

# What do you mean MISSIONAL CHURCH?

Frequently asked questions

What is the difference between a missional church and a church with a mission program?

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A church with a mission program usually sees mission as one activity alongside many activities of the church – Christian education, worship, acts of service, hospitality and other programs. A missional church focuses all of its activities around its participation in God’s mission in the world. That means, it trains people for discipleship and witness; it worships and practices mutual support before the watching world. A church with a mission sends others to witness on its behalf. A missional church understands that the congregation itself is sent by God to proclaim and to be a sign of the reign of God. Just as God sent Jesus, now Jesus sends the church (Jn..20:21).

What’s so new about the missional church? Aren’t we already missional?

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Many congregations already have begun the journey to become more missional, but have never recognized themselves as such. Some congregations are becoming more missional and are eager to share the story of their journey. Other congregations make a distinction between witness outside the church and the rest of congregational life. The vision of a missional church invites all of the being and doing of the church to become shaped by what God intends for the world.

Is “missional” a real word?

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Yes. It may not be in every dictionary. But the Oxford English Dictionary says the word has been around for almost 100 years. Missional is an adjective that describes the way in which we do all of our activities, rather than identifying any one particular activity. Within the last few years, it has

come into more common use. To be missional is to align all of the program, function and activities of the church around the mission of God in the world.

**Does being a missional church mean starting a lot of new activities?  
People in our congregation are already so busy.**

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A missional church does not necessarily do more outreach activities. In fact, a missional church may do fewer things better. To be a missional church means to discern how this particular congregation's calling is aligned with God's mission in the world. To be a missional church means to orient all of the life of the church around God's mission.

**Is this a technique to help our congregation grow?**

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Many missional congregations are growing in numbers. But the missional church vision is not a technique or a way of increasing market share; it is a way of understanding the true calling of the church. It is a way of life for the church. Rather than merely focusing on a congregation's size, the missional church vision calls us to focus on the reign of God. For a congregation, that means to be a living sign and foretaste of God's new creation. It also means inviting people to become a part of God's new community.

**Does being a missional church mean that evangelism is more important than Christian education?**

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No. It would be a mistake to invite people to become citizens of the reign of God without equipping them for life within the reign of God. The purpose of the church is to proclaim and be a sign of the reign of God. A missional church is intentional about both its witness to those outside the community of faith and how its life together gives people a glimpse of God's new reality.

**What connection does the missional church concept have with the unique situation churches are facing in North America?**

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Key to the identity of a missional church is being an alternative society within the dominant culture. When the church proclaims and is a sign of the reign of God – whether by loving enemies or welcoming those on the margins – it will be a contrast community in the eyes of the world. Many Christian traditions that had previously enjoyed a privileged status in the dominant North American culture no longer do. The missional church perspective offers important clues on how to be the church when not at the center of things.

## Can the church simultaneously be both nonconformed to the world and engaged in witness to Jesus Christ in the world?

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Yes. Missional congregations demonstrate full engagement in witness to the world, but in a way that is different from the world. That witness is grounded in Jesus Christ, who calls us to be “in the world... but not of it” (Jn.17:14-16)

## Isn't that risky?

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It usually is. Churches that are in the world, but not of the world, take a lot of risks – physical, financial, social. They are not universally liked. These churches are able to take risks for the sake of the reign of God because they depend on the Holy Spirit for power to witness. These congregations spend a lot of time in prayer. They also know that, even if they experience rejection in the short run, the final victory belongs to God.

## Where do we start to learn more about the missional church concept?

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There are various sources you can explore to gain meaningful insights. Read the Bible as the story of a missionary God, who is always reaching out to us. Consult the following books and essays to explain the theology behind the vision for a missional church and some of its concrete practices:

Guder, Darrell L. ed., Inagrace T. Dietterich, Lois Barrett, George R. Hunsberger, Alan J. Roxburgh, and Craig Van Gelder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998) 288 pp.

Barrett, Lois, ed., Dale A. Ziemer, Darrell L. Guder, George R. Hunsberger, Walter Hobbs, Lynn Stutzman, Jeff Van Cooten, *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., scheduled for release in 2003).

Hunsberger, George R., Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 344 pp.

Dietterich, Paul M., “Mission Programs or Missional Church?” a reprint from *Transformation* (a newsletter of the Center for Parish Development, 1525 E. 55<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite #201, Chicago, IL 60615), VI (1) Summer 2000.

Dietterich, Inagrace T. and Ziemer, Dale A., “Take Time to Be Holy: Cultivating the Missional Church,” originally published in the 1998 Fall issue

of *Reformed Review*, published by Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan.

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<http://www.mennonitemission.net/AboutUs/FAQs/MissionalChurch.asp>

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