

# **Navigating the Missional Church:** Understanding the journey...

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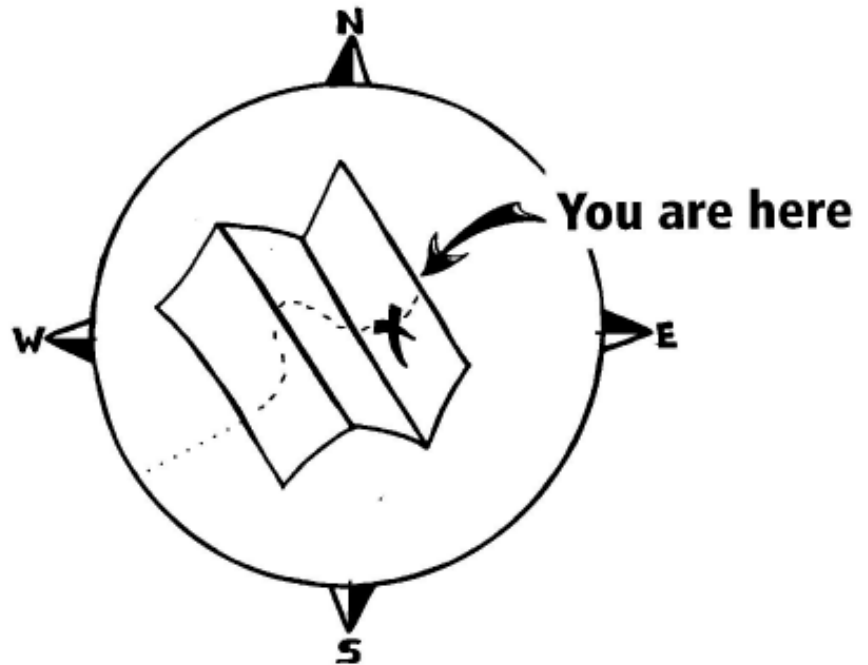
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# Navigating the Missional Church:

## Understanding the journey...



## Starting points:

Where you go depends on how you start. Destinations are closely connected to starting points.

Imagine you are in a canoe at the edge of a lake, ready to launch yourself on a journey. How well you navigate will affect the success of the trip. Are you at the correct starting point? How clear is the map you are using? How well can you relate the map to the terrain around you?

So it is with theological “canoe trips.” How you start already affects the outcome of the journey. This is true of what has come to be known as the “missional church” concept. Most “missional church” thinking is not new. For some, the starting point may be new; thankfully, we have a 2000 year-old, biblical map to guide us along the way. How well we identify the starting point and relate the map to the terrain around us affects the outcome of the journey.

## Is “missional church” new?

This is not new. What is new for North American Mennonites, is the notion of speaking about mission with adjectives and adverbs instead of nouns and verbs—something we’re not use to. For example:

- Our activities are not simply **Mission** (noun) but **Missional** (adjective)
- We don’t just do Mission (verb) but live **Missionally** (adverb)

This seemingly small shift:

- Changes the focus from the program we administer to the character and purpose of the people administering it.
- Changes the focus from the activity to the nature and the characteristic of the activity.

## Missional church objectives:

What has become known as the missional church is a church that identifies its starting point on the missional map with God’s starting point. If we begin with this understanding, then it follows that all aspects of the church, be they the finance committee, the worship team, the pastoral care team, or the Christian education efforts, are guided by the same starting point. In effect, God has already told us where to start.

Let’s go back to the source and look at the origins of the missional map—in, particular, five **Core Beliefs** that help determine the starting point of a missional journey—or canoe trip, if you will—and some biblical affirmations of these beliefs.

## Core Belief 1

### “In the beginning, God...” (Gen. 1:1)

All mission begins with God’s initiative. Our understanding of Core Belief 1 is guided by two principles:

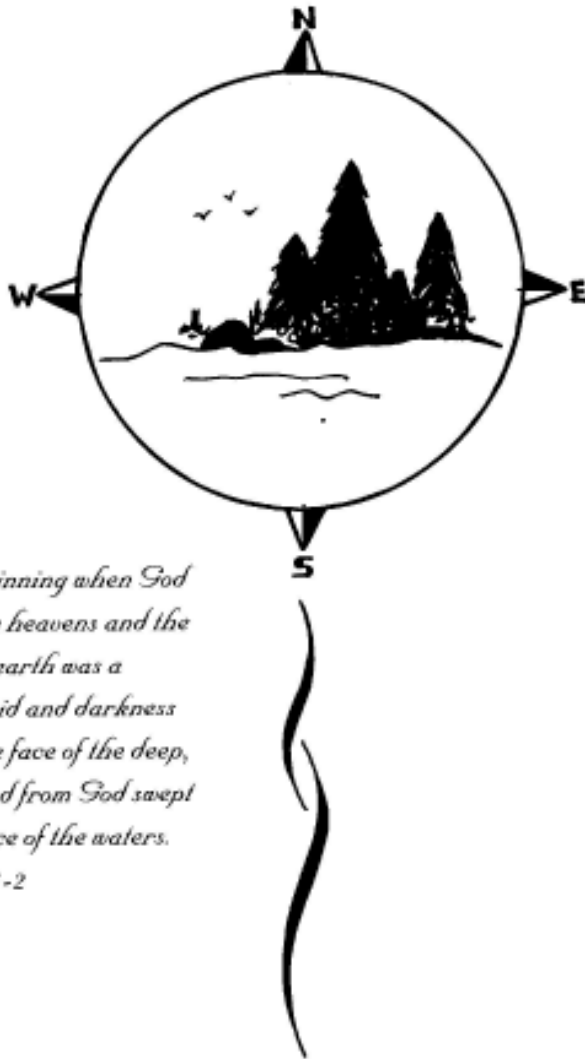
#### It’s God’s Mission

The church’s purpose in the world can be better understood when we acknowledge that the initiative **for** mission and the possibility for our involvement **in** mission come from God. We acknowledge that:

- God is the starting point;
- God is the first missionary to the world;
- God provides the possibility, unity, strategy, and energy for mission.

#### God is God and we are not

- If God initiates mission, then our role is to respond to God’s initiatives;
- Worship, gratitude, and obedience are appropriate human responses to God’s invitation to participate in mission.



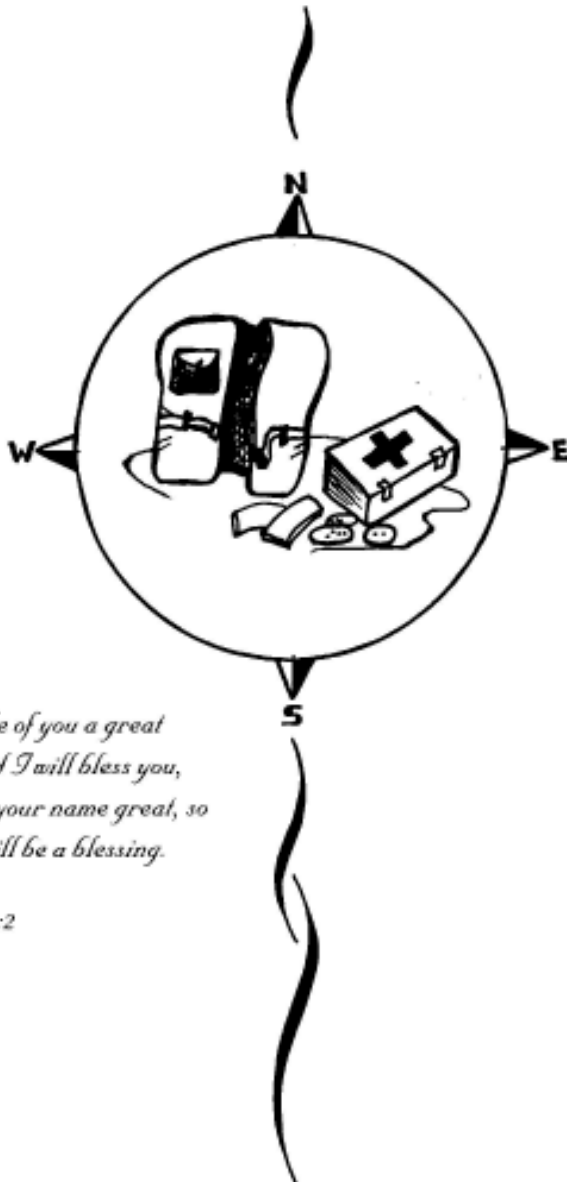
*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.  
Genesis 1:1-2*

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### Biblical background:

The idea that God initiates mission and we do not is affirmed throughout the entire Bible:

- The creation accounts, where all of God’s creative activity is *intended* to be “very good”;
- In the flood accounts, God *restores* and *reconciles* humanity;
- God *calls* Abram and Sarah to *go* and *be a blessing* to all nations;
- God *directs* Moses to *liberate* slaves from oppression and bondage;
- God *leads* and *provides* laws and land to a pilgrim people;
- God’s many initiatives to consolidate the peoplehood of the Israelites (tribes of Israel);
- God *sends* Jesus as Messiah for the *salvation* of many;
- God *forms* the church at Pentecost;
- God *invites* us all to participate in the reconciling and restoring work of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18ff).
- Many other affirmations that God *initiates* activity in spite of who we are “...while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).



*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.*

*Genesis 12:2*

## Core Belief 2

**God's initiatives are designed to restore, reconcile, and save the world.**

This means that God's intention to create things that are "very good," continues to be the overall guiding principle for these "restoring," "reconciling," and "saving" activities (in other words, "to set things right in the world"). The clearest expression of God's reconciling power is shown in Jesus, whose life, death and resurrection, demonstrate not only what a reconciling life looks like, but also as the path to truth and life.

### **God's purpose = Our purpose**

The purposes of God's people (the church) are none other than the purposes of God. The church does not invent its own purpose for being. Therefore:

- The purpose of the church is to restore, reconcile, and save the world as God intended;
- This purpose is the "mission" of the church; it is the church's reason for being.

## Biblical background:

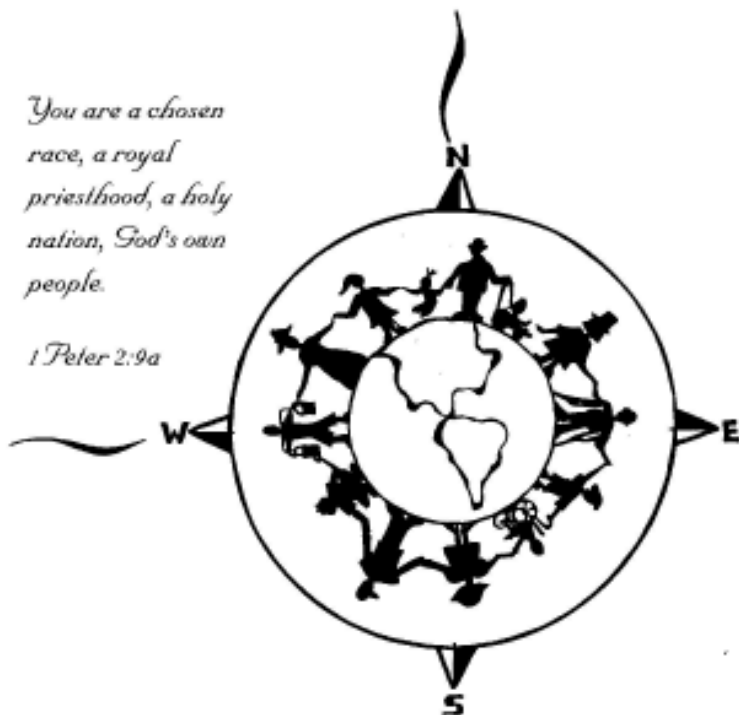
It's no accident that the Bible begins and ends with a harmonious picture of how creation within the full will of God would look (see Genesis 1-2, Garden of Eden; Revelation 21-22, The new Jerusalem). These "book-ends" are the starting point and the destination; the two are perfectly aligned:

- There is harmony between humanity and God;
- There is harmony among individuals, groups, sexes, races, and diverse throngs of people;
- There is harmony between human existence and the created order (the garden, the animals, the rivers, the trees). These provide life to one another.
- There is health and healing; pain is not present;
- The biblical story shows both misguided and healthy efforts to restore harmony, justice, salvation, liberation, shalom:

- |  |                                  |
|--|----------------------------------|
| • Abuse of political and religious power (misguided) | • Servanthood (healthy)          |
| • Land grabbing and kingdom creating (misguided)     | • Suffering for others (healthy) |
| • Military advancement/power grabbing (misguided)    | • Healing (healthy)              |

*You are a chosen  
race, a royal  
priesthood, a holy  
nation, God's own  
people.*

*1 Peter 2:9a*



### God has made us a People

Creating a peoplehood in line with God's purposes is the primary work of the Spirit of God in the past and in our world today:

- While "individuals" are called to respond to God's saving invitation, this is not meant to create an "individualistic" faith;
- When we put aside the health of the church body and favour our own personal preferences, we are not restoring or reconciling what God has intended.

### God calls us to be and do

Being a peoplehood is important because of who we are **and** what we do. "Being" and "doing" cannot be separated. When "being" conflicts with "doing" God's purposes are violated.

- Because the coherence of "being" and "doing" is so important, we must recognize that **doing** more does not necessarily mean we are **automatically** more aligned with God's purposes.

## Core Belief 3

**We are a "people of God" and a "people for God"—a people chosen, formed, and called by God.**

We are both the medium and the message of God's purposes. The creation of a "peoplehood" that reflects God's purposes is both the goal of God's design for the world and the strategy to get us there.

- In North America it is sometimes assumed that Christian mission can (and should) be separated from the Christian church—that the church can exist separately from its mission. This is an artificial separation (of "being" and "doing") that denies God's intentions.

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## Biblical background:

The Bible repeatedly emphasizes the creation of a "people" as central to God's purpose:

- The climax of creation is not the creation of a single human being, but the creation of a social/political peoplehood: humans in relationship with one another;
- Abram and Sarah are *called* as a people, to *form* a people, to *be a blessing* to other peoples;
- The "chosen people" strategy of the Bible is not favoritism or special status. All are invited to be one of a "chosen people". It is a model for the saving work of God in the world;
- The Tower of Babel is a story about how forming a "peoplehood" can go wrong: not because "peoplehood" is wrong, but because "peoplehood" disconnected from or replacing God's purposes is wrong;
- Covenant making in the Bible demonstrates an important function of building a "peoplehood": humans are meant to be in relationship with God and one another.
- Jesus began his ministry by re-creating the peoplehood (the 12 disciples symbolically replacing the 12 tribes);
- In Pentecost the Spirit was *poured out* to create a people of God.

## Core Belief 4

**God's people are called to be agents of change—ambassadors of reconciliation, restoration, and salvation in the world. The church is to align itself with God's purpose in the world.**

### A Peculiar People

If much of the world does not reflect the intentions of God, and if the church does, then the church will logically be different from society. Quakers use the term a "peculiar people" to make this distinction. The church is called to be an alternate society—a different political/social presence in the midst of many others.

- God's intentions—that which is "very good" can also be found beyond the church. The church joyfully discerns these intentions wherever they are found and aligns itself with them in the Spirit of God;
- Individuals (comprising a peoplehood radically committed to God's intentions) will navigate their theological canoes differently. Many will get distracted, diverted, or drift off course along the way; help will be needed to stay the course.
- The church invites the world to risk navigating by a different

map—God's map. Evidence is overwhelming by now that other "maps" are not leading to a destination of abundant living for all.



### The Price of Peculiarity

It's important to clearly understand that this "other-ness" or peculiar nature of a radically committed church may lead to misperceptions, persecution, suffering, and even martyrdom.

There are many examples where the church becomes a threat simply because it promotes "abundant life" using a different map. For example:

- non-cooperation with war efforts
  - emphasis on being a church rather than making sure of global corporate profit;
  - priority is placed on forming God's people rather than individualism, which leads to anonymity and alienation;
  - in all cases placing life-generating agenda over and above death-dealing initiatives.
- It is clear that the church, in being an alternative movement, is confronting powers and principalities that have both the capability and the political will to react negatively. Suffering, therefore, is not uncommon.

### Restoration through Suffering

It is through the wounds of a alternative community that the world can be saved, healed, and restored to its intended purposes. The many things that cause death are replaced by alternatives for a people willing to serve, and suffer if necessary.

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## Biblical background:

The Bible speaks constantly and persistently about the importance of a new peoplehood model.

- The prophet Isaiah spells out at length what this restored servanthood people would look like (Isaiah 40-55). His argument is that this people will bring healing and salvation to the world through woundedness, suffering, and death.
- The Apostle Paul speaks eloquently about a peoplehood founded on the "foolishness of the cross," an alternative that will be profoundly misunderstood by ruling "spiritualities" of our age (I Corinthians 2; Ephesians 6:12)
- Jesus' experience at the hands of the authorities of his time is an indication of what can be expected when God becomes real in the priorities of the people.
- The biblical writers are convinced that the existence of this renewed peoplehood is in itself the mission of the church (I Peter 2:9ff). This new reality will be reflected in its worship (Romans 12), will motivate its testimony (Book of Acts), will encourage its engagement of persecution (Book of Revelation), and will undergird its confrontation with other powers (Book of Ephesians).

*Peace be with you. As the  
Father has sent me, so  
send I you.*

*John 20:21*



### **We are Sent**

The church is a **sent** body, not simply a **sending** body.

- We understand ourselves to be a people “sent” into the world with a mission;
- Our “sent-ness” includes all members, not just those who go overseas or hold specific offices in the church;
- The primary locations to which we are all sent are our homes, our neighborhoods, and our vocations.

### **We are Blessed**

Among other things, baptism is the commissioning of a person for Christian mission, where the person’s “sent” status, as an integral part of a sent community, is formally acknowledged and blessed.

## **Core Belief 5**

**God sends the entire church— each one of its members and all of its activities, into the world to fulfill the restoring, reconciling, and saving purposes of God.**

### **We Celebrate**

Among other things, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is a gathering of the sent community to reflect on their mission, to recommit themselves to the Lord of the mission, and to remember their commissioning (baptism) for mission.

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## **Biblical background:**

The “sent” nature of the people of God is affirmed repeatedly throughout the biblical narrative:

- The sending of Abram and Sarah was meant to bless all the families of the earth;
- Isaiah suggests that “it is too small a thing” to be sent only to the tribes of Jacob, but the people of God are sent “as a light to the Gentiles,” to take the saving intentions of God to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:1-7).
- Jesus sends his fledgling church into “all the world” to make disciples (Matthew. 28:16ff.), and as witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (Acts A8);
- Jesus also sends the church when he says to the disciples: “as the Father sent me, so I send you...” (John 20:21).

# What does all this mean in practical terms?

Practically, this means that increased activity in a church does not necessarily mean that the church is more missional; if the activity is not clearly aligned with the purposes of the church's existence, then it is not missional.

In other words, the way to make an adjective or an adverb better is not by piling up more nouns and verbs, but by applying the adjective and the adverb to more nouns and verbs.

- Worship is done missionally (aligned with God's intentions for the world—inclusive, not exclusive)
- Christian education is done missionally (not only what we teach, but how we teach)
- Mission is done missionally (we are a sent people—sent into our homes, our neighborhoods, our vocations, as well as other places around the world)
- Stewardship is done missionally (we give time, energy, and talent as well as money)

In most congregations this is a shift and thus may be perceived as being new. For example, in many congregations this shift means that:

- Worship leaders will understand their missional role in leading worship and how God engages us in worship.
- The Sunday school teachers will understand the missional purpose of their educative role;
- Ushers are mission workers, and understand the missional importance of their work in greeting, seating, and helping people get oriented;
- The finance committee will think missionally about money

## So what's the bottom line?

The bottom line is simple:

It is the hope that all members, all functions, and all activities of our churches, intuitively and intentionally *understand* the purpose of the church in the world, *join* the church because of these purposes, and creatively *pursue* all functions and activities in light of these purposes. This is the vision of a missional church.

## Is it too small a vision for Mennonite Church Canada?

*...that you may proclaim the mighty  
acts of him who called you out of  
darkness into his marvelous light.*

*1 Peter 2:9b*



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