

What Is a Missional Church Plant?

Whether you call it a paradigm, a metaphor, or a mental model, we all use internal images and constructs to make sense of our world. These mental models not only affect how we think about something but also control our actions. Such mental constructs apply to starting new churches. Our mental model of church serves as an imaging tool that helps us initiate and shape the church's structure. Once we accept a mental model of what it is to *be* a church, that mental model eventually controls how we *do* church—in other words, what activities we carry out as a church.

To start a church successfully, the planter and the initial core group need an effective mental model of what it is to be and to do church within their context. Unfortunately, many of the mental images drawn upon by church planters and their teams are old models, more fitting to former contexts than to the reality of a rapidly changing world. Those older models of church (see the article “[Defining Church](#)” on this Web page) may have successfully demonstrated God's intended actions through the church within former contexts. However, previous success does not guarantee the successful transfer of an older mental model into a new era or into a changed context.

Just prior to the turn of this century, the mental model term *missional church* began coming into vogue, and it has since gained a wider acceptance among mainline and evangelical groups. The following is a synopsis of how the term, and the subsequent mental model of being and doing church, is used by National Ministries' Church Planting Team. As with any mental model, no single image incorporates the full essence of what it is to be a church. However, as the context of North America continues to change rapidly, this emerging model may help to guide your new church's imagination as you seek to initiate its form and actions.

A broad definition of the term *missional church*:

A missional church is an authentic community of faith that primarily directs its ministry focus outward toward the context in which it is located and toward the broader world beyond.

Numerous adherents to older mental models of what it is to be and do church have complained that the term *missional* does not appear in their computer's spelling corrector—or in other dictionaries for that matter. This new coinage of a term is an intentional action, directed at reshaping the mental model of both church and mission.

Older mental models often equated the church's role in mission as being that of mission support or mission mindedness. Consequently, mission activities were limited to the selection, training, and support of a few professional missionaries whom Christendom churches trained, sent, and supported. “On behalf of the church,” these missionaries serve foreign populations in foreign and non-Christendom places. One exception to that mental model of mission-minded churches was the activities of a denomination's home missions, which often functioned as the cross-cultural and social service organization within the North American context. Mission support and mission

What Is a Missional Church Plant?

mindedness reinforced a mental model of the church's role in mission as financially supporting missions and occasionally sending one of their own members to serve in a cross-cultural or foreign context.

It is that mental model that missional church adherents are seeking to break free from, both in form and behavior; hence the term *missional*. Based on this understanding, allow us to elaborate on the missional definition printed above.

- **“authentic community of faith”**—it is *authentic* in that the relationships are authentic, not superficial. It is a *community* in that individuals who respond in faith are connected with God and with each other. It is a community of *faith* in that it is a response to the living God revealed in Jesus Christ.
- **“primarily directs its ministry focus outward”**—the church is called to be engaged in the mission of the kingdom of God, and the faith community is to participate in that mission as its primary function. As such, the church exists for the well-being of others and creation and not for self-serving purposes.
- **“toward the context in which it is located and toward the broader world beyond”**—By joining Jesus Christ and outside partners, the church serves God's purpose by *being* and *doing* good news, in word and deed, locally and globally.

In order to think through the implications of being a missional church plant, you should study “Six Essential Characteristics of the Missional Church,” a related article on this Web page. You will receive the most benefit from the article by responding to its questions.