

WHAT IS MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY?

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Abstract

Missional ecclesiology demands more of the church than deciding which community service projects to undertake or setting congregational priorities for the coming year. Missional ecclesiology is a way of understanding the church. It begins with the *missio Dei*—God’s own “self-sending” in Christ by the Spirit to redeem and transform creation. In a missional ecclesiology, the Church is not a building or an institution but a community of witness, called into being and equipped by God, and sent into the world to testify to and participate in Christ’s work. The Church does not *have* missions; instead, the mission of God creates the Church. The Church serves God’s call to mission through its work in three broadly defined categories: the proclamation of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and the nurture of the covenant community of disciples. It undertakes this mission without regard for its own agenda or survival.

A missional polity makes the following commitments:

- The starting point for a missional polity is God’s self-sending into the world.
- The Church’s calling is to be a community of witness that participates in Christ’s work in the world.
- The congregation is the basic form of the church, and individual believers have their ministries nurtured and guided within the congregation.
- The ministry of the councils of the church is shaped around the calling of the Church.
- The polity provides flexibility for mission in a changing and variable context.
- The polity encourages accountability on the part of its covenanted partners to one another.

1. *Missions and Mission*¹

In Protestant denominations, there has been little distinction between “mission” and “missions.” Both terms connoted a church’s sending of “overseas missionaries.” By and large, the churches sent persons from their fellowships to other places to accomplish tasks of evangelism and development among the people who lived in the “mission field.” In some cases, a church distinguished between “home missions” and “foreign missions”—efforts to expand the church within our national boundaries, and efforts to evangelize and build Christian communities in other parts of the world.

Especially during the 20th century in the United States, churches began to use the term “mission” in a somewhat expanded sense. It still referred to overseas “mission work,” but as indigenous churches in the former “mission fields” began to mature, it became clear that the need for evangelistic mission by non-natives was being superseded by a need for development of

¹ Throughout this essay, we will use the capitalized term “Church” to denote the Church of Jesus Christ, the Church catholic, and the lower-case terms “church” or “churches” to describe denominations. In place of the vernacular use of “church” to mean “congregation,” we will use the term “congregation.”

infrastructure and humanitarian care. At the same time, it was becoming clearer that the American context was in greater need of both social and spiritual transformation than had been previously assumed. Increasingly, congregations began to use “mission” as a descriptor for the congregation’s work in the local community. Local congregations now routinely describe as “mission” their ministries to homeless and hungry people, their work with disadvantaged youth, their efforts to provide affordable childcare, and a host of other such endeavors. At the same time, sessions, presbyteries, and synods regularly seek to clarify the direction and purpose of their common life by conducting “mission studies.”

All these uses of the terms “mission” and “missions” have in common the assumption that mission originates in the Church, and that churches determine what their mission or missions will be. Essentially, in this way of understanding, mission is something that the Church does.

But is there a different, and better, way to understand mission?

2. *“Missional Ecclesiology”: The Mission of God and the Sending of the Church*

Before we go further, we need to define two more terms. The first is *ecclesiology*. Simply put, *ecclesiology* is the discussion of what the Church is called to be and to do—its nature, its purpose, its hopes, its structure and practices. Every great Christian theological system contains an ecclesiology, a discussion about the nature of the Church. Our Reformed theological system is certainly no exception to this truth.

The other term is *missional*. *Missional* is a relatively new term in the parlance of the Church and may be unfamiliar to some. In addition, its similarity to more colloquial uses of the term “mission” or “missions” invites confusion and misdefinition. A missional view of the Church is much more than a list of projects or priorities for congregational energy and resources. It is not the result of having done a “mission study” and defined the congregation’s priorities for its work in the coming year. Instead, it is a more profound understanding of the mission that lies at the very heart of the Church’s existence.

Christian theology is grounded in the affirmation that the Triune God entered the world to redeem and transform it. God comes into the world as the crucified Christ, and it is this crucified God who is raised from death as Lord of the world and of the Church, known to both Church and world through the testimony of the Spirit. There are many places in Scripture where this vision of the God who comes to us can be found, but among the most powerful is Paul’s use of the ancient Christian hymn in Phil. 2:5–11. Here Paul encourages Christians to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

“Who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard quality with God as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking on the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.

“Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus,
every knee shall bend
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”

Paul’s use of this ancient poem points to three truths about mission. First, the *foundation for all mission*—all “sending”—*is the act of the Triune God to enter the world in Christ, to suffer and die and be raised again*. At heart, mission is about the *missio Dei*—God’s eternal movement into the world, God’s “self-sending” for the sake of the world. The late South African theologian David Bosch put it well: “Mission is not primarily an activity of the Church, but an attribute of God.”²

Second, *it is not the Church who sends; it is God who sends the Church*. If the Church is to “let the same mind be among [us] that was in Christ Jesus,” then we must come to understand that, just as Christ was sent into the world, so also is the Church sent into the world. Mission does not happen at the initiative of the Church; mission happens at the initiative of God. Mission is not an item on the “to do” list of the Church; the mission of God is the reason for the Church. Congregations in particular and the Church as a whole do not exist to serve their own aims or even to guarantee their own survival. We exist solely to *participate with Christ* in expressing the love of God to the world, a love that “empties itself” for the sake of the world, even to the point of death. As Jürgen Moltmann has observed,

What we must learn is not that the Church *has* a mission, but the very reverse: that the mission of Christ creates its own Church.³

It is not the Church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill to the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the Church.⁴

Third, *the calling of the church is to be a community of witness to the future God is creating*. The Church is gathered by God’s Spirit and called through its corporate witness to proclaim that, in Christ, God is shaping a new life for the world. The Church is sent into the world, emboldened by God’s Spirit to bear witness to the new life in Christ before whom “every knee shall bend.” The Bible speaks of this new life in various terms: the “kingdom of God,” the “kingdom of heaven,” “abundant life,” the “new heaven and new earth.” But running through all this language is the common theme of anticipation of the future God is creating in the world. The character of that future visible in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but the Church is not a memorial community called simply to remember and relive the past. The calling of the Church is to be a community of witness to and participation in God’s future. It draws its strength from its hope for what God will yet do, more even than from its memory of what God has already done. Darrell Guder puts the matter succinctly:

² David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991. p. 390.

³ J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*. Trans. M. Kohl. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975. p. 10.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 64

It is essential for mission as witness that the reality of the kingdom become tangible in the church—not that the church is the kingdom, but that the church demonstrates the nearness of the kingdom, the first fruits of its coming.⁵

3. *The Shape of Missional Witness: What the Church Is Called to Do*

a. *The Nicene Creed: The Church is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic*

Christians have always struggled to define the Church. One of the earliest expressions of what it means to be the Church is found in the four adjectives in the Nicene Creed: “I believe ... in one holy catholic and apostolic Church...” However, these terms are increasingly problematic for us, especially if we understand them as descriptive of the Church we see around us. The Church is hardly unified; we are divided into denominations and factions, and we are often deeply at odds with each other even within our own communions. The Church is hardly holy; scandals involving money, power, and sexuality have rendered ridiculous whatever claim we might have made to be righteous. The Church is hardly catholic—that is, inclusive (the Greek phrase, *kath-olos*, means “pertaining to the whole”); we have routinely squelched and silenced people on the basis of culture, language, or lifestyle. The Church is hardly apostolic, especially to the extent that the term relies on understanding that its ministers stand in an unbroken line of orthodoxy traceable to the earliest apostles of Jesus; denominational divisions and schisms have long since made such a claim untenable.

A missional ecclesiology invites us to see the Church differently, beginning not with the Church as we see it, but through the lens of the Triune God’s mission in the world. A missional view of the Church would remind us that whatever is true of the Church is true because it is first and foremost true of God in Christ, who through the work of the Spirit calls the Church into being. As we observed in the previous section, God’s act of self-sending into the world defines the Church. As the Father sends the Son the world, so the Church also is sent into the world to be the community of witness to God’s gracious action. The Church is “apostolic”—i.e., “sent”—because God the Father sends God the Son to live in, die for, and be raised from the world through the power of the Spirit. Having witnessed that divine self-sending, the Church is now called to go and “make disciples of all nations” in the name of Christ (Mt. 28:19).

The apostolicity of the Church becomes the ground of our calling to be one, holy, and catholic:

—*The Church is one because the Triune God is one:* The Father sends the Son to suffer and die for the world; the Son is sent, separated from God in his suffering; and yet the Spirit of love binds them together and also binds to them all those whom God calls into the Church.⁶ The Church thus looks forward to the day when God will complete our unity in the new reality God is creating, and we commit ourselves to work toward that unity in our day-to-day life in the world.

⁵ Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, pp. 66–67.

⁶ “On the cross, the Father and the Son are so deeply separated that their relationship breaks off. Jesus died without God—godlessly. Yet on the cross the Father and the Son are at the same time so much at one that they represent a single surrendering moment.” In J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*. Trans. M. Kohl. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981. p. 82.

- The Church is holy because the Triune God is holy:* The holy God, before whom no unrighteousness can endure, sends the Son to die on the cross among the unholy, and yet the two are bound together by the Spirit of holiness, so that all that is unholy is claimed and redeemed—including the sinfulness and failure of the Church. The Church thus anticipates by grace a holiness to which it cannot aspire on merit, and it commits itself to live in gratitude for the forgiveness offered in Jesus Christ.
- The Church is catholic because no part of the world is beyond the reach of the Triune God.* In the death of Jesus, the separation of Father and Son at the moment of the cross is so great that it creates a space within which all the sin, brokenness, and fractionalization of the world can be included and brought into the being of God by the power of the Spirit. Therefore, no human condition or reality lies outside the power of God to heal and redeem.⁷ The Church thus yearns for God’s new reality in which “the dividing walls of hostility are torn down,” and we commit ourselves to being inclusive, openhearted, ecumenical, and multicultural.

b. *The Reformation “Notes”: Proclamation, Sacraments, and Discipline*

In the early stages of the Protestant Reformation, Christians began asking what it meant to be the “true Church,” especially in an environment in which there was open conflict about which side—Protestant or Roman Catholic—had “abandoned” the faith and could no longer rightly claim the title “Church.” The Reformers composed many lists of the “notes” or “marks” by which one could tell whether or not a community of believers was truly part of the Church. One such list, distinctive to the followers of John Calvin, consisted of two “notes”: that the Word of God was truly preached and heard, and that the sacraments were rightly administered. Scottish Reformers, under the leadership of John Knox, added a third “note”: that ecclesiastical discipline is uprightly ministered.⁸

The Reformers believed that, in order to be truly the Church, the Church had to be engaged in certain core ministries. The Church had to be engaged in the task of proclaiming the Word of God, as that Word is found in Scripture and revealed to us in Jesus Christ. The Church had to share the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and that those sacraments had to be “rightly administered”—which had less to do with liturgical language and motions than it did with theology and meaning. And the Church had to live in covenant community, according to an agreed-upon discipline that both restrained our human tendency to sin and nurtured a committed Christian discipleship.

In recent years, the Reformation notes have been criticized as too “internal” to be useful in a missional environment. They seem to describe “in-house” tasks—preaching, celebrating the sacraments, and practicing church polity—that have no connection with the world beyond the doors and walls of the sanctuary. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. A missional ecclesiology understands these activities as essential to the witness and ministry of the Church, but it re-understands them in light of the self-sending of God into the world:

⁷ “Our distance from God is itself taken into God, finds place in God. . . . In the incarnation, God distances himself from himself. . . . And the separation between Father and Son is bridged by the Spirit.” in Rowan Williams, “Barth on the Triune God” in *Karl Barth: Studies of His Theological Method*. Ed. Stephen Sykes. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 177.

⁸ See the Scots Confession, Ch.XVIII in *The Book of Confessions*, 3.18.

- The proclamation of the Word* is more than preaching, although it certainly and significantly includes preaching. Rather, proclamation—understood missionally—is the presentation to the world of the claims of Christ on the world. It articulates in word and work the new reality God is creating for people, and it invites people into that new reality. Missional proclamation invites people not merely to “hear the old, old story” but to understand their own personal narratives as part of that larger and ongoing story of God’s engagement with the world.
- The right administration of the sacraments* is more than Baptismal or Eucharistic liturgy, although the language we use at font and table plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the meaning of these acts. Rather, the sacraments—understood missionally—become a nexus between our reality and the new reality of God. In Baptism, we do more than initiate a new life into the fellowship of the congregation. We also publicly affirm our solidarity with those who are outside the congregation, because we understand that it is by the grace of God and not by our deserving that we are brought to the font. In the Eucharist, we not only gather as members of a congregation. We also gather as participants in the earthly reflection of the heavenly banquet at which “people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God” (Lk 13:29). And we affirm our solidarity with those who have nothing to eat, because we understand that the meal we share is not ours but is given to us by Christ who died for the whole world.
- The nurture of a covenant community through ecclesiastical discipline* is much more than judicial process, although the proper use of the Rules of Discipline to reconcile and restore is an important part. Rather, “discipline” is rooted in discipleship. In its broadest and deepest sense, discipline works to build a community of disciples of Christ, people covenanted with each other to grow in the life of faith and to bear witness in the world. Discipline is about mutual accountability, not to a set of rules, but to others who are part of the community. Such communities constantly seek to include others and invite them to take seriously the disciplines of the covenant: to pray together, to study God’s Word, to worship, to be engaged in ministries of service to the community in the name of Christ, to live responsibly in the networks of their relationships, and to work for the love and justice of Jesus Christ in the world.⁹

4. *Missional Ecclesiology and Missional Polity*

Polity is the architecture of mission. Polity describes the structure and governance by which a church lives out its calling to be a community of witness. What are the elements of missional ecclesiology that we should see in a missional polity?

- A missional polity starts by understanding that the mission of the Church is grounded in God’s self-sending into the world.* The affirmation that God enters the world to redeem and transform the world is the starting point for thinking about the Church. It should be the first word said in a missional polity.
- A missional polity clarifies that the calling of the Church is to witness to and to participate in the work of Jesus Christ in the world.* The Church follows Jesus Christ into the world. Wherever Christ is, there is the Church. The Church is not the purveyor of salvation; only God saves. But the

⁹ See the list of responsibilities of church members in G-5.0102 in the *Book of Order*.

Church is the community of people called and set apart by God's grace to live out before the world the values of that new reality. A missional polity should make that clear.

—*A missional polity locates the congregation—not the individual believer—as the basic form of the Church.*

Just as the being of the Triune God is communal in nature—with the Father, Son, and Spirit distinct yet bound forever as one—so also is the basic nature of Christian life communal. A missional polity recognizes this by speaking of the congregation as the basic form of the Church, the Church engaged in ministry in its particular context. In the congregation, believers are bound together in covenant relations and the ministry of individual believers is nourished, guided, and given meaning. Just as Jesus sent the Spirit upon the community of his disciples to equip them with the gifts necessary to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8), so the Spirit continues to bestow on the congregation the gifts necessary for the ministry of witness. Individual believers are called in their Baptism to share in these gifts, and through the gifts of the Spirit to the Church they are sustained in their individual ministries.

—*A missional polity defines the ministry of the councils of the Church as shaped around the calling of the Church.*

The definition of the work of councils—sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly—reflects the central calling of the Church as a whole: that the Church is sent into the world to bear witness to the new reality God is creating. The mutual interconnection of the Church through its councils is a sign of the unity of the Church, bound together for the work of witness. The Church bears its witness through its core ministries of proclamation of the Word, administration of the sacraments, and building of the covenant community through discipline. As sessions guide and govern the work of congregations, as presbyteries nurture, guide, and govern the work of sessions, and as synods and the General Assembly support and govern the work of presbyteries, they do so under the rubric of these essential tasks.

—*A missional polity provides flexibility for mission.* The contexts into which congregations and councils are sent differ. Such differences mean that a “one-size-fits-all” approach to governance and mission structure is no longer workable—if, indeed, it ever was. Rather, the various parts of the church need flexibility to accomplish the mission of bearing effective witness and participating in the work of Christ in their context. A missional polity must identify the essential functions and define the standards of the Church, but it must also provide maximum flexibility to fulfill those functions within the limits imposed by the standards. So, for instance, a missional polity might define the basic educational, behavioral, and competence standards for those seeking ordination to the ministry of the teaching elder, but permit presbyteries to devise their own process for determining whether those standards have been satisfactorily met by a given candidate.

—*A missional polity encourages accountability on the part of its covenanted partners to one another.* A missional polity understands the life of the Church as a covenanted life, wherein members live in relationship with one another under the architecture of the polity. Members of the covenant are accountable to one another, so that change and adjustment in communal life are negotiated under the broad guidance of the covenant agreements of the polity. Accountability and trust go hand-in-hand. We trust one another within networks of relationships in which we are also accountable to one another. Only in the context of such mutually accountable relationships will trust among the covenanted partners flourish. Rather than using the rules as a club to enforce compliance, a missional polity calls the Church toward deeper relationship

with one another and a greater openness to the world, grounded in our common commitment to being a witness to Jesus Christ.

Will having a missional polity make the church missional? In a word: no. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is not magically rendered missional simply by changing the language of the *Book of Order*. Becoming a missional church requires a far deeper engagement with the sort of ecclesiology described here than can be accomplished by amending our polity. It requires nothing less than a paradigm shift in the church's self-awareness: away from absorption in the struggle for our own survival, and toward a vision of the Church as a self-emptying community of witness to God's grace.

What a missional polity can do is to facilitate a commitment on the part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to be a different kind of church. It is not a guarantee that we will become that church. Shaping a more missional polity will give the church an opportunity to ask itself a fundamental question: Are we ready to be a "sent" church, following Christ into the world?