Thoughts on Becoming a Missional Church

Becoming missional is not adding a new program to your already existing programs. Becoming missional is transformation from the inside out—as a disciple, as a church.

Missional people ask, “What is God up to?” and "How can I be part of it?" starting in my own community.

Missional people “practice God’s life before a watching world.” It includes worship, preaching, communion, loving one another, social justice, caring for the poor, and sharing Jesus’ gospel. Thus: “All of God’s people are on mission to engage their surrounding neighborhoods, not just a few who are sent outside the church to do something called missions”

Missional is a Shift in Thinking, Not a Change of Programs

But first a necessary word of caution for those who wish to explore and understand what it means to be the missional church or people. Alan Hirsch rightly states that “the word 'missional' over the years has tended to become very fluid and as it was quickly co-opted by those wishing to find new and trendy tags for what they themselves were doing, be they missional or not. It is often used as a substitute for seeker-sensitive, cell-group church, or other church growth concepts, thus obscuring its original meaning.” As a result, missional is often looked upon as just another phase or program. But we error when we do so for missional is more than just another movement, it is a full expression of who the ekklesia (“Church”) of Christ is and what it is called to be and do. At its core, missional is a shift in thinking. Let's think about God's mission for a few minutes.

MISSIO DEI

The missio Dei (mission of God) was reiterated by Jesus in the Church's commissioning:

_All authority has now been given to Me. Go, then, and make "disciples" of all peoples... (Matt. 28:19)_

The missio Dei, the mission of your church & mine, the mission of every church is not simply to worship, fellowship, teach, serve or reach out (although those are godly things we do). The missio Dei is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Few churches truly understand and live into The Mission. It should come as no surprise then that so many struggle!

There is no mission apart from discipleship. And there is no discipleship apart from the mission. The mission is to make disciples. A disciple who does not make disciples is NOT a disciple by definition. They may be a believer, but not a disciple. Disciples do what Jesus did. Disciples live out the life & ministry of Jesus. Believers have believed the right things, prayed the right prayers, joined the right church, paid the right tithes, even served in the right ministries. But that does NOT make them a Disciple, because disciples do what Jesus did—reproduce themselves.

Jesus brings poignancy to this idea with a very strong illustration in Mark 11, the cursing of the fig tree --> Mark doesn’t explain why Jesus would have expected to find fruit on the tree after explicitly stating that it was not the season for figs. The Secular Web, the website of the educational foundation, Internet Infidels, presents this story as evidence of contradiction in the Gospels. But F. F. Bruce states that fig trees produce 'taqsh' before
the season if they are going to bear fruit in the season itself. Since this one didn't, it was a sign that it would not produce any fruit that year either. This is paramount to understanding the whole of the passage. It's sandwiched by the triumphal entry, the cleansing of the Temple and the longest discourse Jesus gives his disciples about end times. It's embedded in a sequence of ultimate "signs" of His Messiahship and the missio Dei. He was talking about "signs" that the end is near! Having just left the house of God here he broke the "Vessels" for ritual cleansing that allow for worship to even happen at all, he goes out and sits at the very site of His return on the Mt of Olives. And there starts talking prophecy. LOL! Brilliant!

But the juxtaposition of the fig tree to the rest of the narrative means it is completely tied and even identified with The Church, even believers themselves. Read the sequence as a whole and it is convicting. Some churches will be corrupt and/or fail to do what they were created to do—bear fruit or reproduce. They are therefore "cursed" because the contradict the very missio Dei they are created to represent and embody.

What does this mean? It means there is no such thing as a non-reproducing disciple of Jesus Christ. That's why being missional isn't about church missions, services or programs. Its DNA. Its culture. Its who you are. Or you are not. Its that simple. Its a truth that's as harsh to hear as Mark 11 is a harsh picture of Jesus. How long have been hanging around in our churches having good services, ministries and mission, but not done the One thing we are created to do. No wonder the path of the "Way" is so narrow and many will "Lord, didn't I do etc.... in your name?!" But did we do what He told us to do? That is the Mission, the missio Dei. Make disciples.

Make disciples. When we make disciples, we ALWAYS get the true church on its true . . missio Dei. When we try to create or grow our churches, we rarely get disciples. That's because Disciples NEVER just happen. Disciples are formed, loved, invested in, sacrificed for, raised up and sent . . . to do it all over again themselves. This is the missio Dei—the mission of your church and mine. Like a fruitful fig tree loaded with little figs buds that grow into nice, healthy figs, that are released from the tree and become their own to repeat the process, this is core purpose of every local church's existence. I wonder if we don't spend our resources of time, talent and treasure on this missio Dei, does it mean we're cursed? Does it explain the state of things? You can be a fig tree and not bear the single most important fruit of a fig tree—a fig. Oh, you may stand big and tall and look from a distance really good. You may provide much relief of shade to many a traveler. You may convert carbon dioxide into needed oxygen. You may keep the soil secure from erosion. You may provide a host of symbiotic (companion) organisms with a nice little habitat to hang out, and still not be and do the one thing you are there to do above all else—make more fig trees. It's that simple, but ohh its hard!

How many of us have been discipled? I mean, like Jesus discipled the Disciples. Have you been? If you are one of the few rare followers of Jesus who have been, you know that in the time when that occurred, you grew more as a disciple than in all your other years combined. Its true. This is not rocket science. Its just been forgotten. This is what made Methodists Methodists until 1908 officially. This was the Method in Methodist! And in 1908, General Conference decided that it would begin to happen primarily in Church services, instead of bands and class meetings and societies. Unfortunately, it didn't. If it could, it would. But it can't, so it won't. And the Methodist tree is now cursed. We're dying, with no offspring, because we forgot who Jesus said we are and what Jesus said we are to do. And that is not to get more people in our church. It's actually to get more people OUT of our church! Out of the building, so we can bring more of the Kingdom into the world 24/7. Alan Hirsch calls it "The Forgotten Ways." Wesley called it "Holiness of heart and life." Jesus called it "a disciple." Not a believer, a follower, of the way of Jesus in the world. That is the missio Dei, and it always makes for full church buildings when its time gather the disciples.

Jesus gave us that touch teaching in the final days of his life. Let me ask you, suppose the Mayans are right and on December 21 of this year, the end of the age, the end of life as we know it happens. If you knew then that you only had 326 days left till Jesus comes to do a fig/disciple assessment of your life & your church's life,
would that change how you spend your time between now and then? Would that change how you budget? Would that change your Admin Council meetings? Your Charge Conference this Fall? Would that redefine every single ministry decision and activity up to the last second?!

What are we doing?! Times already up. This is not 1955 or 2005. The world has changed. 60% of your neighbors and mine have already decided they will never ever step foot in our church buildings as long as they live. Don’t believe me? Spend 4 hours on a Sunday morning at the gateway of your residential area and count the # of cars leaving out between 7:00 & 11:00, and assume all of them are going to church some place. Then do the same thing 24 hours later and calculate the % difference. You’ll see what I’m telling you is true. Times up. What are we doing at church? We must get out of the building for as long as possible!

Do you realize that if we don’t change today and get busy with the missio Dei, which is to make Disciples who make disciples who make disciples, and make that central to everything, . . at our present rate of death in 25 years what we once called churches will be memorials . . shrines . . tombs of a bygone era—a permanent reminder of what happens when Methodists forget the method.

The Method in Methodist — Discipling 101

Culture
Sociology has learned from history and the area of study called Polemics (the study of social space) has revealed universal constructs for development and enculturation.

We all need a(n):

1) Immediate Family (3–8 people on average—your household) — Private Space
2) Extended Family (20–50+ people—your family that get’s together at Thanksgiving & Christmas) — Personal Space
3) Clan Family (70–125+ people—your family that gathers at reunions) — Social Space
4) Tribal Family (125+ people—your people from whom you draw your identity, heritage, language, culture) — Public Space

Societies language, norms, mores, values, and meta-narrative are conveyed through these spaces primarily. It turns out that spiritual formation follows suit.

Faith
Faith too is more caught than taught. It takes a village after all, but this village is actually a family. Everybody needs a family to "catch" it, keep it & develop it. Discipleship, being that process, is fostered best in these intentional discipling spaces that mirror the very forms through which we learn how to be who we are and how to do what we do in general sociologically.

Jesus
A look back at how Jesus related to various groups reveals this parallel:
1) The 12 — His immediate family (whom He called his brother, mother, etc).
2) The 70 — His extended family (whom He sent out to practice ministry in His name)
3) The Crowd — group of 120 or so following Him most everywhere (were also the 120 gathered in the Upper Room)
4) The Congregation — larger crowds of 100’s to 1000’s at special times (made up of the intrigued, the sincerely seeking, committed followers, and some antagonist Pharisees & Scribes, but nearly all of whom were of his own people/nation—his identity family, Israel).

[Please note: In the case of Jesus, the Messiah, the family numbers are all larger for the missio Dei]

One can also see the amount of time Jesus invested in each of the four spaces:
The 12 *****
The 70 ***
The 120 **
The Crowd *

By contrast, the Attractional church model of recent decades looks like this:
The 12 *
The 70 **
The 120 ***
The Crowd *****

Wesley & the Early Methodists
A look back at John Wesley & the early Methodists reveals four equivalent spaces where disciple formation happened.
1) Bands — Gender-exclusive personal accountability groups of 4-6 where leadership was also developed (The Holy Club @ Oxford was the first one w/ John & Charles Wesley and others)
2) Class Meetings — home-based get-togethers of about 20-25 used primarily for evangelism, fellowship & study (Wesley felt <3 strangely warmed @ Aldersgate St grp mtg)
3) Societies — larger gatherings of 50-75 where Wesley and other preachers would join laity in teaching, preaching & daring in mission
4) Congregations — large gatherings of 100 or more where worship services were held, where the Means of Grace (Sacraments) were administered, where membership was held, and from which identity came

Today's Missional Movement
The more recent missional movement organizes it this way (generally; there are variations from tribe to tribe):
1) Huddles — Very small groups of 4-8 for intentional discipling, prayer, support, apprenticeship, and leadership development
2) Missional Communities — Mid-sized groups of 20-50+ for worship, Bible study, prayer, support, mission ("Large enough to dare, small enough to care")
3) Social Space/Fellowship — Mid+ sized groups of 70-ish for worship, ministry, fellowship, networking and service projects
4) Church/Congregation/Faith Community — Large gatherings of 100-125+ worship, vision, inspiration, ministry, church-wide mission

In the face of 60% pre-decided against Christianity in America today, the Missional Community movement is growing at 10x the rate of even the mega-churches. It makes sense, since Jesus never told us make, build or
grow churches. He reserved that work for Himself through His Spirit. He did tell us to make & grow disciples, and He showed us how as He invited persons to imitate His life and ministry. He taught and trained His own disciples sent them out to practice, debriefed them, then finally commissioned them not only as followers, but friends. He considered these non-seminary persons as co-laborers who were entrusted with all His authority and power to continue His mission in the world.

This new Missional Movement must flow out of a Discipling Culture. In this culture, clergy do not hoard the 5-fold ministry offices (from Eph. 4) for themselves.

A-postle
P-rophet
E-vangelist
S-hepherd
T-eacher

All are distributed through the Body (the Church/Faith Community)

Hirsch has studied the nature of God movements throughout the Church's history since Christ. In each case, it only occurs when the 5-fold Offices are equally distributed throughout each local faith community. The movement ends as local clergy come to power, are paid, and have to justify that salary by collecting the Offices for themselves. The movement dies. The Methodist movement was initially lay-led and locally-minded. The General Church functionally served the Local Church. Bishop Asbury’s passion was to carry the movement from coast to coast by the use of non-formally trained persons like himself. Practical divinity wasn’t an abstract reminder of a vague heritage. It was a daily necessity. It meant overhead in ministry leadership (i.e., clergy) & facility (church building) was minimal. They relied on lay pastors weekly (for all spaces/groups totaling less than 200) and Elders monthly (for spaces/groups totaling 200+). No church with less than that had their own Elder. An Ordained Elder was an overseer or supervisor or mini-superintendent of lay pastors. They discipled them into deeper faith, holiness and leadership. Visiting house to house among the ordained wasn't pastoral care. It was the gathering place for bands, classes, societies. It was a home-based movement. Out of necessity, the lines between clergy and laity leadership were minimal. By practical divinity, the 5-fold Offices were distributed through each local body and they grew. They even multiplied! By the mid-1800’s, we started building our chapel's & churches throughout the colonies and western frontier. We hired our full-time station pastors who were higher-priced Ordained Elders, turned over all the offices to the hired help, and the movement ended. Maintenance replaced ministry. And we settled comfortably into our nice institution with great sense of pride. The 1908 General Conference finally made it official policy. And more than 100 years later, we see our demise and wonder how we got here. We simply forgot how to be Methodist. So, if we're not going to be Methodist for the Church of Jesus, God's going to raise up something new to recover the lost way. So the new missional movement is simply re-introducing Mr. Wesley to us with the 21st century version of his Methodist system of discipling, a system that's intuitive and repeatable. All because the culture in general, and we in the UMC forgot the most basic things that form us and make us who we are in life & faith—a spiritual family.

Oikos
The Bible uses the Greek word, oikos, to describe this spiritual family where discipling and missional culture are repeated. Oikos is one's house. In Israel at the time of Jesus, when a son married, the Patriarch had to start on a room addition. This happened again and again. The result is a conglomeration of adding onto the house. Nuclear/immediate family turns into extended family. So it is with the first family—Father, Son, Holy Spirit. And the mission of Jesus in the world is to do what has happened naturally and simply and yet so powerfully. That is, to just add to the family. Everybody understands this. It's natural. It's easily understood. It's intuitive. It's a blessing for all, up and down the family line. So when Jesus says "In my Father's house are many rooms," and "I [the carpenter from Nazareth] go to help Dad prepare a place for you," his Disciples are probably
overwhelmed with a whole new meaning for Oikos. It's oikos where formation happens for almost all people throughout human history. It's in the oikos space where Jesus invested most of His precious time during the 3-year period of His earthly ministry. It was the oikos that drove the Methodist movement from England, across the pond, across America and around the world. Today, it's the oikos space where the Church of Jesus is growing 10x faster than all other churches. It also happens to be the exact size space that some 50% of all Methodist Churches are—naturally. We are yearning, the culture is yearning for oikos, the Extended Family. Yet, we are somehow not experiencing it's presence and power in our churches.

Recipe for a Discipling/Missional Movement

If you're still here reading/listening to this, it means we're either mental, or you're a Pastor, Lay Leader, Missions/Discipleship Leader, or a sincere albeit concerned Christ-follower who wants the Church to make a difference in people's lives. If you would hope to see this Biblical culture take root in your own faith community, four key ingredients are required.

The 4 V's:

Vision
A discipling/missional Vision like I'm sharing with you here must be shared compellingly and consistently with your leadership and church, recalling a time when you experienced a taste of it yourself and the profound impact it had on your growth as a disciple. Without a vision, the tree withers. This is all very easy and intuitive to understand, but like raising children, it's hard to do well.
Vision reaches, connects and inspires us to want to belong. Answers: Why?

Values
Values are how we relate to one another, the relational rules of family life together in immediate, extended, clan and tribal family spaces, as well as the world we impact.
Values clarify how exactly we belong, the rules for belonging and relating. Answers: Who?

Vocabulary
Vocabulary is the teaching element whose content leads, defines and unites the members of a movement. It binds us and informs of vision & values' meaning, and lays foundation for applying the vehicles.
Vocabulary defines and leads culture. It provides a unified framework all communication and activity. Answers: What?

Vehicles
The actual entities (spaces) through which the faith community utilizes to fulfill the Vision. There are two Vehicles Primarily: a Discipling Vehicle—The Huddle; and a Missional Vehicle—The Missional Community.
Vehicles must always be intuitive and reproducible for those who belong. Answers: How?

Discipling and Missional Cultures are inseparable. They are one and happen best in these oikos environments:

1) Huddle (Wesley's Bands) — very small, nuclear family-sized groups of 4–8 for the discipling part; and

2) Missional Community (Wesley's Class Meetings) — mid-sized extended family-sized groups of 20–50+ for the missional part.
Jesus' paradigm assumes information without imitation = demonic (the demons know...but they don't follow). Imitation is the key to reduce the likelihood of stumbling. Letting someone down is a much more powerful inhibitor of sin than merely disregarding an idea.

This is relational as much as it is informational. Cannot skip imitation. This is the HUGE difference between typical discipleship strategies utilizing classes, seminars, and even small groups. This is a discipling culture, NOT discipleship.