

The church's missional identity and calling

Introduction:

In many churches and ecumenical bodies there is much talk of the church's "missional" identity and calling, or "being a missional church". The Dutch Reformed Church, for instance, made missional transformation one of its most important priorities. What does the term missional actually mean?

The concept "missional" is a fairly new creation in the English language, with new terminology surrounding it; it creates a whole new language to describe the identity and calling of the church. Unfortunately, it is often understood in many different ways; it sometimes becomes such a broad concept that it actually does not mean anything – see the old saying: "if everything becomes missional, nothing is missional anymore". We therefore need to try to define it more precisely.

The concept "missional" is deliberately used instead of words like "missiological" or "missionary" in order to differentiate it from a colonial understanding of mission. It is no more the (Western) church who sends missionaries to or support churches in Africa, or who does something to other "younger" churches, but it is about the church, and then the whole church (young and old), which is being sent – often in equal partnership with each other. Being sent is not only a facet of the church's calling; it is the essence of its being. The term missional also deliberately stands in opposition or contrary to an understanding of church which is characterised by self-maintenance, self-interest, an inward looking approach – an approach of ministry which is focussing on the church itself. The term missional rather focusses on serving the kingdom of God, serving (ministering to) the world (and people) outside of the church instead of its own members only. The concept missional also works with the understanding that a so-called era of "Christendom", an era where the church assumed its political and societal power and influence, has also disappeared. The church is now mostly a minority in a society that cannot be called Christian any more (despite the numerical claims of being the majority – nominally – in a society). The church's message or impact cannot be taken for granted anymore; the church should deliberately seek to make a difference (impact society) and be a credible witness to the love of God.

The core issues in the missional discourse are not new; it actually represents a return to basic biblical concepts of being a church in the world. By using a new language it seeks to deconstruct terminology that represents a bygone (colonial) era. Some of the core concepts in the missional debate are the following:

1. A radical focus on the Triune God (Trinitarian ecclesiology)

In missional theology the reflection on church (understanding of church or ecclesiology) starts/originates with a reflection on the Trinity (thus a Trinitarian ecclesiology). The Trinity is understood as the harmonious relation between the three Persons in one God; it is about a Trinitarian communion (relational); outreach and inclusion (embrace); sending and being sent; a space of grace and love; a will to recreate and heal; life-giving, etc. As God does, so must the church be and do (John 20:19-23). The church must reflect the image of the Triune God. Important concepts regarding the Triune God are:

Missio Dei – The church is incorporated into/invited to partake in God’s mission to the world. It is about God’s agenda, God’s work, God’s goal with the recreation of everything. God is at work (God is fulfilling his mission) and our role is merely to discern what God is doing and to that. It is therefore important to listen (listen together with others) to God’s Word and God’s Spirit in order to discern where God is at work and where and in what way God wants us to join his work. It is about God’s agenda, and not ours.

Imago Dei – We as human beings (as well as the church) are created to the image of God. We are therefore called to follow God, to imitate God, to embody the qualities of God in his body (the church), to mirror God’s righteousness and grace. How the church is, how others see the church, must be a witness to how God is – for the sake of the world.

Coram Dei – We live before the face of God, in God’s presence, in relation with God. Being church is to be, together with others, invited into the Trinitarian space, the communion of love, embraced into this divine relationship and inviting others to join.

Kingdom of God – The goal is the coming/breaking through of the kingdom (reign) of God. We are to be servants in the restoration of the comprehensive peace (shalom) that the kingdom entails, the dawn of the new creation of God, healing and new life. In this, we, the church, are instruments in God’s hands.

2. Key concepts on identity deduced from a Trinitarian ecclesiology.

When we think about church from a Trinitarian perspective, some key concepts for understanding/ characteristics of being church become important.

- **Listening (Spiritual discernment)** – the formation of a missional identity and calling cannot but to be accompanied by a continuous process of deep listening: listening together with others to the Word, to each other, to others outside the church, to our environments. (Philippians 1:9).
- It is also important to step (enter) into the world, to identify with or have compassion for the world’s needs (be in the world, but not from the world) and therefore to leave the comfort zone of the church – **incarnation** (Philippians 2:6-11)
- Self-emptying, giving away of power (the opposite of gaining/keeping power), humble service, priestly or sacrificial attitude, crucifying of the self – **kenosis** (Philippians 2:1-11)
- Communion, fellowship, relations, shared interests (interwoven lives or in Africa: Ubuntu!), family/friends, unity in the body of Christ – **perigorese/koinonia** (John 15, 17)
- All being sent, prophets, carriers of Good Tidings (to proclaim the Word through words, deeds, communion and worship) – **Marturia** .
- **Hospitality**, a welcoming community, compassionate, embracing, inclusive fellowship, not excluding anybody who is different to us. .
- **Credibility** – trustworthy, obedient (mirroring God’s righteousness), seeking justice in our times – so that the world may believe.

3. Key concepts for the church’s calling

“Christian” means being anointed into the office of Christ. Here it is also important to remember the old Reformed idea of “the priesthood of all believers”. Everybody is called and anointed into the office of being Christian; it is about equipping and empowering all/the whole body of Christ for their calling as (Acts 11, Ephesians 4) – Church it is not about the ministers only!:

All Christians are called to be:

- Priests
- Prophets
- Kings

The goal of being priests, prophets and kings is to work towards the taking away (forgiveness) of sin, the restoration of the image of God in all, the healing of broken relationships, affirmation of life, the appearance of shalom – salvation/gospel.

4. Local congregation

In the missional theology the identity and calling of the local church as the full expression of the church, are emphasised. The local congregation (members together) is the protector and carrier of the gospel in its own context. The denomination (presbytery and synod) is called to support and serve the local congregations in their missional identity and calling.

5. Missional leaders

In missional transformation much emphasis is put on the importance and characteristics of missional leaders. Missional leaders

- Are trustworthy followers of Christ (real disciples)
- Servants of others (servanthood leaders), humble, sacrificial – see John 13.
- Shared leadership (non-authoritarian), prepared to listen to others
- Visionary and focussed on transformation (not mere managers and maintainers/keepers of status qua)
- Spiritual discernment
- Empower and encourage others

6. Context

Understand the challenges/changes of the context

Impacting the context (change agents in society)

Also focussing on the environment (ecological issues) – living space (and beauty)

7. Missional transformation

How does a church change/how is renewal happening/how to initiate reformation/growth?

Missional transformation, as also implied in the reformed principle of “ecclesia reformata semper reformanda”/“always reforming”, is about the need to change within ever changing circumstances in order to remain an obedient and thus relevant/effective church.

Obviously, there must firstly be an understanding/acknowledgement of the need to change. To create this, a prophetic role/action/capability is required. Brueggemann wrote a book on the prophetic tasks and called it: “Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks”. We may make a whole list of reasons why the church needs to change (dwindling numbers, financial survival, theological and other tensions, infighting, socio-political issues, absence of a prophetic voice, etc.)

- (1) Change firstly requires a **seeing and an understanding of reality** – to see reality as it really is.
- It requires a listening process, thorough context analyses.
 - Breaking down of processes of denial (obscuring reality)
 - It requires spiritual discernment, which is the work of the Holy Spirit through leaders that dwells in the Word and prays together.
 - Important is the creation of safe spaces where people can really listen to each other, but also events where people are exposed to the reality.
- (2) Working through **grief/loss**
- Change inevitably brings the death of the well-known and old customs, it brings insecurity, loss and grief. There is mostly resistance to change. But in the liminal space of working through grief, the need for change is accepted, and the longing for new growth is kindled – all of which creates the opportunity for positive change. A crisis creates also new opportunities for growth, but first we must be able to look the crisis into its face.
- (3) **Deep change**
- Real change is not only about organisational or structural changes/cosmetic changes/changing the surface only, but it is about a change of heart, a new way of thinking and speaking, new ways of doing things, a new culture – see Romans 12: 2-3. New customs have to be accepted and practiced: how we speak to each other, how we plan, how we meet, etc.
 - Change can only be sustainable if all people buy into it and own it, and practice it!
 - It is a journey, where we walk together – on the congregation, presbytery and synod level and where we learn from each other
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- (4) **Mystery of change** – it is eventually only God who enables change, who gives change and renewal as a gift. It is therefore a process that has to be guided by prayer.
- (5) Create **moments of celebration** – enjoy the progress made, tell stories of hope, liturgies – it brings new energy and hope.

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