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FROM MAINTENANCE TO MISSIONAL

THE CHURCH IN A WORLD OF CHANGE

*And just as we have borne the image of the earthly,
we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.*

—1 Corinthians 15:49

We face a choice to be worldly Christians or world Christians.

—Paul Borthwick, *A Mind for Missions*

THE PROTESTANT CHURCH in North America was born into a comfortable and familiar environment that was favorable and respectful of its presence. For many years, new churches enjoyed the luxury of acceptance and power. They enjoyed what George Hunter called a “home-court advantage.”

While enjoying the beauty of their religious experience, however, they became increasingly isolated from the world. Some were adamant exponents of this separation, citing such biblical admonitions as “Come out from among them and be separate” (2 Corinthians 6:17). They enjoyed

being with their group on a spiritual journey and sought to add others along the way—especially those who were comfortable in the church environment. Over the years, this separation encouraged members to adopt a specialized language. In some churches, the phrase “She walked the aisle” indicates coming to faith. In other communities church members call others “Brother” or “Sister” even though they are unrelated. Unless one is familiar with the intent, being asked to “give your heart to Jesus” might sound like a request for organ donation! Active members learned such churchspeak as natives of the culture. Inevitably, perhaps, their relationships were primarily with other members of their faith family, and their activities increasingly involved these people with whom they held much in common. They thrived.

By the middle of the twentieth century, however, this relatively peaceful existence was beginning to fracture. The times were changing, and changing fast. Young people, once relatively obedient to their elders, found themselves in an exciting new teen culture. Television, radio, and newspapers communicated startling world events with an immediacy that brought the brutalities of war right into the living room. Violent and non-violent protests challenged national interests. Social balance was upset. What was once considered right was now wrong; what was once considered blasphemy was commonplace. Graphic sexuality found its way onto movie screens. Risqué language crept into television programming. Challenges were met with claims of First Amendment freedoms.

As divorce and cohabitation became more commonplace, traditional family units seemed the exception rather than the rule. Racial and linguistic diversity was accompanied by growth in non-Christian religions. Many felt uncomfortable with mosques and temples constructed in their communities. Court cases challenged prayer in public schools, the Ten Commandments on courtroom walls, “so help me God” in courtroom oaths, “one nation under God” in the pledge of allegiance, and “in God we trust” on U.S. currency. Litigants sought to erase all evidence of Christian bias. It seemed like the end of the world for members of many Protestant churches. To some degree, it was.

Fighting Change with Maintenance

For many church members and leaders alike, these events seemed beyond comprehension. Impossible. Unreal. Even if they tried, they felt incapable of relating in the changing environment. Some longed to engage the changing culture and share with those who had never experienced the serenity and peace found in relationship with God and the members of His church,

but to their surprise other people did not seem to see their church in the same way. They felt bewildered and under fire. In response, they retreated to the sanctuary, their place of comfort, growing ever more inward in their orientation. They maintained the status quo.

Not surprisingly, they found themselves increasingly out of touch with the rapids of cultural change and the real world in which their neighbors lived. Most cared about those on the outside, but they felt impotent to connect and share with unchurched persons in any significant way. Consequently, their churches no longer anticipated having a major impact upon society and hoped only to reach enough people to help the church survive. I call this prevalent consumer orientation, isolation from society, and associated lack of belief in capacity to have significant influence a *maintenance mentality*.

The culture in which the church exists is a changing river, charting its own path without regard to the preferences of previous generational or cultural systems. Members of today's churches, who once felt that they held the high ground in a vast Christian nation, now feel cut off and isolated— islands in a fast-flowing stream. Clearly, the Christian church in North America no longer possesses a home-court advantage.

Where, now, is our home? As more and more people live their lives in their cars, and constant migration from town to town and even country to country becomes commonplace, communities have naturally become less cohesive. Churches, once perceived as the center of community life, have become progressively irrelevant in increasingly diverse communities. Many people are clearly still interested in spirituality, as witnessed by the growing interest in Eastern and Native American religions, contemplative and monastic environments, holistic health, and nontraditional expressions of connection with the environment. Yet the percentage of the population practicing their faith within local churches continues to decline.

Given this situation, it's not surprising that many Western churches are now focused mostly on survival. These churches are no longer storming the gates of hell. They are simply trying to outlast the onslaught of secularism that threatens their existence. These churches are filled with members who have adopted and adapted to consumer culture. Just as they count on Wal-Mart meeting their material needs, they expect their churches to provide religious goods and services. Many of their pastors, like John, are struggling to hang on and give them access to a strong spiritual life.

Still, a change is on the horizon. Some churches—a relative few, but growing in strength and number—are beginning to understand that the key to a revived spirit is both to focus inward and also to move outward—

into the world. They see the future as one of bringing the Gospel alive for a new generation in a new world—so the church will not just survive, but thrive. These congregations focus on God's mission, *missio dei*. These *missional* churches—reproducing communities of authentic disciples, being equipped as missionaries sent by God, to live and proclaim His Kingdom in their world—have connected the pervasive hunger for spirituality with the ancient but contemporary invitation to know God and live to His glory. Jamye Miller, pastor of Christ Fellowship in Grapevine, Texas, sees missional churches as “life-giving, image bearing, reproducing, multiplying, Christ-manifesting churches that glorify Him.”¹ Beyond focusing on maintenance or survival, they are energized as they reconnect with God and His mission.

Theological Foundations of Missional Churches

The Bible reveals that people are created for relationship with God for specific purposes. Foundationally, individuals are created to reflect the image of God, or *imago dei* (Genesis 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 15:49; Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18). (I encourage you to go to the Reflection and Application section at the end of the chapter and ponder these Scriptural passages, which are printed there in entirety.)

The intent of God has not changed with the passage of time. We are still created to reveal the image of God, as was His design before we yielded to temptations of sin. Subsequently, as those redeemed from sin, God desires His image to be imprinted upon His followers. They are to live as He lives, love what He loves, and pursue that which is on His heart. His church is to bear His image to a world that has not seen Him. The New Testament “Body” metaphor evidences God's purpose that His church reflect His image, as His Body being present in the world.

In His image, the Body of Christ will seek to accomplish His purpose. Those who bear His image are sent to serve His mission, *missio dei*, in the same way that Christ was sent to accomplish the Father's purpose. Many have found it instructive to simply reflect upon His statements recorded in the Gospel of John. Consider His dependence upon the Father, commitment to the Father's mission, and His indication of your continued pursuit of His purpose in several verses (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 7:29; 8:29; 9:4; 12:49; 13:20; 17:3, 18; 20:21). (These passages too are printed in entirety in the Reflection and Application sections.) Christ's profound sense of commitment to the purpose for which He was sent resonates with clarity. His incarnational purpose was to accomplish His Father's will. Singular in focus, He knew His purpose. Just as certainly, He indicated the

purpose for His followers. They are to continue pursuing His purpose. God's mission, Jesus' mission, is the mission of His church.

A final end toward which the church is sent as image bearer of God remains. Ultimately, His church exists for the glory of God, *gloria dei*. Jealous for His own glory, this perfect, righteous, loving deity is unwilling to share His glory with another (1 Chronicles 16: 24, 29; Isaiah 43:1,7; Matthew 5:16; Ephesians 1:5–6, 12–14. Again, see the Reflection and Application sections for the full text.)

God desires His church to relish in His glory, share His glory among the nations, and reflect His glory in word and deed. The church is a Body made in His image, sent on His mission, to be to His glory!

A Change Agent Adept at Change

A church sent into an ever-changing environment must be fluid in its capacity to adapt while maintaining a clear commitment to its unchanging purpose and God's eternal truth. Jesus assigned His mission to a Body with adaptive ability, not to a rigid organization. Churches must continuously retool themselves for effectiveness in communicating the message of hope in the rapids of changing cultures. Today, however, most churches struggle with change. As one church leader said, "Churches are very willing to change. They will make any change necessary to keep things the same!"

Change is difficult, and deep culture change is especially hard. Most churches are structured for continuity of what they have been in an age of Christendom, rather than being change, ready to accomplish mission in today's culture. Darrell Guder, editor and contributing author of *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, describes this as the "museum curator" mentality found in many churches. This mentality focuses on "preserving the 'savedness' of the members, and the church's function to manage that salvation."²

Bishop Claude E. Payne offers an extensive and excellent distinction regarding churches focused on maintenance in contrast to mission. He says that two tensions are present in churches: creating community among members and reaching those who are not members. "Today's maintenance-centered Church ministers primarily to the faithful . . . It is not particularly attentive to the unchurched except philosophically, paying only lip service to the idea of evangelism. In the maintenance church, both clergy and laity lose sight of their obligation to make disciples."³

Most observers would agree that Christendom is over, if it really ever existed. Societal changes force the church to carry out its mission in an environment more like that in which the first-century church was born

than perhaps any subsequent period in history. In this environment, the church is challenged to participate with God in His redemptive activity. As a missional community, the church expresses the incarnational reality of Christ, present and ministering in the world. At its core, all mission is incarnational. As Michael Riddell says, "Participating in the mission of God means leaving our place of security, to travel to the place where others are. This is the heartbeat of the incarnation. . . . Mission is always in the direction of the other, and away from ourselves."⁴

Missional churches exist as the presence of Christ, those who know Him and make Him known to others. Knowing Him transforms the lifestyle of His followers, those who are being equipped to live as authentic disciples. They are each being shaped by God's heart, conformed to His will, committed to His mission. As Jimmy Seibert of Antioch Community Church in Waco, Texas, told me, "We have a passion for Jesus and His purpose in the earth."⁵

Mission-Minded or Missional?

If you are confused by the term *missional church*, you are not alone—it's so new that most Christians are still coming to terms with it. In fact, if you search the pages of books written before the 1990s, you will not find the word *missional*. No dictionary included the word; most still do not. In 1991, Charles Van Engen first referred to "missional relationships" as he addressed the role of the local church in the world. Explaining his intent in using the word, Van Engen recently wrote to me, "When I began using the term, I was not aware of anyone else using it yet. I meant a quality of the essence of being Church."⁶

Some insist the term *missional church* is redundant, like "canine dog" or "feline cat." In fact, it is not. All dogs may be canine and all cats feline, but not all churches are missional. Many leaders who hear "missional church" respond that theirs is a very mission-minded church, assuming the terms to be synonymous. As you will see in this book, they are not. Much of the mission enterprise of Western churches has been enabled by mission-minded churches. Such churches view their role as sending and supporting those who have been "called" to mission service. "Mission" is therefore representative; church members pray and give so that others may go and serve. Just as churches have other programs, such as Christian Education and choral music, they also have a missions program. The word *missions* is but one expression of the church.

People in the missional church do pray and give so that others may go and serve; yet for them *missions* is more centered in "being and doing"

than “sending and supporting.” The missional church understands that although some may be supported as those sent to other locations, every member of the church is “sent.” Mission is therefore participative rather than simply representative.

In this sense, *every member is a missionary*. *Missions* is not perceived as an expression of the missional church, but as the essence of the church. Pastor Nilson Fanini of First Baptist Church of Niterói, Brazil, communicates this vision simply: “Missions is our mission.”⁷ The church he pastors sponsors a school, a missionary training center, and a seminary to equip leaders for missional churches; it offers more than one hundred community ministries. The church has missionaries serving around the world.

We can break down the difference between a mission-minded church and a missional church as follows:

- The mission-minded church emphasizes *sending and supporting*; the missional church emphasizes *being and doing*.
- The mission-minded church is *representative*; the missional church is *participative*.
- The mission-minded church perceives mission as *one expression of its ministry*; the missional church perceives mission as *the essence of its existence*.

The rest of this book explores the nature of missional churches, the practices that separate them from traditional churches, and structures and strategies for becoming missional.

Becoming Missional

Can a mission-minded church become a missional church? Emphatically, yes. The key for contemporary churches that want to be counterculture agents for spiritual transformation is to move beyond maintenance, reconnecting with God’s purpose for His church.

As author John Steinbeck was preparing to embark on a journey across the United States, he described the nature of a trip with these words: “We find after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us.”⁸ Missional churches understand that sentiment. They have not chosen God’s mission; God has chosen them for His missional purpose. The initiative for mission lies in God. Jesus said, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain; that whatever you ask of the Father in my name,

He may give to you” (John 15:16). The impetus for mission resides in Christ, who invites the church to become His missional Body.

A missional church is a reproducing community of authentic disciples, being equipped as missionaries sent by God, to live and proclaim His Kingdom in their world. The community does not own the mission; they are, however, invited to share its marvelous wonder. Missional churches and their disciples may be like the son in Henry Van Dyke’s pleasant treatise *Who Owns the Mountains?* While enjoying the beauty of a mountain range, the young son asked his father, “Who owns the mountains?” only to be told of their impending sale to a logging company. After a quiet moment of reflection, the child remarked with simple profundity, “Well, I don’t see what difference that makes. Everybody can look at them.” Of the mountains, Van Dyke later said, “We knew and loved them all; they ministered peace and joy to us; they were all ours, though we held no title deed and our ownership had never been recorded.”⁹

The missional church holds no title deed to God’s mission, but it enjoys witnessing the beauty of God’s handiwork as, through His church, God invites people to be transformed by the dynamic Gospel of grace and love. To the incipient missional church, Christ said, “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

It is His mission. It is His missional church. In the next chapter, we look at how this church moves outward to bring its passion for God into the world.

Reflection and Application

1. Please take some time to reflect on these biblical passages, which were referenced in this chapter. Let God speak to you as one who is created in His image, to live His mission, that He will receive glory.

IMAGE OF GOD (*IMAGO DEI*)

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness. . . .” And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26–27)

And just as we have borne the image of the earthly, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. (1 Corinthians 15:49)

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren. (Romans 8:29)

But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

MISSION OF GOD (*MISSIO DEI*)

Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who *sent* me, and to accomplish His work.” (John 4:34)

I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who *sent* Me. (John 5:30)

For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who *sent* Me. (John 6:38)

I know Him; because I am from Him, and He *sent* Me. (John 7:29)

And He who *sent* Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him. (John 8:29)

We must work the works of Him who *sent* Me, as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can work. (John 9:4)

And Jesus cried out and said, “He who believes in Me does not believe in Me, but in Him who *sent* Me. And he who beholds Me beholds the One who *sent* Me.” (John 12:44–45)

For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who *sent* Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak. (John 12:49)

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I *send* receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who *sent* Me. (John 13:20)

And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast *sent*. (John 17:3)

For the words which Thou gavest Me I have given to them; and they received them, and truly understood that I came forth from Thee, and they believed that Thou didst *send* Me. (John 17:8)

As Thou didst *send* Me into the world, I also have *sent* them into the world. (John 17:18)

Jesus therefore said to them again, “Peace be with you; as the Father has *sent* Me, I also *send* you.” (John 20:21)

GLORY OF GOD (*GLORIA DEI*)

Tell of His *glory* among the nations, His wonderful deeds among all the peoples. Ascribe to the Lord the *glory* due to His name; bring an offering and come before Him; worship the Lord in holy array. (1 Chronicles 16: 24, 29)

But now, thus says the Lord, your creator, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; You are Mine! Every one who is called by My name, and whom I have created for My *glory*, whom I have formed even whom I have made.” (Isaiah 43:1, 7)

Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and *glorify* your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the *glory* of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. To the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His *glory*. In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His *glory*. (Ephesians 1:5–6, 12–14)

2. Michael Riddell said, “Mission is not an optional extra for the church.”¹⁰

- What do you think he means?
- How does this meaning apply to your church?

3. Compare the culture in which your church was founded with its current cultural context. How have “being” and “doing” changed from then to now? Identify five of these changes that best indicate your church's capacity to adapt effectively in a changing culture.

4. For this exercise, enlist six members of your congregation—preferably two newer members, two older members, at least one youth, and one young adult. Ask them to respond to these questions, and then compare their responses.

- How does our church help you be transformed into the image of Christ?

- Through which means does our church prepare you to carry out God's mission?
- How does our church best glorify God?

Now, propose strategies to strengthen members' expression of each area of theological foundation.

5. In a small-group setting, brainstorm how disciples can:

- Transfer their learning, skills, insights, and values into the world
- Bring experiences and skills from the world into the church

SUGGESTED READING

Van Gelder, C. *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000.