

WHAT IS A MENTAL MODEL?

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Whether we call them paradigms, metaphors or mental models, we all use internal images and constructs to make sense of our world. These mental models not only affect how we think about something; they also control our actions. Mental models are powerful because once they are accepted, they work subconsciously and consciously to govern how we think about and respond to our surroundings. Once a mental model is accepted as reality, it influences how we interact with others, our community and the world. Churches have ecclesial mental models based on scriptural interpretation and historical traditions. In the past, some of these mental models worked well in connecting churches with their community, nation and world. In Christendom, for example, churches viewed themselves as an integral part of community life, giving society a unified spiritual identity and moral order, providing social services and even governance. The church, in Christendom, often served as an ethical standard for society, setting and reinforcing social mores. At times, churches served a prophetic role, confronting social injustice and serving as a rallying point for cultural and social transformation.

As the northern hemisphere moves into a post-Christendom understanding of the world, the meaning and purpose of the church is questioned. Christendom churches, most of which are considered “mainline” because of their historical position of significance in society, often find themselves in decline. Growing old together, these congregations no longer attract residents from their community, nor do they influence their communities as they did in their glorious past. Once the pillars of society, many mainline congregations are now alienated from their communities.

For some churches, this cultural alienation is intentional. Separatist churches operate out of a mental model that views the world, including their communities, as hostile to religious life. Such churches view themselves as bastions of faith, protecting their members from the community and world and their many evils.

Other churches have a mental model that overlooks their disconnection from the community. Churches focusing on a model of attraction or church growth often see their role as attracting people from this world and calling them to a heavenly future. For such attractional churches, the relation of church to their communities is that of indifference or cordiality. Because attractional churches tend to draw members from outside of their host communities, and because many of these churches occupy large tax-free prime real estate, townships often view the attractional church as a liability rather than an asset to community life. To mitigate the church’s right to exist among other non-tax-paying organizations, attractional churches often attempt to provide volunteer community service to their host community. Social service, however, is usually limited to activities that either give the church higher visibility in the community or attract more people into the faith community.

This Missional Church Transformation Web site explores an emerging mental model of church that takes seriously the need for churches to be reconnected with their communities and beyond for the purposes of participating in the work of God in a Post-Christendom era. The missiological roots of this mental model are diverse, stemming back to Rolland Allen (1868–1947), Anglican missionary to China, Africa, and his homeland, England. Influenced by Allen, Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998), once associate general secretary of the World Council of Churches' Division of World Mission and Evangelism, called for missionaries to be faithful to the *missio Dei* rather than the mission of the church. Newbigin confronted imperialism and the church's partnership in Western dominance over other cultures. Perhaps the most influential missiologist giving a foundation to the missional church mental model was David Bosch (1929–1992). Bosch, early in his ministry, was influenced by the injustices of apartheid and the blatant indifference of his church, the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa. In his extensive work *Transforming Mission*, Bosch traces the *missio Dei* from Jesus and the New Testament writers to the twentieth century and what he referred to as a new paradigm for the relationship of the church and its mission in the world. Bosch envisioned an "ecumenical" or "missional" paradigm for the church in its relationship to its context, very similar to the definition of a mental model used in this Web site. Other contributors to the missional church movement include voices of the social gospel, liberation theology, evangelicalism, and the emergent church movement, to mention a few. But more important, it is those faith communities that are engaged in the *missio Dei* that are giving definition to this movement, a movement that is gaining momentum in the twenty-first century.

This article is one of several on the Missional Church Transformation Web site that attempts to briefly define the missional church mental model and to give brief descriptions of its primary characteristics. By its very nature, the missional church mental model focuses on discovering the mission of God at work in the world so that churches might respond to God's invitation to participate in God's mission in their community and beyond.

For more on this mental model's missional church definition, go to "[What Is a Missional Church?](#)" Other articles on the Missional Church Transformation site give witness to the potential impact this mental model can have locally and globally once churches begin this transformational process. We invite you to visit this site regularly for informative articles, resources and stories of churches on the missional journey.