
Anabaptist Missiology: Ecclesiological Considerations¹

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Your spellchecker may not accept the word “missional,” but in many church circles it describes a particular kind of missiology and ecclesiology. The purpose of this presentation is to propose a description of the term “missional church,” using it here to describe the church’s character as an alternative community sent by God to proclaim and to be a sign of the reign of God. Though the term was not in common usage in sixteenth-century Europe, many characteristics of what we refer to today as “missional church” were present in the early Anabaptist movement. This will become clearer as we examine the term and apply it to Anabaptist understandings of the central role of the church in God’s reconciling work in the world.

Early Anabaptism Was at Its Core a Missional Church Movement

Despite its not being in every dictionary, “missional” is not a new word. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces its beginnings to 1907, although at that time the word was simply a synonym for the adjective “missionary” and did not carry the connotations of the present essay. Contemporary understandings of the word “missional” begin in the 1950s with the International Missionary Council’s discussions of the concept of *missio Dei* (the mission of God). The emphasis was on the mission as God’s, not the church’s, and on the church, participating in the *missio Dei*, as missionary by its very nature.

1 This essay was presented as “Anabaptist Missiology: Ecclesiological Considerations” at the first gathering of the Association of Anabaptist Missiologists (AAM) in January 2000 at Techny Towers, north of Chicago, IL. It was later edited and published under the title “Defining Missional Church,” in *Roman Catholic, Evangelicals, and Anabaptists in Conversation*, edited by James R. Krabill, Walter Sawatsky, and Charles van Engen (Orbis Books, 2006), 177–183. It has been adapted here and used with permission in its current form.

British Reformed missionary Lesslie Newbigin traced the frequent use of the phrase *missio Dei* to the World Missionary Conference at Willingen in 1952.² In that usage of the term in the 1950s and 1960s, invoking a trinitarian theology often meant emphasizing the first and third persons for the concept of *missio Dei* to connote God's support of all kinds of secular social and political movements, whether or not they had a basis in faith in Jesus Christ. The stress was on how God was working outside the church and on the responsibility of Christians to join God in that work.

Newbigin himself, a missionary in India who had come back to Britain to discover a mission field at home, was much more careful in promoting a trinitarian mission. He defined Christian mission as proclaiming the kingdom of the Father, sharing the life of the Son, and bearing the witness of the Spirit.³ He wrote:

By proclaiming the reign of God over all things the church acts out its faith that the Father of Jesus is indeed ruler of all. The church, by inviting all human-kind to share in the mystery of the presence of the kingdom hidden in its life through its union with the crucified and risen life of Jesus, acts out the love of Jesus that took him to the cross. By obediently following where the Spirit leads, often in ways neither planned, known, nor understood, the church acts out the hope that it is given by the presence of the Spirit who is the living foretaste of the kingdom.⁴

Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder was also connecting early on with the discussion of *missio Dei* in the ecumenical world, particularly in the writings of Dutch ecumenist W. A. Visser 't Hooft, and most particularly his understanding of the church in mission as distinctive from the world, no longer bound by Constantinian understandings of the relationship of church to state and society. In a lecture in 1964, Yoder said,

The three marks of the church in mission to which Dr. Visser 't Hooft pointed [a witnessing body, a serving body, and a body fellowshiping voluntarily and visibly] were all defined with reference to its distinct nature as church; not by the identification of the church with the total society but rather in its distinctness from it. The presuppositions of a relevant witness or ministry are a distinctiveness, a "having crossed over"; otherwise, there is nothing to offer. Mission, then, is its witness to its distinctiveness, its calling, rather than to the church's own self-confidence.

When we confess that Christ is the light of the world this implies a critical attitude toward other pretended "lights." When we confess that Jesus Christ is

2 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1995), 18.

3 Ibid., 29.

4 Ibid., 64–65.

Lord, this commits us to a relative independence of other loyalties, which we would otherwise feel it normal to be governed by.⁵

For Yoder, the connection between the church and mission was that the new Christian community, in which walls are broken down by the work of Christ, “is not only a vehicle of the gospel or a fruit of the gospel; it is the good news. It [the church] is not merely the agent of mission or the constituency of a mission agency. This is the mission.”⁶

Missiologist David Bosch continued in this vein of seeing the church as essentially missionary, noting that in 1 Peter 2:9, the church is not the sender but the one sent, and quoting Karl Barth in affirming that the church’s mission is not secondary to its being; the church exists in being sent and in building up itself for the sake of its mission.⁷ Mission is not an activity of the church, but an attribute of God.⁸ Moreover, the church “can be missionary only if its being-in-the-world is, at the same time, a being-different from the world.”⁹ Bosch covers, as well, the themes of ministry, trinitarian missiology, the *missio Dei*, and eschatology in relation to mission. Bosch does not use the term “missional church,” but rather “church-in mission” or “mission-centered church.”

In the 1970s and subsequently, other missiologists began using the adjective “missional” to refer to this concept of the church-in-mission and the church as sent by God to participate in God’s mission in the world. Mennonite missionary John Driver says he was using the equivalent Spanish word at least twenty-five years ago. And one finds other scattered uses of the word among Mennonite writers and elsewhere as an alternative to the adjective “missionary.”

The term “missional church” began to be used more broadly after the publication of the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* in 1998.¹⁰ Jointly written by six authors, the book was a project of the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America. The network itself grew out of conversations at the Ecumenical Mission Consultation at Madison, Connecticut, in October 1987, co-sponsored by the Division of Overseas Ministries of the National Council of Churches of Christ USA and the US

5 John Howard Yoder, “Let the Church Be the Church,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Eerdmans, 1994), 171.

6 John Howard Yoder, “People in the World,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Eerdmans, 1994), 91; originally written in 1967.

7 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1971), 372.

8 Ibid., 390.

9 Ibid., 386.

10 Darrell Guder, Lois Barrett, Inagrace Dietterich, George Hunsberger, Alan Roxburgh, and Craig Van Gelder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans, 1998).

Catholic Missions Association. From this discussion and from the example of the British Gospel and Our Culture Programme (inspired by Newbigin), a group of seven to eight people met at the end of the consultation and committed themselves to beginning an informal network in the United States and Canada whose purpose would be to encourage “a missionary encounter of the gospel with our North American culture.” This was followed by a meeting at Princeton Seminary in October 1989 of Wilbert Shenk, Charles West, Craig Van Gelder, and George Hunsberger, who concluded that, among all the ways in which faith and culture issues were being addressed, the Gospel and Our Culture Network was uniquely aimed at the missiological dimensions of the issues. Others involved in the early meetings included Paul Hiebert, Lamin Sanneh, and William Willimon.¹¹

The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) began holding open meetings in the early 1990s and described itself as “a collaborative association of Christian leaders from diverse communions, working together to help the church explore and engage the newly emerging missionary encounter of the gospel in the cultures of North America.” In 1994 the GOCN received a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts for research and writing on the topic of a missionary ecclesiology. The project included conversations with Douglas John Hall, Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, and Justo Gonzalez. This project resulted in the jointly written book *Missional Church* in 1998. As the six authors searched for a book title that would describe our topic succinctly, we chose the term “missional church”—in part because we thought the word “missional” would signal a new paradigm different from that usually evoked by the word “missionary,” and in part because “missional” was not a common word and would make readers take a second look at what it might mean.

What Do We Mean by “Missional Church”?

The discussions around the missional church and its meanings have been carried forward by a variety of books in the Gospel and Our Culture Series.¹² In addition, the agenda of missional church has been carried forward by the Christian

11 George Hunsberger, “The Genesis of the Gospel and Our Culture Network,” unpublished paper, 1993.

12 See various titles found in the bibliography of the Krabill, Sawatsky, and Van Engen volume *Roman Catholic, Evangelicals, and Anabaptists in Conversation*, e.g., George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture* (1996); George Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit* (1998); Craig Van Gelder, ed., *Confident Witness—Changing World* (1999); Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (2000); James Brownson, Inagrace Dietterich, Barry Harvey, and Charles West, *Storm Front: The Good News of God* (2003); Lois Barrett, Darrell Guder, Walter Hobbs, George Hunsberger, Linford Stutzman, Jeff Van Kooten, and Dale Ziemer, *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (2004).

Mission and Modern Culture Series, edited by Alan Neely, H. Wayne Pipkin, and Wilbert Shenk, and published by Trinity Press International, with some of the authors using missional terminology.¹³ The words and often the concept of missional church have also been picked up by denominational bodies, mid-level church governing bodies, mission agencies, other associations of churches and ministers outside of denominational structures, and church consulting agencies as expressing something about an alternative way of understanding the church-participating-in-God's-mission.

The following is a summary of what I understand "missional church" to mean, at the present state of the conversation. Anabaptists, past and present, will recognize these characteristics as core to the sixteenth-century free-church stream of history and as those for which many adherents both lived and died.

To Be Missional Is the Essential Nature and Vocation of the Church

There are, of course, other popular understandings of what it means to be the church in North America. Some still hold a quasi-Constantinian understanding of the church as chaplain to society. Others see the church as one more voluntary association in society, alongside the soccer club or the garden club; that is, in fact, the legal status of the churches in the United States and Canada. Or some might see the church as the waiting room for heaven for saved individuals. The most popular image of the church these days seems to be the church as vendor of religious goods and services.

Missional church theology sees the church as participating in the *missio Dei*. Thus, the mission is God's, first of all, not our own creation. Rather than seeing mission as one among many activities of the church, it sees participation in God's mission as permeating every activity of the church. Thus, all of the church's life is a witness to the gospel, whether it be its outreach or its life together. This cuts across the old divisions about whether the inner or outer life of the congregation is more important, or whether it is more important to pay attention to church discipline and discipling or to social action and evangelism. The making of disciples through catechesis and practices of continuing loving accountability is training for participation in God's mission. Sustained public witness is impossible unless it is undergirded by spiritual disciplines and practice in loving enemies.

Thus, the missional church conversation has intersected the conversation about practices as meaningful clusters of communal human activity and thinking that

13 Authors included David Bosch, Wilbert Shenk, Lesslie Newbigin, Lamin Sanneh, J. Andrew Kirk, Douglas John Hall, Judith M. Gundry-Volf and Miroslav Volf, Alan Roxburgh, Kenneth Cragg, Bert Hoedemaker, Jonathan R. Wilson, Gordon Scoville, James Brownson, and Barry Harvey.

need to be learned and are done over time.¹⁴ These practices are not just internal to the life of the congregation; they are witnessed by the watching world.¹⁵ These practices include baptism, the Lord's Supper, forgiveness, accountability, hospitality, prayer, watching over one another in love, how the church deals with conflict, and how it makes decisions. The missional church practices spiritual discernment as it seeks to understand its unique missional vocation within the *missio Dei*, so that all its communal behaviors are focused on living out that vocation.

In one sense, this understanding of the missional church provides an alternative to the discussion of the traditional *notae*, or marks, of the church. In answer to the question "Where can one truly find the church?" one has not a short (Word and sacraments) or long list (see Menno Simons's list of six ways whereby the church of Christ may be known¹⁶), but a unitive understanding of how all those "marks" hold together in ways that do not pit one aspect of the church's life against another.

To Be Missional Is to Pay Attention to the Church's Context

An early impetus to the missional church conversation was recognition of the changing status of the mainline churches in North America. Constantinian understandings of the church and its relation to government and culture have been disintegrating in many church circles (although it seems that some in evangelical circles wish for a return of Constantinianism, albeit with their own agendas). Mainline churches—and to some degree, all Christian churches—are experiencing something of the marginalization that the heirs of the Radical Reformation have been experiencing since the sixteenth century. As one bishop wistfully said to me a few years ago, "We just don't have access to the governor's office the way we used to." When I mention this conversation to Mennonite audiences, they typically laugh, because most Mennonites don't expect to have much access to government offices, and they recognize that the mainline churches are now joining them on the margins of influence. The bishop was not laughing, but some of his colleagues in other denominations are wondering whether the margins are not a better place to be, after all.

The decline of the church's influence in society has been a major factor in the church's willingness to see North America as a mission field. Mission is no longer only across salt water or among the down-and-out of North America. Mission is

14 See Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Eerdmans, 2002), 11.

15 Note the subtitle of John H. Yoder's book *Body Politics: Five Practices of Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Discipleship Resources, 1992).

16 Menno Simons, "Reply to Gellius Faber," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Herald Press, 1956), 734–44.

also to the dominant culture. Missional churches do not assume that their country is a Christian nation or even that most residents of the country are Christian. Every context is a missionary context.

Freed of the need to make things come out “right” for the government or society or to feel at home in the culture, the missional church can live out its understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church can have a different worldview. It can become an alternative community. It is different from the world, not for the sake of being different, but because it is seeking to conform to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, rather than to conform to the surrounding culture.

So, the church is a people. It is a communal body, rather than a collection of saved individuals whose primary identity and loyalties are outside the church. As Rodney Clapp has written:

God the Father and God the Son are not fundamentally known privately and ethereally. They are instead encountered through a holy people, a community set apart, a light to the world, a city on a hill, a tribe bearing promise to all other tribes. Christians are inescapably called to the corporate witnessing of the coming of God’s kingdom in Jesus Christ.¹⁷

Evangelism in a non-Constantinian setting requires that evangelism be understood not simply as declaring a message to someone but as initiation into the world-changing reign of God. The convert must understand that they are becoming a member of a new race, humanity, or family.¹⁸

Worship in a missional setting casts a new worldview. Worshipers enter a different reality—a preview of the reign of God. As in Orthodox worship, worship on earth is to be according to the pattern of heaven.

The church has no message to the world if it is just like the world. That differentness from the world is shown in its worship, in its common life, and in its public witness. In its encounter with the dominant culture, the church may sometimes be *affirming* of that culture—the ways in which it supports justice or peace or right relationships among people. The church may sometimes be *nonconforming*, acting and speaking out of a different worldview. It may sometimes *propose* to parts of society or government actions that move it closer to Jesus’s way—what Yoder called “middle axioms”—not Jesus’s way of living, but principles that bring one closer to it. The church will always seek to *demonstrate* the Jesus way, to be a sign of God’s future. The church is to be what Mennonite theologian Larry Miller has termed “messianic microsocieties present in and daily interacting with the existing sociopolitical order.”¹⁹

17 Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People* (InterVarsity, 1996), 109.

18 Ibid., 167.

19 Larry Miller, “The Church as Messianic Society: Creation and Instrument of Transformed Mission,” in *The Transfiguration of Mission*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Herald

To Be Missional Is to Proclaim and to Be a Living Sign of the Gospel

The witness of the missional church is always grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ, initiated by God, and led by the Holy Spirit. The good news that Jesus proclaimed, as recorded in the Gospels, was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mark 1:15). The kingdom of heaven, or reign of God, is that sphere in which God is ruler and God’s way of doing things is practiced. We know that sphere now in part; we believe that one day God’s victory will be obvious to the whole world, and God’s peace and justice will prevail. The church is called to continue Jesus’s ministry (“as the Father has sent me, so I send you” [John 20:21]), to continue to proclaim the reign of God, both near at hand and yet to come. The church is called to align itself with God’s in-breaking future and to be a preview of the age to come.

This all assumes God as an actor—past, present, and future. God is more than a clockmaker who set the world in motion and then went on to something else. God is more than a ground of being. The missional church celebrates God’s actions in the past. It points to God’s action in the present; one of my colleagues refers to Christians’ calling to be “detectives of divinity.” It expects God’s action in the future. It depends on the Holy Spirit to come through with glimpses of God’s future in the present. This is the foundation of the spirituality of the missional church—its reliance on the Spirit, its expectation that prayer will make a difference, its desire to do the will of God above all else.

In the missional church, Jesus—his is life, death, and resurrection—is normative for Christian behavior. When Jesus is not the norm, all kinds of things get attributed to God; all kinds of behaviors are justified. The missional church takes seriously Jesus’s words “Take up your cross and follow me.” It knows that suffering or even death can result from following Jesus. Not everybody will like you all the time. It assumes that Jesus’s commands are to be obeyed. It expects God’s vindication through resurrection, which it can already count on because of Jesus’s resurrection from the dead.

Disciples in the missional church let the Bible form and shape them. Newbigin emphasized that for the churches of Western, post-Christendom culture to be genuinely missionary, they must learn again to indwell the “plausibility structure” of the Bible.²⁰ The Bible is not simply a book to be studied but a world in which to live.

In such a church, evangelization is not confined to the initial hearing and acceptance of the gospel. Evangelization is a full spectrum that includes the first hearing/seeing of the gospel, catechesis, baptism, continuing formation and

Press, 1993), 130.

20 Cited by George Hunsberger in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, eds. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Eerdmans, 1996), xvi.

discipling, mutual accountability, and training for witness. To be evangelized, to be “gospelled,” is to be formed into the image of Christ as witness to the reign of God.

“Missional Church” Is Shorthand for Talking About a Particular Ecclesiology

In this ecclesiology, mission first constitutes the church. God’s mission creates the church and gives the church its reason for being. Second, the missional church is an alternative community, engaging with, but not conforming to, the surrounding cultures. It is conformed instead to Jesus Christ. Third, the missional church points to the reign of God, depending on God’s action in the past, present, and future. Anabaptists have not always lived up faithfully to their missional calling, but when they are at their best, they will find deep resonance with the ecclesial missiology articulated by the missional church movement.