

## Mission-Minded or Missional? By Mike Ruhl

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If you're a bit befuddled by the term *missional* congregation, you are not alone. The term *missional* does not even occur in books written prior to 1990. No dictionary included the word; most still do not. Even Spell Check uses **red** to protest its passage onto the printed page. The reason lies in the fact that much of the mission work of the Western Church has been enabled by mission-minded congregations which view their role as "sending and supporting" those who have been "called" to mission service. But the missional congregation understands that, although some may be supported as those sent to other locations, every member of the church is "sent." In other words, mission is therefore participative rather than merely representative. And this reality makes mission the very *essence* of its existence, and not merely one expression of its existence.

Recent research by analysts such as Milfred Minatrea suggests that the missional congregation exhibits nine essential practices: high threshold membership, be real but not religious, teach to obey rather than to know, rewrite worship each week, live apostolically, expect to change the world, order actions according to purpose, measure growth by capacity to release people into mission and place kingdom concerns first. Let us briefly explore the first essential practice of having a high threshold for membership.

The heart of *high threshold membership* is authentic discipleship. Believers in Christ bond and covenant together to live out and proclaim the reign of God in the context of their communities. Members set forth evidence of transformed lives that encourage the searchers (those engaged in spiritual pilgrimage) to become authentic disciples of Jesus and join with the covenant community in serving God's missional purpose. And because missional congregations are high-threshold discipleship congregations, five dimensions of behavior are observed:

- They are concerned for nominal church members -- The idea of being a church member without having a vital connection to the body is foreign to Scripture. Authentic Christianity is *communal*, not individual.
- Membership is not casual -- The difference between "attenders" and "members" is commitment. Quite simply, membership matters. Christians need to be accountable to each other for spiritual growth and that accountability is lived out through commitment to the congregational family.
- They are a unified community -- Because the missional congregation is a *community*, members are mutually interdependent. They are convinced that God has invited their community to participate in His mission. The will to sacrifice for the good of another is a reflection of the very nature of God. Personal desires are surrendered to what members sense to be direction from the heart of God.

- They have clear expectations for members -- Specific requirements for authentic and missional discipleship do not discourage, but actually *add value* to the meaning of membership.
- Members have clear expectations of the congregation -- Missional congregations articulate and deliver what authentic disciples can expect as added values in the missional pilgrimage. One missional congregation states it this way: Members of this congregation can expect: (1) To encounter God in worship, the Word and relationships (2) To be cared for by people you can trust and (3) To get connected with specific benefits of joining the journey.

Members of more mission-minded (but not overtly *missional*) congregations are often skeptical when they hear stories of these new missional congregations. They often ask: "How do they enforce those expectations?" The answer, of course, is that *authentic cultural practices do not have to be enforced*. The practices are normal and expected. And so "normal" Christianity is redefined.

*This article is one of a series on the 9 characteristics of missional congregations. Access the others from our website: Resources – listed by topic and type – under the topic “Missional congregation.”*