

Missional Churches Value Authentic Relationships

Leader's Guide

by Kevin Wilson

From the Missional Bible Studies series of the Center for U.S. Missions

Purpose: This Bible study is designed to discover the Biblical background for authenticity as an essential element of missional churches.

Background: Missional churches are differentiated from conventional churches by at least five characteristics. Most churches have some of these characteristics, but all are needed to be missional:

- + Building the Kingdom of God
- + Developing authentic relationships
- + Sending people to do ministry in the community
- + Daily incarnational living – living as Christ at home, in school, at work, etc.
- + Rapid reproduction of the missional church through new mission starts.

A Closer Look: “Authenticity” is part of the fabric of missional churches. Authenticity is seen in the character of members, in relationships between members and in congregational activities. It is a core value. Leaders are chosen in part due to their authenticity. Guests and visitors decide whether to become part of these churches based on whether they find its ministry authentic.

As with all deeply-held core values, there is the risk that authenticity could become too important to a church. Congregations can value authenticity so highly that it can become more important than doctrine. Members of “authentic” churches can be tempted to look down at conventional churches. The demand that members be authentic can also dissuade people who are new to the faith to join such churches.

The bottom line is that missional churches are reaching some people that conventional churches are not, in part because missional churches are considered “authentic.”

Time of Gathering

Over the past 20 years, more and more mainline denomination churches have stopped using a number of traditional worship practices, such as pastors wearing vestments. Brainstorm some of these changes in worship. Talk about some of the reasons churches have made these changes.

Changes: Not following a lectionary; pastors writing special creeds for worship; not preaching from a pulpit; worship centers with chairs replacing sanctuaries with pews; worship service printed in bulletin; use of electronic media, etc.

Why: Some churches wanted to reach new and different people, other churches wanted to make it easier for their members to worship; the cost of land and buildings has driven the move to multipurpose rooms for worship; other successful churches are emulated.

Transition: One driving change in worship practices is the desire for churches to be “authentic.” Authenticity was seen as part of living the Christian faith for members and as a way to attract people to Jesus and the church as well. Thus churches wanted to be as “real” and as “transparent” as possible. This led to the changes in worship.

Defining “authentic”

Complete the definitions. Then, as a class, brainstorm real life examples for each definition.

Authentic: Genuine or real, not copied or false.

A fact which is considered trustworthy because evidence supports the fact

People who consistently have their words and actions match their beliefs.

Biblical Support for Authenticity

Colossians 2:20-23. The key concept is “transparency” Authentic churches want transparency, so members and especially leaders do not just “keep up appearances.”

James 3:9-10. The key concept is consistency. Authentic church members demand that their leaders do what they say and say what they do.

Matthew 23:27-28. The key term is hypocrisy. Authentic churches despise hypocrisy.

1 John 1:5-7. The key concept is integrity. If as Christians we have integrity, we walk in the light as Jesus walked in the light.

1 Peter 3:15-16. The key concept is living out the faith. Christians in missional churches express their authenticity by loving strangers, witnessing to neighbors and caring for outsiders.

Biblical Stories of Authenticity among God’s People

Acts 17:10-12. The Bereans did not just trust Paul’s teaching or reject Paul out of hand. Instead they studied the “authentic” source for such knowledge – the Scriptures.

2 Samuel 12:1-13. Authentic churches do not expect perfection from members. They do expect them to live as followers of Christ. Nathan demonstrates authenticity in summoning the courage to confront the King. David does so by admitting his guilt before God.

Galatians 2:11-21. Peter was unauthentic when he expected the Gentiles to act like Jews but did not expect the Jews to act like Gentiles. Also, Peter was putting the mission at risk by his expectations of Gentile Christians. Paul was authentic because he challenged Peter, instead of practicing avoidance.

2 Corinthians 8:1-5. The Macedonian Christians were authentic because they followed God’s teaching on giving, instead of taking an easier path with their gifts to God and the Church.

Acts 5:17-33. Authentic churches proclaim Christ regardless of His popularity or of personal risks.

“Authenticity” Explains some Distinctive Practices of Missional Churches

Discuss the following examples of churches “being authentic.” What are the “pros” and “cons” found in these illustrations?

First Lutheran Church has a policy of allowing any member to review all the financial books with the congregational treasurer. When asked why, the church president says, “We want to keep the trust of the congregation, so we are open and honest in every area of ministry.”

“Pros” include openness about finances which builds trust in members and the practice shows integrity. “Cons” include the perceived risk of private information being shared.

After a Bible class, a relatively new member approaches the class leader. He says he was uncomfortable with how openly the leader talked about Biblical views of sexual relationships. The leader answers: “I could sense some discom-

fort in class, but as a church we deal with real life issues in a straightforward way.”

“Pros” include participants receiving Christian instruction for daily life and the ability to attract outsiders through felt needs. “Cons” include driving some people away because the topics seem inappropriate.

Community Lutheran Church has very informal worship services, from worshipers in jeans to a pastor in khakis and a polo shirt. When asked why, the pastor said: “Our members and most visitors see dressing up in suits or vestments as being unauthentic. We stress being real here, focusing on God and relationships and not on traditions.”

“Pros” include reaching people not otherwise being reached and reclaiming some people lost to congregations. “Cons” include pushing away people who find traditional worship very meaningful and mainline churches being perceived as inauthentic because they do resemble traditional churches in worship.

Risks of Authenticity

Discuss how the following Bible passages suggest risks for churches being overly “authentic.” Then talk about whether these also apply to conventional churches.

Galatians 6:4-5. There is a temptation for members of growing, “authentic” congregations to become prideful about the success of their congregation.

Romans 14:1-6. There is a temptation for participants in “authentic” congregations to think that their missional church model is better than a conventional model. This is not necessarily true. Each church fulfills the Great Commission as the “Master” leads.

John 4:19-24. There is a temptation in “authentic” churches to see their style of worship as the way to worship God. Jesus shifts the focus to who is worshipped and why people are worshipping.

Why Missional Churches are Authentic Churches

Christians who left other churches because of perceived hypocrisy are more likely to return to churches that value authenticity.

The older segment of the “Buster” generation highly values authenticity. Christians and non-Christians alike from this part of this generation are attracted to authentic organizations.

Churches that stress authenticity are generally healthy because they are less likely to avoid confronting sin and more likely to deal with challenges and issues.

Authentic churches tend to deal with issues from daily life in sermons, Bible classes and seminars, which is attractive to many in the “Buster” and “Millennial” generations.

Authentic churches define their mission according to the “authentic” source, Jesus, as opposed to what other churches have done or denomination heritage.

Time of Sending

During this week, think about how your church is authentic or could be more authentic. Also ponder examples from other churches. Be prepared to share your thoughts next Sunday.

April 2007. Kevin Wilson is a Mission and Ministry Facilitator for the Ohio District, Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. Accompanying Participant Handout, and other studies by Kevin Wilson on characteristics of missional churches, are also available from the Center for U.S. Missions.