



## PRACTICES OF A MISSIONAL PEOPLE - EDITORIAL

*The church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic.* Stanley Hauerwas<sup>[1]</sup>

*“Missional Church” is like “Female Woman”.* Christopher Wright<sup>[2]</sup>

How might we better understand and participate in God’s mission in western culture? That is the question and vision that gives rise to this journal. The first editions of this journal have explored and mapped out something from that vision that has not been immediately obvious - that God has a mission, and is a missional God. Whilst some are surprised at the notion of understanding God as missional, others are increasingly surprised that we need to be reminded of this at all. A bit like suggesting that we understand water as being *wet*.

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Something else is emerging in this journal that is on the one hand new to many and increasingly obvious to others - that not only is God missional, but that His Church is missional too. Stanley Hauerwas has already reminded us that the Church does not have a social ethic, something to bolt onto what it already is and does. For all churches, already have a social ethic. The only question is whether that ethic is Christian.

You will find a kindred methodological conviction in this journal with regards to mission. Being missional is not optional for the Church. For all churches are already missional, oriented around imaginations, beliefs and practices for life and living. The only question is what is that mission, and is it aligned around the God who is missional? For some it is so obvious that as Christopher Wright notes, to talk about Missional Church is like talking about a 'female woman'.

So this issue of the *Journal of Missional Practice* makes a focused turn to explore the practices of God's people within the mission of God. How can we, the Church, participate with the God who is missional? It is not that earlier issues of this journal have not forayed into exploring missional practices already, for the Church is an open inter-ecclesial dialogue within its own practices of reflection.<sup>[3]</sup> By that I mean that to reflect on the mission of God is to reflect on the practices of God's people. We cannot talk about the God who is missional without reflecting on the practices of the people of God, and the first issues of this journal evidence that understanding wonderfully.

Exploring *how* the practices of the Church can and ought to be missional is of a different order of magnitude to asserting that the practices of the Church *should be* missional. So it was a delight to read the varied, rich and nuanced articles in this journal issue that recognize this challenge and respond at the level it warrants. They do not seek to define the missional practices of the Church, but rather begin to explore this most difficult question of all - if God is a God of mission, how are we to be missional in our practices and participation with Him?

Alan Roxburgh with his Keynote article is provocative, as we might expect of him! Alan claims that there is an ecclesiocentricity in the missional movement and conversation that is eclipsing the very understanding of God as missional. A rich understanding of the God of mission and how practices align around that has for Roxburgh become replaced with a thin veneer of the use of the term 'missional' within church tactics. Missional Churches have largely integrated the term *missional* into their ongoing business as usual in discussions about church growth and health. Roxburgh diagnoses the cause of this as the ongoing obsession with Church, such that the word missional is simply a modifier of the word Church in the phrase *missional church*. Roxburgh is careful not to reject the Church, but wants us to start outside the current Church. For he claims that it only outside the Church that we might understand the God who is missional and what missional practices might entail.

I understand his sentiments, and have observed how all too easily, missional is tagged onto church tactics and programs without any real understanding of Missional. But I wonder if something else is taking place that gives rise to this, which is perhaps the opposite of Alan's claim.

The issue of qualifiers and terms, of how one eclipses the other, has also been raised by Hauerwas. With Hauerwas the danger is that the qualifier eclipses the main term, and for Hauerwas the main term is Ecclesial – the Church. Missional Church understood this way, is therefore in danger of removing any weight and understanding of the Church within a missional horizon. For example, Emerging Church, Organic Church, Cell Church, etc. run the risk of a focus on the modifier that does not allow for any real ecclesial understanding within the horizons of those modifiers. Dough Gay says something similar wanting to place some ‘weight’ upon the ‘Church’ of the ‘Emerging Church’ where all too often Emerging has led to the loss of Church. He suggests that we would be better served to talk of the ‘Church Emerging’ as ‘a conscious attempt to re-weight the term towards ecclesiology’.[4] With a similar regard to Missional, we might then suggest that what we need to talk about is the ‘Church that is Missional’. That would re-weight our focus on ecclesiology, and is something very different to what Alan is suggesting. In other words, the problem is not of ecclesiocentricity but one of de-ecclesiologizing.

Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost, both very involved and well known in the Missional Church movement, are perhaps examples of this de-ecclesiologizing.[5] Their focus and claim is that the Missional takes priority; with ecclesiology as something that comes along afterwards, taking its shape from an understanding of that mission. Yet this often leads to the opposite of their hopes. The overweighting on the Missional too often leads to the practices of Church becoming separated from that very mission.[6]

The rest of Alan’s article seems to reduce the Church to being a place where worship, Eucharist and confessions take place with no engagement in the real world and current contexts. For Alan, churches have become dematerialised and disembodied from their current missional context. I suspect the opposite has happened, that those seeking to be missional have all too often become embedded into the social practices, social structures and realities of modern western society. It is a paucity and lack of understanding of ecclesiology that gives rise to a captivity to the formational forces of society. Here we perhaps see Alan’s Anabaptist leanings, and my more Anglo-Catholic ecclesial understandings.

In any event, I have dwelt on my response to Alan, to show how I have found this journal issue provocative, as I hope you will. But also because I do believe that the issue of where is the Church and how it is connected to contextual and worship practices, is one of the most important issues for anyone exploring all things missional. It is also one thread that I see woven through all of the other articles in this issue (and might warrant a journal issue to itself).

Phil Meadows begins his article on ‘Wesleyan Wisdom for Mission-Shaped Discipleship’ with the bold claim that, ‘It is not that the church of God has a mission, but that the mission of God has a church; or, in other words, missiology precedes ecclesiology’. Phil much like Alan wants to start outside the Church to understand the Missional, claiming ‘it is not ‘churches’ but ‘people’ that participate in the mission of God.’ Phil’s focus is on how people as individuals participate in the mission of God, rather than churches. He draws on Methodist resources to demonstrate that claim and suggest how ‘mission is an inherently personal matter, primarily expressed in movements of divine love and grace, before it is expressed in church structures and strategies’. Can we pit the individual against an understanding of

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the Church in the way that Phil suggests?

Then Roy Searle and Joshua Searle propose that whilst spiritual disciplines have long been examined for individual spiritual formation, they have not been correlated against the formation of missional communities. Roy and Joshua make a theological reading of the worship practices of the Northumbria community, and suggest how the rule of faith in that community has given rise to the formation of a new monastic community, one that is socially transformative and missional, in the way that Church presently is not. For example they share with us how 'In the Community we often say that if you want to see the signs of the kingdom of God, don't look within the walls of the church, but seek for the kingdom in the streets.' Again we see that thread of ecclesiology and practices, and are left asking if the wider Church really is that far outside of missional practice?

Then Christopher James takes inspiration from Ignatius of Loyola for suggesting 'Practices for a Missional Church Planting Order'. His account is in a similar vein to Roy and Joshua Searle, of how monastic rules of faith might provide resources for worship practices able to establish missional communities within church planting (but draws on a wide variety of theological missional sources instead of a particular community). Christopher's focus is Christocentric, with a belief that worship practices can lead to an orientation around a narrative for living that is ultimately missional. In other words, worship can help us see how God is missional and give us a vision for our life with that narrative as an alternative to the other narratives offered by modern society.

Then we have Ash Barker who explores how life in consumer society trains us into pathological isolation, unable to undertake the very practices that lead to real community. Ash maps how intense practices of Christian community in slums and impoverished areas can lead to the sense of community many people in western society are looking for. But he is the first to admit not all Christians are called to this lifestyle and he is left wondering what would impact the larger swathes of Christians in the world into a more missional life.

His work, as indeed this whole journal issue, left me with a lingering question. What kind of Christian worship and practices are able to train us into participating naturally in the mission of God? Beyond small committed communities that see themselves outside the larger 'Church', what is the hope and possibility for missional life by the broader Church? So I invite you to read this issue with an eye to those questions, and those of your own, as together we seek to better understand how to participate with the God of mission.

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[1]Hauerwas, Stanley, *The Peaceable Kingdom : A Primer in Christian Ethics*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SCM Press, 2009), 99.

[2]<http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2010/10/missional-church-is-like-female-woman.html>, accessed 26<sup>th</sup> November 2013.

[3] For an exploration and example of this kind of 'reflexive-practice' methodology see Doug Gay, *Remixing The Church: Towards an Emerging Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 2011)

[4] Doug Gay, *Remixing The Church*, xiii

[5] Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003.)

[6] This problem of making too little of ecclesiology within missional horizons is something others, such as David Fitch have explored, see David Fitch. *The End of Evangelicalism? Discerning a New Faithfulness for Mission: Towards an Evangelical Political Theology (Theopolitical Visions)*. (Eugene, OR: CascadeBooks, 2011.)



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