

INTRODUCING THE
MISSIONAL
CHURCH

WHAT IT IS, WHY IT MATTERS,
HOW TO BECOME ONE

ALAN J. ROXBURGH AND M. SCOTT BOREN

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Series Preface

Allelon is a network of missional church leaders, schools, and para-church organizations that envisions, inspires, engages, resources, trains, and educates leaders for the church and its mission in our culture. Said simply, together we are a movement of missional leaders.

We have a particular burden for people involved in new forms of missional communities (sometimes called “emerging”), people starting new congregations within denominational systems, and people in existing congregations who are working toward missional identity and engagement. Our desire is to encourage, support, coach, and offer companionship for missional leaders as they discern new models of church capable of sustaining a living and faithful witness to the gospel in our contemporary world.

The word *allelon* is a common but overlooked Greek word that is reciprocal in nature. In the New Testament it is most often translated “one another.” Christian faith is not an individual matter. Everything in the life of the church is done *allelon* for the sake of the world. A Christian community is defined by the *allelon* sayings in Scripture, a few of which include: love one another, pursue one another’s good, and build up one another.

The overarching mission of Allelon is to educate and encourage the church, while learning from *one another*, so that we might become a people among whom God lives as sign, symbol, and foretaste of his redeeming love in neighborhoods and the whole of society. We

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seek to facilitate this reality within ordinary women and men who endeavor to participate in God's mission to reclaim and restore the whole of creation and to bear witness to the world of a new way of being human.

To accomplish this goal, Allelon has partnered with Baker Books and Baker Academic to produce resources that equip the church with the best thinking and practices on missional life. After years of interaction around the missional conversation, we continually get asked, "What is a missional church?" and then the follow-up question, "How do we become one?" This is the reason why we feel this book is especially important on this leg of the church's journey. Alan and Scott are trusted friends and colleagues who have poured their lives into this message that is based on both experience and research. You will find these words challenging and even somewhat unique. In fact, you may find their insights surprising; however, these are words you can trust to lead us forward as God's people into a new future.

Mark Priddy
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Introduction

In 1974 a missionary returned home to his native England after more than thirty years in India. Seeing his own country after so many years away, he viewed it as an outsider with insider eyes and was shocked by what he observed. The Christian England he had left was gone; the depth of hopelessness he saw among the young was alarming. He realized that the West (the United Kingdom, Europe, and increasing portions of North America) was now itself a mission field. The once mission-sending nations of the West were in need of radical re-missionizing. This shock, with its awareness of the challenge to be addressed, became the focus of his work and writing for the next twenty-five years. The basic question he asked was about the nature of a missionary encounter with the modern West.

The man was Lesslie Newbigin. His work inspired the development of what came to be designated the Gospel and Our Culture Network that sprang up in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and North America. The New Zealand group came to an end in the 1990s, and the movement in the United Kingdom has remained a relatively small, academic conversation. The North American Gospel and Our Culture Network had a somewhat different story.

In the late 1980s a group of church leaders and thinkers formed the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America to ask basic questions about why and how churches had become so captive to individualism and consumerism. They wondered why churches had lost touch with the way the biblical texts spoke of God's mission in

and for the world and why the central biblical theme of the kingdom of God had just about disappeared from the preaching and teaching of the churches.

Out of these conversations a team of authors collaborated to produce the book *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*.¹ It touched a deep chord across North America so that by the beginning of the new millennium the missional conversation was the primary way church leaders talked about the challenges facing the church. While the book reframed the questions about being the church in North America at the end of the twentieth century, many local church leaders found it too abstract with too many concepts veiled in technical and academic language. Most of those who wrote *Missional Church* were academics teaching as theologians and missiologists in seminaries. Alan Roxburgh, one of the authors of that book as well as this one, remembers a conversation with a denominational leader about a year after the book's publication. His comments were telling: "I love the book. Its argument and ideas are the right ones. But few of my leaders will have any clue what it is about because the book is too technical and academic. If one of my pastors came into this office to ask for help in making his or her church a place that could engage its world, I couldn't give the pastor this book. There's nothing practical in it." He then turned to another section of his bookshelf and pulled down a thick workbook on how to make the church healthy. "I can give the pastor this because it tells how to do something. But your book just talks academic ideas." It was tough criticism to hear, but Alan understood what he meant.

Although part of the writing team, Alan had shifted from teaching in a seminary to pastoring a local church, so he had some sympathy with the denominational leader's plea for help. Many in Alan's church felt the missional conversation was a new program brought in by the new pastor, and they were his guinea pigs. Others were excited about the ideas but wondered what it all meant for existing programs and their identity as a church. Getting from the book's academic ideas to the down-to-earth practicalities of missional life looked like a big, big challenge.

When Alan was part of the team writing *Missional Church*, Scott Boren served on the staff of the church where Alan was pastor. Alan

shared the concepts with the pastoral staff, and we discussed the implications for the way our church functioned. We had many of these conversations, which gave us an opportunity that few others at the time had to talk about the practical ways the missional church might play out. In our discussions we were looking for a plan that would make us a missional church. Being competent leaders, we thought we had a good plan for leading our church into a missional future. Little did we know we had simply embarked upon an unknown journey on which we would have to rethink from the ground up what it means to be God's people.

Since those days, both of us have moved on to other responsibilities working for different organizations. During that time we independently tested ideas, researched missional innovators, observed unexpected developments, and began to produce practical resources to help churches move into this missional vision. Three years ago an opportunity arose for us to work together again. It has allowed us to refine our communication about the missional church and get it out of the realm of theory and academics and into the everyday life of churches. We are now realizing the implications of what was initiated by Lesslie Newbigin more than thirty years ago. This book seeks to answer the question of how these important developments become accessible and usable for the whole church.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 addresses what it means to have a missional imagination that causes us to ask a different set of questions than is addressed in much of the material currently available on church strategy. With such an imagination, we discover the nature of a missional river to carry the church into the vast, uncharted missionary context of our time.

Part 2 identifies three missional conversations that generate understanding of what the missional church is and why it is so vital. Instead of a list of characteristics, traits, or programs of a missional church, we have observed that these three conversation topics shape the life of a missional people. They help us create ways of journeying together in a time and place where many of the habits of church life we had taken for granted no longer work. Although these occur in different ways in different churches, they serve as markers that help us discern what God is doing in a strange, new land.

Introduction

Part 3 shares some key ways to enter the missional river, outlining the journey that lies ahead of local churches and church systems. The journey of a particular church cannot be prescribed in a book. Each is a unique story forming its own ways of being God's missionary people in its own neighborhoods and communities. Instead we propose a way of listening to the imagination the Spirit is giving ordinary people in local churches. This is where we discover the missional pathways the Spirit is birthing in our time. We want to emphasize that it's a movement of ordinary people in ordinary churches, because this is where the Spirit is at work gestating and birthing a new movement of God. The releasing of the missional imagination of God's people in the midst of the ordinary and everyday is far more powerful and transforming than importing a predetermined plan from the outside.

Let's see where the journey takes us.

Not All Who Wander Are Lost

Stories of a Church In Between

There once was a people who were neither significant nor exceptional nor privileged. In fact they did what most people of the time did: worked, married, raised children, celebrated, mourned, and carried out the basic stuff of life. You would not think them unique, because their dress, homes, and professions were much like that of everyone else. What was different about them, however, was their strange conviction that they had been chosen by God to be a special people, a journeying people who were forced to discover again and again what God wanted them to be doing in the world.

That community was what the Bible calls “the people of God,” and their stories are captured in Abram’s leaving of Ur, the wilderness wandering of the Israelites, the partial occupation of the Promised Land, and the Babylonian exile. We also have insight into their life through the stories of the early churches, partially told by Luke in his Gospel and the book of Acts. From these stories we see how God’s people were sojourners, like their father Abraham, who sought a home like strangers in a foreign land, looking for a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Heb. 11:9–10). At every stage in the biblical narratives is hope for a future reality toward which the people are moving. Being missional means we join this heritage, entering a journey without any road maps to discover

what God is up to in our neighborhoods and communities. Before examining the shape of our journey, let's look at what this meant for the first Christians.

First-Century Wanderers

In some ways the church founded in Jerusalem after Pentecost failed to recognize the nature of the journey onto which the Spirit was calling them. These Christians immediately settled into a pattern they thought exemplified God's mission as they met at the temple as Jews had done for centuries, and they met in small settings as extended households with a sense of belonging and fellowship. They saw themselves as basically a Jewish movement that was the completion of God's people.

If this mind-set had remained, this Jesus-follower movement would have been little more than a branch of Judaism—not the Christian church. They had turned the teaching and life of Jesus into an improvement of the Judaism of the time instead of understanding it as a radical re-visioning that removed Jerusalem from the center. What transpired wasn't planned, strategized, or chosen: persecution forced many of the believers to flee their precious center in Jerusalem, and the Spirit broke the boundaries and shattered the assumptions these Christians had too quickly made about the location of God's future.

Then the boundary-breaking, assumption-challenging Spirit took some unknown Christians from Jerusalem north toward Antioch where they encountered Gentiles who had heard about Jesus and wanted to learn more. What happened next was outside the imagination of those early Christians and could not be controlled by the church in Jerusalem. As they spoke to the Gentiles about Jesus, the Holy Spirit fell upon them and a new kind of church was birthed in Antioch, comprised mostly of Gentiles.

Nobody expected this turn of events. This did not fit the plans and paradigms of the first followers of Jesus. The Spirit broke boundaries that were already defining what it meant to be Christian. The church was forced out of the box it had created and into a space it had never imagined and would never have entered by itself.

We might say, using our own categories, these first-century followers of Jesus were moved from a well-defined attractational way

of doing church into a missional imagination of being the church in the world. The church in Jerusalem was an attractional model of church life because it sought to draw people into the center of a predetermined understanding of what it meant to be God's people. It was a Jerusalem-centered movement shaped by the assumptions of Judaism. They saw Jesus as the Jewish Messiah who had come to fulfill the promises for the Jewish people. They were not able to grasp the extent to which Jesus's mission was greater than the imagination that had shaped them to that point. They could not comprehend that the Spirit was about to take them beyond their attractional center and lead them to wander on a mission they did not fully understand.

None of this makes those early believers failures, nor does it render useless what they sought to achieve in Jerusalem. We simply want to recognize that the Spirit is always shaping something far greater than we imagine and that there is a natural tendency to try to fit the work of the Spirit into old familiar patterns. We believe something similar is happening in the life of the church in North America; a stirring is taking place; the Spirit is up to something where we least expect the presence of God to break out. People are tiring of the attractional pattern as the primary focus of their churches; they are hungering for a different journey.

Attractional and Missional

"If you build it, they will come." This imagination shaped Kevin Costner's character in the movie *Field of Dreams*. And it is still the dominant imagination of the church, whether traditional, contemporary, seeker, or emergent. Figure 1 illustrates how it can be pictured.

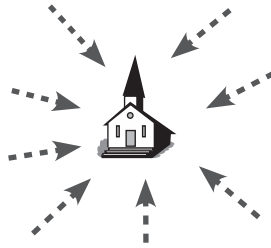


Figure 1

The assumption of the attractional imagination is that average people outside the church are looking for a church and know they should belong to one, and therefore, church leaders should create the most attractive attractional church possible. The mission, then, is to get people to attend. This story is still repeated over and over again across North America. It's not that we shouldn't be attractive for those looking for a church to attend; it's that this has become the primary focus of churches, and as a result they miss what the Spirit is up to in the world.

It's an old story: A congregation recognizes its neighborhood has changed dramatically. The leadership senses something has shifted, and they want to reach out to the new realities of their context. They upgrade the building to make it more attractive to outsiders, putting in new carpet, giving the place a paint job, and hanging religious art on the walls. Then they change the Sunday service: alongside the *traditional* service at 11:00 a.m., they now offer a new *contemporary* service at 9:30 with a worship band, PowerPoint slides for the worship lyrics, and even a bit of drama. The sermons shift from expositional preaching to themes like "How the Bible Helps to Make Your Life Work." They hire a marketing consultant to develop new brochures to communicate the kind of people they are as a church and why others would want to join them. Finally, they decide to hire a new youth and children's worker who provides high-quality programs.

Alan was a pastor in the Pacific Northwest. Before his arrival, the church had created a program called "Walk to Bethlehem." Each year by mid-November the church building was transformed as rooms were turned into ten or more different sets depicting the story of the birth of Jesus. It was an amazing undertaking done with exceptional quality and ability. Without any exaggeration, thousands of people from the community came during the four days of performances. In a thirty-minute walk they moved through each of the scenes, stopping to watch people in costume act out a biblical event. At the end of the program people were given beautifully designed cards inviting them to the church's series of Christmas services. Attractional.

The attractional way of doing church is not limited to new innovations. Scott grew up in a small, rural Southern Baptist church in North Texas. On Sunday afternoons church members did what they called *visitation*. This was a time when we visited either people

who were prospects for attending church or people who had not been to church in a while. Later, as a youth intern in a large Baptist church in Houston, Scott loaded up the car with the faithful youth on Tuesday nights and visited homes of other young people, telling them about the upcoming events. The hope was to generate some interest in the church so that more people would come.

Attractional churches come in many different forms: they can be very traditional or very innovative; they can be small or large; the preaching can be Bible centered or liturgy driven. The common theme is that *church* is about an event (usually the Sunday morning services) and about getting people to attend that event. Those who come to this event expect certain people will provide *spiritual goods and services* that will help them live better lives. From the perspective of the average church attendee, church plays a specific and limited role of speaking to their *spiritual* life, and it has little to nothing to do with how they live with their families or at their workplaces. If the measure of church success is how many people come to an event, the church must meet the expectations of providing excellent spiritual goods and services to attract people.

But what happens when people don't respond to this attractional marketing anymore? What do we do when we realize that no matter how good we build it, they aren't coming? Worse still, what happens when even the successful megachurches realize that their success is just a veneer that may have addressed the reactive needs of a specific generation but has little connection with the emerging generations? As one local pastor confessed, "All we're doing is putting on a better show for Christians who move from their small church to our big church with all the programs and pizzazz. I'm not sure that's how I want to spend the rest of my life."

You may be reading this thinking, *What's wrong with getting people to come to church meetings?* You may be asking, *Why are you attacking what the church has done for generations?* Let us be clear: we do not intend to attack or to denigrate being attractive in what a church does. No one should plan a worship event or a program unless it's attractive. Neither of us would be content to lead a church that intentionally repels people because we have some ideal vision of *being missional*. There is nothing wrong or bad about attracting people to attend the various meetings that a church holds. We

are not advocating an either/or imagination that demands that we move from attractional to missional. That would be a sign of poor leadership. If we are good leaders in a church that is good at what it does, then we will attract people, and that is good. We are simply saying that the attractional pattern is not the goal or the primary call of the church.

The Missional Church Is Not about the Church

We need an alternative imagination to the attractional in order to understand the missional church. This imagination starts with a paradoxical statement that often leaves people confused: A missional imagination is not about the church; it's not about how to make the church better, how to get more people to come to church, or how to turn a dying church around. It's not about getting the church back to cultural respectability in a time when it has been marginalized. All of these are good things, but they aren't the focus of a missional imagination.

God is up to something in the world that is bigger than the church even though the church is called to be sign, witness, and foretaste of God's purposes in the world. The Spirit is calling the church on a journey outside of itself and its internal focus. Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury, summarizes this imagination in this way: "It is not the church of God that has a mission. It's the God of mission that has a church." He is saying God is at work in the world to redeem creation, and God invites us to participate in this mission. God is not interested in getting more and more people into the institution of the church. Instead the church is to be God's hands and feet in accomplishing God's mission. This imagination turns most of our church practices on their head. It invites us to turn toward our neighborhoods and communities, listening first to what is happening among people and learning to ask different questions about what God is up to in the neighborhood. Rather than the primary question being, "How do we attract people to what we are doing?" it becomes, "What is God up to in this neighborhood?" and "What are the ways we need to change in order to engage the people in our community who no longer consider church a part of their lives?" This is what a missional imagination is about.

To be quite honest, the idea that the predominant form of attractional church life is faulty is not new or novel. Over the past forty years there has been a litany of books that have raised the concern about the attractional church where spiritual things happen in spiritual buildings at spiritual times led by spiritual people. There is wide-scale agreement that this falls short of God's purposes. As an alternative to the attractional, some take up a contrarian stance. They become anti-building, anti-clergy, anti-denomination, anti-megachurch, anti-tradition, and anti-structure. They point fingers at what is now in place and tear it down. Many are stuck on the negative, and they know how to write blogs that deconstruct and talk about what is wrong. Who doesn't know how to do that? There's nothing creative about it, even if the media is used well. Others move past the negative by elevating an ideal or dream of what the church should be. This is understandable, but it is not helpful. As counterintuitive as it may sound, we don't cultivate a missional imagination by setting up some ideal type of the church or telling people what we should be. There are different forms of these dreams. They often come in some form of *getting back to New Testament patterns* or describing some point in the church's history that we need to recover. Some use quite strange, almost nonsensical language about how the church must become deinstitutionalized (we actually haven't come across any human system that isn't institutionalized in one form or another) and that it needs to return to a preinstitutionalized state of organic life. None of this is helpful, because it fails to recognize where the Spirit is actually at work in shaping a new imagination.

Show Me a Model

When people engage the missional church conversation, one of the first questions they ask is, "Can you show me a missional church model?" They assume that the missional church is following the pattern about an ideal church and providing a model to emulate. They want to know if there is a church that is doing this successfully and has worked out all the unknowns and kinks. These are understandable questions, but they are only relevant in a stable and predictable church world in which there was continuity over time and models

were easy to find. We don't live in that world anymore. While we will tell stories about churches on God's mission, we can't point to a model that can be copied or emulated. Once we offer a model of missional church, the focus of our imagination turns to internal questions about how to do missional church correctly or how we can measure ourselves against this predetermined model. This would be to entirely miss what missional church is about.

Instead we need to see ourselves being called out of the comfort and security of attractional church life onto a journey like Abram leaving Ur of the Chaldees; we are moving into a strange land without maps to guide us on our way to a land God will show us. We are like those early Christians after the church at Antioch was birthed by the Spirit. We know something has shifted, but no one has the formula; it's confusing and filled with friction as we try to figure out the next steps.

When we teach seminars on this topic, we wonder if it would be helpful to hang two signs so that no one misses this point:

Beware of formulas for creating missional churches!

and

Beware of missional church models!

When we heed this warning, we launch out upon a vast river where we have never been before; we move into a place where we are guided by the Spirit in the formation of a church that steps outside the bounds of being merely attractional. The local churches the Spirit will shape on these unknown waters will come in many different forms: new, developing churches and old, traditional congregations; large, small, and medium churches; denominationally connected and independent churches. There isn't one specific form, predictable pattern, or predetermined model. On these new waters we become pioneers who are creating new maps shaped in, with, and for the contexts and communities into which we have been called. Here we will learn to experiment and test ideas. Some will work; others will fail. Through trial and error we will imagine new ways of being Jesus's people.

Why Not a Formula or Blueprint?

In times of significant change or high anxiety, it is normal for us to instinctively turn to people we view as experts. This is why we often find security in authors and church consultants who claim they have the answers to this new space and can provide plans for success. Just as there are a multitude of attractional models, we assume there must be a list of missional models we can easily replicate. A missional way of life, however, calls us away from answers with formulas and blueprints. It is an invitation to move out of our comfort zones.

Too often we have taken Luke's account of the early church as if it were a blueprint presenting the pattern for church life for all times and all places. We read it idealistically as the *pure* beginnings of the church that we should copy today. Some, for example, use it to support the notion of a large and small group structure (which is like going to the Bible to show that because some prophets in the Old Testament drove chariots, we can drive automobiles). Because the Jerusalem church met in the temple courts and from house to house, they conclude this pattern of meeting is the key reason for having large and small group gatherings today. Strange reasoning, but nevertheless, this is the level at which many believe the Bible gives us patterns and models for all times and all places. All human groups meet in small and large groups. It has nothing to do with a biblical pattern and everything to do with how humans meet together.

On the other hand, some point to the same passage and argue that the large meeting was actually not a consistent pattern in the life of the early church and that the house church was the only form of meeting. They conclude that the only *biblical* model for being the church is meeting in house churches, even proposing that all other forms of church meeting are actually pagan in origin. All of this goes to the basic flaw of assuming the New Testament is a template against which we measure all our structures and organizational forms so that some forms are more biblical than others. A moment of reflection reveals how silly all this is, but we often have a deeply embedded belief in blueprints that, once we have figured them out, give us the formula for getting everything right. But that

wasn't Abram's experience, and it's far from the experiences of most of the characters and communities we encounter in Scripture. Most of the time they were being compelled to risk journeying with this God who called them out of their comfort zones, and they had to figure it out along the way.

We want to challenge three perspectives here. First, we are challenging the elevation of any model as *the* way to do church. The addiction to mimicry so easily entraps church leaders. The new way of doing church or the next great model for church life is always on the horizon. Cell church, megachurch, seeker church, purpose-driven church, house church, externally focused church, multisite church, equipping church, emerging church, simple church—all point to models, and someone is happy to provide us with resources to help pull off these models.

Second, we challenge arguments that the Bible reveals a *missional secret or formula* that provides twenty-first-century Christians with a magic pill for entering missional life. This never happened to figures in Scripture; why should it now be true for us?

Third, we are challenging the idea that there is some point in the history of the church that provides us with just the right pattern and formula for creating missional churches—such as the Celtic missionaries of the fifth and sixth centuries or what happened in China after the Christian missionaries were expelled. We don't live in those times and societies. For example, during the twentieth century Christians in China were persecuted, and the Chinese were steeped in communist philosophy. This kind of social context shaped new experiments that no one could have predicted at the time and that can't be simply duplicated or applied to a late-modern Western context in which democratic liberalism has reigned for three hundred years. No matter what era one chooses, there will always be much to learn and wisdom to be gained from listening to the stories of the churches in those times, but we cannot turn to them to find formulas and templates for our time. Just as God called the Celtic missionaries of Northumbria into risky, unknown journeys and the Christians of China into places they did not want to go and could not plan for, so we are being called into a new time of missional life. We are going to learn and discern how to be the church as we go.

Skilled Navigators

When Alan and Scott were serving in the same church in Vancouver, a couple joined the church who had recently immigrated from South Africa. Their journey was unusual. They had crossed the ocean in a twenty-foot sailboat and entered North America through a port in North Carolina. When they left South Africa, they knew where they wanted to go, but the path for getting there was less than predictable. Sailing any distance never occurs in a straight line; instead it involves tacking back and forth while moving toward the intended destination but never actually sailing directly at it. When you factor in the unpredictability of the winds, the currents of the waters, and storms, we cannot imagine what it would have taken to sail from South Africa to North Carolina.

Those on the missional journey are wanderers, and we need to develop skills of reading the winds of the Spirit, testing the waters of the culture, and running with the currents of God's call so that we are not lost on the journey. To some it might look like we are lost when we cannot point to a model that can be easily applied anywhere. Instead we are participants on a journey in which we have to learn from one another as we move toward becoming God's missional people.

All of this might feel about as solid as Jell-O. But it is the reality of the missional journey. In the following chapters we will get much more concrete about what this means, but if you choose to ignore this point about being on a journey without blueprints, you will not understand what we are really saying in the coming chapters. At the heart of this discussion is the need for us to let go of our desire to be in control of either the church or the place in which we find ourselves.

If You Have Read This Chapter

If you have made it to this point, you are part of the conversation. Welcome! You may not agree with what we have written, you may be looking for a model, or you may be happy with the result of the model you are currently using. If the adventure of missional church is about letting go of our need to control outcomes and manage

people, or if it is about this Abram-like journey into a new space, then this chapter is a first step on the journey.

You will have questions. There will be things you have to go back and think about. You will want to have conversations with others. Even if you disagree with some or all of what you read here, we encourage you to stick with the journey a little longer. God is up to something bigger than any of *our* ways; he is beyond all of our models, but the Spirit is in the midst of our questions. The following chapters aim to generate a conversation about this journey by contrasting *missional* with *attractional* ways of church life and raising questions about too easily accepting the new formulas and templates that promise quick results for being missional. The places where we feel like we have little control and don't know what is going to happen are exactly the places where God's future breaks forth. In 1998 the World Council of Churches concluded their assembly with words that can point us forward:

We are challenged by the vision of a church that will reach out to everyone, sharing, caring, proclaiming the good news of God's redemption, a sign of the kingdom and a servant of the world.

We are challenged by a vision of a church, the people of God on the way together, confronting all divisions of race, gender, age or culture striving to realize justice and peace upholding the integrity of creation.

We journey together as a people of prayer. In the midst of confusion and loss of identity, we discern signs of God's purpose being fulfilled and expect the coming of God's reign.

We expect the healing of human community, the wholeness of God's entire creation.¹