

SO YOU WANT TO BE MISSIONAL

By Bob Young

DEFINING MISSIONAL

Missional—how should we define “missional”? The world ultimately means sent and thus implies “going.”

This meaning can be illustrated with comparisons. What is the opposite of missional?

Missional vs. maintenance. This is often explained by contrasting an external vs. an internal focus. Is the work of the church “in here” or “out there”? (The truth is that what we do “in here” equips us for the work we are called as a body to do “out there.” This equipping is one function of assembly and fellowship.) Ministry is two-pronged and dually-located. Ministry is about making sure the “in here” stuff equips the saints for works of service (Eph. 4:11-16). Ministry is about being “out there” as an example and Christian influence. Ministers who wish to be missional must not devote all of their time to maintenance and internal activities; neither do missional ministers neglect the equipping of the members.

Missional vs. attractional. This contrast suggests where the “evangelistic interaction” is going to occur. Where are we going to make contact with the world? Where are we going to “make the ask”? This is one advantage missionally-planted churches have when they rent an assembly facility. There is less likelihood of identifying the work of the church with the location. I can tell you that I have not set up many Bible studies at the church building. I have set up appointments to meet and talk about the possibility of a Bible study, but I have seldom set up the Bible study schedule at the church building. The evangelistic interaction to which people respond positively is going to occur as we are going and as they are going, at the intersections of our lives. *Note: one challenge or problem with the attractional model is that if people start attractinally, they often remain attractional. If they start attending church because of an attraction, it takes more and more attractions to keep them coming, or removing the original attraction causes them to stop attending.*

ILLUSTRATING MISSIONAL

Missional is better seen than described.

Some churches were “missional” before the word was in vogue. Missional is lived out by accepting our sent-ness, that is, by going. The church must also recognize that missional is more than going—it is going in the name of Jesus with the message of Jesus. All of us go, some more often and more broadly than others. But few go with the message of Jesus.

Many bus programs were missional. The initial point of contact was external, outside the church building. Christians regularly went into the highways and byways in search of people who would learn about Jesus.

An overwhelming majority of the Bible studies I have taught in my lifetime were taught in homes, away from the church building. An intensive individual Bible study program is generally missional. A helpful model seeks to develop interest, set up the study, teach about Jesus, see people ‘naturally’ seek out and experience worship and fellowship, and facilitate changed lives and commitment to Christ.

Missional churches recognize that almost all of the work of the church is external. (What we do internally is for us, regardless of what we may say or how we may spin it.) We may think or say that visitors are welcomed, but we generally do Bible classes for us, we worship for us, and we often even do VBS primarily for us. Most of what we say and do is not interesting to outsiders. The visitors we attract and keep most often join “us” because they were already “of us” but in a different place. Many supposedly “visitor friendly” activities are mostly consumed by us. We consume the visitors’ donuts, our buildings are still undecipherable labyrinths for visitors, our Bible classes are mostly closed groups, and our worship assemblies are focused internally—with inside references, jokes and humor. Our sermon illustrations are mostly inside and personal illustrations. We use our own unique vocabulary as we talk.

Most of our small groups are for us—focused on fellowship and our needs more than on evangelism and touching outsiders.

Having an event away from the church building—small groups, worship in the park, etc.—does not automatically make it missional. Remember that missional is going to outsiders in the name of Jesus with the message of Jesus.

EXPLAINING MISSIONAL

The easiest way to explain and evaluate missional is to ask where the church spends its ministry time. When religion turns inward, it is hard to turn outward again. All of this says that a missional church spends a tremendous amount of energy externally.

During one period of my local ministry, the Lord was adding at least one person per week to the church. Consider a sampling of some of the comments I heard regularly from church members during that time: *“I met a good prospect. I want you to talk to my friend, my neighbor, my family member. They don’t come to church, let’s go visit them together. I want you to attend a funeral with me. My cousin is getting married and needs a preacher. Do you do marriage counseling? I want you to meet a co-worker. My neighbor is in the hospital. My neighbor is asking spiritual and Bible questions.”* These interactions occurred because Christians were taking the message of Jesus and their Christianity into the world. They were talking about Jesus, they were seeking opportunities, they were praying about souls.

Missional is also reflected in what the church counts—the statistics that are published. A person counts what matters. What do you count? Let me tell you what we were counting in the missional setting described above. We were counting the number of Bible studies ongoing, the number of contacts made in the Personal Evangelism Program, the number of daily pray-ers (an activity done away from the building), the number of initial contacts made in an effort to develop interest, and the number of baptisms.

Someone says that this is too much focus on numbers. The Bible focuses on numbers—3000, then 5000. We know how many Jesus fed on at least two occasions. We know how many were in the upper room; we know the number of disciples, the number of deacons in Jerusalem. We are familiar with such phrases as “The Twelve” and “The Seven”. Numbers motivate us and represent souls. God is interested in numbers because he is interested in people.

WHEN MISSIONAL IS MISIDENTIFIED OR MISUNDERSTOOD

Some things we do in the name of “missional” may actually be “anti-missional.”

- Having more gadgets, gizmos, etc. at the building is not missional, and may work against being missional by misdirecting resources that could be focused externally.
- Having non-religious events at the church building may not be missional.
- Generally, duplicating and distributing materials that reflect internally-focused activities is not missional (copies of classes, sermons, etc.)
- Communication that is focused on internal activities is not missional. Most church bulletins I read are not missional—most church websites I visit are not missional.