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Missional Buzz

Will the real church please stand up?

The upcoming winter issue of *Leadership* will wrestle with the meaning of a very popular word—missional. Tim Conder, pastor of Emmaus Way in Durham, North Carolina, says, “So many fellowships that once boldly self-identified as cell churches, meta-churches, house churches, seeker-style, or purpose-driven now claim to be missional. It’s such a buzzword that it’s fair to ask, ‘Is there really any such thing as a missional church?’ Tim’s full article on the subject is featured in *Leadership*’s theme section, “Going Missional.” Here is a preview.

The game show *To Tell the Truth* pitted three guests (two imposters plus the day’s mystery guest who had some unusual occupation or accomplishment) against a panel of celebrities. The panelists asked questions of the guests, trying to identify which one actually had that occupation or accomplishment. The show ended dramatically when the truth was revealed: “Will the real _____ stand up!”

Today, it would be almost impossible for “the real *missional* church” to stand up. Yes, there are plenty of imposters, but there’s no one true example to play the day’s mystery guest. And any panel of celebrities probably wouldn’t accept the outcome.

So many fellowships that once boldly self-identified as cell churches, meta-churches, house churches, seeker-style, or purpose-driven now claim to be missional. It’s such a buzzword that it’s fair to ask, “Is there really any such thing as a missional church?” Although some use the term glibly, I believe the answer is “yes.”

Missional at the core

In essence, missional churches seek to align their identity, activities, and hopes with God’s redemptive mission on earth. This is a tall order for churches that brim with cultural and programming expectations, resource abundance, iconic labels (like “evangelical” or “mainline” or “Pentecostal”), and visions of grand ambitions. The temptation is always to have a grand scheme to which we incessantly try to woo or invoke God’s presence rather see ourselves fitting into God’s agenda.

In contrast, the missional church is a corrective to or an outright rejection of commodified and cultural Christianity, steeped in institutionalism, individualism, and sentimentality.

Identifying missional churches can be difficult. Such churches are separated by identity and perspective as much as their visible forms. Nonetheless, there are some common commitments.

(1) Missional communities try to align themselves holistically with God’s theme of redemption. They resist the use of Christianity as an anesthetic to the pain of human needs and as an affirmation of the superiority of one culture’s way of life.

This is lived out in several common practices.

(2) Programming and finances are directed outward. It’s easy for much of the church’s program and fiscal reflexes to become directed internally. Emphases on church growth or “building the body” are often

presented as the mission (“A larger church means more space and opportunity for our community to encounter Christ,” is the overt message, when the real message to staff is, in fact, “Keep the saints happy and coming back.”).

To counter this temptation, missional communities may cut back on programming to leave space for breathing and living. Some ministries are relocated from the safe confines of the church into the community. Financial assets are viewed as both opportunity and burden. Some missional churches have made a pattern of giving away resources without control or strings attached to reduce congregants’ sense of entitlement.

(3) Missional communities are discontent with spiritual formation as primarily cognitive assent (“I believe this to be true”). Instead, formation is presented as a way of life, a rhythm of being, and a rule of values. It emphasizes faithful living during the week rather than gathering for worship at a weekend event. The sharp boundary between the sacred and secular is evaporating as missional fellowships seek to hear God’s voice in culture and creation.

(4) Embracing the ethnic and social diversities of local communities is becoming a moral expectation. (This is one aspect of God’s voice that I believe we have heard strongly from outside the confines of the church.)

(5) Finally, missional communities are not only ardent listeners for the earmarks of God’s redemptive work in our world, these communities are passionate activists when they find the pathways and trajectories of God’s redemptive presence. The work of justice, reconciliation, peace, and spiritual direction are becoming the dominant reflexes of missional communities.

In this spirit of activism, theological debates and historical Sunderings are becoming marginalized. Not only does the sacred/secular boundary blur in missional communities, but also the sharp divisions between mainline and evangelical, between Catholic and Protestant, and even between Western and Eastern Christianity.

When I think of broad-based and radical changes like this, no single community or individual leader can stand up, “tell the truth,” and perfectly embody the spirit of that revolution before a panel of inquirers. The missional church is diverse beyond single models and dominant voices. It comes in Reformed and post-reformation varieties, new monastic and post-church gatherings, and in transitional churches building missional ministry on their traditional foundations.

The missional church is far from complete; the exploration has just begun. But from the wide-angle, historical lens of God’s great redemptive narrative, the task remains the same—to find and join God’s gracious work.

Tim Conder is the founding pastor of Emmaus Way in Durham, North Carolina, and author of The Church in Transition: The Journey of Existing Churches into the Emerging Culture (Zondervan, 2006). This post is excerpted from an article in the Winter 2007 issue of Leadership.