The Missional Church in Perspective

Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation

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Foreword by Alan J. Roxburgh
Contents

Foreword by Alan J. Roxburgh  xiii
Series Preface by Craig Van Gelder  xvii
Acknowledgments  xix

Introduction  1

Part 1  The History and Development of the Missional Conversation  15
  1 Concepts Influencing the Missional Church Conversation  17
  2 Revisiting the Seminal Work Missional Church  41
  3 Mapping the Missional Conversation  67

Part 2  Perspectives That Extend the Missional Conversation  99
  4 Expanding and Enriching the Theological Frameworks  101
  5 Missional Engagement with Culture in a Globalized World  125
  6 Missional Practices of Church Life and Leadership  147

Epilogue  167
Bibliography  171
Index  183
Foreword

ALAN J. ROXBURGH

During the last dozen years it’s been my privilege to travel across North America and much of the world working with churches, leaders, schools, and denominational systems on questions of change, innovation, and missional transformation. In all these places the language shaping these engagements is missional language. Some ten years ago, when the book Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America was published, “missional” was a little-known word buried in the deliberations of European missiologists. Today the word is so commonly used that hardly a month goes by without a book or two arriving at my door from one publisher or another with the word “missional” in its title. It is significant that in the brief space of a decade such an obscure word came into common use across all denominational systems and within a diverse set of Christian movements. And yet, despite such widespread usage, it is a word that is regularly misunderstood by the vast majority of people, be they clergy or laity. One of the first questions I am usually asked by clergy and church members alike is, can you give us a definition of “missional”?

I write this as a way of introducing this wonderful book by Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile. It addresses the issues around the word “missional” with clear analysis, a strong theological assessment, and a comprehensive understanding of the missiological issues at stake in both its history and current usage. At the same time, this book is not primarily an analysis of what has happened to this word; rather, it is a call to the church to em-
brace the mission of God in our strange new place. I confess that for the past several years I’ve been frustrated, angry, disillusioned, and disheartened at the ways the missional language has come to be used within the church. The metaphor that comes to mind is that of after Babel, when people use language to describe reality and yet the language seems to be so different it fails to communicate or connect.

Like me, you may have noticed the plethora of missional images presented in a wide variety of books and seminars these days (obviously, I have contributed to this Babel of proposals, so I count myself in the observations). We are told how to form a missional movement or create a missional renaissance or form missional leaders or find a missional Jesus and so on and so on. One reads these various books with a basic question: how can they use the same word but not seem to have much in common beyond that one point? No wonder people in our churches keep asking what the word means, and why they feel as if they have been propelled into a confusing world whose language sounds like a lot of “ba, ba, ba, ba, ba. . . .” In this context, this particular book is a welcome gift. Carefully, thoughtfully, and with incredible grace, Craig and Dwight seek to convene a table where we are able to listen to one another, discern our differences, understand what is at stake in terms of gospel issues, and so frame a new kind of conversation.

But this book also offers much more. It is a work of imagination; it wrestles with utterly critical, existential issues that are shaping the future of the church. These authors are convinced that missional language contains crucial ideas and themes essential for the future of the church. What they have undertaken is nothing less than an invitation to a divergent audience of church leaders and academics to enter a robust community of engagement, not to determine who is right or wrong about specific aspects of what “missional” means, but to recognize what is at stake right now: our very participation in the mission of God in North America.

Craig and Dwight are not asking us to agree on all the theological points they make; they’re not assuming we will concur with everything about their assessment of some movements or, even, some theologian or missiologist. You may not agree with how they present certain facts, and you might parse details of twentieth-century missiology or discussions of the past decade differently, but this level of argument is really not their intention. They believe the missional language continues to offer us something really important; critical issues are at stake in its usage, and we have to engage them with as much theological vigor and wisdom as we can. This book grapples with the evangelical call of the church to be God’s sign, witness, and foretaste in massively shifting, changing, morphing worlds.
What strikes me about this work of imagination is how Craig and Dwight have gone about constructing their book. As I read the emerging argument of these chapters, I was struck by the generosity that pervades every page. The pull of the book is to construct a welcoming table around which differing versions, visions, and views of missional might come together to ask new questions that are God-shaped, seeking to support one another and discern ways in which the theological and missiological implications of missional language during the past decade or more might support us all for the sake of the kingdom. This central motif of the book kept drawing me forward in following the unfolding of these two writers’ carefully developed arguments and proposal.

This book is written by two people who love the church and who long for the gospel to be practiced in our strange times. It is unique, therefore, in its direct appeal to many, like me, who have shaped this missional conversation during the last decade. The book invites everyone to a table for engagement with one another because the authors believe we can’t let the missional conversation slide into the oblivion of another Babel. As I read the manuscript and moved through its chapters, I was addressed by the Spirit of God at this very point. In my own work I talk a lot about creating safe spaces in which to call forth the voices and stories of God among the people. I provide others with the resources and skills to do this. And yet, to confess my own issues, I have also carried a critical spirit toward many of the ways that people use missional language in their work. This book offers me a different possibility, inviting me out of my sense of being right and calling me to a table of listening and dialogue with others for the sake of the kingdom. It challenges me to offer a welcoming, safe space in the midst of others with whom I disagree about how they use missional language. This book goes much deeper than argument; it is an invitation to all of us to enter the spaces of welcoming and dialogue where we might be read and transformed by the Spirit of God.

I am deeply grateful for this book and the two people who wrote it. In truth, it has changed my mind and attitudes. I have heard the Spirit of God in these pages and want to respond to the invitation I have received. And I want to invite others who write, teach, preach, consult, and seek to lead movements that are missional to read this book with an openness also to hear its invitation and come to the table. This will not be an easy table. Craig and Dwight have made it clear that there are hard questions and tough issues to engage, but this is the conversation we need now. We need the engagement, not the Babel and not the distance from one another.

Earlier this year I was in Marburg, Germany. I was taken on a brief but delightful tour of the old city with its wonderful streets and massive castle. It was pointed out to me that in one of the castle’s rooms Luther and Zwingli
met in the early days of the sixteenth-century European-Germanic Reformation to discuss their differences concerning the Eucharist. The details of the debate are not important here. I was struck by what it must have cost these men to make this journey in terms of the times and the terrain. The castle sits atop a high hill; reaching it today still requires a demanding walk. The tragedy of the image that came to me, as I stood by the castle on a cold March day and looked up at the window of the room where the two men met, is that they walked away from each other without ever coming to resolution. How different those European movements might have been had they stayed and reached a new understanding. I think we are in such a place today in the missional conversation. I read this book through the Spirit inviting us to come together for the sake of the church and its mission in our time, and I invite you to read it with openness to the possibility of the Spirit’s invitation to you.

May 2010
The missional church conversation is continuing to expand. Scores of books have come into print over the past decade that reference “missional” as a key concept for discussing the identity, purpose, and ministry of the church. Those of us working with The Missional Network (TMN) are especially committed to contributing to this conversation in three primary ways: (1) offering consulting and coaching services to churches; (2) providing tools and resources to help churches engage in adaptive change; and (3) publishing books that utilize missional theology to help churches engage in systemic transformation. Our focus in each of these ministry initiatives is to contribute to the ongoing missional discussion in light of biblical and theological perspectives. We believe that reclaiming more fully the identity of the church is basic for informing its purpose and ministry.

The church’s identity has to do with its very nature, what the church is in light of its being created by the Spirit. Much of current missional church literature assumes the church’s identity is self-evident and moves all too quickly to focusing on what the church is to do on behalf of God in the world or how the church should organize itself for this work. These approaches, however, shift the focus too quickly away from the agency of the Spirit in the midst of the church and redirect it to the primacy of human agency and responsibility.

Being explicit about the agency of the Triune God through the Spirit in relation to God's mission in the world and clarifying the church’s participation in that mission are important concepts. These perspectives were central to the conception of “missional” when it was first introduced in the 1998 publication of the now seminal book Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America. Continued developments in trinitarian studies...
since that time, which emphasize the social trinity into relation to the sending trinity, increase the importance of maintaining this perspective. This is the biblical and theological approach that The Missional Network is seeking to contribute to the missional conversation—framing the role of human agency within the divine agency of the Triune God.

In pursuing this contribution, TMN has developed a partnership with Baker Publishing Group to publish a series of books, beginning with this present volume, that will build on the already established tradition of contributing to the missional conversation. This work, we believe, is of great importance to the church today as it seeks to participate more fully in God’s mission within our dramatically changed context.

Craig Van Gelder
Editor, The Missional Network Series
The word “missional” seems to have traveled the remarkable path of going from obscurity to banality in only one decade.

Alan J. Roxburgh

The word “missional” came into vogue just over a decade ago with the publication of *Missional Church* in 1998. It now appears increasingly in book titles, blogs, and denominational and judicatory literature, and on the lips of church leaders. This word, for most everyone using it, represents a changed relationship between the church and its local context, one that calls for a renewed understanding of the church’s identity in God. “Missional” evokes a powerful new imagination for reflecting on the church’s nature and purpose in a complex twenty-first-century world.

The word “missional,” however, is now being used in very divergent ways by its many advocates. This is evident in the above quote from Alan Roxburgh, one of the contributing authors to *Missional Church*, who suggests that this development has led to the word losing its definitional value. To what extent is this the case? The diverse usage of the word by various authors becomes quickly evident if one examines a few recent publications, as illustrated in the following sample of books published in 2008 and 2009.


1. This critique was recently made publicly by Alan Roxburgh, as confirmed in his email of January 25, 2010.
What an interesting array of themes is represented in this sampling of recent publications, all of which share in common the use of the word “missional.” The question naturally arises: how are we to make sense of the diverse ways in which the word “missional” is presently being used throughout the conversation? To answer this question, it is helpful to review in more detail when and how this word became popularized.

“Missional” appears to have been introduced into the English vocabulary in the late nineteenth century and was used only sparingly up until the latter part of the twentieth century (a detailed archaeology of this word is provided in chapter 2). It did not catch on in popular parlance until it was used in 1998 to redefine an understanding of church in Missional Church. That book resulted from a collaborative writing project in the mid-1990s by six participants in the Gospel and Our Culture Network and has now sold over 38,000 copies. This is a remarkable number of sales for such a book, one that has regularly been critiqued for being both quite thick and overly academic in style (charges that are, in fact, true). The concept of missional church apparently struck responsive chords with many of its readers. This responsiveness soon led to the word “missional” being used in diverse ways by a wide range of church leaders.
Making an Argument for a Missional Understanding

Some argue today, as noted above, that the word “missional” has become vacuous and has thus lost its definitional value. We are proposing a different argument in this book, namely, that “missional” displays an inherent elasticity that allows it to be understood in a variety of ways. This elasticity is actually evident in its use in Missional Church. There are several competing interpretive strains evident in that book in relation to the various biblical and theological themes that were formulated by the participants (these competing strains are explored in detail in chapter 2). At present, the inherent elasticity of the word “missional” continues to be demonstrated through its use by various faith traditions to express an understanding of mission from within their own biblical and theological perspectives.

Some commonalities, however, exist within much of this usage. These are primarily the result of the adoption by many authors of one of the key insights offered by Missional Church: that mission means sending and that God is a sending God. The quote from the book that is most frequently referenced in the broader missional literature concerns this point and comes from the introduction by Darrell Guder: “The ecclesiocentric understanding of mission has been replaced during this century by a profoundly theocentric reconceptualization of Christian mission. We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation. ‘Mission’ means ‘sending’ and it is the central biblical theme describing the purposes of God’s action in human history.”

This important insight continues to lead many authors to draw out further the implications regarding a missional understanding. Our study of the present diverse literature that has emerged in North America led us to identify four themes that appear fairly regularly, although there clearly are some exceptions (especially among those who make the meaning of “missional” equivalent to

3. Guder, Missional Church, 4. It should be noted that David Bosch is also regularly quoted as a primary source on this point. For example: “The classical doctrine of the missio Dei as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and Son sending the Spirit, [is] expanded to include yet another ‘movement’: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world” (David J. Bosch, Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991], 390).

4. Since the missional conversation is now worldwide, we should note that our intent in focusing primarily on the North American context is not to exclude the significant developments taking place in other contexts around the world but rather to acknowledge the reality that we live and work in, and are primarily shaped by, this particular context. We would invite and encourage those working in different contexts to take up the issues associated with the missional conversation that are unique to their locations.
obedience to the Great Commission). These themes in the North American literature are:

1. God is a missionary God who sends the church into the world. This understanding shifts the agency of mission from the church to God. It is God’s mission that has a church rather than a church that has a mission.

2. God’s mission in the world is related to the reign (kingdom) of God. This understanding makes the work of God in the world larger than the mission of the church, although the church is directly involved in the reign (kingdom) of God.

3. The missional church is an incarnational (versus an attractional) ministry sent to engage a postmodern, post-Christendom, globalized context. This understanding requires every congregation to take on a missionary posture for engaging its local context, with this missionary engagement shaping everything a congregation does.

4. The internal life of the missional church focuses on every believer living as a disciple engaging in mission. This understanding makes every member a minister, with the spiritual growth of every disciple becoming the primary focus as the body is built up to participate more fully in God’s mission in the world.

It is important to note that these themes represent powerful insights that significantly redefine how we think about the church. In the present book, we are arguing, first, that these themes represent key insights that are largely derived from the initial argument made in Missional Church. We are arguing, second, that the actual use of these themes raises critical questions that many of the authors and movements employing them unfortunately leave unanswered.

It is also important to note that concepts and language do not just drop from nowhere into public conversation. What might be referred to as new concepts and ideas always draw to some extent on previous sources. Just as the construction of the original Missional Church argument helped to frame the insights now being popularized in the emerging literature, so also that original argument was itself influenced by biblical and theological concepts developed earlier in the twentieth century. Those seeking to utilize missional language today would be served by paying close attention to this earlier cluster of biblical and theological concepts. Some clear areas of convergence among various concepts were drawn together in the argument developed in Missional Church. But there were also concepts that were inadequately developed, as well as concepts that were incongruent, if not actually somewhat in conflict with
one another. Chapter 2 provides a discussion of these points in an examination of the initial argument presented in *Missional Church*.

We believe that at least some of the confusion generated around the use of missional language today is related to this lack of precision and integration in the initial argument. Those seeking to draw on this language should be aware of how this lack of precision and integration may impact their use of the language as well as their choices and actions. We develop this part of our argument in some detail in chapters 1 through 3.

We believe that those seeking to draw on this language should also be aware of how more recent biblical and theological developments continue to refine and shape the concept of missional. We explore this part of our argument in chapters 4 through 6. We believe that attending to both aspects of what can be described only as a dynamic missional conversation can help all of us to enrich and deepen our understanding of God’s mission and our participation in it.

**Key Concepts That Influenced the Missional Church Conversation**

Ideas matter. They shape our understanding of reality, frame our interpretation of life, and help to inform our choices. But what we really believe, that to which we are truly committed, is what becomes embodied in those choices that we actually make and the practices in which we engage. Maintaining this connection is at the heart of understanding “missional” from a biblical and theological perspective. To take one example (which we will explore further in chapter 4), the Bible asserts that we are created in the image of God. This idea has profound ramifications in shaping our choices and behaviors. For example, when embodied, it locates us within a community related to the community of the Triune God, giving us a sense of place; when embodied, it provides us with a story, giving us an identity; and when embodied, it invites us to broaden our community within reciprocal relationships, enabling us to openly welcome and learn from others.

This focus on the embodiment of biblical and theological ideas, in which ideas and behaviors are understood as intricately interrelated, is critical to the missional conversation. We behave our way into new thinking, even as we think our way into new behaving. Throughout our book, we discuss this understanding as representing a “theological imagination” or, more specifically, a “theologically informed social imagination.”

to consider carefully the biblical and theological ideas, the theological imagination, that informed the conception of missional and its defined practices in *Missional Church*.

These concepts are identified in the introduction to that book, although their historical development (embodiment) unfortunately was not pursued in detail in the book. Specific quotes from the introduction to *Missional Church* are provided below to help the reader gain perspective on this cluster of biblical and theological concepts, all of which were developed earlier in the twentieth century. Guder, as the book’s editor, refers to this constellation of themes as a “missiological consensus” that was made available to the authors primarily through the work of Lesslie Newbigin. This so-called missiological consensus served as the foundation for the development of the concept of missional church. It is important when using the word “missional” to be aware of this cluster of ideas, which conveys important biblical and theological commitments.

*Church and missions/mission:* We must overcome the historical dichotomy of church and missions/mission by connecting ecclesiology and missiology.

In the ecclesiocentric approach of Christendom, mission became only one of the many programs of the church. . . . What would an understanding of the church (an ecclesiology) look like if it were truly missional in design and definition? . . . Out of [a discussion of this] emerged the present research project to explore the possible shape and themes of a missiological ecclesiology for North America.

*Trinitarian missiology:* We must start with the Trinity in order to understand mission, for Trinity introduces us to a sending God who is a missionary God.

We have learned to speak of God as a “missionary God.” . . . God’s character and purpose as a sending or missionary God redefines our understanding of the Trinity. . . . This Trinitarian point of entry into our theology of the church necessarily shifts all the accents in our ecclesiology.

*Missio Dei:* The emergence of this conception of the mission of God reframes our understanding of mission from being church-centric to becoming theocentric, a view articulated especially by Newbigin.

7. Ibid., 6–8.
8. Ibid., 4–5.
Newbigin brought into public discussion a theological consensus that had long been forming among missiologists and theologians. . . . The missiological consensus that Newbigin focused on our situation may be summarized with the term *missio Dei*, “the mission of God.” . . . Mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation.9

**Reign (kingdom) of God:** The message of Jesus is centered on the reign of God, which must be understood as both *already* and *not yet*. The centrality of the Gospel as God’s good news for all the world pervades our discussion from beginning to end. . . . It has become particularly important to us to focus our discussion on Jesus’ message and practice of the reign of God. A vast contemporary biblical discussion of this theme guides us in our thinking.10

**Church’s missionary nature:** God is a missionary God, and God’s mission involves a church sent into the world to represent the reign (kingdom) of God. Thus the church is missionary by nature.

We have begun to see that the church of Jesus Christ is not the purpose or goal of the gospel, but rather its instrument and witness. . . . God’s mission is calling and sending us, the church of Jesus Christ, to be a missionary church in . . . the cultures in which we find ourselves.11

**Missional hermeneutic:** It is necessary to use a missional hermeneutic to read Scripture in order to understand the full intent of God’s mission. We have been guided by a shared conviction that the Scriptures are the normative and authoritative witness to God’s mission and its unfolding in human history. . . . We now agree that one must read Scripture from a missional hermeneutic.12

**Missional Church Is Not Just Another Strategy**

A key insight of the initial missional church conversation is that it was not primarily about the church developing yet another strategic approach for reaching a new generation. Such strategic approaches have usually focused on the purpose/mission of the church. Some dimensions of missional think-

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10. Ibid., 10.
11. Ibid., 5.
12. Ibid., 10–11.
ing clearly lead to such outcomes, but strategy was not the driving force that initially undergirded the energy and agency associated with this concept. The authors of *Missional Church* clearly understood that, in fact, a *fundamental change in perspective* occurs with a missional understanding. Their work shifted the focus from understanding mission primarily in terms of the “mission of the church” to understanding that the church’s mission instead derives from the “mission of God.” With this shift in perspective, the primary agency for mission moves to divine initiative through the ministry of the Spirit as the larger framework within which our human responses take place.

This shift in perspective represents a dramatic reframing of the conversation about church in relation to developing strategic approaches to ministry. Interestingly, a continuous unfolding of movements focusing on strategy can be observed within U.S. churches during the past half century. These were generated largely by the church’s efforts to respond to continuously changing contexts. These movements, in focusing primarily on strategy, largely reflect a deep pragmatism within much of U.S. culture that tends to concentrate heavily on technique. This focus has led generation after generation of church leaders to search for fresh approaches to help the church remain successful within a changing context. These various strategies have typically focused on redefining the purpose/mission of the church as a way to get the church back on track in its mission and ministry. Such movements include the following:

- Church renewal movement (1960s and 1970s)
- Church growth movement (1970s and 1980s)
- Church effectiveness movement (1980s and 1990s)
- Church health movement (1990s and 2000s)
- *Emerging church movement* (1990s and 2000s)

Some suggest that a “missional church movement” is yet one more strategic initiative that should be added to this list. If one takes this approach, then the missional church becomes yet another effort to help congregations become relevant in a changing context. Fortunately, many church leaders today who employ a missional understanding realize that a missional approach actually draws on a different biblical and theological understanding of God and God’s mission. This different way of thinking helps many of these leaders to move

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13. The emerging church is listed here, but in a qualified way (indicated by italics), since some represent this movement as one that now succeeds previous movements. However, see the further explanation below regarding some in this movement who are also focusing on the identity/nature of the church.
beyond the primacy of human agency, which is so deeply embedded in the DNA of these earlier movements, and to shift their focus to the primacy of God’s agency.

The initial missional church conversation critiqued these earlier movements as inadequate for understanding the church and its ministry. These movements were viewed as focusing too readily on the purpose/mission of the church without first attending to the reality of God’s being and agency. God’s being and agency require us to attend first to the identity/nature of the church before seeking to address its purpose/mission—what the church is prior to what the church does. Thus the missional church conversation presents an alternative way to think about the church, one that focuses on God’s mission as determinative for understanding the mission of the church. It should be noted that in the diagram below, as in the list above, the emerging church is included in a qualified way in this shift. Even though the emerging church and missional church movements are somewhat distinct, some emerging church leaders also attend to identity/nature as the formative clue for understanding the church and its ministry.

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<tr>
<th>Focus on the Church’s Purpose/Mission</th>
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An Initial Mapping of the Missional Literature

The missional conversation is now a little more than a decade old, and, as noted above, the use of this concept has become somewhat diverse. This diversity reflects to some extent the broad range of Christian traditions that employ the concept of missional, including independent evangelicals, evangelical denominations, emerging and emergent churches, mainline denominations, Pentecostal churches, and even some Roman Catholics. However, the diverse usage of the word “missional” today cannot be adequately explained by employing this type of framework. Branches of the missional conversation cut across all these diverse groups. For this reason, we utilize a thematic approach
that relates theological imagination to the issue of agency to identify the various branches of this conversation.

A diagram of a tree is used in figure 1 to map the missional conversation in terms of both its original sources and its current expressions. First, the root structure of the tree identifies the key theological concepts in the twentieth century that helped to shape the initial conversation. These concepts were noted above, along with illustrative quotes from *Missional Church*, and are discussed in greater detail in chapter 1. Second, the trunk of the tree represents the contributions made by the *Missional Church* volume. A substantive critique of the strengths and weaknesses of the argument made in that book is presented in chapter 2. Third, the four branches emerging out of the trunk represent the diverse understandings of the word “missional” that have emerged during the past decade. These four branches, along with their various subbranches, are discussed in detail in chapter 3.

**The Four Branches of Conversation Partners**

*Discovering missional.* This branch of the missional conversation involves publications and web sources that actually reach back to the previous framework of “church” and “mission,” where these concepts are understood as separate though related realities. These authors tend to utilize the popularity of missional language to promote a more traditional understanding of mission, one focusing primarily on human agency.

*Utilizing missional.* This branch of the missional conversation includes those publications and web sources actively trying to utilize the biblical and theological ideas that shaped the initial missional conversation as presented in *Missional Church*. They are working to deepen an understanding of what a missional church looks like, especially in relation to God’s agency.

*Engaging missional.* This branch of the missional conversation is found in publications and web sources attempting to engage and live out a missional perspective in relation to some aspect of church life. These authors tend to assume an understanding of missional as they develop the choices and behaviors of a missional approach for some dimension of church life or for the transformation of church systems.

*Extending missional.* This branch of the missional conversation involves publications and web sources seeking to develop further the biblical and theological frameworks that can undergird a missional understanding. Those working in this area usually acknowledge in some detail the concepts that informed the initial missional conversation as they proceed to extend an understanding of it.
Figure 1: Missional Tree with Primary Branches

Why We Are Writing This Book

As coauthors of this book, we believe the time is right to bring greater clarity to the missional church conversation. There are indications that others are also pursuing this task, and we have been helpfully informed by their work. We also believe that we are uniquely situated to contribute to this effort. However, we want to offer the following comments in regard to our own social locations since they influence the way we have framed and pursued this project.

Craig holds doctorates in both missiology and administration of urban affairs. He actively serves as both a theological educator and a church consultant, ministries in which he has engaged for the past thirty years in focusing on the North American context. His church home and ordination are within the Reformed tradition. He was an early leader in the Gospel and Our Culture Network and also served as a member of the writing team of *Missional Church*. After stepping away from the GOCN in 2000, Craig utilized his position at Luther Seminary as professor of congregational mission to continue to pursue the missional church conversation. He helped to develop PhD and DMin degree programs in congregational mission and leadership at Luther and also pioneered an annual missional church consultation that brings together established scholars, graduate students, and local church leaders to consider a designated missional church theme. Each consultation has resulted in a volume in the new Missional Church series published by Eerdmans. To date, Craig has written, edited, or coedited nine volumes related to the missional church conversation.

Dwight is an adult convert to the Christian faith who grew up in a secular home in California as a member of Generation X. His intuitive understanding of the postmodern and post-Christendom world grows out of his life experience. He eventually found a church home in the Anglican tradition, in which he is now ordained. After leadership experiences in several congregations, including serving a church in one of America’s least-churched areas, Dwight pursued a PhD at Luther Seminary in congregational mission and leadership. This academic program helped him to explore more deeply the missiological backdrop of the missional church conversation as well as to pursue current developments in thinking biblically and theologically about the missional church. After completing his doctorate, Dwight joined the Luther Seminary faculty, where he now helps to prepare students for leading congregations in ministry from a missional perspective. He remains rooted in the Anglican tradition.

within local church leadership as a part-time staff member of a congregation in St. Paul.

We represent different generations but share a common commitment to engaging in the development of a biblical and theological understanding of the missional church. The combination of our training and life experiences provides us with a unique ability to look back as well as to see forward. Although both of us engaged in shaping all the chapters in this book, Craig took the lead in drafting chapters 1 through 3, which deal with the historical development of the missional church conversation, and Dwight took the lead in drafting chapters 4 through 6, which deal with extending the missional church conversation in light of recent biblical and theological developments.

The Purpose of This Book

Our purpose in writing this book is to place the missional church conversation in perspective in terms of how it was initially understood, how it has become popularized in a wider conversation, how it is being enriched by biblical and theological developments that continue to take place, and how these perspectives can inform the wider conversation that has emerged. This is a timely task to pursue, given the current popularity of the concept of missional, as well as the growing confusion resulting from its diverse usage. Our approach is twofold, as reflected in the two parts of this book.

Part one provides an introduction to the missional church conversation. Chapter 1 explores the historical development of the biblical and theological sources underlying this conception of the church. Chapter 2 examines in some detail the strengths and weaknesses of the argument made in the seminal volume *Missional Church*. Then chapter 3 maps the diverse ways in which the conversation has developed during the past decade, along with identifying how these various perspectives might more fruitfully engage the biblical and theological concepts embedded in the conception of missional church.

Part two extends the missional church conversation. Chapter 4 notes how recent biblical and theological developments continue to contribute to some of the core themes embedded in the original conversation. Chapter 5 draws out further the implications of missional church in relation to the world, which requires careful attention to the concept of culture. Then chapter 6 deepens this conversation in relation to spiritual formation/discipleship and leadership/organization in the life and ministry of the church.

It is our desire to be *invitational* in developing this argument. We are not seeking primarily to critique others’ usage of the concept of missional. Rather,
our intent is to explore how further examination of the various biblical and theological concepts that helped to shape the initial missional church conversation, as well as concepts introduced through recent biblical and theological developments, might be used by all of us to enrich our understanding of missional within our different Christian faith traditions.