

Six Essential Characteristics of the Missional Church

Six common characteristics are emerging among those who hold a missional church mental model. The degree to which individual faith communities emphasize each of the following characteristics varies according to theological and biblical traditions and understandings. Nevertheless, the common missional ingredients seem to be as described below. The task of missional church planters is to envision how their community of faith can live out these characteristics within their own context and in the broader world beyond.

1. The missional church views its own context as missional.

Missional churches no longer view themselves as existing in the heart of Christendom. Rather, missional churches recognize that the era of Christendom is rapidly closing or has already ended in most of Europe and North America. Instead of seeking to reestablish Christendom, missional churches tend to imagine themselves as being an alien subculture within a cross-cultural context. In other words, the missional faith community imagines itself to be a missionary community living in a mission field. We are convinced that if your faith community imagines itself to be such from its conception, it will soon discover that it actually is a mission organization in a mission field and thus will behave as such.

Six characteristics constitute the traditionally held definition of a mission field. Missional churches recognize that many, if not all, of these characteristics are operative within the church's own context. The characteristics include the following:

1. A substantial presence of religions other than Christianity and Judaism
2. Languages other than "our language" spoken
3. Cultural worldviews differing from historic European or American Christianity's worldviews
4. High levels of social need and justice issues among large population groups
5. The presence of un-reached people groups
6. An inadequate number of indigenous churches to reach dominant cultural groups

Questions for your consideration: As you investigate the context of your new church, begin asking which characteristics are operative in your community. If you embrace the missional mental model of being and doing church, you will want to discern God's desired missional response on your part to these community characteristics. What procedure does your faith community have for investigating the cultural characteristics of your community?

2. The missional church is both engaged in and supportive of missions.

The missional church does not wish to undermine the importance of cooperative missional efforts, such as denominational or ecumenical international mission endeavors. However, missional church leaders recognize that apart from a few "tourist group" types of short-term mission involvement, few church members become directly involved in or engaged in mission efforts themselves. When asked the question "Is your church engaged in missions?" most congregational groups respond by showing their budgetary support of various causes. The

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intention of the missional church movement is to move churches beyond financial support of mission into direct engagement of their people in missional endeavors. This engagement includes activities both within the faith community's own context and in the broader world beyond.

Questions for your consideration: If you embrace the missional mental model of being and doing church, you will want to equip and empower your people to engage in God's missional activities within your host community and in the broader world beyond. As you investigate the context of your new church, begin asking which needs you, as a faith community, are called to serve. What gifts do your members have that can be incorporated into that service? What structure do you envision that will give permission to your members to become engaged in a variety of mission activities? What resources do you have for equipping and deploying your people into the mission context?

3. The missional church recognizes that its mission includes both the Great Commission and the Great Commandments.

Matthew 28:18-20, sometimes referred to as the "Evangelistic Mandate", draws the church's attention to the significance of calling people to discipleship. The missional church movement recognizes the significance of this evangelistic effort. Therefore, missional churches actively invite people of other beliefs and of no belief to partner with the faith community by following Jesus into God's missional activities. Evangelism in missional churches is inseparably connected with the call to missional discipleship; it is not a means of increasing the numerical and financial supporting base for the enlargement of the faith community.

Mathew 22:37-38, sometimes referred to as the "cultural" or "social mandate", draws the church's attention to the significance of engaging its disciples in acts that demonstrate the love of God by every available means. Missional churches tend to distinguish between two forms of exercising the cultural mandate: *social service* and *social action*. Social service can be characterized by the analogy of giving a cup of cold water in Christ's name. It is serving the basic needs of individuals. Social action might be characterized by the analogy of addressing and seeking to transform the unjust systems and powers that deprive people of that water. The prophetic voice of the church is essential to the missional nature of the church; however, the missional church recognizes that prophetic statements of concern have little or no effect unless accompanied by congruent action on the part of Christ's disciples.

Questions for your consideration: Missional churches hold both the evangelistic mandate and the social mandate to be of equal value in the work and witness of the church in its own context and in the world beyond. As you form your missional faith community, it will be important for you to ask such questions as these: What is the goal of our evangelistic efforts? By what means do we invite others to partner with our faith community as we seek to be involved in God's mission in our own community and in the broader world beyond? What means will we be putting into place to nurture and equip would-be disciples of Jesus mentally, physically, socially, and spiritually?

4. The missional church recognizes all people as being both the “subject” and “object” of God’s mission.

It doesn’t take an English major to recognize the difference between the *subject* of a sentence and the *object* of a sentence. The subject performs the action, and the object receives the action of the subject. The missional church recognizes the temptation to limit mission activities to serving people (thus objectifying them). It is all too easy to serve people in our missional activities rather than actually engage those whom we would serve in God’s mission. It is even more difficult for some churches to become the object of service by those from outside our faith communities. Jesus served people but also invited the people he served to be actively engaged in God’s mission. In addition, Jesus served people but surprisingly also became vulnerable and accepted the service of others to him. Missional churches seek to imitate the actions of Christ in this regard. This is ultimately the meaning and purpose of discipleship.

Questions for your consideration: As you seek to serve your host community, how willing are you to, and by what means will you, be inviting, equipping, and empowering people to become “subjects” and “objects” in God’s mission? What structure can foster a balance between serving and being served both from within and from outside the faith community? How do you envision empowering and mobilizing those you serve in order to multiply your missional activities?

5. The missional church is engaged in personal, systemic, and cultural transformation.

During any period of transition, established systems need to undergo transformation in order to remain viable to their context. Missional churches anticipate and assume constant and often discontinuous change both within and outside the faith community. Rapid change demands rapid responses on the part of God’s people. Church systems based on older mental models tend to respond to change incrementally. Missional churches embrace a constant change process and seek rapid responses to rapid external change.

The process of transformation is applied by missional churches to personal life as members of the faith community grow mentally, socially, and spiritually in their walk with Christ. They apply the principles of transformation to the systems of the faith community, allowing for the initiation of new missional endeavors and the discontinuation of missional efforts that no longer fill their purpose. Because missional churches focus on assimilation into the host community, they serve as catalysts of change in community systems, calling community organizations and resources to their rightful position of serving the needs of the broader community.

Knowing that transformation precipitates conflict, missional churches from their conception learn and practice skills in conflict management, actually using conflict as a tool for transformation. By exercising effective conflict transformation skills within the faith community, missional churches become versed in skills that serve the transformational process of the host community, bringing reconciliation and partnership among people and systems that might otherwise be competitive or hostile toward one another.

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Questions for your consideration: What is your preferred model of transformation, and how are you training others in applying its principles to personal, church system, and community system transformation? How aware are you of the various agencies, services, and resources in your community? What services do they provide? What community needs are underserved or overlooked by existing institutions? What are the expressed needs and concerns of their staff and leaders? Are there ways a faith community such as yours can partner with these agencies for the purpose of positive community transformation?

6. The missional church is engaged in multiplication of itself and of its missional engagements.

Most missional churches have multiplication as a part of their original intentions. Through starting new missional churches, these faith communities foster the creation of new faith communities reflecting the rich variety of cultural and affinity groups within the host community. Since the missional church images itself as existing in the cross-cultural setting of a mission field, it embraces the formation of other new missional faith communities. Because missional churches value cultural diversity, they avoid cloning themselves and attempt instead to initiate new churches that differ from their parent church in cultural expressions of worship and service.

Missional churches also recognize the importance of expanding missional activities by forming new mission teams. Whereas traditional churches respond to needs in the community through the formation of programs limited by budgets and personnel, missional churches prefer the formation of multiple mission teams. These teams are formed as participants respond to their interest and sense of God's call to service. They carry in them the six primary missional church characteristics. They discover and utilize resources of training and equipping for service. And they seek to multiply their mission through recruitment, through empowerment of those being served, and by finding partners outside the faith community who share a common concern.

Questions for your consideration: What are your plans for multiplication as you form your new congregation? Are you discovering other people groups that may benefit from another faith community more compatible with their cultural expressions and interests? How do you plan on encouraging the start of additional faith communities? What systems do you have in place for multiplying your missional engagements? Have you initiated your first mission team? How do you intend to multiply mission teams, and how will they be trained and equipped for service?