

SIX CHARACTERISTICS OF A MISSIONAL CHURCH

by the Rev. Dr. Ronald Carlson

Missional Church Strategist for National Ministries, ABCUSA

A missional church is an authentic community of faith that primarily directs its ministry focus outward toward the context in which it is located and to the broader world beyond.

Before delineating some of the core characteristics of a missional church, I will elaborate a bit more on the missional definition above. **A missional church is an authentic community of faith** (*authentic* in that the relationships are authentic—not superficial; *faith* in that it is a response to the living God revealed in Jesus Christ; *community* in that individuals who respond in faith are connected with the communal triune God and with each other in God’s missional activities) **that primarily directs its ministry focus outward** (The church is called to be engaged in the mission of the kingdom of God. Mission is the church’s primary purpose, and that mission is to be participated in as the primary function of the faith community. As such, the church exists for the well-being of others and creation, and not for self-serving purposes), **toward the context in which it is located and to the broader world beyond.** (By joining Jesus Christ and outside partners, the church serves God’s purpose by *being* and *doing* good news in word and deed locally, nationally and globally.)

Readers may wish to review the basic definition of the missional church in the Resource page article “[Definition of a Missional Church.](#)”

Six Essential Characteristics of the Missional Church

Six common characteristics (“missional DNA markers”) are emerging among those who hold a missional church *mental model*. The degree to which individual faith communities emphasize each of the following characteristics varies according to theological and biblical traditions and understandings. Nevertheless, the common missional ingredients seem to be as described below. The task of a missional church leader and his or her faith community is to envision how their community of faith can live out these characteristics within their own context and in the broader world beyond.

1. The missional church treats its context as a constantly changing mission field.

Missional churches no longer view themselves as existing in the heart of static Christendom. Rather, missional churches recognize that the era of Christendom is rapidly closing or has already ended in most of Europe and North America. Missional churches tend to reimagine themselves as being an alien subculture within a cross-cultural host community. In other words, the missional faith community views itself to be a missionary

community living in a mission field that is constantly changing. With this mental model in mind, it begins to engage the community as such.

Six characteristics constitute the traditionally held definition of a “mission field.”

Missional churches recognize that many, if not all, of these characteristics are operative within their own context. The characteristics include:

- A substantial presence of beliefs and religions other than Christianity and Judaism exist in the community and should be respected, understood and interacted with through dialogue.
- Languages other than “our language” are spoken. For effective communication to take place between church and culture, the language of the church must be modified to be understood.
- Cultural worldviews differing from historic European or American Christianity’s worldviews prevail. Just as effective foreign missionaries seek to understand the cultures of their host nations, missional churches study and seek to understand the cultures of their host communities.
- High levels of social need and justice issues exist among large population groups and need to be addressed by both church and society. Missional churches consider engagement in social concerns within their own communities to be as significant as the social engagement traditionally supported in foreign missions. These activities include economic development, health care and environmental improvements.
- In the case of overlooked or marginalized people groups with little or no Christian representation, missional churches make contact, build relationships, and stand as their advocates with the dominant culture.
- When there is an inadequate number of “indigenous” churches to reach dominant population cultural groups, missional churches form new culturally connected faith communities in proximity to the host population.

Questions for your consideration: What procedure does your faith community have for investigating the cultural characteristics of your community? As you investigate the context of your church, begin asking which of the above characteristics of a mission field are operative in your community. If your church embraces the missional mental model of “being and doing” church, it will want to discern God’s desired missional response to these community characteristics.

2. The missional church is both active in and supportive of missions.

The missional church does not wish to undermine the importance of cooperative missional efforts, such as denominational or ecumenical local and international mission endeavors. However, missional church leaders recognize that outside of a few brief short-term mission projects, few church members ever become directly involved in mission efforts. When asked, “Is your church engaged in mission?” most congregational groups respond by showing their budgetary support of various causes. The intention of the missional church movement is to move churches beyond financial support and short-term mission

projects into a lifestyle of direct mission engagement. This engagement includes, of course, activities both within the church's host community and in the broader world beyond. Once engagement in mission occurs, missional churches expand their understanding of support to include encouragement, training and accountability of those participating in mission.

Questions for your consideration: If you embrace the missional mental model of “being and doing” church, you will want to equip and empower your people to be engaged in God's missional activities within your host community and in the broader world beyond. As you investigate the context of your church, you will begin asking which needs you, as a faith community, are called to serve. What gifts do your members have that can be incorporated into that service? What structure do you envision that will give permission to your members to become engaged in a variety of mission activities? What resources do you have for equipping and deploying your people into the mission context?

3. The missional church recognizes that its mission includes both the Great Commission (making new disciples) and the Great Commandments (loving God and loving others as self).

Sometimes referred to as the “evangelistic mandate,” Matthew 28:17ff. draws the church's attention to the significance of calling people to discipleship. The missional church movement recognizes the significance of this evangelistic effort. Evangelism in missional churches is inseparably connected with the call to missional discipleship: it is not a means of increasing the church's numerical and financial supporting base or merely a means for the growth of the faith community. Therefore, missional churches actively invite people of other beliefs and of no religious belief to partner with the Christian faith community as it follows Jesus into God's missional activities.

Sometimes referred to as the “cultural or social mandate,” Matthew 22:37–38 draws the church's attention to the significance of engaging its disciples into acts that demonstrate the love of God by every available means. Missional churches tend to distinguish two forms of exercising the cultural mandate (*social service* and *social action*). Social service can be characterized by the analogy of “giving a cup of cold water” in Christ's name. It is serving the basic needs of individuals. Social action might be characterized by the analogy of addressing and seeking to transform the unjust systems and powers that deprive people of that water. The prophetic voice of the church is essential to the missional nature of the church. However, the missional church recognizes that prophetic statements of concern carry little or no effect unless accompanied by congruent prophetic action by Christ's disciples.

Questions for your consideration: Missional churches hold both the evangelistic and social mandate to be of equal value in the work and witness of the church in its own context and in the world beyond. As you form your missional faith community, it will be important for you to ask such questions as: (1) What is the goal of our evangelistic efforts? (2) By what means do we invite others to collaborate with our faith community as

we seek to be involved in God's mission in our own community and beyond? (3) What means will we be putting into place to nurture and equip would-be disciples of Jesus, mentally, physically, socially and spiritually?

4. The missional church recognizes all people as being both the “subject” and “object” of God’s mission.

It does not take a linguist to recognize the difference between the subject and the object of a sentence; the subject does the action, and the object receives the action of the subject. The missional church recognizes the temptation to limit mission activities to serving people (thus objectifying them). It is all too easy to serve people in our missional activities rather than actually engage those whom we would serve in God's mission. It is even more difficult for some churches to become the object of service, thus receiving from those outside of our faith communities. Missional churches recognize that Jesus served people, but he also invited the people he served to be actively engaged in God's mission. Surprisingly, Jesus also became vulnerable and accepted the service of others to him. Missional churches seek to imitate the actions of Christ in this regard.

Questions for your consideration: As you seek to serve your host community, how willing and by what means are you inviting, equipping, and empowering people to become “subjects” and “objects” in God's mission? What structure can foster a balance between serving and being served both from within and from outside the faith community? How do you envision empowering and mobilizing those you serve in order to multiply your missional activities?

5. Missional churches are engaged in transformation of persons, systems (including the church), communities and culture.

During any period of transition, established systems need to undergo transformation to remain viable to their context. Missional churches anticipate and assume constant and often discontinuous change, both within and outside of the faith community. Rapid change demands rapid responses by God's people. Church systems based on older mental models tend to respond to change incrementally. Missional churches embrace a constant change process and seek rapid responses to rapid external change. The process of transformation is applied by missional churches to personal life, as members of the faith community grow mentally, socially and spiritually in their walk with Christ. They apply the principles of transformation to the systems of the faith community, allowing for the initiation of new missional endeavors and the discontinuation of those missional efforts that no longer fill their purpose. Because missional churches focus on assimilation into their host communities, they serve as catalysts of change in community systems, calling community organizations and resources to their rightful position of serving the needs of the broader community.

Knowing that transformation precipitates conflict, missional churches, from their conception, learn and practice skills in conflict management, actually using conflict as a

tool for transformation. By exercising effective conflict transformation skills within the faith community, missional churches become versed in skills that serve the transformational process of the host community, bringing reconciliation and partnership among people and systems that may otherwise be competitive or even hostile toward one another.

Questions for your consideration: What is your preferred model of transformation, and how are you training others in applying its principles to personal, church system and community system transformation? How aware are you of the various agencies, services and resources in your community? What services do they provide? What are the expressed needs and concerns of their staff and leaders? What community needs remain underserved or overlooked by existing institutions? Are there ways a faith community such as yours can partner with existing agencies for the purpose of positive community transformation?

6. The missional church multiplies churches, disciples and mission.

Most missional churches have exponential multiplication as a part of their original intention. Through starting new missional faith communities, missional churches reflect the rich variety of cultural and affinity groups within the host community. Since the missional church imagines itself as existing in the cross-cultural setting of a mission field, it embraces the formation of other new missional faith communities. Because missional churches value cultural diversity, they avoid cloning themselves and attempt instead to initiate new faith communities that differ from their parent church in cultural expressions of worship and community service.

Missional churches also recognize the importance of expanding missional activities by forming new mission teams. Whereas traditional churches respond to needs in the community through the formation of programs limited by budgets and personnel, missional churches prefer the formation of multiple mission teams. These teams are formed as participants respond to their interest and sense of God's call to service. They carry in them the six primary characteristics of a missional church. They discover and utilize resources of training and equipping for service. Moreover, they seek to multiply their mission through recruitment and empowerment of those being served, and by finding partners outside of the faith community who share a common concern.

It is unlikely that any singular congregation models all six missional characteristics. Missional church transformation is a process. Like New Testament discipleship, missional faith communities respond to Jesus' invitation of "Come follow me." In following Jesus into the mission field of our own community and beyond, missional churches learn what it means to be his disciples currently in their community and world.

Other articles on the Missional Church Transformation Web 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 transformation journey.