Monthly Missiological Reflection #34
Contrasting Missional and Church Growth Perspectives

By Gailyn Van Rheenen

I pray that churches will become missional, i.e., theologically-formed, Christ-centered, Spirit-led fellowships who seek to faithfully incarnate the purposes of Christ. Missional churches define themselves as bodies formed by the calling and sending of God and reflecting the redemptive reign of God in Christ. They are unique communities in the world created by God through the Spirit as both holy and human. Missional leaders, likewise, reflect the calling and sending of God. They minister with humility recognizing themselves as "jars of clay" who finitely seek to enter into what God is already doing in his world.

The missional approach to ministry stands in obvious contrast to the traditional Church Growth perspective. Church Growth thinking has brought much to the practice of foreign and domestic missions. Donald McGavran, the father of Church Growth, encouraged missionaries to personally minister among unbelievers rather than attempt to draw people into Western-style mission enclaves or mission stations. He rightly emphasized the missionary nature of the local church and the need for pioneer evangelism among peoples ready to hear the gospel. He called for the incisive evaluation of missions. Above all, he taught us to employ tools from the social sciences to analyze culture and to use this analysis to develop penetrating strategies for reaching both searchers and skeptics with the gospel of Christ.

The seeds of syncretism, however, were rooted in the very principles of cultural analysis and strategy formation employed by this movement. Practitioners succumbed unintentionally to the humanistic suppositions of the Modern Era. Assuming that they could chart their way to success by their ingenuity and creativity, Church Growth practitioners focused on *what humans do* in missions rather than on *what God is doing*. They saw the missional task as setting goals, developing appropriate methodologies, and evaluating what does or does not work rather than seeking God's will based upon biblical and theological reflection. Their thinking segmented the gospel and practice, the human and divine into two compartmentalized worlds, and practice was developed on the basis of "what works" rather than the will and essence of God. Christian leaders placed more emphasis on developing effective strategy than forming communities shaped in the image of God. Although they advocated faithfulness to God, the system they proposed was based on human intelligence and ingenuity.

It has been my privilege to work with five other missions educators (Elmer Towns, Craig Van Gelder, Charles Van Engen, Howard Snyder, and editor Gary McIntosh) to evaluate the Church Growth Movement. The resulting book, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* (McIntosh, 2004), is part of the Zondervan counterpoints series. My comparison of Missional and Church Growth thinking is are drawn from my chapter and that of Craig Van Gelder (Van Gelder, 2004) in this book. A fuller description of this comparison can be found here.

	Missional	*Church Growth*
Orientation/ Perspective	Theocentric	Anthropocentric
	Theological	Practical
	Postmodern	Modern
Theological Focus	*Missio Dei*	Great Commission
Beginning Question	What is the gospel?	What makes the church grow?
Perspective on Scripture	Narrative of God's purposes	Propositional truth
How does missions happen?	By the Spirit (God's "surprises")	By strategic planning
Nature of community	Inclusiveness, unity of the body of Christ	People groups
Focus of Evangelism	Initiation of people into the kingdom of God; holistic understanding of "making disciples"	Differentiation between discipling and perfecting, individual salvation
Orientation toward Social Action	The Gospel, evangelism, and social action cannot be separated	Priority of evangelism and church planting over social action; Reactive to the Social Gospel

Church Growth thinking begins anthropocentrically. The focus is on strategy development and cultural analysis with biblical passages appropriated to give validity to the perspectives. The Missional movement, on the other hand, begins theologically with the perspectives of the mission and kingdom of God.

The Church Growth movement, emphasizing the human ability to decipher and strategize, reflects Modernity. Missionaries and missions scholars, however, increasingly doubt the ability of human ingenuity to guide the mission enterprise. They recognize the finite nature of human understanding and the need for dependence on the Spirit of God. Post-Modernity provides a more favorable cultural environment for Christian leaders to understand missions as authored and guided by the Holy Spirit.

Deciding the primacy and ordering of questions determines the missiological focus. Church Growth begins with the question "Why do some churches grow and others do not?" The central concern of the Missional movement, on the other hand, is "What is the gospel?" The gospel is thought to intersect with every question of theology and strategy. Because it is the essence of the Christian faith, the gospel cannot be relegated to the periphery, even when formulating practical issues of strategy.

The Church Growth movement focuses on truth as proposition. Christianity is reduced to culturally-defined categories and communicated based upon these conceptual groupings. This topic framework of mental referencing is susceptible to syncretism because it is

based upon conceptualizations made by Christian leaders attempting to intellectually clarify Christianity in the human cultural categories. The Missional movement maintains that the gospel cannot be contained in a set of propositions. The mission of God must be communicated as the dynamic story of God's relationship with his creation.

Missional proponents believe that God's mission cannot be predicted by human planning. They point to "God's surprises" in the book of Acts, resulting from the Holy Spirit going ahead of human messengers and directing them in God's mission. For example, Acts 10 describes the Spirit of God going ahead of Peter, teaching him of God's acceptance of the Gentiles, and leading him to household of Cornelius. The story is one of God working through his people for his purposes. While the Church Growth heritage has emphasized the mighty workings of God and the Holy Spirit due to the emphasis in such writings as Roland Allen's *Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*, the major focus has been on human ingenuity in decision-making. Elmer Towns, for instance, has great trust in human creativity. He believes that Church Growth thinking is leading missionary practitioners into a period of unprecedented growth by intentionally applying the scientific method to evangelism and church planting (2004, 39-40). The tension between the sovereignty of God, on the one hand, and the creativity of evangelists and church planters to strategize for success is the most significant difference between Missional and Church Growth thinking. A balance is needed between these two perspectives. God does miraculously lead us forward in His mission. He, nevertheless, calls us to minister intentionality. Paul, for instance, viewed himself as "an expert builder" laying the "foundation of Jesus Christ" and encouraged other ministers to "be careful" how they built (1 Cor. 3:10-11).

The Church Growth movement has focused on the uniqueness and distinctiveness of people groups and the contextualization of the Gospel among the *ethne* of the world. The Missional movement, on the other hand, believes that the gospel breaks socio-economic and ethnic divisions between peoples so that all become one in Christ.

The Missional orientation does not dichotomize evangelism and social action, discipling and perfecting, but views God's mission holistically. Church Growth adherents, reacting to the Social Gospel, argue that the primary task of missions is evangelism and incorporating new believers into the body of Christ. Evangelism and church planting, therefore, take priority over social action. They point to the existence of many social programs, which share loaves and fishes without the gospel.

The Church Growth and Missional movements represent two very different emphases. The Missional perspective accentuates theological reflection and historical perspective and the Church Growth movement cultural analysis and strategy formation.   Each movement has much to learn from the other. Those of a Missional heritage can learn from Church Growth how to study culture beyond the general impressionistic level and be more intentional in strategy formation. Church Growth practitioners can learn to rethink their discipline in integrative theological categories and to study culture, interpret history, and develop strategy through the lens of Christian theology.

The Missional Helix

The limitations of Church Growth that have been discussed--the anthropocentric focus, pragmatics and the segmentation of theology and praxis, the theological level of inquiry, and the focus on growth--suggest the need for a new model of missions. This new paradigm would maintain the strengths of the Church Growth model--a focus on identificational ministry, belief in the missionary nature of the church, critical understandings of culture, and incisive evaluation--while broadening its theological horizons. The model, termed *missional*, is rooted in an understanding that a missionary theology should permeate both theology and missiology. Kirk writes:

> All true theology is, by definition, missionary theology, for it has as its object the study of the ways of a God who is by nature missionary and a foundational text written by and for missionaries. Mission as a discipline is not, then, the roof of a building that completes the whole structure, already constructed by blocks that stand on their own, but both the foundation and the mortar in the joints, which cements together everything else. Theology should not be pursued as a set of isolated disciplines. It assumes a model of cross-cultural communication, for its subject matter both stands over against culture and relates closely to it. Therefore, it must be interdisciplinary and interactive.
> (Kirk 1997, 50)

The Missional Helix visualizes such an "interdisciplinary and interactive" approach to the practice of ministry and provides a corrective to traditional Church Growth perspectives. It images the intertwining, inseparable nature of **theological reflection**, **cultural analysis**, **historical perspective**, and **strategy formation** within the context of the practice of ministry.

The helix begins with **theologies**, such as *Missio Dei*, the kingdom of God, incarnation, and crucifixion, which focus and form our perspectives of culture and the practice of ministry. **Cultural analysis** forms the second element of the helix. Cultural awareness enables church planters and Christian leaders to define types of peoples within a cultural context, to understand the social construction of their reality, to perceive how they are socially related to one another, and to explain how the Christian message intersects with every aspect of culture (birth rites, coming of age rituals, weddings, funerals, etc). The spiral then considers **historical perspective,** how things came to be as they are based upon the interrelated stories of the particular nation, lineage, the church, and God's mission. Finally the spiral considers incisive contextual **strategies**, which are based upon theological reflection, cultural analysis, and historical perspective, for the practice of ministry. This process of ministry formation must occur within an environment of **spiritual formation** in which the soul is being nurtured through a personal walk with God and a continual seeking of direction from God where God is sought for direction.

The Missional Helix is a spiral because the missionary returns time and time again to reflect theologically, culturally, historically, and strategically in order to develop contextual ministry.   Theology, social understandings, history of missions, and strategy all work together and interpenetrate each other. Thus theology shapes praxis, which in

turn influences theology within the context of on-going ministry. The helix also infers growth as the practitioners spiral to higher levels of maturity and ministry effectiveness.

The Missional Helix is useful in at least two ways. First and foremost, it provides the Christian practitioner with a model of decision-making. Church planters, evangelists, and pastors seek theological understandings, cultural analysis, historical perspective, and strategy formation in the process of developing patterns for ministry. Second, the Missional Helix could be used as a model for theological education. Equipping for ministry should not place high emphasis on some elements and give little consideration to others. Rather, it should provide an intentional, integrated model of ministry formation.

Conclusion

I embrace Steuernagel's belief: "As we move into a new century, . . . we need to reposition ourselves and to work once again on the agenda" (2000, 127). The Church Growth model is inadequate. By beginning with anthropology rather than theology and segmenting theology and practice, Church Growth advocates assume that their model reflects the nature of God. In other words, church growth determines effective practice and then seeks to validate this practice by the use of Scripture. The movement emphasizes growth rather than faithful proclamation of the gospel and faithful living of the gospel.

I advocate an adapted missional model, one which begins with and always returns to theological reflection while taking seriously cultural analysis, historical perspective, and strategy formation.

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