

## WHAT IS THE MISSIONAL CHURCH MOVEMENT?

*W. Rodman MacIlvaine III*

A FEW YEARS AGO HARDLY ANY BOOKS ADDRESSED North America as if it were a mission field. But that has changed. After the publication of Darrell Guder's groundbreaking book *Missional Church*<sup>1</sup> and the rediscovery of Lesslie Newbigin's missional ecclesiology, an explosion of books hit the market, explaining how churches can "go missional." Missional books range from densely argued theological tomes, such as Arthur F. Glasser's *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God's Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), to missional works with denominational slants, to highly practical field manuals that give step-by-step instructions.<sup>2</sup> At a recent conference, Alan Roxburgh suggested that ten new titles were either under contract or about to be published with the term "missional" in the title or subtitle.<sup>3</sup>

This trend has been noticed by magazines such as *Christianity Today*, *Leadership*, and *Charisma*, which regularly feature articles on the work of missional churches. Riveting stories are showing up in the blo-

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W. Rodman MacIlvaine III is Senior Pastor, Grace Community Church, Bartlesville, Oklahoma, and Veritas Worldview Institute Fellow, Oklahoma Wesleyan University, Bartlesville, Oklahoma.

<sup>1</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> For example Rick Rouse and Craig Van Gelder, *A Field Guide for the Missional Congregation: Embarking on a Journey of Transformation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 43–44.

<sup>3</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, "Beyond the Church Doors: Developing a Missional Culture in Your Congregation" (Center for Christian Leadership, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas, March 31–April 1, 2008).

gosphere about churches shifting from an inward focus to an external focus, seeking to serve their cities for the advancement of the Lord's work. Clearly missional ecclesiology is developing as a new form of ministry.

Gone is the idealism of the social gospel, in which service was done for the glory of service. In contrast the church has witnessed the emergence of energetic and informed lay leaders seeking to be conduits of God's *common* grace so that they can then be conduits of God's *saving* grace. As they serve, their missional theology is sophisticated enough to remind them that God is responsible for the results, and therefore they can serve with generosity and authenticity.

Some theologians, inspired by John Stott and Lesslie Newbigin, are developing comprehensive biblical theologies that portray God's preexisting and eternal mission—His *missio Dei*, as the organizing principle of the Bible.<sup>4</sup> “Missional” has become a precise term with a growing body of scholarly and popular writings to support it.

The adjective “missional,” when applied to the church, is different from other adjectives currently in vogue. Terms such as “emergent” and “emerging” describe so-called cutting-edge churches reaching young postmoderns. But some emergent thinkers seem to be jettisoning major portions of the historic Christian faith altogether, edging toward old-fashioned liberalism with its theological double-speak.<sup>5</sup> The term “missional,” on the other hand, has evolved to have a precise definition, rich in theological significance in four areas: theology proper, Christology, soteriology, and ecclesiology.

#### DEFINITIONS

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<sup>4</sup> A case in point is Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> This is a criticism leveled against Brian D. McLaren, especially his book *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-Yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Some younger pastors feel emerging churches are sacrificing doctrine to accommodate culture (see, e.g., Kevin De Young and Ted Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be* (Chicago: Moody, 2008).

A missional church is a unified body of believers,<sup>6</sup> intent on being God's missionary presence<sup>7</sup> to the indigenous community that surrounds them,<sup>8</sup> recognizing that God is already at work.<sup>9</sup>

Taking seriously the fact that they have been sent by the risen Christ to be the agents of God's preexisting mission, missional churches embrace a distinctly countercultural mindset. On the one hand they engage a lifestyle of common ground with the world but without moral or spiritual compromise. On the other hand they are not afraid to challenge assumptions, even the idols within the culture that harm and enslave people.

Missional Christians generally display common ground with the world, first through generous acts of service but also through the arts<sup>10</sup> and at times through positions of leadership within the community or the state. Having earned the right to be heard, they lovingly invite friends to a different way of life in Christ within their transformed community.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The importance of unity, which shows up consistently in missional literature, is rooted in Trinitarian theology. The triune God is eternally unified in His mission, and believers under the headship of Christ must be unified in the accomplishment of His mission as well. See Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 217–41. This concept of unity was also championed by Lesslie Newbigin in a work based on his Kerr Lectures at the University of Glasgow called, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (New York: SCM, 1953; reprint, London: Paternoster, 1998). See also Alister E. McGrath, *Theology: The Basic Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 31. In his latter years Newbigin decried the privatization of the church in modernity and felt it was antithetical to the spread of the gospel. See Michael W. Goheen, "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You: J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missional Ecclesiology" (Ph.D. diss., University of Utrecht, 2000), 420.

<sup>7</sup> This is based on Jesus' statement in John 20:21, "As the Father has sent me, I also send you." This was an important cornerstone to Newbigin's missional ecclesiology (Goheen, "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You," 277).

<sup>8</sup> The needs of the indigenous culture have always been taken seriously by biblical writers, as evidenced, for example, by Paul's message to the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill in Acts 17:16–34. Rodney Stark asserts that Christianity was an urban movement in the first century, with Christians especially concerned about serving specific needs in their cities (*Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Religion and Conquered Rome* [New York: HarperOne, 2007], 30–31). See also idem, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 76–94, 161.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 22–23.

<sup>10</sup> The importance of the arts has been recognized by many in the missional movement not only as a basis for common ground with the culture, but also as a way of awakening the culture to the reality of Christ (Andy Crouch, "Creating Culture: Our Best Response to the World Is to Make Something of It," *Christianity Today*, September 2008, 25–29; and Tim Stafford, "Re-Imagining Reality: Artist Makoto Fujimura Launched the International Arts Movement to 'Re-Humanize' the World," *Christianity Today*, September 2008, 31).

<sup>11</sup> Newbigin's philosophy of cultural engagement has been crucial to the movement and is

Missional churches see themselves as agents of God's preexisting mission within their own indigenous communities, and they engage those communities on common ground without compromise.

What then is the current status of the missional church?

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

### BEGINNINGS OF *MISSIO DEI*

The modern missionary movement is generally traced to the publication in 1792 of William Carey's book, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* and to the subsequent establishment of the Baptist Missionary Society.<sup>12</sup> For the next 125 years the explosion of missionary activity around the globe was astounding.<sup>13</sup> At the time of the inauguration of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 the Christian faith had moved from being a mostly European phenomenon to become a global faith.<sup>14</sup> Western-style Christendom, it was assumed, would continue to flourish in foreign lands unabated for years to come, while also advancing at home.<sup>15</sup>

This expectation was fueled both by pioneer missionaries who opened new fields and the creation of new missionary societies that often

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concisely summed up by Goheen. "The church is part of the cultural community that embodies idolatrous faith commitments. On the other hand, the church is called to be part of a new humankind that embodies a different story. The incompatible stories intersect in the life of the church, producing an unbearable tension; the church must separate itself from the idolatrous story that shapes its culture and yet participate in the ongoing development of the cultural community. Living in this tension, the church challenges the idolatrous story of the culture with an alternative way of life. . . . The church is called to embody the cultural forms yet at the same time subvert them and give them new meaning shaped by the gospel. In this way, the church is both for and against its culture. It identifies with the form of its culture but stands against the idolatry that gives meaning and direction to [it]" ("As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You," 423–24).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 306.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette called the period between 1815 and 1914 "the great century" because every time the growth of the church was repudiated by modernism, it responded with vibrant expansion (*A History of Christianity: Reformation to the Present* [Peabody, MA: Prince, 1975], 2:vii, 1063).

<sup>14</sup> Ruth Tucker, "William Carey: Father of Modern Missions," in *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*, ed. John D. Woodbridge (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 307.

<sup>15</sup> This was the assessment of Charles Clayton Morrison, editor of the *Christian Century*, reporting on the World Missionary Conference. "Everyone feels the presence in the conference of a power not ourselves, deeper than our own devices, which is making for a triumphant advance of Christianity abroad. And not less are the delegates thrilled by the sense that the conference foreshadows a new era for the church at home" ("The World Missionary Conference," *Religion Online* [1910] <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=471> [accessed January 13, 2008]).

crossed denominational and confessional barriers.<sup>16</sup> Their passion was to unify the body of Christ and mobilize resources for worldwide evangelization. As church members back home heard stories of God’s powerful work in exotic lands, many of them sensed the missionary call and prepared for service.

However, the “long nineteenth century” of missionary advance must be understood within the framework of the prevailing worldview of the West.<sup>17</sup> By the close of the eighteenth century, Europe was well into the era of the Enlightenment. The wars following the Reformation (ca. 1562–1648) and the excesses of the Radical Reformation had left Europeans weary of all religion, both Catholic and Protestant. Simultaneously there was a rapid increase in scientific discovery sparked by the publication of Isaac Newton’s three-volume *Principia Mathematica* in 1687. Negative attitudes toward religion, coupled with intellectual advances in the sciences, led to the idea that perhaps humans can discover truth through unaided reason, bypassing divine revelation altogether.

On the European continent the Enlightenment lasted for approximately 150 years (1650–1799)<sup>18</sup> and culminated in the atrocities of the French Revolution. After 1799, Europe, wary of rationalism but still clinging to it, shifted into literary and artistic romanticism at best and intellectual skepticism and atheism at worst.

In Britain and America, however, the spiritual climate was different. The First Great Awakening (1730s and 1740s) prompted evangelical fervor on both sides of the Atlantic. Methodism and Pietism brought renewed interest in a personal relationship with God and a reformation of morals. Moreover, evangelicals in the decades to come, especially in Victorian England, developed a zealous commitment to social action, which was epitomized in the work of the Clapham Sect.<sup>19</sup>

The modern missionary movement thus began in this climate of evangelical renewal, but it was set within the broader context of post-Enlightenment romanticism.

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<sup>16</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Complete in One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Prince, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> The “long nineteenth century” describes either the period from 1789 to 1917 (the French Revolution through World War I), or the period from 1815 to 1914 (post-Napoleonic Europe to World War I). See Robert Weiner, *The Long 19th Century: European History from 1789–1917* (Chantilly, VA: Teaching, 2003); <http://www.teach12.com/ttcx/coursedesclong2.aspx?cid=8190&pc=History%20%20-Modern> (accessed December 8, 2007). See also Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 1063.

<sup>18</sup> This period spans from the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) to the French Revolution (1789–1799).

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, 445.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT AND *MISSIO DEI*

In the nineteenth century, however, remnants of the Enlightenment worldview left an indelible mark on attitudes toward missions. Pocock, speaking broadly about this period, suggests, “Christianity and Western Enlightenment principles tended to coalesce in the missionary endeavors launched from Europe and North America.”<sup>20</sup> Jongeneel agrees. “To understand this new development [*missio Dei*], it is necessary to go back to the age of the Enlightenment which, for the first time in history, did not regard mission as God’s very own work but as a purely human endeavor. Thereafter, a very anthropocentric theology emerged.”<sup>21</sup>

In examining the broad sweep of nineteenth-century missionary advance, Nussbaum suggests that “people became so convinced of the importance of human initiative that they hardly thought of God as being active in mission.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed at times missions became completely divorced from its biblical and theological underpinnings and was identified with Western imperialism and colonialism.<sup>23</sup>

Not all missiologists accepted the prevailing Enlightenment model in the nineteenth century. Charles Pettit McIlvaine (1799–1873), for instance, revealed a strongly God-centered missional understanding as early as 1839.<sup>24</sup> While not specifically using the term “missional,” the journals and letters he wrote while aiding wounded soldiers during the Civil War reflect his strong conviction that he had been sent to serve as a representative of Christ’s preexisting mission.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen, and Douglass McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 11. Following David Bosch, Stan Nussbaum develops this further (*A Reader’s Guide to “Transforming Mission”* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005], 78–79).

<sup>21</sup> This assessment of Jan Jongeneel is mentioned in Goheen, “As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You,” 420.

<sup>22</sup> Nussbaum, *A Reader’s Guide to Transforming Mission*, 95.

<sup>23</sup> David J. Bosch suggests that the missionary drive during this period was rooted in four motivations: soteriology, saving individuals from damnation; culture, introducing people to the Christian West; ecclesiology, expanding the church or a denomination; postmillennial theology, hastening the kingdom through the Christianization of the world (*Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991], 389).

<sup>24</sup> Charles P. McIlvaine, “The Missionary Character and Duty of the Church,” in *A Series of Evangelical Discourses Selected for the Use of Families and Destitute Congregations* (Columbia, OH: Isaac N. Whiting, 1839), 2:309–28.

<sup>25</sup> Charles P. McIlvaine engaged in missional activities on both sides of the Atlantic. He has the distinction of being the only American to lie in state in Westminster Abbey (a plaque commemorates the spot). A friend of Charles Simeon of Cambridge, University, McIlvaine’s life story was compiled by William Carus, Simeon’s successor (*Memorials of the Right Reverend Charles Pettit McIlvaine*, 2nd ed. [London: Eliot Stock, 1882], 7, 249–51, 269–71).

*MISSIO DEI* AFTER WORLD WAR I

In the aftermath of World War I anthropocentric views of mission began to change because of the work of Swiss theologian Karl Barth. He played an important role in bridging the gap between the separatist Fundamentalism of the 1920s that eschewed meaningful involvement in culture and humanistic liberalism that sometimes equated culture with God.<sup>26</sup> Barth's theological approach had three strengths that were particularly helpful to the revitalization of a missiology that was both Christ-affirming and culture-affirming. First, his theology is rooted in biblical exegesis, and therefore it was less dependent on preexisting theological and philosophical bias.<sup>27</sup> Second, his theology is thoroughly Christocentric, stressing Jesus' role as the Revealer of God.<sup>28</sup> Third, his theology is highly Trinitarian.<sup>29</sup> While these three developments might seem like a reiteration of Reformation principles, Barth's neoorthodox pedigree, intellectual prowess, and creative genius forced liberals and fundamentalists alike to wrestle with his ideas.<sup>30</sup> "At the Brandenburg Missionary Conference in 1932, Karl Barth [articulated] mission as an activity of God himself."<sup>31</sup> Using the term *actio Dei*, Barth suggested that the Trinitarian relationship within the Godhead is the source of all mission.<sup>32</sup>

Bosch notes that Barth broke radically from the Enlightenment approach to mission by grounding mission *first* in God and *not* in the human endeavor of the church.<sup>33</sup> If Barth's hypothesis was true, then God's eternal and Trinitarian mission would be ontologically prior to the commands of Jesus expressed in the Great Commissions at the end of the

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<sup>26</sup> Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 577–79.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 578.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 588.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Toon, *Our Triune God: A Biblical Portrayal of the Trinity* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1996), 46–47.

<sup>30</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 238.

<sup>31</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 389. There is some disagreement about precisely when Barth first suggested this. Following Hoedemaker, Wright suggests that Barth first proposed this in a lecture in 1928 (Wright, *The Mission of God*, 62–63). See also L. A. Hoedemaker, "The People of God and the Ends of the Earth," in *Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction*, ed. A. Camp, L. A. Hoedemaker, and M. R. Spindler (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 165.

<sup>32</sup> In Barth's view the Trinity is "the first principle of all Christian faith and thought and life." Thus Barth set the stage for a Trinitarian view of mission (Toon, *Our Triune God*, 47).

<sup>33</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

four Gospels and in Acts 1:8, and would provide the foundation for them.<sup>34</sup>

The following year (1933) German missiologist Karl Hartenstein expressed similar views. However, rather than using the term *actio Dei*, a term coined by Barth, he employed the term *missio Dei*: the mission of God.<sup>35</sup> This emerging concept of *missio Dei* suggests that from eternity past the triune God has been on a mission. To fulfill that mission He engages in a series of sending acts. The Father sent the Son into the world at the Incarnation (John 1:14). The Father guides His Son during His ministry (5:31). The Son sends the church into the world after His resurrection (20:21). The Son sent the Spirit into the world at Pentecost (14:16–17; Acts 2:1–4).

The real crystallization of *missio Dei*, however, came in 1952 at the meeting of the International Missionary Council in Willingen, Germany, in the work of Georg Vicedom.<sup>36</sup> According to Vicedom, “Mission flows from the inner movement of God in personal relationship.”<sup>37</sup>

In the aftermath of this meeting a shift in thinking occurred—from the church as *possessing* a mission, to God being a missionary God and the church *participating* in His mission.<sup>38</sup> As Pachuau suggests, “Since the middle of the twentieth century, this understanding of Christian mission as *missio Dei* has enjoyed such popularity that it has come to be recognized almost as a theological consensus.”<sup>39</sup> In this concept mission is not primarily the activity of the church but of God.<sup>40</sup> The emphasis is not that Jesus gave the church a mission. Rather, the emphasis is that Jesus invited the church into God’s preexisting mission.

#### INITIAL REJECTION BY EVANGELICALS

Evangelicals did not immediately embrace this new theological understanding of mission for two reasons. The first reason was theological. Young suggests that the concept of *missio Dei* went through a thirty-year

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<sup>34</sup> The biblical justification for this is John 20:21.

<sup>35</sup> Karl Hartenstein, quoted in Wright, *The Mission of God*, 62–63.

<sup>36</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 63. See also David Claydon, “Aims of Mission: *Missio Dei*,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, ed. John Corrie, Samuel Escobar, and Wilbert Shenk (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 16–17.

<sup>37</sup> Georg Vicedom, quoted in Wright, *The Mission of God*, 63.

<sup>38</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 183 n. 9.

<sup>39</sup> Lalsangkima Pachuau, “*Missio Dei*,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, 232–33.

<sup>40</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.



dark period, roughly from the 1960s to the 1990s, because the ecumenical movement, driven in part by process theology, hijacked the term and made it synonymous with God's work in history.<sup>41</sup> *Missio Dei* was associated with a social gospel that met needs but did not stress personal salvation. It "was used as a way of showing how all religions were advancing God's work, and evangelicals were rightly suspicious."<sup>42</sup>

The second reason was cultural. From the 1920s through the mid-1940s evangelicals, especially in the United States, were placed on the defensive. Confronted with problems such as denominational liberalism, the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, and the Scopes Trial, many Christian leaders led their flocks into a shell of legalism and cultural isolationism that lasted well into the 1970s. During this time in some traditions radical separation from culture was seen as evidence of Christian spirituality.<sup>43</sup>

#### THE EVANGELICAL REAPPRAISAL

*John R. W. Stott (and Christopher J. H. Wright).* In his works *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (1975) and *New Issues Facing Christians Today* (1984) Stott, an active participant in the emerging *missio Dei* conversation and a founding leader in the Lausanne Movement, affirms the God-centeredness of mission. "The primal mission is God's, for it is he who sent his prophets, his Son, his Spirit. Of these missions the mission of the Son is central, for it was the culmination of the ministry of the prophets, and it embraced within itself as its climax the sending of the Spirit. And now the Son sends [believers] as he himself was sent."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Mark S. Young, "Turning Theology Inside Out: *Missio Dei* (Part I)" (chapel message, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, TX, November 1, 2005). See also Stott's historical assessment of Walter Rauschenbusch's social gospel claim that "the Kingdom of God is the Christian transfiguration of the social order" (*A Theology for the Social Gospel* [New York: Macmillan, 1918], 145, quoted in John R. W. Stott, *New Issues Facing Christians Today*, 3rd ed. [London: Marshall Pickering, 1999], 9). Also the missional language in Vatican II, though biblically accurate, certainly did not endear Protestant evangelicals to the missional cause in the middle 1960s: "The Church on earth is, by its very nature, missionary since according to the plan of the Father it has its origin in the mission of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (quoted in Darrell Guder, "The Worthy Walk of the Missional Congregation," in *Walking Worthily: Missional Leadership after Christendom* (Peyton Lectures, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, May 2, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Young, "Turning Theology Inside Out: *Missio Dei*."

<sup>43</sup> In his memoirs Frank Schaeffer depicts the painful consequences of these extreme views of separation (*Crazy for God: How I Grew Up as One of the Elect, Helped Found the Religious Right, and Lived to Take All (or Almost All) of It Back* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2007). And yet ironically his father Francis Schaeffer paved the way for a renaissance of appreciation for the arts and philosophy among evangelicals.

<sup>44</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 22.

While Stott correctly roots mission in the proper place (God, not man), his work at times seems to suggest that evangelism and social action are the *only* two essentials of mission. Evangelism has traditionally been considered the cornerstone of mission, and the inclusion of social action seemed a valuable emphasis as Stott provided leadership at the initial Lausanne Conference in 1974. But in the following years evangelical missional theology has evolved with a fuller conception of mission.

Stott's protégé, Christopher J. H. Wright, updates his mentor's thinking in his groundbreaking theological work *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. Like other missional authors, Wright grounds mission in the triune God, but rather than limiting mission to evangelism and social action, he looks to the saving acts of God in the Bible as the example of mission. "A missional hermeneutic of the Bible is not limited to the Great Commission passages in the Gospels and Acts. Rather those great imperatives are set within the truths that the Bible affirms about God, creation, human life in its paradox of dignity and depravity, redemption in all its comprehensive glory, and the new creation in which God will dwell with His people."<sup>45</sup>

Some suggest Wright may be subject to the criticism that "if everything is mission, then nothing is mission."<sup>46</sup> But Wright avoids this problem by carefully categorizing God's missional acts toward His creatures and then constructing a specific missional agenda, including such practical things as responding to the AIDS crisis.<sup>47</sup> But the man who, more than anyone else, is seen as the father of missional ecclesiology is Lesslie Newbigin (1909–1998).<sup>48</sup>

*Lesslie Newbigin*. After his theological education in Cambridge University, Newbigin became a missionary to India under the auspices of the Foreign Mission Committee of the Church of Scotland, eventually

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<sup>45</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 61.

<sup>46</sup> This was the criticism evangelicals often leveled against proponents of the social-gospel movement who did not distinguish between the world (Eph. 2:2) and God's kingdom goals (Matt. 6:33). However, social-gospel adherents had a much deeper problem. In reality, most were embracing some form of the non-Christian worldview of panentheism.

<sup>47</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 535.

<sup>48</sup> Ruth Tucker calls Newbigin the premier missiologist of the late twentieth century. She credits the strength of his particular missiological understanding (in contrast to McGavran's homogenous unit principle) to his conviction about community. Newbigin taught that diverse communities displaying the supernatural headship of the risen Christ help people to "see" God. This understanding of unity amidst diversity plays a profound role in missional church ecclesiology (Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004], 455–57). See also Will Mancini, *Church Unique: How Missional Leaders Cast Vision, Capture Culture, and Create Movement* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 29–35.

becoming a bishop in 1947. When Newbigin first arrived in India, he was firmly entrenched in the view that the missionary venture involves a concomitant importation of Western values and culture along with the gospel. But as his ministry progressed, he recognized that this view was inadequate, and he adopted a model of engagement with the world based on Paul's example of common ground without compromise (1 Cor. 9:19-23). Once common ground was established and trust earned, Newbigin proposed challenging the prevailing cultural assumptions and presenting a better way in Christ.<sup>49</sup>

When he returned to England in the mid-1950s, Newbigin realized that England had changed dramatically and had become a more difficult mission field than India.<sup>50</sup> England and indeed the West had become post-Christian and postmodern. Therefore the missionary principles he had used for decades in India needed to be used in England.

Newbigin's protégé, Michael Green, suggests that Newbigin at this time began to reject the Enlightenment rationalism that sought to prove Christianity through reason alone. Newbigin's emerging apologetic was rooted in experiencing the person of Jesus in the context of a countercultural community.<sup>51</sup> He affirmed that a gospel of reconciliation can be communicated only by a reconciled fellowship.<sup>52</sup>

Newbigin's extensive bibliography of articles and books, beginning in 1933 and continuing till his death in 1999, displays intellectual vigor on many fronts. He was especially strong as he proposed his philosophy of crossing cultures with the gospel message. In missional ecclesiology he proposes being culturally sensitive and yet radically countercultural at the same time. Newbigin's presentation of this biblical tension presented an exciting field of exploration to a new generation of missiologists increasingly concerned that North America had become a mission field.

*The gospel and culture network.* In the mid-1980s "The Gospel and Our Culture Network"<sup>53</sup> was founded largely in response to Newbigin's *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches*.<sup>54</sup> The founders

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<sup>49</sup> Goheen, "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You," 423-24.

<sup>50</sup> Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 456.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Green, "The Apologetics of Lesslie Newbigin," in *The Lord Is My Light* (Oxford: Zacharias Trust, 2005), 3.

<sup>52</sup> Newbigin, *The Household of God*, quoted in McGrath, *Theology: The Basic Readings*, 131.

<sup>53</sup> "The Gospel and Our Culture Network" is a "network of Christian leaders from a wide array of churches and organizations, who are working together on the frontier of the missionary encounter of the gospel with North American assumptions, perspectives, preferences and practices" (see [www.gocn.org](http://www.gocn.org) [accessed November 15, 2008]).

<sup>54</sup> Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983.

claimed that “Bishop Newbigin and others have helped us to see that God’s mission is calling and sending us, the church of Jesus Christ, to be a missionary church in our own societies, in the cultures in which we find ourselves. These cultures are no longer Christian.”<sup>55</sup>

While fresh works on missional themes began to appear in the 1980s and 1990s—most notably by DuBose and Van Engen<sup>56</sup>—the work of Darrell Guder in 1998 (*Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*) set the stage for the extensive interest in missional ecclesiology today. Guder, then professor of evangelism and church growth at Columbia Theological Seminary, was convinced that a theological revolution was needed in the area of ecclesiology that answered the question, “What would the church look like if it were truly *missional* in design and definition?”<sup>57</sup>

#### THE EXPLOSION OF LITERATURE SINCE GUDER

Guder’s book *Missional Church* (1998) has become a surprise best-seller and the fountainhead of a new genre of books addressing missional themes. Missional literature falls into six categories.<sup>58</sup>

Seven works stand out in the first category on biblical and theological foundations for missions. Works by Wright, Kaiser, and Glasser trace God’s mission through the Bible.<sup>59</sup> Bosch’s *Transforming Mission* combines biblical-theological methodology with historical theology. While he only scratches the surface on missional themes, his protégé Stan Nussbaum updates Bosch’s work in *A Reader’s Guide to “Transforming Mission”* and delves more deeply into *missio Dei* concepts. The *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations* weaves concepts in missional ecclesiology and *missio Dei* into its more than 160 articles.

Of these five books Wright’s is most practical in applying God’s mission to current issues such as the AIDS crisis and the stewardship of God’s creation. And Michael Goheen’s dissertation is the finest study on

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<sup>55</sup> Guder, *Missional Church*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Francis DuBose, *God Who Sends: A Fresh Quest for Biblical Mission* (Nashville: Broadman, 1983); and Charles Van Engen, *God’s Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

<sup>57</sup> Guder, *Missional Church*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> See also the survey by Alan Hirsch, “Defining Missional: The word is everywhere, but where did it come from and what does it really mean?” *Leadership* (fall 2008): 20–21.

<sup>59</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 21–22; Arthur Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom: The Story of God’s Mission in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); and Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

the missionary ecclesiology of Lesslie Newbigin.<sup>60</sup>

Other books examine how this concept is applied to denominations and parachurch contexts. Minatrea writes from a Southern Baptist perspective,<sup>61</sup> and Van Gelder and Kiefert address how missional churches operate in a Lutheran context.<sup>62</sup> Van Gelder also notes that since the 1960s Catholic theologians have been wrestling with a missional understanding of the church along with missional praxis.<sup>63</sup> Roxburgh offers helpful insights about missional transitions in a Presbyterian context.<sup>64</sup> Lewis shows how churches in the Bible church movement have transitioned toward missional ministry.<sup>65</sup> Hirsch and Frost write as Australians addressing how churches in the West can transition to missional ministry.<sup>66</sup> In this category Hirsch is the most engaging writer but is more theoretical than practical. Gibbs and Bolger's work *Emerging Churches*, while not missional as such, addresses missional praxis themes in their chapter "Serving with Generosity."<sup>67</sup>

A third category of books with missional themes consists of the polemic against churches that have decided to withdraw from active engagement with the culture. McNeal's work *The Present Future* is a prophetic call for the North American church to reject the Christendom model and embrace missional ministry. His follow-up book *Missional Renaissance* shows specific examples of how churches are actually doing this.<sup>68</sup>

The fourth category consists of books that train leaders to provide

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<sup>60</sup> Goheen, "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You."

<sup>61</sup> Milfred Minatrea, *Shaped by God's Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

<sup>62</sup> Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*; and Patrick Kiefert, *We Are Here Now: A Journey of Missional Discovery* (Eagle, ID: Allelon, 2006). Lutheran missional works all display a strong emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit to lead congregations in their missional ministries. This Spirit-led emphasis is not a prominent feature outside this denominational emphasis.

<sup>63</sup> Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 87 n. 187.

<sup>64</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation: Leadership and Liminality* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1997).

<sup>65</sup> Robert Lewis, *The Church of Irresistible Influence: Bridge Building Stories to Help Reach Your Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

<sup>66</sup> Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006); and Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006).

<sup>67</sup> Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

<sup>68</sup> McNeal, *The Present Future*, xv-xvi; and idem, *Missional Renaissance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

leadership in a missional context. Roxburgh and Romanuk's *The Missional Leader*, while highly theoretical, is superb, as is Mancini's work *Church Unique*, and Stetzer and Putnam's *Breaking the Missional Code*.<sup>69</sup>

A fifth category consists of periodical articles and Internet resources about mission. New websites are popping up almost monthly, purporting to help churches move in a missional direction, such as Friendofmissional.com. Many of these Internet sites link to articles on what churches are learning through their missional transitions. One site links to a case study on the missional transitions taking place at College Hill Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) in Cincinnati, Ohio, a church that found new missional life after a painful crisis.<sup>70</sup>

A sixth category includes books that discuss missional methodology from other disciplines. The books by Baylor University sociologist Rodney Stark have been useful to missional writers who ask, "What was Christianity like during its pre-Constantinian days, and how can we learn from its experience?"<sup>71</sup>

#### PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF THE *MISSIO DEI* CONSTRUCT

One might ask, "What practical benefit did the *missio Dei* construct give to conservative theologians and missiologists? And why in the post-Newbigin era is missional ecclesiology embraced so passionately?"

The answer seems to lie in the profound encouragement that the *missio Dei* concept gives to those on the forefront of mission in godless cultures, especially those who are engaged in mission in the North American context. If God is already at work, showering His creatures with His *common grace*, and if God the Holy Spirit is already at work

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<sup>69</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006); Mancini, *Church Unique*; and Ed Stetzer and David Putnam, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006).

<sup>70</sup> After years of cutting-edge evangelical ministry in the Cincinnati area, College Hill Presbyterian Church encountered a theological crisis in their confrontation with the more liberal PCUSA denomination. In the crisis they sensed God's movement into missional ministry (Stephen Eyre, "Can the Church Be Converted: How 'Missional' Came to College Hill Presbyterian Church," *Theology Matters: A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry* [September–October 2004]: 6–10).

<sup>71</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); idem, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), and "The Rise of Christianity," in idem, *Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 282–338.

convicting unbelievers of their need for *saving grace*, then believer-priests can have confidence that God has preceded them in mission.

The believer's role, then, is not to do the "heavy lifting"; God is doing this already. The believer's role is to discern prayerfully where and how God is working and to come alongside Him in the work He is already doing. This theological construct empowers risk-taking faith in the process of fulfilling the mission.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore missional theology seems to provide a motive for compassionate service rooted in the nature of God. If God is continually at work in extending common grace as part of His mission, then believers can extend themselves in common grace as well, as they seek to fulfill Jesus' Great Commission.

#### ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MISSIONAL CHURCHES

In essence a missional church is a highly unified body of believers, passionately committed to being God's missionary presence to the community that surrounds them, recognizing that God has already been at work in that location and has a specific agenda for it. Christians in a missional church will embrace a particular set of activities consistent with missional ministry.

#### THE SELF-IDENTITY OF MISSIONAL CHRISTIANS

*Toward God.* Missional Christians take seriously the notion that they have been sent by Christ into their particular culture (John 20:21), and they learn to love the diverse people in that culture as Christ does (Matt. 9:35–36).

*Toward themselves.* They embrace the mindset that they are exiles (Heb. 11:13) and resident aliens (1 Pet. 1:1) whose citizenship is firmly rooted in heaven (Phil. 3:20). They therefore seek to live a countercultural lifestyle in ways meaningful to that culture (Dan. 1:4–8). This mindset empowers consistent, humble, and sometimes sacrificial service (Mark 10:45).

*Toward their local church.* They believe their local church is not an end in itself that must be growing constantly into an ever more powerful institution. Rather their local church is a means to an end, namely, to advance God's work. The church is a beachhead within the culture. They therefore pursue godly goals even if it means their church might not grow as fast. They are willing to partner with other churches and parachurch organizations to advance the cause of Christ.

Missional church leaders measure the effectiveness of their church, not by counting the number of people attending the main weekend ser-

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<sup>72</sup> This was the experience of Don Richardson in his work with the Sawi people in Irian Jaya (*Peace Child* [Ventura, CA: Regal, 1975]).

vice but by assessing the number of people serving significantly in the city.

Missional church members do not enter corporate worship for the purpose of being entertained or for having their felt needs met. Nor is their worship energized because of an implied promise of prosperity. They go to connect with God, who calls His people into mission, and with their fellow soldiers who are also on mission. They see the main worship event as a context in which they may glorify God and hear from Him.

*Toward Christendom.* They recognize that organized religion has often posed a problem for many postmodern people. Therefore they eschew all forms of legalism and ecclesiastical control, passionately exuding God's grace to all. They seek to major on the essentials of the faith.

*Toward the world.* Remembering that God works locally, they concentrate on the needs of their city. They know its distinct regions and cultures. They seek the welfare of their city, knowing that their own welfare depends on its welfare (Jer. 29:4–7).

*Toward pain and brokenness.* Missional churches recognize that Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Isa. 53:3), and that He learned obedience through the things He suffered (Heb. 5:8). Missional churches are therefore generally opposed to idealistic expressions of a health-and-wealth gospel that minimizes or perhaps denies the very thing that brings believers into mission.

#### THE ACTIONS OF MISSIONAL CHRISTIANS

*With respect to worship.* Missional Christians view corporate worship as an event that celebrates God's eternal mission and the work that His people have done during a given week. They also view it as a time to strengthen their biblical worldview so that they can continue to live effectively for Christ as exiles and aliens in the world. As they come to a corporate worship event, they come with the intent to connect, minister, and be equipped—not to be entertained or seen.

*With respect to the world.* They practice the principle of cultural flexibility without moral or spiritual compromise as a way to express God's common grace (1 Cor. 9:19–23). In a missional church, expressing common grace involves six qualities: showing hospitality to strangers (Heb. 13:1); loving those of diverse races, political orientations, and sexual preferences without sacrificing biblical principles (Mark 8:1–9); serving those who cannot pay them back (James 1:26–27); being wisely generous with financial and material resources, even to the point of sacrifice (2 Cor. 8:1–3); taking a collaborative role among the arts community within a given culture (Exod. 31:1–6); and taking a collaborative role, even a leadership role, in the civic structures within a given culture (Dan. 6:1–3; Jer. 29:4–7).

*With respect to the gospel.* Once they have built a bridge of com-



mon ground through common grace, missional Christians find ways to express the gospel. Sometimes this takes place in the context of a serving event (Acts 9:36, 39). Other times this takes place as a believer exposes friends to the destructive idols of culture (17:22–23). At some point the believer invites his friends into the context of the redeemed community, where Christ is experienced and His message is seen in action (9:17–19).

*With respect to ordinary life.* Missional Christians are always mindful that they are living in the presence of the risen Christ and are on mission at all times. This mindfulness prompts them to ask many questions. “What is God doing in this situation? How is God directing me? Does this person need prayer? How might I be helpful right now?” In general the missional Christian realizes that he leads best through prayer, often asking a person if he or she can pray about a matter at that very moment.

*With respect to discipleship.* Missional churches take spiritual growth seriously but with a missional bent. They do not disciple for the purpose of increasing head knowledge. They disciple for the purpose of missional life change, realizing that if a Christ-follower determines to be “on mission,” he or she will become highly motivated to grow and change. This discipleship also recognizes the powerful influence of spiritual warfare. Because the evil one aggressively seeks to sidetrack Christians from this kind of lifestyle, missional Christians encourage high levels of accountability and supportive prayer (Eph. 6:10–20).

*With respect to cultural trends.* Missional Christians recognize that much of North American culture is postmodern and post-Christian and in many ways is anti-Christian. They are committed to studying and learning about the culture so that they can be more effective in reaching people in it.

## CONCLUSION

As the North American culture continues its drift into the murky waters of postmodernism, the *missio Dei* construct encourages pastors and laypeople seeking to engage in authentic and life-changing ministry. They are encouraged to reach boldly into their respective indigenous cultures, seeking common ground without compromise, challenging idolatrous practices, and trusting that God will use them to lead others to Christ and to bring about change that honors Him.

Churches want in on the missional movement. But what is it really and why are some claiming it is the biggest development in Christianity since the Reformation? The missional movement, in many ways, is a counter force to the traditional way of "doing" church. Rather than being program-focused, the missional church prides itself on being people-focused. "Missional is a way of living, not an affiliation or activity," explains missional leadership specialist Reggie McNeal in his new book, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*. "To think and to live