

Understanding Missional Church

Background - how we got to where we are

Our inherited model of Church is based on what has been called Christendom – a time when it was assumed that everyone in our country was Christian. The Reformation was born within this context and at a time when many saw that the church was not doing what it should. It was not holding Christians to account and not teaching them properly what it meant to be a Christian. The Reformers saw 3 marks which were required for the church to be a true church:

- The Word truly preached
- The sacraments properly administered
- Discipline properly exercised (See appendix 1 for a fuller outline)

The work of the church in Scotland was therefore to keep the people of Scotland focussed on living as Christians, maintaining right beliefs and behaviour. In this context, **the work of mission belonged overseas** – working in non-Christian countries with the hope that many would come to faith there and that the whole country would become a Christian country, just like Scotland.

In fulfilling the work within Scotland, the pattern of church life was:

- 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 did, indeed, want to be members of the church
- The church placed members in “districts” with elders who took responsibility for shepherding them (Initially with a discipline role - see appendix 2 outlining how the role of elders changed.)
- Sunday worship provided teaching about beliefs along with an encouragement to members 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 1950s though this pattern began to break down. The number of baptisms began to decline in the period 1957-63 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. The assumption made was that they would come back when they got married or when their children were born, since they would want for their children the same upbringing that they had. This didn't happen and the cycle had been broken.

However, with people living longer and remaining fit and active, the crisis that this might have created in local churches was, at least in some ways, averted. Whilst membership dropped (around 165,000 members lost in each decade) 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, an ordained Church of Scotland minister who served as a missionary within the Anglican Church. Returning from India to Britain in the seventies he saw a changed and changing landscape. A society that shared similarities with where he had been serving - where most people did not “own” Christian faith, although they might maintain some vestige of it. He argued that Britain was post-Christian. He also argued that the church had not only failed to see or respond to these changes – but had, in fact, being 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.

However, he did not suggest that the church in Britain needed to engage in Billy Graham style missions in order to see more people converted, filling our churches and allowing the church to return to the pattern that had existed for generations. Instead 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. Engaged with God in the three-fold work of reconciliation:

- Seeing people reconciled with God
- People reconciled with one another
- And the balance of nature itself restored

Recognising within this that God is the prime mover, the Church a participant in what God is doing. *Missio-dei* is the theological term!

The basic premise of the missional church is that “missions” is not simply one of the functions or programs of a church. It constitutes the very essence or nature of the church. Drop the “s.” God is a God on mission. And God has sent the church on mission. “As the Father has sent me,” Jesus said, “even so I am sending you” (John 20:21).

Jonathan Leeman: What in the world is a missional church? <https://9marks.org/article/what-world-missional-church/>

Whilst a good number of those writing about missional church have drawn on Newbigin’s work, the seminal and key work for the past quarter century in Western missiology is *Transforming Mission* (1991) a major work on post-colonial Christian mission written by David Bosch, a member of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (NGK.)

This line of thinking can also be seen in the Church of Scotland though, with the Church without Walls Report standing very clearly in this tradition – Peter Neilson, convener of the Commission who produced the report describing it as part of the Church of Scotland’s contribution to Missional Church thinking. However precursors of Missional thinking can be seen in the Church of Scotland 50 years before Church without Walls was written, with the pioneering work of Tom Allan, George MacLeod and others. 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. I would argue that theirs was a contribution to the CofS’s missional thinking which was stronger given that it is also involved dynamic action and outcomes, or at least that their contribution is on equal terms in contemporary importance.

Defining Missional Church

Missional theology and understanding is developing rather than fully formed. As a consequence, there is a distinct reluctance to closely define it rather than give the “broad brush stroke” above. This is seen, for example, in Alan Roxburgh’s *Introducing the Missional Church* where he explains in a chapter entitled “Just give me a definition” why that isn’t possible, comparing it to giving a clear definition of the Kingdom of God. Instead he offers eight examples of what Missional church is not, which is what many authors do. Pointing out what it is not correct, as a way of steering people in the right direction.

What is clear though is that a Missional church is a church which is reaching out, not turned in; engaged with culture not withdrawn from it and deeply rooted in her relationship with God.

Characteristics of a Missional Church – 3 Strands

Whilst recognising the legitimate reluctance which exists in defining Missional church, the Church of Scotland Panel on Review & Reform have suggested that there are 3 strands which are common to Missional churches. It is these three strands which the Path of Renewal would seek to engender in every church.

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. The same thing can be seen when the Jews find themselves in exile in Babylon and Jeremiah writes: Make yourselves at home there and work for the country’s welfare. Pray for Babylon’s well-being. If things go well for Babylon, things will go well for you. Jeremiah 29.7

Yet in both situations, 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. That there is something in our communal life and worship which points people to something different and which they find they want to be part of. (In fact some thinking on this suggests that for many people church becomes a place where they find they **belong** before they **believe**.)

This thought of being a people who are attractive and to which people are drawn finds echoes in the writings of the Old Testament prophets, where the temple in Jerusalem stands as a place to which people are drawn, from all nations (Isaiah 56.7) and the people of God will stand as a light to the nations (Isaiah 49.6.) It is not surprising then to find Jesus describing his disciples as being light for the world – and in the early church we discover that the shaping of their community life and worship led to many finding a new relationship with God and a place within the church.

It is therefore, seen as a key element in Missional churches

In North America, what might it mean for the church to be such a city on a hill? ... to be a light to the world? It means, first of all, that the inner, communal life of the church matters for mission. [Guder ed, Missional Church, 128]

Amen! This author goes onto emphasize the importance of love, holiness, and unity. ... Conservative 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.” Taking this on board we recognize that whilst encouraging people to belong is crucial, we also need to hear the Great Commission – to “go and make disciples.”

This is something which the Church of Scotland has not been good at. We have been keen to get people to join the church but have done little of what Butler Bass talks of in “forming them in faith.” 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. In other words, it is not something which happens by chance or that we will emerge no matter what we do, whilst recognizing that there is no one set pattern for this.

Within this is a focus on helping people at every stage of the faith journey. From those dipping their toe in the water and expressing a simple interest in finding out more about the Christian faith through to those who have been Christians for a long time and need encouraged to step out further, discovering and exercising more fully the gifts God has given them.

The importance of this cannot be overstated:

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/>

Drawing it together

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.

Understanding the differences

In some ways setting out the differences between the two models of church has helped others to picture what is meant by Missional church and some of these are set out below.

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

Appendix 1

The notes, therefore, of the true kirk of God we believe, confess, and avow to be: first, the true preaching of the word of God, into the which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles do declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, which must be annexed unto the word and promise of God, to seal and confirm the same in our hearts; last, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed, and virtue nourished
Scot's Confession 1560

Appendix 2

The main purpose for the formation of eldership after the Reformation was the exercise of 'discipline' in the parish, in order to seek the fruits of the Word in the parish, which had been sown by the minister. 'Discipline' entailed the upholding of moral standards, and also the instruction of intended communion celebrants to ensure that the sacrament was rightly administered, and not tainted (thus the table fenced). It is only with the departure of moral oversight in the 19th Century, and the loss of the Church's roles in poor relief and education, that the eldership became stuck in the 20th Century in a purely functional role which Stewart Matthew has described as being emasculated to 'The Doorman' (at Sunday worship), 'The Spiritual Postman' (delivering communion cards), and 'The Royal Cup-Bearer' (at communion).

For further information see the paper on "History & Theology of the Eldership" written by Revd Dr Alexander Forsyth, Hope Trust Research Fellow, New College, University of Edinburgh which can be accessed at <https://www.resourcingmission.org.uk/general-assembly/2016>

The paper concludes that we need to recover in the eldership that responsibility for the spiritual wellbeing of all people in the parish, now in a missional sense.