

Empirical indicators of a 'missional church'

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Editor's Note: What follows is part of a working document of the "Developing Congregational Models" Team of the GOCN "Transforming Churches Towards Mission" Project. The team's assignment is to discover and study twelve to fifteen congregations across North America that give a particularly vivid display of the qualities of a "missional church" as that is defined in the book by that title in the Gospel and Our Culture Series published by Eerdmans. In order to identify what such churches would look like—how to know one when you see it—the team has developed a working paper articulating what they are calling "empirical indicators" of such churches. What is presented here is a selected portion of that document, the full version of which is available upon request from the GOCN office.

The document is currently being sent to a number of people who are in a position to know churches that illustrate in their life the qualities identified here. These people are being asked to nominate such churches for the team's consideration in their selection of churches to study and highlight in the final publication which will report their work. Readers of the GOCN newsletter are also welcome to suggest churches they believe match the portrait. These can be sent to Team Leader Wally Hobbs in care of the GOCN office.

The missional church represents God in the encounter between God and human culture. It exists not because of human goals or desires, but as a result of God's creating and saving work in the world. It is a visible manifestation of how the Good News of Jesus Christ is present in human life and transforms human culture to reflect more faithfully God's intentions for creation. It is a community that visibly and effectively participates in God's activity, just as Jesus indicated when he referred to it in metaphorical language as salt, yeast, and light in the world.

The following empirical indicators are an effort to identify what might be some of the key aspects that contribute to the church's unique saltiness and yeasty nature in the varied and diverse worlds within our North American culture today. Twelve indicators are summarized below with a brief description of each.

1 . The missional church proclaims the Gospel.

What it looks like: *The story of God's salvation is faithfully repeated in a multitude of different ways.*

The community's thought, words, and deeds are being formed into a pattern that proclaims the Gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. As a result, the Good News of God's reign is publicly announced. The proclamation

is a "word and deed" proclamation; it is not only audible but visible as well. It is *audible* in a proclamation that focuses not solely upon the salvation of persons, or the transformation of individual human lives, but also the transformation of the church, human communities, and the whole human community, history, and creation in the coming and already present reign of God. It is *visible* in, with, and through the quality of a common life that manifests the unique culture-contrasting good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

2. The missional church is a community where all members are involved in learning to become disciples of Jesus.

What it looks like: *The disciple identity is held by all; growth in discipleship is expected of all.*

Persons are not expected automatically to know the 'way of doing things in the reign of God.' Citizenship in the reign of God is learned. The learned protocol involves primarily those behaviors and processes that witness to the way of Jesus, who is forming his people for life in the reign of God. The community does not simply rely on 'how we've always done things here,' or 'that's how we Baptists/Lutherans/Presbyterians/Methodists/ etc. do it,' or even 'that's how we do it in the company where I work.' Rather, the community seeks critically to integrate already-learned practices with skills and habits of Christian discipleship. This community shows evidence of growing, changing, and deepening the skills and habits of discipleship. Nurturing citizenship in the reign of God is an overall priority of the church for all members of the community of faith.

3. The Bible is normative in this church's life.

What it looks like: *The church is reading the Bible together to learn what it can learn no where else – God's good and gracious intent for all creation, the salvation mystery, and the identity and purpose of life together.*

There are two commonly held expectations: that we will seek to know the Scriptures, and that we will seek to become obedient to the Word which is revealed in the Scriptures. Listening, reading, studying, and obeying the Bible is integral to all of church life, including its worship, spirituality, service, education, stewardship, and witness. The Bible is engaged communally. The overarching approach to Scripture study in the body is not solely 'personal devotion' or merely 'moral guidance,' but is characterized by the question, 'What is the text saying to the church which is attempting to be faithful today?' 'How does the biblical word prepare God's people for their mission in this particular place?'

4. The church understands itself as different from the world because of its participation in the life, death, and resurrection of its Lord.

What it looks like: *In its corporate life and public witness, the church is consciously seeking to conform to its Lord instead of the multitude of cultures in which it finds itself.*

Discipleship requires a willingness to follow the way of the cross and share in the sufferings of Christ. The church is not getting its bearings by the world's standard of success—Institutional status, power, or influence. Rather, it witnesses to the truth of the Gospel that the one on the cross is the way, the truth, and the life for the church. Jesus models what the church is called to be. Thus the church is called to show hard evidence that as a body of people it provides a collective witness to its crucified savior. The church's distinctive conduct, then, is frequently different from and often in opposition to the world's patterns of behavior. This is particularly evident when the power of love, service, and sacrifice for one another in the community is contrasted with the powers of hate, violence, and domination in the world.

5. The church seeks to discern God's specific missional vocation for the entire community and for all of its members.

What it looks like: *The church has made its 'mission' its priority, and in overt and communal ways is seeking to be and do 'what God is calling us to know, be, and do.'*

The goal of decision-making is not simply to discover the will of the community, but to discern together the will of God. Because all participants in the body participate in decisions that affect their life and mission together, shared power and influence (rather than status, position, or 'majority opinion') are the keys of authority. The need for the gifts and insights of all members to shape and guide a faithful and effective ministry is recognized and emphasized. Mentors, teachers, and partners provide intentional support, challenge, and advice to enable one another to extend these

skills and habits and deepen their participation in the life of Christ. Members make efforts to set aside the necessary time to listen, study, share, struggle, pray, and plan together as they search for God's will and seek to participate in God's mission. Members pledge to live out together the conclusions they have reached together. Church leadership encourages, guides, teaches, and serves the process of communal discernment through consistently holding the following key questions before the community as they seek together to answer them:

- What is God calling us as this church to be and do?
- How can we enter more faithfully into the reign of God?
- How will we learn from the Bible what it means to be the church?
- How will we more faithfully and effectively practice Christian community in our life with one another?

6. A missional community is indicated by how Christians behave toward one another.

What it looks like: *Acts of self-sacrifice on behalf of one another both in the church and in the locale characterize the generosity of the community.*

The church exhibits the fruits of the Spirit which include (but are not limited to) not thinking more highly of oneself than one ought; valuing the gifts of others; loving one another with mutual affection; eagerness to show the workings of the Spirit; patience in suffering; hospitality to strangers; blessing those who do not understand, or who persecute; associating with the lowly; not repaying evil for evil, but overcoming evil with good; and living peaceably. Acts of generosity are commonplace and self-giving is a behavioral characteristic of this community.

7. It is a community that practices reconciliation.

What it looks like: *The church community is moving beyond homogeneity, toward a more heterogeneous community in its racial, ethnic, age, gender and socio-economic make-up.*

The barriers that separate people are identified, addressed, and overcome. Differences and dissension among people are dealt with constructively. Conflict is used to enrich discussion. Evil done within or to the body is overcome by doing good. Healing involves confession to and the forgiveness of one another wherever and whenever wrong exists. This process of healing and reconciliation takes place between individuals and within the body, both of which serve to shape and reform the community as a whole. Society's boundaries are crossed—class, economic status, race, gender, age, occupation, education. Amazingly diverse people allow themselves to be formed by one Lord into one body. Violence is rejected as a method of resolving difference.

8. People within the community hold themselves accountable to one another in love.

What it looks like: *Substantial time is spent with one another for the purpose of watching over one another in love.*

They covenant together to uphold and watch over one another in love, praying for one another. They are committed to one another, and that commitment is expressed through collaboration, interdependence of work efforts, and being dependable. People place a high value on sharing a common life and supporting one another.

9. The church practices hospitality.

What it looks like: *Welcoming the stranger into the midst of the community plays a central role.*

People are reached and invited into new relationships with God and with one another as the community's intent is to welcome as God welcomes. As a result, people are becoming citizens of God's reign. Having heard and received this invitation themselves, they extend the invitation to others to know and experience God's love.

10. Worship is the central act by which the community celebrates with joy and thanksgiving both God's presence and God's promised future.

What it looks like: *There is significant and meaningful engagement in communal worship of God, reflecting appropriately and addressing the culture of those who worship together.*

Worship is the community's action of publicly giving allegiance to GodSFather, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is an act of the whole people of God who remain faithful to tradition while integrating variety which reflects and gives new meaning to the unique cultural context of the congregation. Worship actively engages the community in ways that nurture the dynamic, growing and changing aspects of discipleship in the world. As such, it provides for the incorporation of people into the community of faith, their formation into a new humanity, and their reception of God's gift of sustenance for daily life. Its focus is on celebrating God's presence and promises without seeking or expecting worship to be the occasion for God to meet human needs. The congregation departs from worship, knowing that it is a sent and sending community, and each Christian is conscious of his or her apostolic sentness as light, leaven, and salt in the world.

11. This community has a vital public witness.

What it looks like: *The church makes an observable impact that contributes to the transformation of life, society, and human relationships.*

What the community intends to be and do actually does occur, and is confirmed both by those who participate in the community (e.g. 'I have learned here that I can disagree and I don't have to leave') as well as by those who do not, (e.g. 'Oh, you're the church that always helps clean up after floods and tornadoes'). Like political ambassadors, persons know and can articulate where their allegiance lies. They know and can articulate the nature and expectations of the mission that has been given to them. Its public deeds do not consist of imposing its moral will on others, but of giving hard evidence of the reign of God that intrudes as an alternative vision and practice in the immediate locale and elsewhere.

12. There is a recognition that the church itself is an incomplete expression of the reign of God.

What it looks like: *There is a widely held perception that this church is going somewhere and that somewhere is more faithfully lived life in the reign of God.*

The church has been given the gift of citizenship in the reign of God which it has received less than perfectly. Knowing that the church is as yet a flawed witness to the reign of God, it is open to its own reformation as it continually seeks to provide a more faithful and more effective witness in its changing context. Therefore, the church is constantly critiquing and intentionally reshaping its vision, common life, teaching, organization, obedience, witness, and ministry on the basis of its hearing of the Word of God.