

MISSIONAL CHURCHES the message in context



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MISSIONAL

In the book *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, an American missionary to Africa wants to teach his African village that “Jesus is precious.” Unfortunately, the word for precious in the jungle language of that village can also mean “poisonwood.” And so, due to a lack of understanding and improper voice inflection, the missionary ends up teaching the entire village that Jesus is “poisonwood.”

Confusion often results from terms not being defined or being used out of their proper context. Let me give you an example that you can probably relate to. If you lived in Lebanon today and identified yourself as a fundamentalist, an unpleasant image might enter the mind of the listener—guns, jihad, holy wars and senseless deaths. However, if you traveled 5000 miles to the west and described yourself as a fundamentalist, the mental image might be quite different. To some, a fundamentalist is a radical right-wing conservative who embraces Republican pro-life candidates and prayer in the school. Others would view a fundamentalist as one who subscribes to a biblical worldview, the inerrancy of scripture, and the sanctity of marriage and life. Fundamentalists are loved and hated—understood by some and misunderstood by others. The way someone defines a term can shape their opinions, perceptions, and conclusions.

The word *missional* has been used frequently in recent years and its meaning can vary greatly depending on who you know and how you have heard it defined. The purpose of this article is to give a fuller explanation and description of the missional church.

I remember singing the chorus “Be a Missionary” in junior church back in the mid-seventies:

Be a missionary every day! (clap)
Tell the world that Jesus is the way!
Be it in the town or country
or the busy avenue!
Africa or Asia, the task is up to YOU!
So, be a missionary every day! (clap)
Tell the world that Jesus is the way!
The Lord is soon returning
There is no time to lose, so
Be a missionary
God’s own emissary
Be a missionary to day!
Let’s GO!!!

In thirty years, many of us gone from singing songs like that to being surrounded by a post-modern, irreligious, hedonistic culture on which we have little impact. Part of the problem lies in the professionalization of ministry and leadership. Bible colleges and Christian colleges began producing more non-preaching pastoral positions: youth pastors, Christian education pastors, outreach pastors, administrative pastors, executive pastors—the list could go on and on.

Why would the average person in the church recognize his call from God to serve, when all ministry service could be left to the professionals? In many churches the staff is being equipped *by the people* to do the work of the ministry. In reality, the Bible teaches a process that is turned around 180 degrees. Ephesians 4 clearly presents the role of the pastors as equippers of the flock. As pastors, we need to be developing the people in our churches so that they can begin thinking, living and ministering as missionaries right where they are.

WHAT DO MISSIONAL PEOPLE LOOK LIKE?

You will not recognize them by what they wear or where they live or what they do for a living. Missional Christians are just like you and me in so many ways. They are a part of our churches, businesses, schools, and families. What makes a missional Christian stand out is **how** they live. Missional Christians live with great intention. They are a part of the community—investing great time, effort, and resources into introducing those around them to their best friend, Jesus. This is done with great skill and sensitivity. A foreign missionary would attempt, when entering a new culture, to minimize all barriers and misunderstandings. In the same way, missional people here in the states should attempt to minimize barriers and misunderstandings with the culture they are in. Missional Christians understand the barriers that the lost have placed around them and can skillfully remove those barriers through authentic relationships.

WHAT DO MISSIONAL CHURCHES LOOK LIKE?

They are **intentional**. Missional churches are not program-driven but rather God-focused and people-minded. They look to reach out into the community because they are a part of the community. Missional churches make equipping the saints for ministry a very high priority. At Columbus Road, where I serve as pastor, we presently have 80% of our people actively involved in weekly ministry. This is unheard of in most churches, yet has a tremendous impact on the church body and the community around us.

Missional churches intentionally initiate God-centered relationships. Community is a very valuable part of the process. Community means not just *doing* church but *being* a church family. Meeting together often is important in forming the DNA of community and family. Taking the summer off from ministry would be unheard of.

They are **indigenous**. Churches that take on a missional mindset reflect the culture and community of those who they are reaching. Each church community should take on an identity within the culture they serve. At Columbus Road, we happen to minister to a community that enjoys athletics, hunting, and fishing. Our ministry reflects this culture. In foreign missions, this mindset explains why missionaries will use soccer as an outreach tool instead of American football.

They are **incarnational**. Missional churches are deeply connected to the community. They are not program, facility, or music driven. What is important? Demonstrating and living out biblical community and displaying it for the culture to witness. As the lost are invited to join with a community of passionate followers of Christ, they can explore and evaluate the authentic nature of being a Christian. People at Columbus Road often come to the Savior while participating in the community events and ministries.

TURNING TOWARD A MISSIONAL MINDSET

Unleash the people for ministry. If you are a control freak this may be difficult. It involves letting go of every area of ministry. Take your strangle-hold off of all the ministries that your people could do. Often people may not be serving because **you are!** It is essential that you recognize what areas you specifically need to lead and what areas are better given away. I have learned that the more things one gives away, the more people and ministries grow.

Multiply ministry, not programs. We have learned to shape ministry around the gifts and abilities of our people and not the pastors and programs. It is much easier, and generally more successful, to train people to serve in environments that are natural for them. Let those that have a desire to use their specific abilities for Christ use them. That is why we have a four wheelin' ministry, an archery league, an outdoor expo, and my favorite...a stock car racing ministry.

Interpret the culture. Pastors need to know who they are trying to reach. It is mandatory for us to know and interpret the culture. It is not good enough to look at other churches that are growing and assume that they are reaching the community. Many churches are growing simply by adding five or ten families from every other local church in the area. Are they actually penetrating the lost culture and community? I don't know.

Can you say why things happen the way they happen in your community? Do you know what is important to the people in your community? Do you know their passions and their pastimes? If you don't know these things, you may need to spend some time interpreting your culture.

Apply what you know. I have interpreted the culture of Quincy and it screams, “**Sports are as important as anything in this town.**” I have not preached a series of messages on the evils of “sports as an idol.” I have not planned all of our ministry events during major sporting events to determine who the committed and faithful are. What I have done is included every major sport somewhere in our ministry, asking the community to participate with us and see God’s love demonstrated.

WRAPPING IT UP

Jesus clearly communicates in John 20:21 the role of those who followed Him when He says, “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent me, I also send you.” He was sending out His followers. He was not sending out just missionaries, pastors, and para-church leaders. He was sending real people from every culture, in their neighborhoods, businesses, schools and communities. The term *Missional* goes far beyond preferences, trends, programs, terms and models. It is proclaiming the gospel to people of a particular culture by people living within that culture.