the ministry of the missional church

A COMMUNITY LED BY THE SPIRIT

FOREWORD BY ALAN J. ROXBURGH :: craig van gelder
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Craig Van Gelder
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Alicia was sitting at her word processor, typing a paper for her mission theology class, attempting to bring the ideas that she was working with into a coherent presentation. Then, there it was again, that pesky red underline that appears in Microsoft Word every time a word is typed that is supposedly misspelled. She thought to herself, *Why did the professor keep using the word missional in lecturing about mission theology and the church if, in fact, it isn’t really even a word?*

### A Changing Conversation about the Church

The conversation about the church today is changing. This conversation is introducing a way of thinking about the church that is quite different from several current trends. One such trend is the seemingly endless obsession with trying to discover strategies to help congregations become more effective or successful. These strategies are usually defined in relation to clarifying and carrying out the purpose of the church—the *purpose-driven church*. The necessity of utilizing such strategies is normally justified in terms of the changing context in which the church now finds itself. The church must change and adapt cultural patterns in order to be relevant. Another current trend utilizes the logic of this argument about needing to change in light of a changing context, but offers a different answer as to the solution. This
The Ministry of the Missional Church is the emergent church discussion where the focus shifts to trying to recapture the ethos and practices of the church of the early centuries and bring these to bear within the emerging postmodern condition. In contrast to these approaches, a quite different discussion regarding the church also surfaced during the past decade, one that seeks to probe more deeply key questions about the church. It is a discussion that is not being driven primarily by changes taking place in our cultural context, although these are attended to as being important. And it is a discussion that seeks to go beyond just focusing on purpose, strategies, or recovering early church practices. This different conversation is being shaped by a biblical and theological imagination for understanding the very nature of the church. The key premise is that understanding the nature of the church is foundational for being able to clarify the purpose of the church, and for developing any strategies related to that purpose. And understanding the nature of the church is also seen as being foundational for discerning how to address changing cultural contexts. This represents a change of kind in the conversation about the church, and is a change of kind being developed around the concept of the “missional church.”

The missional church conversation is being popularized largely by the fast-becoming seminal work published in 1998, entitled Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America. This volume is the product of six missiologists who spent two years in intensive discussions attempting to develop a shared argument about the very nature of the church. They sought to explore how the discipline of missiology (understanding God’s mission in the world) is interrelated with ecclesiology (the study, ology, of the church, ecclesia). The result was the construction of a missional ecclesiology, or in short hand, the concept of the “missional church.”

This conception of the church is now catching hold among church leaders and congregations across a wide range of denominations. The missional church discussion is capturing a basic impulse within many churches in the United States (U.S.) that there is something about the church that makes it inherently missionary. But it is clear that confusion still exists over what the term missional really means. Some appear to want to use it to reclaim, yet one more time, the priority of missions in regard to the church’s various activities. Unfortunately, this misunderstanding continues the effort to define a congregation...
primarily around what it does. The concept of a church being missional moves in a fundamentally different direction. It seeks to focus the conversation about what the church is—that it is a community created by the Spirit and that it has a unique nature, or essence, which gives it a unique identity. In light of the church’s nature, the missional conversation then explores what the church does. Purpose and strategy are not unimportant in the missional conversation, but they are understood to be derivative dimensions of understanding the nature, or essence, of the church. Likewise, changing cultural contexts are not unimportant, but they are understood to be conditions that the church interacts with in light of its nature or essence.

There is a growing literature about the conception of the missional church that is now becoming available. But there is still a need to make more explicit the connections between the church’s nature in relation to its purpose and strategies for ministry and also to explore how it engages changing contexts. It is not uncommon for persons to ask, “So, what does a missional church actually look like?” This is a fair question, and to date there has been little research and writing in this area with the exception of the 2004 Gospel and Our Culture series publication *Treasure in Clay Jars.* There is a need to develop a more focused understanding of what Spirit-led ministry looks like in a missional church.

**Understanding Spirit-Led Ministry**

This volume makes the connection between the church’s nature and its purpose in relation to changing contexts more explicit by focusing on the ministry of the church as being Spirit-led. It builds on my earlier book, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit,* which was published by Baker Books in 2000. That book focused on the nature, or essence, of the church as being inherently missional. In simplest terms, the argument in that volume was developed as follows:

The church is.
The church does what it is.
The church organizes what it does.
The interrelationship of all three aspects is important to understand. The church is. The church's nature provides the framework and foundation for understanding the essential character of the church. The church does what it is. The nature of the church establishes the foundation for understanding the purpose of the church and its ministry and determines their direction and scope. The church organizes what it does. The ministry of the church introduces strategies and processes that require the exercise of leadership and the development of organization within the church. The key point to understand is that the Spirit-led ministry of the church flows out of the Spirit-created nature of the church. What is also critical to understand is that the exercise of leadership and the development of organization need to function in support of this ministry. What is crucial is to keep these in the proper sequence when considering the missional church—nature, purpose/ministry, organization.

The missional church reorients our thinking about the church in regard to God's activity in the world. The Triune God becomes the primary acting subject rather than the church. God has a mission in the world, what is usually referred to as the missio Dei (the mission of God). In understanding the missio Dei, we find that God as a creating God also creates the church through the Spirit, who calls, gathers, and sends the church into the world to participate in God's mission. This participation is based on the redemption that God accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a redemption that was announced by Jesus as the “kingdom of God” (which I prefer to reframe as the “redemptive reign of God in Christ”). This redemptive reign of God in Christ is inherently connected to the missio Dei, which means that God is seeking to bring back into right relationship all of creation. Or as Paul put it in 2 Corinthians, “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (5:19). The Spirit-led, missional church is responsible to participate in this reconciling work by bearing witness to the redemptive reign of God in Christ as good news, and through inviting everyone everywhere to become reconciled to the living and true God.

Seeing the Triune God as the primary acting subject changes the way we think about both the church and the world. The world becomes the larger horizon of God's activity. This represents a fundamental reframing of God’s primary location in relation to the world.
When one starts by focusing on the purpose of the church, the church tends to become the primary location of God, which makes the church itself responsible to carry out activities in the world on behalf of God. A trinitarian understanding shifts the focus such that the Spirit-led, missional church participates in God’s mission in the world. In doing so, it becomes a sign that God’s redemption is now present in the world, a foretaste of what that redemption is like, and an instrument to carry that message into every local context and to the ends of the earth. In living out of this identity and living into this role, the focus for the church shifts primarily to one of discerning and responding to the leading of the Spirit—being a Spirit-led, missional church.

When this understanding is translated to congregations, we find that congregations begin to take seriously how to explore and engage the communities within which they are located. Leadership in congregations focuses on discerning the Spirit’s leading and discovering ways to implement ministry in their particular context in light of that leading. Anticipating and accepting change becomes a natural part of the unfolding journey for congregations as they seek to participate in God’s mission in their context. Anticipating and addressing conflict constructively becomes a norm in congregational life, since congregations expect differences to emerge in the midst of the changes that are taking place.

The Argument of This Book

Developing this perspective is the purpose of this book. The premise is that it is crucial to understand the Spirit’s role in the creation of the church if we are to correctly understand its missionary nature. So also, it is crucial to understand the leading of the Spirit in shaping the church’s ministry if we are to correctly understand its purpose. This discussion is developed through the following six chapters.

Chapter 2 provides a biblical framework for thinking more specifically about the ministry of the church in light of the ministry of the Spirit. This chapter examines the ministry of the Spirit throughout the biblical record to identify how the Spirit has worked and is working both in the world and through the church. Patterns of the Spirit’s ministry in the Old Testament are examined, the leading of the Spirit
in the life of Jesus is defined, and the leading of the Spirit in the life of the early church is explored.

Chapter 3 situates the leading of the Spirit within specific contexts. The church is always located and congregations are always contextual because the church is inherently translatable into any and every context. The challenge is to avoid becoming either undercontextualized or overcontextualized. The key is to understand how the leading of the Spirit is shaping a congregation’s ministry as it reads and engages the context within which it is located. This chapter identifies seven inherent aptitudes that a Spirit-led, missional church needs to cultivate in order to minister effectively within its context.

Chapter 4 moves this discussion forward into thinking more specifically about the leading of the Spirit in relation to the church in the context of the U.S. as well as in regard to a more explicit understanding of the missional church. The church has been contextualized and recontextualized within the U.S. over several centuries. It is important to understand something about how the Spirit has led the church over time in this context and how the church’s self-understanding has evolved. The fundamental organizational identity of the denominational, corporate form of the church in the U.S. is contrasted with an understanding of the missional church.

Chapter 5 discusses how leadership needs to function within congregations in order to discern the leading of the Spirit and in order to make decisions for developing the church’s ministry. This process for discernment and decision making is developed in relation to what is called the “hermeneutical turn.” This represents the shift that has taken place in our understanding during the past century that all human knowledge is situated, perspectival, and interpreted. We now see that no one has a privileged position of objectivity when it comes to knowing something. So how then do we proceed to make truth claims? This chapter seeks to answer this question in relation to the role of Scripture in the life of a congregation.

Chapter 6 examines the exercise of leadership and the development of organization within a Spirit-led congregation. It examines how leadership in congregations under the leading of the Spirit can best function in giving direction to a congregation’s ministry and in developing organization to support that ministry. These perspectives are developed within an understanding of congregations from an open
systems perspective. A variety of insights from the social sciences are utilized to bring further clarity to the functioning of leadership and the development of organization in congregations.

Chapter 7 examines how the ministry of the Spirit leads to growth of and development in the church. This is clearly evident in the Spirit's ministry in the church in the book of Acts. Growth and development in the church also introduce the important issue of change. Some biblical and theological foundations are offered for understanding change as inherent to our being human and being Christian. Various types of planned change are examined along with a process that should be considered when planned change is introduced into the life of a congregation. Attention is also given to understanding the patterns of response that persons often have to change.