

## Understanding Missional Church

### Background - how we got to where we are

Our inherited model of Church is based on a time when it was assumed that everyone in our country was Christian. The role of the church was therefore to hold Christians to account and teach them properly what it meant to be a Christian. The pattern of church life developed reflected this:

- Children baptised, their parents promising to bring them up in the Christian faith and in the church.
- Children were taught the basics of the Christian faith at home, school and church
- As teenagers they confirmed that they wanted to be members of the church
- The church placed members in “districts” with elders who took responsibility for shepherding them
- Sunday worship gave teaching about beliefs and encouragement to live as Christ calls us, alongside communion and Christian “markers” for key stages of life– baptism, weddings, funerals.

This pattern underpins much of what we still have in place in many of our churches.

From as early as the late 1950's this pattern began to break down. The number of baptisms began to decline and those who had been baptised as children started to drift from Sunday School in or before their early teens, never making public profession of faith. However, with people living longer and remaining fit and active, whilst membership dropped everything was able to continue, with those serving in different roles within the church able to continue in them for longer than previous generations.

Those operating within this did not see the changes as acutely as, for example, Lesslie Newbigin, a Church of Scotland minister who served as a missionary in India. Returning to Britain in the seventies he saw a changed and changing landscape. He argued that Britain was post-Christian and that the church had not only failed to see or respond to these changes – but had, in fact, been sucked in by them. That members were far less secure in their faith and had a diminished commitment to live sacrificial lives for Christ.

### The Emergence of Missional Church Thinking

What Newbigin and others saw was that this changed environment needed a different approach. The “pastoral/discipline/teaching” model was simply not appropriate for a context where most people did not want the church to pastor, discipline or teach them! Instead the church needed to engage in mission on its own doorstep – to reach out rather than sit back and expect people to come.

His thinking followed a similar line to that of the World Council of Churches, who in the late 50's/early 60's began speaking of the church being missionary “by its very nature.” This resulted in talk of engaging in mission not missions and to Stephen Neills' famous quote in 1966 that “the age of missions is at an end, the age of mission has begun.”

In this understanding mission is not an activity that the church engages in, the “recruitment arm” of the church, but is of the very essence of what it means to be church.

This line of thinking can also be seen in the Church of Scotland, with the Church without Walls Report standing very clearly in this tradition – although, as Rev Dr Alexander Forsyth comments:

*Whilst I think that CWW is a very important contribution, it is by no means the start and end of the CofS's missional thinking. CWW is re-stating, albeit in a cogent way, the essence of what Tom Allan, George MacLeod and Ian Fraser were writing and doing in the twenty years after WWII.*

So how can mission be returned to its proper place at the very heart of what the local church is and does? How can mission become part of the DNA of congregations across the length and breadth of Scotland?

### Characteristics of a Missional Church – 3 Strands

The Church of Scotland Panel on Review & Reform have suggested that there are 3 strands which are common to Missional churches. All three strands above are seen as important, without any sense that one is more important than the other. In fact there is a distinct interplay between all three.

**Strand 1: Engaged in their local community and more widely; working in partnership with other people to meet social needs and bring about change so that justice prevails.**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes the influence his disciples are to have, telling them they are to be salt for the world. They are not to hold themselves apart but are to engage with the culture of which they are part. However maintaining their distinctiveness will be crucial. They are not simply to take on the values of their culture and “fit in.” Indeed to do so would mean they cannot fulfil what God has for them to do “For if the salt loses its saltiness it has become worthless.”

**Strand 2: Sustaining & building authentic, engaging Christian community and worship which is relevant to daily life and living and which draws in people of all generations.**

As well as being sent there is an element of the church being something to which people are drawn. There should be something in our communal life and worship which points people to something different and which they find they want to be part of. This thought finds echoes in the writings of the Old Testament prophets, where the people of God will stand as a light to the nations (Isaiah 49.6.)

*(Some) writers on the missional church tend to emphasize the mission of every individual member to share the gospel. That’s excellent. But let’s emphasize the importance of our corporate witness as well. Our churches should be attractive. They should be foretastes of Christ’s consummated kingdom.*

Jonathan Leeman: <https://9marks.org/article/what-world-missional-church/>

**Strand 3: Helping people become mature Christians who live out their faith in daily life and have in place groups, activities or mentoring to help people at every stage of their faith journey.**

Diana Butler Bass in her book “Christianity for the Rest of Us” writes “The primary job of a church is to be a spiritual community that forms people in faith” and the inclusion of this third strand suggests that this is something which needs a distinct focus and some practical structures in place to enable it. It is not something which happens by chance or that we will emerge no matter what we do.

*A missional church is the new car that everyone is talking about right now, but no matter how beautiful or shiny the vehicle, without an engine, it won’t go anywhere. So what is the engine of the church? Discipleship. I’ve said it many times: If you make disciples, you will always get the church. But if you try to build the church, you will rarely get disciples.*

Mike Breen <http://www.vergenetwork.org/2011/09/14/mike-breen-why-the-missional-movement-will-fail/>

Understanding the differences

Whilst not definitive, the table below sets out some of the differences between “inherited” and “missional” models of church.

Inherited Model	Missional Model
Expect people to come to us	We go out to where people are
We hold to our traditional patterns	We reshape what we do, whilst holding firmly to our faith and values
Understand Christian service as = church work	Understand Christ can use us wherever we are
We are a member based organisation, focussed on the needs of our members	We are a missionary organisation, focussed on how God can use us in his work in the world
We measure “success” by membership statistics	We measure success by a whole range of factors, membership is only one
The wider community should contribute to keep the church going	The church contributes to community well being in sacrificial ways
Driven by maintenance – keeping things going	Driven by Missional thinking
Averse to change without good worked out, costed, proven plans	Ready for change - willing to experiment and to take risks