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Leadership

Missional: Possible

Steps to transform a consumer church into a missional church.
by Chad Hall

In his role as super spy Ethan Hunt, Tom Cruise portrays an agent willing to face incredible odds and unbelievable danger in order to accomplish a "mission: impossible." Church leaders face assignments just as tough: to lead congregations to serve Christ in a changing and sometimes hostile world.

The word for this ministry challenge is *missional*. How does a church become missional? And for leaders, is moving a consumer church to become missional, in itself, a mission: impossible?

What "missional" means

When asked, "What kind of church do you serve?" leaders are finding that denominational qualifiers or adjectives such as *innovative, emergent, contemporary, liturgical* and *purpose-driven* don't get to the heart of the question; they tend to over-emphasize a particular aspect of the church.

Leaders are (re)discovering that the essential calling of the church has less to do with the way a church is organized, its doctrinal distinctions, or its style of music, and more to do with the *missio Dei* (mission of God).

UK blogger Andrew Jones explains: "*Missio Dei* stems from the Triune God: the Father sends the Son, the Father and the Son send the Spirit, the Father and Son and the Spirit send the church into the world." So a missional church is about doing God's work in the world today. In this sense, the missional church isn't a new emphasis, but is a renewed focus on what has been (or should have been) there all along.

Mike Breen, pastor at Community Church of Joy near Phoenix, Arizona, believes the missional church is something very old, very fundamental, and very much at the core of what it means to be church.

"Missional church is radical only in the sense that radical means root," he says. "The missional church is rooted in not just the New Testament church of Acts, but in the mission of Jesus himself. A missional church lives out the church's three-dimensional calling: to be upwardly focused on God in worship that is passionate; to be inwardly focused on community among believers that is demonstrated in relationships of love and compassion; and to be outwardly focused on a world that does not yet know God."

Two distractions

But if being missional is the essence of being the church, why isn't every church missional? Because many churches have turned attention to matters that distract and deter from the mission. Two main distractions often block a congregation's missional expression.

The first is *self-preservation*. Janetta Cravens, pastor of First Christian Church in Macon, Georgia, says her congregation is beginning to rediscover and refocus on God's activity in the

world rather than the church's activity for itself. "The Builder generation came back from WWII and built churches that could withstand bombs, metaphorically and sometimes literally. The focus was on an institutional church so solid that it could endure, and yet that focus on preservation too easily became the very identity of the church. The church began to exist for the sake of the church."

Brian Wright, pastor of Northeast Baptist Church near Atlanta, agrees: "The institution is the means to do the mission. The church serves the mission, not vice versa."

So the point is not whether we can build churches that last, but whether churches can touch the world with God's love.

The other primary distraction is *church growth*. When the emphasis is on bringing the world to the church, the church's mission of going to the world can get lost.

Jack Mercer, pastor of Harrisonburg (Virginia) Baptist Church says his church stumbled on this point: "Our mission statement is based on the Great Commission, and so we looked at those words of Jesus and everything was fine until we tripped on the word *go*. Jesus tells us to 'go' and make disciples, but we were just trying to get people to 'come' into the church so we could make disciples. We needed to shift our activity from getting people into the church to going out to the people of the world."

Obviously, attracting people to the church is not necessarily wrong. In fact, it's important not to view *missional* as the opposite of the term *attractional*. Placing these concepts at odds puts the church into an either/or contrast that is neither accurate nor helpful.

Leith Anderson, pastor of Wooddale Church near Minneapolis says, "I think attractional is really a subset of missional. Churches ought to be attractional. After all, there is an attractive appeal to the mission. Churches that don't attract people to the gospel or even to the institution will not live out the mission because they won't live at all. The problem arises when attracting people to the church becomes the mission."

Wright also believes being missional is attractive. Northeast is a rapidly growing small church. After three years of leading this church, Wright says, "We've found that many churches in our area have grown by putting on a great show. Our model is different. We believe that by serving those around us, we show them Christ, which does have an attractional quality. Still, the primary goal is to serve, not to attract."

In fact, when Northeast recently started two neighborhood groups, one that advertised fun for the kids, games, and free food got a mediocre response.

Another group invited people in the community to work alongside churchgoers in addressing community issues, from providing sandwiches for the soup kitchen to baby clothes for a shelter. The service group attracted more involvement from both the church and the community.

When a church focuses on trying to grow, the larger mission suffers and the church can actually become less attractive.

Redirected resources

Becoming missional means redirecting resources toward the world. This means church leaders take a hard look at how money, time, and energy are allocated. Is it for the sole benefit of those in the church, or invested in God's mission to the world?

For Community Church of Joy, the journey outward involved shifting from being a staff-led and consumer-driven church to being lay-led and contributor-driven. In such a context, staff

become encouragers and equippers. Those spotlighted as frontline performers of ministry are those who serve Jesus in the world.

"The analogy is a football stadium," Breen says. "In the past, the majority of our church members were in the stands watching and applauding the paid staff on the field. The staff was worn out from doing all the ministry. Meanwhile, the lay members were well-rested but resistant to getting in the game. Now that is reversing."

Getting people active in ministry can get its start in worship. For a congregation like Community Church of Joy, which had perfected the seeker-sensitive approach, missional worship meant a major reversal.

"Back then," Breen explains, "we would say in worship, 'You don't need to stand or sing or give. Just relax, sit back, and observe.' Now, we say you do need to stand and sing and give. In effect, we are now much closer to a Reformation theology of worship in that worship is 'the work of the people' of God, not just observing and supporting the work of paid staff."

Anderson says that Wooddale emphasizes the priesthood of all believers and gets more people involved in God's mission by encouraging them to take ownership of ministry, including worship. While their traditional worship services rely on a few persons up front, their two newest services get as many as half the worshipers involved in important ways: "We have an arts team that creates wonderful and original works for each service, and a muscle team of about forty people who set up and get things arranged. More importantly, we estimate that half our Sunday evening worshipers actively invite others to worship. The high level of ownership in making the worship service happen translates into ownership of inviting others."

Taking it into the world

Missional churches activate laity to carry out God's mission in their various spheres of life. This creates a community of Christians who let the upward focus on God in the worship service impact their orientation and activity during the rest of their lives. This means inviting the lost and making worship hospitable to others on weekends, but also working for God during the week.

Cravens describes an attitude shift being made among her leaders: "We are moving from seeing ourselves as a church who needs members from the community to seeing ourselves as being in a community whose members need the church. We've realized we're here to serve the community in unique ways."

For instance, when the city of 100,000 stopped its curbside recycling program, First Christian Church converted part of its parking lot into a collection site for aluminum, plastics, and paper. And since earth stewardship is important, the children made door hangers about the recycling opportunity and delivered them, with cookies, to homes and apartments in the neighborhood.

"Our efforts generated great interest," says Cravens.

Community Church of Joy has organized groups of about fifty people. Breen says, "These groups are small enough to have their own unique vision---such as ministering to shut-ins or working with the homeless--but they are big enough to do something about that vision. Each group owns a specific aspect of God's mission for the world."

Such projects implant a missional mindset. Harrisonburg Baptist Church did a one-day community service project. Pastor Mercer says, "Operation 'In As Much' was a one-day blitz of community service projects. That day had a ripple effect in our church that lasted at least a year. It opened people's eyes to how serving those around us is not peripheral to the church, but is central to our mission."

These churches do face great difficulties, but as these leaders can attest, the task is indeed missional: possible.

Chad Hall is a ministry coach living in Hickory, North Carolina, and the co-author of Coaching for Christian Leaders: A Practical Guide (Chalice Press, 2007)

The Missional Leader

How does a leader prepare to redirect a church toward its mission in the world?

1. Anticipate and work through conflict. As with any transition, the shift to being more missional will be felt as a loss by those who are accustomed to traditional "the staff is here to meet my needs" assumptions. Churches that have long been self-focused have well-formed habits and attitudes that are tough to overcome.

Mike Breen says that many members resisted the emphasis on laity doing ministry: "They were used to being consumers who paid professionals to do the ministry. It was like we were a restaurant where they'd been coming for years and had always been served great meals. When we handed them an apron and asked them to help in the kitchen, many resisted and quite a few left the church."

2. "Controlled release and releasing control." That's how Jack Mercer describes it. A dogged resolve coupled with a relaxed willingness to let the Spirit blow in unexpected ways.

The leader must be direct and uncompromising in leading the church to live out the missional mindset. But once that mindset catches hold, the leader must step back and let go. Leaders who attempt to control the expressions of missionalality will always be tempted to control them, and thus suffocate them.

Breen says that Community Church of Joy puts together community-size groups of fifty to gather around the vision of serving, but then lets each group give birth to its unique mission.

Like any birth, it is messy: "A leader with a controlling tendency—like most of us!—will try to come up with the mission for the community. But letting the group birth it allows the life of Jesus to be expressed in and through that community in ways the leader could never imagine."

Brian Wright is finding his leadership role in helping Northeast Baptist Church make the shift "from people being consumers to being producers." He has had to stop producing ministry for would-be consumers as well as cease trying to get people to resource his ministry ideas. Instead, he is setting his members free to dream of what God wants to do and is then empowering them to do it.

"We gathered people in groups of six to eight and let them dream up ways of creatively addressing the needs of our community," he says. "I've helped the groups find grants to support the ministries, and I encourage and coach them to invest their own time and energy as well. Really, my role is as much to stay out of the way as it is to be involved."

3. Recognize the personal losses. For pastors and other church leaders, this includes getting less recognition for doing ministry. Janetta Cravens says their missional emphasis means the spotlight is less and less on her. "I've become more like a symphony conductor than one who actually plays an instrument. This has required me to really be a servant leader, to stop working for accolades, and to start measuring success according the quality of music [ministry] the symphony members are producing."

Breen says the church staff also faced the reality that some paid positions would have to be

eliminated in order to help the church shift toward lay-led and outward focused mission.

"We realized the church is not here to give someone a job. It was tough to make decisions that cost people their job on church staff, but the move toward being missional meant we had to become a lighter, more nimble church. Too much staff was weighing us down and preventing our pursuit of God's activity."

4. Stamina required en route to better days. Since the transition toward missionality is complex, there will be great difficulties to endure. For leaders used to measuring success by attendance or accolades, they may have to endure desert days without those signs of success.

Signs of health may get inverted. Attendance and giving may actually drop.

This is what happened at Community Church of Joy. Breen says, "We lost a lot of people initially. That was tough, but eventually the levels of commitment went up, and today we have a more highly committed congregation. Our attendance and giving are still rebounding, and we have a much higher level of commitment in almost every measurable way.

"Our average attendee gives 50 percent more than a year ago, we have more kids in Bible study, and more people in our teaching experiences. Interestingly, our demographic is shifting younger, because the younger people want a call to commitment, not another call to be a consumer. For them, being a consumer is not compelling. If we had not weaned ourselves of the consumer model, we'd never have gotten to the level of commitment we are today." —*Chad Hall*

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