
An Ethiopian Response: “Repositioning the Role of the Church in God’s Mission”

Ruth Haile Gelane

It seems that we are in an era when the church often finds itself entangled with secular power and state structures and when many people see this alignment as the church’s mission in the world. Such an association with power often distorts the church’s true mission—revealed through Jesus Christ—and consequently diminishes the Church’s witness. It is within this tension that Lois Y. Barrett’s article on Anabaptist missiology, “Ecclesiological Considerations,” provides a comprehensive exploration of the church’s identity as a participant in the *missio Dei*, God’s ongoing mission.

Barrett explores the trajectory of the concept’s historical development from its theological roots to its contemporary understanding. She traces the term “missional” to 1907 and states that it was initially used as an adjective for “missionary.” Barrett’s exploration shows that the trajectory moves from “mission” (something we do), which historically in the church was linked to Constantinian understandings of the relationship between church and state, to *missio Dei*—God’s mission, in which we participate. Her central thesis emphasizes that the church must shift from a model of cultural dominance—something that early Anabaptists understood very clearly—to one of engagement as an authentic, alternative community rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In my reflections here, I will engage with Barrett’s primary arguments regarding the church’s identity as a participant in the *missio Dei*. I will explore what the “missional church” means and then examine Barrett’s call for the church “to be.” While I build on Barrett’s missional framework, I will argue that missional church must move beyond symbolic presence toward a strategic engagement and the use of prophetic voices directed at societal and structural forms of injustice by examining the broader themes and relevance this might have on the contemporary

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church. I will in addition provide a contextual example from the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) in Ethiopia by illustrating its mission perspective.

Defining the Church's Role in God's Mission

Barrett's emphasis on the shift from *mission* to *missio Dei* offers a vital perspective. She states that the emphasis is on the mission as *God's*, not as that of the *church*. The church, then, is missionary by its very nature by participating in God's mission, the *missio Dei*. This illustrates clearly the shift from a church-centered mission to participation in God's mission and highlights the importance of understanding mission as established in *God's* activity rather than resulting from *human* effort.

Barrett defines "missional church" by offering three points that explore what it means to be missional.

Primary Purpose

First, she says, to be missional describes the very nature and essential vocation of the church. The primary purpose of the church, then, is to participate in God's mission (*missio Dei*). This means seeing every aspect of the church's life—from worship and sacraments to social justice and community discipline—as an active participation in God's ongoing mission. The church's practices are not a routine, but a witness to the gospel. This idea challenges the traditional way of defining mission and offers a way of thinking and seeing the church as the primary instrument of God's mission in the world, integrating all activities holistically and discerning the church's essential nature and vocation within God's mission.

Context

Second, according to Barrett, to be missional is to pay attention to the church's context. Barrett emphasizes viewing the North American church's marginalized position as an opportunity to be a faithful witness that can offer a compelling identity in contemporary society. Her assertion that churches are no longer centers of cultural power but are instead called to embody the gospel faithfully from the margins challenges the church to see its current state as a tactical benefit rather than a hindrance. I believe that this aligns with the Mennonite perspective on the separation of church and state, as well as with a missional perspective and participation in mission that does not succumb to the temptation of cultural dominance.

However, this view can raise critical questions. While being on the margins can foster a sense of community and reliance on God, the question becomes how the church can engage with societal structures for justice and transformation as a body of witness. How can a church, as a participant in God's mission and a community in the margins, be a beacon of peace, hope, and justice as it embodies

the love and reconciliation of Jesus? What distinctive elements can define its identity as a prophetic and compassionate community in society?

As Barrett states, the church is an “alternative community.” The question this statement raises is: How does this community embody different values and live out the gospel in tangible ways? While Barrett’s perspective encourages paying attention to the church’s context to be missional, I believe it should be strengthened by strategic engagement and the exercise of a prophetic voice to remain relevant as a change agent in society. What I mean by strategic engagement is that the church should be thoughtful in addressing the marginalized, the oppressed, and all people by choosing the Jesus way and using a prophetic voice to show solidarity with all people.

To underscore this shift, Dutch ecumenist Willem Visser ‘t Hooft articulated a similar view to Barrett, stating that when the church in mission is distinct from the world, it is no longer bound by Constantinian understandings of the relationship of church to state and society. This perspective emphasizes a meaningful move away from the church’s traditional alliance with power, principalities, and social dominance. That is why Barrett emphasizes paying attention to the church context given the shift, as the church freely embodies Jesus’s love and compassion in its engagement with society.

As the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* states, “The church is called to live as an alternative culture within the surrounding society. Thus, the church is involved in cross-cultural mission whether it reaches out to people of the majority culture, to people of minority cultures within the society, or to various cultural groups in other countries.”¹ This embodying of the gospel involves engaging with various cultural settings and reaching out to marginalized groups with an approach that is rooted in Jesus’s love, peace, reconciliation, and hope. I believe this essential way of engagement to be a prophetic witness, lived out in words and deeds in society.

Proclamation and a Living Sign

Third, to be missional, according to Barrett, is to proclaim and to be a living sign of the gospel. I appreciate how Barrett articulates the theological foundations of a missional church—centered on the gospel, the kingdom of God, and reliance on the Holy Spirit as the foundation of the church’s mission. Her emphasis on viewing God as actively involved in the past, present, and future provides ongoing engagement with creation—and with the centrality of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection to Christian identity and practice. Additionally, Barrett highlights

1 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, ed. by the General Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church General Board (Herald Press, 1995), 44–45.

that reliance on the Holy Spirit is essential to mission and spirituality and nurtures the church in strengthening her witness in society.

I also believe that this invites the Church to think about how to translate this vision into diverse cultural, social, and political contexts. Is proclaiming the gospel enough, or does the church also need concrete actions of justice, reconciliation, and community transformation? These questions emphasize the practical challenges the church faces in participating in God's mission and embodying Jesus's teaching as a witness in society. It encourages reflection on how the church faithfully interprets and embodies the teaching of Jesus, both internally as a faith community and externally as a witness to society. How, then, does the church navigate the tension between hope in a future fulfillment and active engagement in present suffering and systemic injustice?

Barrett emphasizes the church's fundamental role as a community—namely, to participate in God's mission (*missio Dei*). She advocates for an understanding of the church as an alternative community that embodies the gospel and Jesus's love, peace, and justice, and engages holistically in mission through its practices and identity. Building on her insights, I am particularly interested in exploring how this theological vision manifests itself within the Ethiopian context, especially through the mission of the Meserete Kristos Church.

The Meserete Kristos Church: A Case Study of a Church in Mission

The Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) seeks to be a missionary church empowered by the Holy Spirit to expand God's kingdom. This vision is implemented through a mission dedicated to the holistic preaching of the gospel and the rigorous discipleship of all who come to faith in Jesus Christ. At the core of MKC is a conviction that the missional church approach must be holistic. This is reflected in strategic goals that balance effective pastoral ministry and leadership equipping with the promotion of justice and peace, and the provision of services that address the community's needs, as revealed in practice. MKC manifests an ecclesiology in which "service" is not a separate department but an essential witness to the gospel. MKC's efforts in social justice, relief, and cross-border missions exemplify the contextual engagement that Barrett highlights in her article.

As someone who grew up in MKC and actively participated in evangelism programs organized by the local church at various times, I have observed a mixed understanding of what "mission" truly requires within the community. First, the church affirms its participation in God's ongoing mission, and second, there is an emphasis on one-to-one evangelism, with church leaders encouraging members to participate, stating that evangelism is not only for full-time ministers. Both methods of evangelism—full-time and lay-driven—are supported and acknowledged

by the church, and this involves a scheduled program and prayer before going out to the community.

While mission in one-to-one encounters demonstrates a commitment, it also reflects a somewhat fragmented understanding of the nature of mission, because it tends to focus on individuals rather than on the collective, ecclesial participation in God's mission. The dual perspectives invite us to think thoroughly and reflect on how MKC understands and practices its role as a church participating in God's mission, both collectively and individually. Barrett's emphasis on the church's participation in the *missio Dei* highlights the importance of the church's collective identity as the main instrument of God's mission. The church's practices—worship, justice, service, and community life—are integral to its mission and must be fostered within a shared ecclesial identity.

From a biblical and theological perspective, the New Testament consistently presents the church—the body of Christ—as the central agent in God's mission (Eph 3:10). The church is called as a collective to be a witness, to embody Jesus's love and compassion, and to advocate and preach peace, justice, and reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18–20). If church leaders, pastors, and members fail to understand mission as a collective and focus primarily on it as an individual act of evangelism, the church neglects the corporate ecclesial dimension that scripture emphasizes. However, the church is a collective of individuals. Each one is vital for participating in God's mission, keeping in mind serving within the larger vision of the church as it functions as the body of Christ and as a collective that is called to embody Jesus's teaching and to be a witness in society.

Generally, Barrett's article provides a strong theological foundation for viewing the church as God's instrument in mission and participating in God's mission (*missio Dei*). Her article challenges traditional ways of thinking and illuminates the shift in the church's mission and ecclesiological vision, positioning the church as the primary instrument of God's mission. Barrett also invites us to think more deeply and thoroughly about what we mean when we say that the church is "missional."