

Missional Banality

Is Being Missional Too Commonplace?

A Travel Free Learning Article

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Ordinary. Bland. Flat. Mundane. Stale. Monotonous. Tame. Mediocre. Trite. Commonplace. Banal. These are not the set of words I would expect to be using to describe the word and concept of missional. Yet, they fit the characterization offered by Alan J. Roxburgh, a missional advocate, as quoted on page one of a recent book.

Here is the quote: “The word ‘missional’ seems to have traveled the remarkable path of going from obscurity to banality in only one decade.” [Quoted in *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* by Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011.]

The statement is provocative. Probably intentionally so. It certainly caused me to pause and reflect on it. Quickly I found that it fit my perspective on what has happened in the use and practice of the word and concept of missional.

Like many words and concepts that catch on, become viral, or create a movement, everyone has to figure out how to be part of it. The purveyors of the movement can become caught up in the buzz to the extent they affirm the viral growth of the movement. Or, they find themselves in a place where they need to describe and define the movement for clarification. Such may the case with the excellent book, *The Missional Church in Perspective*.

Anything that becomes viral carries with it a desire by a large group of people to possess or be possessed by it. To fulfill this desire it is often necessary to diminish the quality of what is being offered. In doing so the concept, the thrill, the rush can lose some of its luster. Many young ladies must have the shiniest and largest diamond possible from their suitors. Not always economically possible for the suitors, a broad range of qualities exist in diamonds, and even a fake diamond that looks authentic can adorn the ring finger of many young ladies.

What happens to diamonds can also happen with words and concepts. Remember how, not too long ago, we continually uttered the word or phrase “paradigm” or “paradigm shift”? So often were these words spoken that the concept lost its meaning. The same thing has happened to missional. Use the word in the title of a book or an event, and a certain segment of people flock to it whether or not there are sound concepts of missional being discussed beyond the title.

In the case of missional, if everything the Church does that hints of the *Missio Dei* is labeled missional, and if every congregation has to figure out how to be called missional, the word and concept loses its meaning. It moves from high expectation to low expectation. It moves from excellence in serving the *Missio Dei* to mediocre service. It moves from the exceptional to the ordinary. It moves from cutting edge ministry to commonplace ministry. It moves from fresh, new, and original to banal. As Roxburgh suggests, it moves from obscurity to banality.

What if we had high expectations for excellent missional service? What would it take to be called a missional congregation? Not a congregation where doing things in the spirit of missional is part of the work and ministry of the congregation, but where it is a congregational-wide movement that characterizes everything that is done. The congregation is captivated by a missional movement. It is second nature in spirit of Matthew 25:44-45.

What Does it Take to Be Called a Missional Congregation?

Not to co-opt the name and claim that is who you are, but to truly become a missional congregation. As a popular name or designation in many places, missional as a word and concept is being watered down.

First, let's start with a definition. Another one won't hurt, and it will also define the frame of these musings. A missional congregation is one who, out of their worship of the Triune God and their passion around fulfilling the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment, seeks to make the world more loving and just through actions focused on spiritually transforming the lives of their neighbors and modeling the gathering of these neighbors into healthy mission outposts called congregations for the scattering of these same neighbors through their own missional efforts. [Wow! That's a mouthful. Let's try a shorter version.]

A missional congregation is captivated by the *Missio Dei*, and seeks to make the world more loving and just through spiritually transforming the lives of neighbors.

Neighbors are defined here in a full global and local context. It is not a geographical neighbor but a theological neighbor. It is not neighbors to be attracted, but neighbors with whom we can represent the incarnational presence of the Triune God.

Missional congregations, while deeply caring for the needs of one another in their own congregation, are externally focused and seek to mobilize their congregations to be received, accepted, caught, embraced, and trusted by their neighbors. Missional congregations do not send missionaries and volunteers into their immediate or world context. Rather they invite people to be received by the neighbors for whom God has given them great passion. To be missional is to be received by the people to whom you feel sent. To be genuine. To be internal agents within their culture. To present the gospel in contextually relevant ways. To share the gospel with people who are becoming our friends.

Since many congregations claim the term missional for what they do, let's break down the concept into three different types. First, *push missional* congregations are seeking to increase discipling processes in their congregation to prepare people to go out into the mission field and express their gifts and passions to or at their neighbors. The desire may be to remake neighbors in the image of the sending congregations. I suspect it is the approach taken by 80 percent of congregations claiming to be missional. That is just a hunch. I have no research to support it.

Second, *pull missional* congregations are seeking to understand the neighbors to which they perceive God has called them, and then equip disciples within their congregation with the skills and preferences needed to be received by those neighbors. The desire is to remake neighbors in God's image.

Third, *leap missional* congregations are seeking to connect with emerging cultures that often cannot be geographically defined, and for whom there are few if any people fully prepared to reach these cutting edge target groups composed of neighbors who may feel disenfranchised by God and the Church, or may have a clear awareness of neither. The desire is for neighbors to share back with us what the image of the Triune God ultimately looks like in their context.

Push is primarily boxed. *Pull* is moving beyond the box. *Leap* is outside the box and has declared it irrelevant. If your congregation is seeking to become missional, it must at least be *pull* in its focus. Anything less is not yet missional. Anything else is simply doing good to make you feel good. Anything less is a project rather than a lifestyle. Anything less is organizational rather than incarnational.

What are your thoughts? Is your congregation *push*, *pull*, or *leap* missional? Is it even missional at all? What are the next steps your congregation needs to take to be characterized as missional?

Go forward and make missional the uncommon expression of the *Missio Dei*. Make missional fresh, new, and original each day in your congregation.



Important Things to Know

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