



# ALLELON

A MOVEMENT OF MISSIONAL LEADERS

## WHAT IS MISSIONAL CHURCH?

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE  
MISSIONAL CHURCH CONVERSATION

BY ALAN J. ROXBURGH

What is Missional Church - An Introduction to the Missional Church Conversation  
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## ONE MAN'S JOURNEY INTO MISSION

As a young boy growing up in Liverpool, England, I was known as the “quiet child.” I spent hours by a tiny coal-fire reading book after book that chronicled the adventures of the great explorers and how they opened paths to far off places. I was engulfed in perilous, promising adventures that shaped my imagination.

Little did I know that I would participate in my own kind of adventure as my family immigrated to Canada. As a teenager, the *Empress of France* swept me away from the world I knew, one that I could control and manage, to the unknown world of suburban Toronto. On the other side of the ocean, the rules had changed. While I was a quiet boy inside my home in Liverpool, I was a survivor on the streets. My life was shaped by street gangs, fighting and a deep mistrust for adult systems of power. In Canada, I had to learn the hard way that fists were not an effective weapon in my new world.

By my late teens, I found a few people in a church who were warm and caring beyond anything I had ever encountered. For the first time in my life, as strange as it sounds, I found people who loved me. I wanted what they had, and thus, I became a Christian. My becoming a Christian had nothing to do with guilt, sin or failure. When you grow up in an underclass in the inner city, those religious words are just boring and numbingly banal. On the streets, we were surrounded by guilt, sin and failure. This was not news – it was just the way life was. But, to be loved, to experience human beings who gave themselves to you without strings, that was overwhelming, confusing news. And it conquered me.

At the same time, I began listening to the formal words that come from the front of the church. The pastor spoke much about guilt, power and conformity. I left wanting no part of that narrative or its social codes.

While attending university, I discovered that God had gifted me with the ability to think and imagine. I thrived at university and determined that academics would be my life. However, this was not to be. In a moment of utter clarity, sitting in the basement of a library, I knew I was being called to the church. According to the tradition, this calling meant that I was to go to seminary and be trained to serve as a pastor. During this part of my preparation, I was given images of ministry and leadership that made no sense to me. I did not fit the social norms and expectations of the future pastors. I just started asking questions about a different way, but no one seemed able to engage these musings.

By my late twenties, I was pastoring my first church and it grew during my eight years with these people. I concluded my service there, however, in a state of confusion and crisis. I found it relatively easy to make church work, but I knew it had little to do with the kingdom I was discovering in Scripture. I knew that for almost all my generation the church and the Christian narrative were not only irrelevant but also antithetical to their hopes and dreams for a different world. I was realizing that church had to be a lot more than attracting more people and telling

them God had a wonderful plan for their lives. It seemed to me that the Gospel was about an incredible adventure that took me far from the question of meeting “my” needs and on wild journey into places where I would need to display the same kind of the love I had been shown as a teenager.

My questions kept piling up, but there were few people to talk to. When I shared my questions and frustrations about the church, most others only heard me being critical. It was hard to live alone with this struggle and confusion. I didn’t want to spend my life growing a church filled with transfers from other churches, people who came because we had better programs for their kids or better music. I had been called to the church; I couldn’t leave or quit!

With these overwhelming questions, I began working in a dying church in downtown Toronto, went to graduate school to study theology, and wandered around North America and Europe to find anyone who would share my experience. I read Lesslie Newbigin’s *Foolishness to the Greeks*, which he wrote after returning to his homeland of England, after serving as missionary to India for over 30 years. Then, I met him at a conference in Sweden. We went to supper together, an experience that was nothing less than my own adventure into C. S. Lewis’ Narnia. Later, I stumbled upon a workshop led by Craig Van Gelder, about the church, the Gospel and our culture. I was finally discovering those involved in a conversation about what it means to be the church in our culture. All of these encounters launched me on a new journey where I began experimenting with new ways of being the church.

Along the way, I have been privileged to teach and write about what is called the Missional Church. I have found that many people still struggle to understand clearly what it means. In the following pages, I have sought to provide a summary account of what is meant by and involved in missional church. More than anything else, it is about a people who are continually asking questions about what God is up to in the world about them and experimenting in all kinds of ways with joining God in the mission of the kingdom.

## **WHERE DID MISSIONAL CHURCH COME FROM?**

In 1998, a small network completed writing the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. We met over three years with theologians, missiologists and historians for conversations around the ideas of a missional ecclesiology. We were all tentative and testing our convictions. We didn’t have a clearly developed narrative of the *missional* church; we were just testing ideas and convictions. We were laboring on a journey of learning and discovery. Our work coalesced around the writings of Lesslie Newbigin. Each of us had been drawn into this conversation through some interaction with or connection to him. In the mid 70s, Newbigin returned to England to encounter the fact that the Christian culture he had left some thirty years earlier had all but disappeared. Newbigin recognized that the greatest challenge to Christian mission was now within the very nations that had once sent missionaries out around the world. The peoples of Europe, shaped by the Western tradition, had all but lost their identity as Christian.

In one memorable epithet, Newbigin had been asked by an Asian leader the question: “Can the West be converted”? That question represented the fundamental issue to be addressed by the church. The challenge facing the Western churches was the re-conversion of its own people.

This European conversation found its way to North America as numbers of younger missiologists visited Newbigin and invited him to spend time with them. Newbigin visited 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 struggling with similar questions about the nature of Christian witness in America at the close of the millennium. Out of these stirrings, a small, but growing network began more intentional conversations with one another, eventually, forming what became The Gospel in Our Culture Network. Through its consultations and writing projects, it became clear there was significant work to be done to address issues of Gospel faithfulness in North American culture. Against this background, developed the concepts shared in *Missional Church*.

## **MISSIONAL CHURCH – WHAT IT DOESN'T MEAN?**

While writing *Missional Church*, I was pastoring a church in West Vancouver, British Columbia. The ideas I was developing with the team of writers were challenging my imagination, but it was also confronting everything I knew about leadership. While developing an understanding of missional church, as a pastor I was practicing forms of leadership contrary to the formation of missional communities. The missional journey was a difficult one – it took time for me to recognize the patterns and understandings of leadership in me that needed to be addressed.

Through the trials and errors of pastoring, I discovered nuances of doing church that appeared to fit the missional church category, but in reality they fell dramatically short. For the last ten years, pastors, denominational leaders and seminaries have invited me to help them process the meaning of the missional church. In conferences, teaching sessions or simply dialogue with other leaders, I've learned that what took place for me has to also happen in every leader – (big shift of pronouns) one must first deconstruct one's preconceived definitions before helping others construct a missional way of life in a church. Some of the common misunderstandings I and others have had about the missional church follow. Missional church is not:

- An evangelism program
- A new way of doing foreign missions
- A method for church growth
- The "Next" way to do church
- A Post-modern way of doing church
- The Anti-traditional pattern of church



What I find most disturbing about these misunderstandings is how the *missional* language is now used for almost everything we are already doing. Holding an evangelistic outreach is labeled *missional*. Taking a missions trip, witnessing on the street and feeding the homeless are labeled *missional*. While these activities are all good things, the church has had a long history of mission and service before the *missional* language entered the scene. This is why I find people suspicious of *missional* language and assuming that it's just a trendy new adjective or word.. When we paste *missional* onto everything we already do, we continue doing church without ever challenging our basic assumptions about who we are as communities of God's kingdom.

*Missional* church is not a new label for old ideas. Putting new paint over the cracked frames of an established way of thinking won't change anything. The illustrations of these misunderstandings are only old forms of church dressed up in new language. What I've learned in workshops and ongoing work with many church systems is that we need new frameworks or glasses, in order to see what *missional* church is about. I have to confess that it took me a long time to understand these frameworks and then create resources based upon them. It was a struggle requiring a lot of stumbling and failing. Because leaders often don't take the time to discover the frameworks (it just takes time and you fail as you learn) many often mistakenly define a *missional* way of seeing the church with their old patterns. This is normal, but we can't settle for these old frameworks. I have to confess that the *missional* church dialogue has challenged some of my most basic assumptions about the church, my leadership and my understanding of what God is up to in the world.

Lay people are the most suspect of the *missional language*. They see it as another unnecessary piece of esoteric language invented by the ordained and seminary professors to further convince the rest of the church that they're needed. They are suspicious that it is little more than a fancy word for evangelism or missions. There is a need for clarity and explanation rather than assuming everyone already understands what it means. Many people want a simple two or three sentence definition that satisfies their need for an explanation. However, the issues of meaning are not that simple. If the language of *missional church* is to help form communities of God's people in a radically changing culture, we have to spend time and energy understanding what's at stake. Simple sentence definitions won't cut it.

## **MISSIONAL CHURCH: CHARACTERISTICS AND MEANING**

If we could provide a simple straight-forward definition of *missional church*, there wouldn't be so much confusion. Some have tried this approach. Google *missional church* and you'll find all kinds of propositional statements that provide neat, clean clarity like a nicely wrapped package. Most of the time these definitions fail to challenge our imaginations or help us break out of assumed patterns and assumptions of the church.

Without trying to give a definition, I will offer some themes for exploration that might stretch your imagination and give you a new picture of missional church.

## **1: Western Society as Mission Field**

Missional church recognizes that Western societies are now, themselves, mission fields. This fact calls for more than new evangelism tactics. Modern evangelism developed in a time when people assumed the Christian story was a normal, regulative part of the culture within which they lived. Most folk knew the basic Gospel story in one form or another. Evangelism fulfilled the role of presenting an apologetic, which pressed for commitment. It worked in a world where the culture-at-large understood the basic Christian story. This is no longer the case.

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!” The same comments could be made for most of Western Europe. Similarly, in Canada, the vast majority of the emerging generations have literally no memory of the Christian narrative. Only twenty-five years ago, this was not the case. The shift has been dramatic and swift. The corrosive forces of change were building for decades under the surface of popular culture, and then suddenly, they reached the tipping point as the culture shifted like a great earthquake. America is not far behind in this shift. It’s already happening in various regions of the country. Beneath the façade of the suburban mega-churches, are growing numbers of people across America who don’t want anything to do with the church as it is.

The missional language emphasizes the fact that we are confronted with a radically new challenge in the West. We are not in a situation that requires minor adjustments or course corrections to what we are already doing. We must fundamentally rethink the frameworks and paradigms that have shaped the *come-and-see* church over the last half-century. The basic stance of denominations and local churches must be transformed to that of missionaries in their own culture. This requires more than adjustment; it calls for a new kind of church.

## **2: Mission Is about the Missio Dei**

Latin phrases may not be the most appropriate form of communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but grasping the nature of the God of mission does capture a theme central to the missional conversation. If the West, including North America, is once again a mission field where the central narratives of the Gospel are being 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 such an obvious statement that requires no explicit comment, but that is not the case. In Western societies, churches have shifted their focus from God to *how* God serves and meets our needs. Jesus Christ has been packaged as a choice in the spiritual food court used to meet the private needs of individuals. The result is a debased, compromised, sterilized Christianity, which misrepresents the Gospel.



The focus of attention is toward God not the other way around. The *missio dei* is about a *God-centered* rather than a *meeting-personal-need centered* understanding of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The focus of the church is *missional* and doxological. Craig Van Gelder uses two questions to help people grapple with this: The first is: "What is God doing in this world? This requires discernment to recognize what God is doing in our neighborhoods, schools, businesses, etc." The second is: "What does God want to do in our world?" To answer this question, the church needs wisdom and a Spirit-led imagination to envision what the power of the Gospel might reveal if a people were willing to listen.

Whenever I engage others in this aspect of the missional church, consternation and confusion arise within both clergy and lay alike. They often respond, "If 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 extent to which our frameworks must be changed for us to hear and practice the Christian story once again. The language of *missional* was coined to challenge this mindset. It calls for:

- a) a shift in the locus of the Gospel to God and God's actions,
- b) a recognition of the depth of the compromise that has overtaken Christian life
- c) and a commitment to address this challenging situation.

### **3: Missional Church Is about the Church Being a Contrast Society**

As we wrote the *Missional Church*, we were offering a proposal about what the church in North America as the agent of God's mission might look like. The discussion looked at two areas; a) the culture in which we currently find ourselves, and b) the purposes of God in the world revealed by Jesus Christ and his Gospel. In terms of the former, we recognized that our culture continues to move through massive levels of discontinuous change, which is rapidly de-centering the church from its former place at the center. This raises fundamental questions about the relationship between Christian life and the pluralist culture in which we live. In terms of the latter, the message of Jesus is the breaking-in of *God's* reign into the world. Therefore, the church is the *called-out community of God* in the midst of the specificity of a culture.

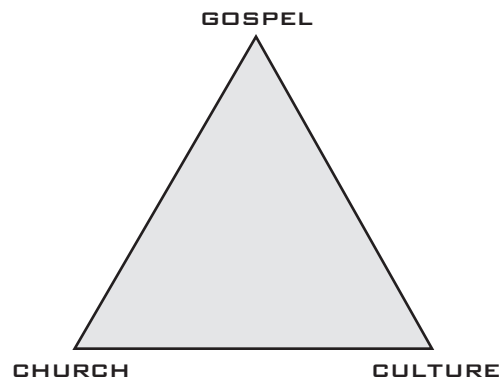
The church is an *ecclesia*, which means an assembly that has been called out in a public way as a *sign, witness, and foretaste* of where God is inviting all creation in Jesus Christ. The church, in its life together and witness in the world, proclaims the destiny and future of all creation. Local congregations are embodiments of where God is calling all creation to be through the power of the Spirit. The God we meet in Jesus calls the church to be a community of people who no longer live for themselves and their own needs but as a *contrast society* whose life together manifests God's future for the whole of creation.

As a *contrast society*, the church is formed around beliefs and practices, which continually school and form it in a way of life, which cannot be derived from the particular culture in which it is found. The culture in which we find ourselves, and within which we are called to be that people, is now designated as late-modern or postmodern. It is a context where the explicit story is that everyone lives within his or her own expressive *rights*. We live in a context where it is simply

assumed that the operative and appropriate means of living in a tolerant and open society is to create environments, which do not step on or over any specific set of personal rights, feelings or wants. This is part of the madness of the *needs-centered, seeker-driven* mentality of the church. These approaches actually believe they are faithful to the tradition when, in fact, they undermine the elements essential for missional faithfulness. We want to affirm everyone's need for personal autonomy to such a degree that we have lost the resources provided by Scripture and a great tradition to shape, form and create a people as a contrast society.

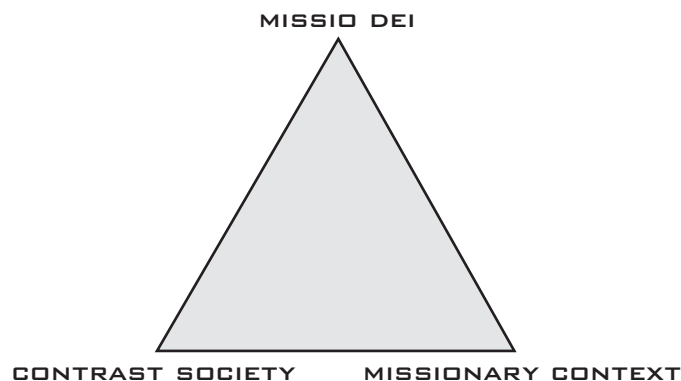
### PUTTING THE CHARACTERISTICS TOGETHER

Lesslie Newbigin talked of a three-way conversation between the gospel, the church and the culture in which the church finds itself. The missionary encounter requires interaction among the people of God, the Gospel as it is revealed in Scripture, and the surrounding culture. In every location and at every point in time this three-way conversation is required if the Gospel is to be revealed to the world.



This triangle helps to understand how the three characteristics of the missional church relate to one another. In other words, being a missional church is not about doing church in a better way so that more self-seeking individualists might get their private needs met. Being missional church is not just about the *church* corner of the triangle. There is much more to the missionary encounter than the church. The conversation can only occur as there is a true encounter among all three corners. We can no longer assume that we possess a valid understanding of the culture or even of the nature of the gospel.

I have adapted this Newbigin's illustration and inserted the three missional church characteristics to illustrate how Newbigin's three-way conversation applies to the current situation of the church in the Western world.



## THE JOURNEY FORWARD

As a boy huddled by an open fire in Liverpool while reading of the explorations of people like Magellan, Vasco da Gamma and Cook, I never imagined that I would venture across the ocean and live on a different continent. Nor could I ever have imagined I would one day be in on the explorations and discoveries that have shaped me in these past twenty-five years. A few years ago, I picked up a new biography of Magellan. What struck me were the parallels of this missional journey to Magellan's travels. He set out with little information about his destination. He only had a dim sense that somewhere on the other side of the Atlantic and the Americas were the famed Spice Islands. The maps with which he began were hopelessly inadequate and misleading. The ships in which he sailed were less than adequate, to say the least. Magellan, himself, made mistake after mistake as a leader. Even still, he journeyed to discover new paths around the world.

My adventures have not been anything like those of Magellan. However, the adventure of the missional church is one that will lead us into some of the greatest discoveries ever recorded in history. We will chart new paths - paths that don't exist on current maps that show us how the church should work. We will discover new lands - lands only found as God reveals the kingdom in our time. Yet, we will also meet our God, as the Spirit of God moves in our midst and redeems creation.

To head out on this venture, we need tools. More than anything, we need conversation partners. This is what Allelon seeks to be to the church. It offers a partnership of conversation with one another and a place where each of us can receive and bring the resources and conversations that are enabling us to move forward on that adventure.