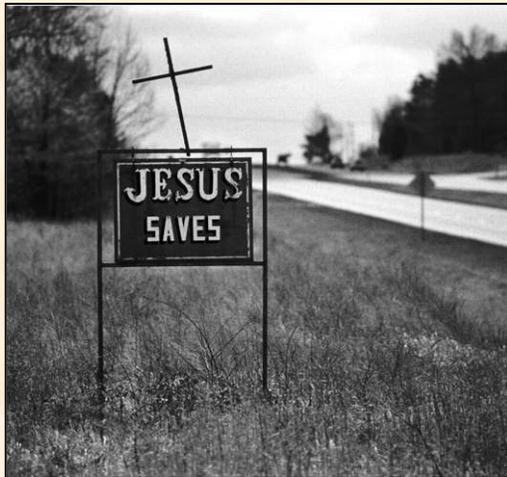
As you know, mission is all about God, God's great heart for the world. Mission refers to the sending of Jesus by the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son (John 17:18; 20:21). Indeed, prior to the modern era, the word "mission" was always used by Christians to refer to God's mission in the world. And you know the biblical story all too well. You taught it to me as a child. Initially, God's missionary character was evident in creation as he formed the world and invited his crowning creation, human beings, to become his partners in caring & developing planet earth. After the fall, God expressed his missionary character by sending Jesus Christ into the world to restore to right relationship all that had been lost in the fall. Ultimately, God's missionary nature will be evidenced in the work of consummation when he acts in history to bring all creation to completion ("Come, Lord Jesus" – Rev. 22:20). So remember that when your pastor uses the word "missional," it refers, first and foremost, to God's heartbeat for the world.



Now here's the exciting part. God invites the church (his people) to join Him in his caring, sustaining, and redeeming activity in the world. We are called & sent to dance to the rhythm of God's heartbeat for the world. Amazing isn't it? Our great God needs a people who live out the implications of the "good news" in their individual and corporate lives. If those outside the Christian faith are to experience God's love for them and the entire cosmos, God seems to believe they encounter His love best in the church, God's missionary community. We are shaped and formed by the "good news" and called to demonstrate to others what the "good news" looks like. We are the "lens" through which and by which they can see, taste and hear the "good news." Clearly, the church plays an important role in God's mission to the world! We are God's partners.

But it's not an easy assignment. God is asking us to be as rigorous about our missionary life here in North America as we have been about missionary work done elsewhere (Africa, Thailand, etc.). As God's people we live in a sort of tension between the gospel on one side, and our culture on the other. We are called to be faithful to the gospel but in a fully contextual way, which means we may be unfaithful to the gospel message at times, and we may be uncontextual at other times. These are the two dangers we need to try to avoid as God's people.

Let me say this again in a different way. As God's people, we are shaped by the gospel message but we are also shaped by our culture. We are always in the place of being converted by the gospel message. We are always in need of more changing and transforming. God is never finished with us. Like any other church in the world that finds itself gripped by the gospel message of God's love for the world, we find our culture affirmed at some points (e.g., whenever it cares for the poor & needy) and critiqued at other points (e.g., whenever it succumbs to materialism, greed, & violence) with the result that we are constantly being re-patterned in our life together as God's people. The hard part about being a "missional" church is that we must always be clarifying our identity as the people of God, seeking to understand the shape we have inherited from our cultural context and then hearing the gospel's call to be transformed for the sake of God's mission in the world. This is not a singular event. We continue to be converted in our thinking & living in the style of Romans 12.



Like a lot of evangelical anabaptists, I've come to believe that God's people are called to be different, to live as a contrast society. A lot of people think the church in NA looks suspiciously like the dominant culture rather than an alternative to it. I suspect they are right. But I want to be part of a church that is more than a "place where certain things happen" and more than a "vendor of religious goods and services." We are called to conform to Christ rather than the surrounding culture. For some congregations it may mean intentionally rejecting materialism by being with the poor, or rejecting the domination of the profit motive by giving generously, or rejecting

individualism by being committed to one another. These are just examples. My point is that whenever a congregation chooses to live as a contrast society at some critical point, it bears witness to the “good news” of God’s love for the world.

This business of being a “missional church,” as I have defined it, is not easy but I believe it’s biblical and it has its advantages. It eliminates the need for distinctions like “social action” and “evangelism” by integrating these two noble tasks into the fabric of God’s mission through the church. Whenever a person becomes a Christian, s/he joins God’s community, which loves others by seeking their good in the style of Jeremiah 29. Second, it eliminates old distinctions like “ministry” (what we do inside the church) and “mission” (what we do outside the church) for all ministry/service is for the sake of the world. We deepen our common understanding of the biblical story not just for our own sake but so that we are better equipped to love God and neighbor in the style of Luke 10. Third, it eliminates old distinctions like “missionary” and “mission field” for every Christian is a missionary (sent by God) and every place is a mission field (the focus of God’s love) as Paul states in Romans 12. Today, the mission field is “under my roof” (home), “over my fence” (neighbor), “in my workplace” (co-workers), “to my city” (urban center) and “among the nations” (global).



I apologize for rambling on and on like this. But I confess: I’ve made a shift in my thinking about the church since I left home as a young man. For me, mission is not just a program or projects some people in the church do from time to time (like a short term mission trip, mission committee & budget). The church is missionary by nature; we are a “sent people,” not just a “sending” people. Also, I no longer worship a God who is simply a “personal Savior,” I worship a “cosmic Savior.” For me, salvation is no longer just about me, my soul, my personal identity or my maturity (you know, the “I will bless you” part of God’s words to Abraham). Rather, salvation is all about joining God in his love for the world; it’s all about others. The church exists for the world in imitation of God’s own love for the world (you know, the “I will make you a blessing to others” part of God’s words to Abraham in Genesis 15 & 17).

Well, thanks for listening to me, Dad. I hope these few comments help you sort things out a bit. Let me know what you think, OK?

Much love & respect, Raymond (robelb@aol.com)

PS: By the way, my seminary community (MBBS) has recently adopted the “missional” church paradigm as its theological core value statement: “We give witness to a biblical theology that is both Anabaptist and evangelical, teaching that the church is called by Jesus Christ to represent God’s reign (read “mission”) in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit as its community (being), servant (doing), and messenger (telling).”