

## A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America

Excerpted from a presentation by Inagrace Dietterich at American Society for Missiology  
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**What is “Missional Church”?** The phrase “missional church” has entered the vocabulary of the church in North America. A few years ago, I participated in a conference focused on “missional church” sponsored by the United Church of Canada. During this conference two speakers used this language but in very different ways. The pastor of a mega-church, Walt Kallestad (author of *Entertainment Evangelism*), described the endeavors of his “missional church” to buy a huge acreage to develop a campus for ministries to meet the self-defined needs of the “unchurched” in the suburbs of Phoenix, AZ. A later speaker, Jim Wallis of Sojourners, used the phrase “missional church” to describe the activities of his faith community which engages in ministry with the poor and homeless on the streets of Washington, D.C. As Alan Roxburgh, one of the co-authors of *Missional Church: The Vision of the Church in North America*, observed about the impact of that book:

“In a very brief period of time a new form of language entered the common conversation of the church and diffused itself across all forms of church life. At the same time, it is still not understood by the vast majority of people in either leadership or pew. This is a stunning accomplishment: from obscurity to banality in [a few] short years and people still don’t know what it means.”

From my perspective, and I believe, from the perspective of the other authors of “Missional Church,” the ambiguity of missional language is built in. There is no one model, no one set of qualities or characteristics that designate a congregation as a “missional church.” This is because my working definition of a missional church is a faith community of people discerning and participating in God’s mission. As a dynamic process, the outcome of their discernment and participation will undoubtedly vary given their unique circumstances. The focus of missional congregations is twofold: at the center of their life together, they spend time together, opening their minds and hearts—and imaginations—to the movement of the Holy Spirit through prayer and worship, Bible study and conversation. At the same time, missional congregations engage in research and analysis regarding their missional context, asking “What are the principalities and powers that are blocking the fulfillment of human life as intended by God?” Thus missional congregations do not withdraw from the world but neither do they uncritically embrace the standards of the world. As together they discern God’s mission **and** discern the challenges of their context, missional congregations will shape their life and ministry in distinctive ways. Through the active illumination and inspiration of the Spirit, congregations are called and empowered for particular ministries within their particular situations utilizing their particular gifts.

My ministry, as the Director of Theological Research with the Center for Parish Development, has involved developing biblical and theological resources to bring members of congregations together to pray, study, and talk as they seek to discern God's call for their future. Over the years we have found that central problem is that it is very difficult for people to imagine the church in any way different from that which they have known. And, at least in North America saturated with marketing and consumerism, most people understand the church, in George Hunsberger's terms, "as a vendor of religious goods and services." Rather than focus upon a sociological analysis of the church ten years after the publication of *Missional Church*, I would like to explore the role of the "missionary spirit" who forms and empowers missional congregations. Such congregations are not only the agents of God's mission, but the locus of mission. I believe that this discussion continues the theological work begun by the ecumenical team in the writing of *The Missional Church*. I will consider the role of the Holy Spirit within and among congregations as the Creator Spirit, Eschatological Spirit, and the Community Forming (Koinonia) Spirit.

### **The Missionary Spirit**

As with many of you gathered here, the life and work of Lesslie Newbigin has been a powerful influence upon my ministry. In the small booklet, *Mission in Christ's Way*, Newbigin expresses the connections between the Holy Spirit and the mission of the church. "It is not that the church has a mission and the Spirit helps us in fulfilling it. It is rather that the Spirit is the active missionary, and the church (where it is faithful) is the place where the Spirit is enabled to complete the Spirit's work" (Newbigin, 1987:20).

The community forming Spirit who actualizes God's eschatological vision for humanity is also the Creator Spirit who gives life to all that exists. Thus God's hope and promise are intended not only for the Christian community but for the whole of created reality. As God's energizing breath the Holy Spirit seeks to revitalize, renew, and transform life, to give flesh and breath to dry bones and to turn hearts of stone into hearts that beat again. The future-oriented, promise-filled, and hope-inspired life of believing and worshiping communities is intended to give witness to God's intention for the whole of God's creation.

Much more than a burden, mission is the overflow of a great gift—the gift of new life in the Spirit. The mission of the church is not a strategy or a program but the fulfillment of a promise: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8).<sup>1</sup> As they experience love, forgiveness, and freedom within the *koinonia* of the Spirit, Christian communities give evidence that God's redemptive future has dawned as well as a guarantee of its final consummation.

The church's mission is initiated by an explosion of joy—the good news that the rejected and crucified Jesus lives. The active presence of the Spirit began to form a new people who concretely experienced God's reign of justice, righteousness, and peace. It is a striking fact that within the Book of Acts proclamations of the gospel come as responses to questions. According to Newbigin: "There is something present, a new reality, which calls for explanation and so prompts the question to which the preaching of the gospel is the answer" (Newbigin 1989:117) As a people "walking in the Spirit" and manifesting the "fruit of the Spirit," Christian communities stimulate people to ask questions about how they can live in such a manner. It is within such communities that the promised fulfillment of all creation is visible, tangible, and capable of being experienced, even though not yet perfected.

The church's mission of proclaiming and embodying the good news of what God has done in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world is empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is the liberating and transforming presence of the Spirit—the missionary Spirit—which constitutes the church as a witness to the mighty acts of the living God. As observed by John V. Taylor in his wonderful book *The Go-between God: The Holy Spirit and Christian Mission*: "Our theology would improve if we thought more of the church being given to the Spirit than of the Spirit being given to the church" (Taylor 1972: 33).

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. What is the mission of the church?
2. What is the connection between the Holy Spirit and the church's mission?
3. What are the implications –

for your ministry?

for efforts of transformation in the church?

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Please contact the Center for Parish Development for access to the complete text of Ingrace Dietterich's presentation or those of other presenters.



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