

Developing Missional Leadership

The shifts in North American culture over the last forty years, since the “revolution” of the 1960’s, have had an extreme impact, mostly negative, on the church. Yet, they have produced a society much closer to the situation found in the days when the New Testament was written. There is not room to catalog all that has changed, nor the timeline of its appearance. It serves our purpose to focus on a few key characteristics that radically differentiate the ministry context of churches in pre-1965 North America and the context of churches today in 2006.

I choose “pre-1965” as the time when the institutional church, mainline Protestant, evangelical, and especially Southern Baptist, was in its heyday. Southern Baptists after WWII began a frenzy of church planting to “church” the hundreds of thousands of Southerners who were displaced in the search for war-industry jobs and remained for the surge of industrial expansion that followed in the late 1940’s and 1950’s. The pattern of culture in America was invariably Judeo-Christian. Churches were seen through the lens of manufacturing and business, and so were developed into “institutions” of faith and worship; structured, hierarchical, productive, and orderly. Buildings were an important component of producing believers and meeting their needs. Programs of all sorts, complete with staff, budgets, curriculum, and measurements of success were the norm. The church as business, developed as it was in a time of great expansion, became the normal and normative way to do church in North America.

This normative view of the institutional church continues to persist to this day. In the case of Southern Baptists, our seminary curriculum, though shifting some, still basically produces graduates competent to function and lead in this environment. The emphasis is on developing people who can function well in a context of organizational complexity and hierarchical, business-like structures.

There is overwhelming evidence, however, that the form of church that thrived in the middle of the last century is ill-suited to cultural context facing the church in more and more communities across North America. A new context, radically discontinuous from that of mid-20th-century, calls for rethinking the structures and organization that “clothe” Christ’s church. This rethinking must include rethinking the kind of leader needed to foster the healthy development of new churches to reach the residents of these new contexts. The current fad term for the kind of contextualized church needed in this new setting is “missional” and so we want to look at missional leadership for this new day.

What are the key shifts that define this new context in which the church must thrive? Avoiding a catalogue of changes, this writer sees a few changes that are crucial to understanding the new kind of leader we must produce. And chief among these changes is the fact that Christendom is dead in North America. What I mean by Christendom is the assumption of correctness of Judeo-Christian values that guided choices in government, public education, and the conduct of business. It includes the preferential treatment of churches and synagogues in tax policy, and the fact that they had an influential voice in the local and national community when discussions of policy ensued.

One icon of Christendom was the posting of the ten commandments in seats of government and in our schools.

That day is gone. The shift against a preferential view of Judeo-Christian values gained momentum throughout the period I described, but critical mass in the United States was reached only in the last decade or so – as shown by the almost universal removal of the icon (the Ten Commandments) from all public venues.

A second earthquake-like change in North America has been the shift from an objective view of truth and choices made through rational process, to a subjective view of truth and the testing of truth claims first by experience. Many people today validate truth claims pragmatically, by experiencing the conduct implied by the claim, rather than looking for rational argument and evidence to justify a choice. This experiential approach to life places priority on the journey; that is the history of our personal choices and experiences that have shaped who we are today. Relationships become primary, not truth claims, in people's search for spiritual meaning. Corollary to this experiential approach to life is a mistrust of institutions as centers of truth and control. North American individualism has been cultivated by forces antagonistic to historic Christianity. The focus given to "fallen" leaders, both in the church and in all the institutions of American society, exacerbates the aversion to be identified with an institution – the church among the list of organizations found repellent.

The third shift, and the last I will mention in view of the limitations of length, is the increasing cultural fragmentation of North America. Canada explicitly embraced "multiculturalism" as a doctrine of state. No one religious view will get preference. This is becoming the de-facto situation in the United States. What this means for the church is that assumptions about world view that shaped our evangelism and every other aspect of how we engage the society around us no longer are true. Cultural diversity is the normal situation of ministry in North America. In many areas, the "granularity" of culture shift is so small that it is impossible to describe the cultural context of even one zip code in a city. True, most of these highly diverse areas are in the urban core, so churches that grow by attracting a monolithic subculture of significant size will still thrive in the suburbs today. Diversity is the future, however, even in the suburbs and rural areas. Assumptions of worldview will cripple the missional leader of tomorrow.

Even as brief a survey of the changed cultural landscape as appears above makes clear that a shift is needed in the leaders emerging for tomorrow's church. The training of an institutional leader places a premium on skills related to managing complexity, both structural and organizational. Institutional leaders are trained to develop elements of church programming and structure that are attractive, pulling people from the society into the church, and often packaged as a program complete with staff training, curriculum, and advertising. The ability to "read" a culture and penetrate it with ministry is only a third level concern, at best. Management skills are first, and program selection and maintenance skills are second. The last thing to note is that leadership in the institutional church allows for a level of anonymity and distance from the rank and file members which make a leader's modeling of the Christian life less visible.

Missional leadership changes all of these elements. In the new context where relationships are valued far more than institutions, the leader's character and relational ability are crucial. Rather than the ability to manage complexity, the ability to manage multiple networks of relationships is crucial. Rather than anonymity, the character of the church planting leader is on display all the time. In fact the quality of their character becomes the primary attractive element in bringing people to Christ. The plant a church out of who they are rather than credentials or attractive programming. The missional leader must focus on modeling, mobilizing, and multiplying, all primarily on a relational level. Organization will emerge as the church planter brings various relational networks together, but this organic development of church will resist traditional institutional forms by its very nature.

How then can we describe a missional leader, distinguishing them from the leader that is needed for the institutional church? Again, let us focus on a few critical distinctives.

Seven Characteristics of a missional leader

They grasp the importance of leading like Jesus

When we examine the teaching of Jesus, we are confronted by the strong emphasis he place on obedience as the basis for discerning a true disciple (John 14:21 as just one example of this pervasive theme.) On an individual basis, this stands out. A missional leader will show a strong commitment to obey the Lord as he reveals his will, especially through his Word. This quality of obedient living implies a corollary commitment to the authority of the Word, as our primary guide to God's will. It also implies that God's will shapes the leaders vision, even pre-empts it at times, just as was true for Paul.

Shifting from discipleship to leadership, Jesus' words on servant leadership are foundational for how a missional leader behaves in order to enter and influence a relationship-driven context (Mark 10:41-45). The leader's character is revealed as they serve others, both believers and non-believers. In the broader view of the New Testament this is affirmed by Paul in Galatians 6:7-10. It is interesting in this passage that the negative consequences of an impulsive, experiential lifestyle are contrasted with a life of doing good – exactly the choice people in this missional context face.

A third aspect of leading like Jesus is the taking of faith-based risks. Jesus was not afraid to offend the high and powerful when he was sure God was leading; he took on the elemental forces of nature and the demonic powers under the same assurance. His words in John 5:18-20 make clear that in each of the circumstances where he acted, it was in faith that his Father was there acting before him.

They don't assume a friendly environment in which to carry out church life

The missional leader has come to grips with the end of Christendom. They don't assume nor expect a friendly environment in which to carry out church life. Coupled with an

incarnational approach to ministry, they are not afraid to confront initial skepticism or even antagonism, but aggressively enter the context as a servant. Over time they win the respect and trust of people in the networks they enter through genuine concern, integrity, and a willingness to put others interests above their own. This finds a responsive chord in the hearts of individuals in whom the Spirit is at work. They are drawn to these leaders by their exemplary life and are won to faith through their witness.

A second aspect of environment is culture. The missional leader is not afraid of a multi-cultural ministry setting. Different worldviews provide new apologetic opportunities and the potential to win people to Christ who will, in turn, impact their country of origin. A missional leader builds faith communities made up of converts from many different backgrounds, and lets the culture of the church reflect the indigenous flavor of all these cultural sources. If the differences are too great, the missional leader organically starts additional communities of faith to keep the gospel spreading.

They work opportunistically rather than routinely

A missional leader in the new context expects to find God at work in the most unlikely of circumstances and among the seemingly least receptive individuals. Because of this expectation that God has already been “here,” they initiate conversations and acts of selfless service crowned with offers of prayer and words of witness wherever they find themselves. A primary strategy is to look for new networks, enter them, then pray, talk, and serve until God shows them the “person of peace” who will help the gospel spread through that whole network. The opportunity to enter a new network of relationships may come unexpectedly, though the planter also works intentionally. Nevertheless, the planter is always ready to follow up a divine appointment.

Their focus is expansion of the Kingdom, not preservation of an institution

The new context presents the institutional church with tremendous challenges. Sustaining the institutional organization as it grows takes ever-increasing sums of money just to continue operations. Yet institutional preservation is not a Kingdom value. Throughout history organizations have begun, served God’s purpose for a time, then passed off the scene. A missional leader is cautious of entanglements with buildings and formal organizations. Though often useful tools, they must be held in an open hand, ready for the day when God decides to take that tool away and give us another. A missional leader works in contexts where the culture makes owning a building and developing a large organization problematic; it may happen, but often much more slowly than in prior days. For that reason, they learn not to depend on structures that tie up large sums of money and create boundaries on how expansive a ministry can become. Using resources without becoming tied to them is a spiritual discipline. It marks the missional leader.

They foster relational structures rather than institutional structures

There is no doubt that compared to institutional structures, relational structures seem chaotic. One of the reasons organization emerges is to reduce and control the chaos of purely relational networks. The missional leader uses organization in this way, and allows it to take appropriate institutional form, but they allow the growing edge of the church to remain purely relational and learn to live with the chaos this implies. If we take a tree for an analogy, the trunk moves very little, the branches somewhat more, but the twigs and leaves are constantly in motion under the influence of the wind, and the whole tree expands as the leaves manufacture sugars to nourish the expansion of the tree.

They disciple with a view to deployment on mission, not servicing the organization

One typical characteristic of the institutional church is that as it ages an ever higher percentage of its workers and leaders are deployed to service existing members and maintain the organization. The more “successful” the church is, the larger it grows, the more complex it becomes, and the greater the pressure to deploy workers to maintain it. Without a clear missional vision, a church can easily end up investing almost all of its workers and leaders inward, leaving none to reach out to the surrounding lost community.

A missional leader maintains a hard commitment to raise up leaders primarily for kingdom extension, not maintenance. This implies a certain bias towards limiting size to control complexity. A missional leader embraces this as an opportunity to plant other daughter churches by sending out leaders and workers into the harvest fields. This doesn't imply that all large churches are not missional, but it does suggest that size is not a major criterion in decision-making. If the Lord grants a large membership to a missional church, they will take that blessing and strategize how to turn more laborers into the harvest fields

The commitment to deploy workers into the harvest also has a broad scope. As workers mature from converts to disciples to leaders, the missional leader works to match them to their proper field. Some will maintain the local church, some will extend that church through local evangelism, some will cross cultures to evangelize and plant, some will form teams to minister in distant places. Each makes up a component of a missional vision.

They believe the Kingdom is bigger than the church

They move out in ministry expecting God to already be at work there, and that he desires to show them how to join him. The Holy Spirit is constantly at work in the hearts of non-believers drawing them toward him. When the community of faith reaches out into their community, they find people prepared by him to believe. They find opportunities for service and witness. They find a door of ministry opened by him. As the souls of people are prepared for God's people to share good news, some of them become “persons of peace” who open the door into a network of relationships. The missional church is

continually seeking to find and enter additional networks of relationships through which the gospel can spread naturally. The missional leader thrives when his church is surrounded by a lost world needing a savior.

They see the church as an outpost of the Kingdom that exists to bring God's influence into the affairs of men in that area. For that Christendom leader, they thrive on being an insider able to influence the process by direct interaction with friends in government, the school system, and community organizations. This is the nature of organizations in general. Three people with an opinion have little influence, but give them a name like; "The Three People With an Opinion Advocacy Group" and now society must deal with them, the same as if they were a huge group. There is still a place for this strategy, but the missional leader's heart doesn't care as much for that kind of influence as for influencing the world to experience transformation, one soul at a time. Being disconnected from the seats of power merely gives the missional leader greater focus on the surrounding situation of souls.

They believe that the wider their outreach, the greater the harvest. A friend, John Worcester, describes two kinds of churches, frog churches and lizard churches. Both frogs and lizards eat bugs, but how they get their dinner is quite different. The frog sits on its lily pad and waits for dinner to fly by. The lizard scurries through the brush stirring up the bugs. In the church world, frog churches primarily wait for the lost to come to them, while lizard churches aggressively go out into the community serving and sharing with the lost. This second kind of church is what a missional leader gravitates towards

Finally, they freely invest resources to bless other ministries, without seeking credit for their participation. Being kingdom minded; believing that the Kingdom is bigger than your church and your interests; that is at the heart of a missional leader's strategy. Philippians 2:3,4 resonates throughout their ministry.

Developing Missional Church Planters

The previous section has described a missional leader in terms of seven characteristics that distinguish them from a Christendom leader. Many of these leaders will emerge from the harvest and serve in their place without the intervention of denominational or strategic leaders. Nevertheless, North America is a place where missional leaders are needed to penetrate pockets of lostness where no church exists. They must be found, trained, and deployed effectively so that they multiply themselves through a grass-roots movement of church planting. How do we foster this process?

Finding Missional Leaders

The first issue is finding these people. Some NAMB estimates suggest the number of lost in North America at 220 million. A set of studies by the Barna Group suggest that the number of "born again believers" has fluctuated from 41% down to 38% between 2002

and 2004, then rebounded some to 40% in 2005¹. As the North American population increases this means an ever increasing number of lost people. These numbers suggest that most of the missional leaders needed for church planting will not come from graduate theology schools. At best they turn out a few hundred church planters per year. A 60% lostness ratio on our current population of 300 million implies at least 180 million lost. Whether we use The Barna Group's estimate, or NAMB's estimate, we need a huge number of new communities of faith, started primarily through evangelism, just to catch up. Where our seminaries can provide qualified leaders we will rejoice, but we need a system that works with people holding bachelor degrees in some career-wage field, high school diplomas and union jobs, even laborers with little education.

Where leaders exist, the primary element of assessment is mature, obedient Christian character. Since the ability to engage with the lost through incarnational ministry and relation-based witness is primary, the foundation for this becomes primary in assessment – strong character. This is difficult to assess in a format similar to the Ridley Assessment. Instead, the testimony of many witnesses to the lifestyle of a potential planter is critical. This implies interviewing the leaders of churches where these potential missional church planters are currently serving.

Missional leaders do their work through evangelistic engagement within the relational networks of their community, and by mobilizing each convert to reach their family and friends. This evangelistic environment deemphasizes crusade type ministry and shifts the emphasis to personal evangelism and evangelistic Bible Studies. Again, this is observable behavior as they take initiative in their local church. Additional training will probably be needed, but the natural motivation to evangelize in these ways should be there.

Missional leaders will likely be working in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic situations. Candidates need to be assessed for the ability to form relationships with people from divergent cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The best indicator that a person has this ability is that they are currently in a multi-cultural church. Other indicators are real enjoyment of ministry on short-term cross-cultural mission trips, and stories of friendships that cross cultural lines.

The last special assessment issue for missional leaders is their skill at networking for the purpose of sharing the gospel and creating chains of witnessing relationships. This has two aspects. The first is a certain perspective that keeps them looking for new networks to enter, even after they have one identified and witnessing relationships established. It is not clear that this non-linear approach to networking can be taught, or if it must be assessed for as a part of wiring. The second aspect of networking is recognizing a “person of peace” and the network they influence in all the various forms in which they appear. This can be trained, but also needs to be intuitive.

¹ The Barna Group, *The State of the Church Report: 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005*. Summarized on The Barna Group website under the search topic, “Born Again Christians”

The assessment implications of the above assertions are that we need a much closer relationship with those churches that have a kingdom vision, whether they would be classified as missional or Christendom in perspective. A partnership must be strengthened that allows us to “fish” for planters among their leaders, but in a way that also blesses their church. One approach might be to redefine the basic missional worker as a new work starter for the local church. Their task would be to start new Sunday School classes or small groups in places and among people that the church has not yet reached. Most of these new work starters would operate at a level that would keep them connected to that local church, expanding its ministry through evangelism and group formation. Some, perhaps 10% would show the ability to grow into an independent worker. These few, now people whose ministry behavior is known and has been tracked by church planter recruiters, can be jointly trained and jointly deployed by the church, the local association, the state convention, and NAMB. Those that do well as independent new work starters – planting bi-vocational churches – could be encouraged to attend formal theological training and redeployed as strategic church planters in new locations where there is no multiplying network already in existence.

Training deployed planters

The distinct characteristics needed in a missional church planter suggest to this writer that a mentored approach will be more fruitful than just coaching. There will need to be life-on-life character development at an ever-deeper level if the planter is to expand a missional ministry that is based on his character as much as skill, and that of those who follow him. Missional leadership is very much a balance between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. While coaching helps the planter in skill areas that are crucial to a solid and evangelistically-expanding community of faith, mentoring focuses on character and personhood areas, without which the credibility of the planter suffers.

The issue of the planter’s character has been adequately addressed, but the kind of ministry they need to be trained into is distinct. I would call it grace-based because it attempts to disciple around the perceived work of God in individual lives rather than according to a strict curriculum or schedule of preaching. It must focus on matters of the heart rather than rules. There are many books on discipleship which offer a systematic approach and suggested topics, so we will not try to replicate them here. It only needs to be noted that obedience-based discipleship is the only foundation upon which leadership skills can be built that results in the kind of leadership essential for missional church planting.

One of the nagging issues that presents in a fast-developing network of missional churches is the availability of wise counsel, and conversely of mature accountability, to the young church planter who is being trained primarily on-the-job. As networks expand, their ability to stay sound in doctrine and practice depends not only on their dependence on the Holy Spirit, but also on this factor of mature leaders in their circle of influence. The trainer or network strategist really has only two options. The first is to import more formally trained leaders of excellent character to maintain a proper span of influence and accountability. The second approach is to somehow slow the rate at which the network

of new churches multiplies to allow the most mature members of the network to get formal theological training and provide an anchor of sound doctrine and practice to the whole. Otherwise the church planting strategist's success sows seeds of future destruction or stagnation.

Leadership emergence in the missional church

Evangelistically effective churches that also have a working strategy for assimilation and maturation of converts will grow. Within this growing church the need for additional leadership is always pressing. No matter what the model or organizational pattern, every growing church needs lay leaders. When we focus on the missional church, with its outreach orientation, workers of high character who take initiative to reach their own network of friends and family, are very valuable. As with the planter, their personal ministry drives off of character and initiative. The same approach to character development in discipling of leaders would apply to developing mature workers. As I suggested earlier, most of these mobilized workers who demonstrate leadership ability will start something that reaches their family and friends and melds them into the existing church. Hopefully, the planter will realize that a very healthy characteristic of church planting networks that is true of missional churches in general is the rapid redeployment of new Christians to reach their relational network.

Many new believers don't display leadership ability. Nevertheless, the encouragement to tell their story in partnership with an emerging leader in their church, can still result in expanding the kingdom through missional ministry to their network of family and friends. Matched to their gifting and working in teams, a balanced missional life can develop that ministers and witnesses to several relational networks connected to a church plant. Historically, a mobilized membership, working together according to God's gifting has been the normal method by which whole regions have been salted down with New Testament churches.

Summary

The missional church, always moving outward in ministry and witness, needs missional leadership. It needs people whose eyes are focused outward, looking for the harvest fields, committed to exemplifying the character and life of Jesus in everyday circumstances. The rapid development of large numbers of these leaders will require a retooling of our methods of assessment, the character of our partnerships with church and seminary, and the way we disciple and develop leaders for the church planting work. Each of these changes will disrupt complex inter-relationships of long standing, yet these changes must come.

The leaders we need by the thousands will be a peculiar people when compared to the leaders of Christendom; driven to expand relationships rather than organizations, focused on character development rather than influence, and unshaken by a hostile culture. Their chief pride will be in multiplying themselves over and over by raising up other missional leaders to extend God's Kingdom through evangelism, ministry, and church planting.