

## Evaluating the Possibilities of Missional Change in Older Congregations

By Bob Young

James Nored recently asked: “How does one bring missional transformation to an already existing congregation?” My question over the last few years is slightly different: “CAN one bring missional transformation to an existing congregation?” Frankly, I increasingly wonder if such a drastic change is possible—redefining the identity of the church, its purpose, its work, its primary activities, and its focus.

Nored writes that missional transformation in an existing church “is not easy” and suggests such may be one reason the church planting movement has taken hold so strongly. As one church planting director explained it, “When things change, they mutate, and most mutations die.”

In the book, *The Missional Leader* (Jossey-Bass, 2006), Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk suggest a sequence of steps required to bring about missional transformation in an established congregation. I shared these steps and an accompanying chart from the book with the elders at McAlester when I agreed to return to this ministry about three years ago. Consider the steps Roxburgh and Romanuk outline as a part of a significant change process (p. 105).

### **Stage 1: Creating Awareness [4-6 months]**

→Through intensive communication events, both one-on-one and in groups, leaders take people through dialogue and discussion about the need for missional transformation of the church.

### **Stage 2: Creating Understanding [3-5 months]**

→The dialogue and discussion serve to bring thinking and feeling modes of understanding together into a coherent pattern of understanding.

### **Stage 3: Evaluation [3-5 months]**

→What is currently happening in the congregation is evaluated in light of awareness and understanding.

### **Stage 4: Creating Experiments [3-8 months]**

→People begin to identify actions that they believe will move them toward becoming a missional church. The critical word is *action*. People will experiment through action.

### **Stage 5: Commit**

→People commit to getting others involved in the process of moving through awareness to understanding, to evaluation, to experimentation, and finally to commitment.

This suggested timeline requires a minimum of one to two years before missional change can begin under the best of circumstances. My experience is that the timeline is overly ambitious when one considers the situation and dynamics of stable churches with well-established traditions. The less “turnover” a church typically experiences, the longer the required timeline. That is to say, generally rural churches with a stable membership and fewer transfers in and out will require a longer time, if such change is possible at all. The proposed timeline may be more

workable in urban settings that experience change as a part of the normal ebb and flow of church life.

To initiate the process in the average congregation, the first requirement is to define missional. Confusion exists because of the similarity of the words missional and missions. Such misunderstandings must be handled as a first step. Second, expectations must be discussed. A frequent point of confusion centers on the expected results of missional change. Some think a missional focus will bring more members like “us” with the ability to expand programs and missions due to increased contributions. The reality is that a missional focus often attracts lost and needy persons who need Jesus but do not have the ability to contribute to the church according to our traditional expectations. Third, the timeline clarifies the need for involvement of the membership in any effort to transform a church from a maintenance mentality to a missional way of thinking. Missional change must be a grassroots effort. Top-down leadership-driven decisions and methods are not likely to bring about lasting change, even when the church leadership firmly commits to missional transition. Ministers must be especially cautious in this regard, since many (lay) church leaders do not understand what it means to be missional. Nored observes that many think it is a fad and others think it is a panacea for church growth. Some equate it with evangelism, even describing out-dated methods of evangelism as missional. The most effective missional change in a local church comes from efforts across the spectrum of the congregation—both from members and from leaders. Nored observes that if the change does not bring instant results, leaders may reject the effort. Also, missional change that is only grassroots can easily be squashed by leaders if they feel threatened, do not understand it, or think it is a waste of time.

One author suggested that bringing missional transformation to an established congregation takes ten years, if it can be done at all. Nored correctly concludes that most genuinely missional leaders will find waiting ten years to do what ought to be accomplished now terribly difficult. May God bless those who are facilitating missional transformation in established churches, as well as those who are planting missional churches.