

What is a Missional Community?

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Often times people use the phrase 'missional community' to describe the state of a group of people. It's descriptive. The question seems to be, "Is this community missional?" Or, as Neil Cole says, "Is this community joining the mission that God is already doing?" Are we existing as a sent people? It is meant to be descriptive and rather general. The way that I have used this phrase in the past 20 years is a bit more specific and more as a proper noun. Just like the phrase 'Worship Service' denotes something quite specific, so the phrase 'Missional Community' originated as a very specific thing, identifying a type of missional vehicle that was created in the late 1980's in the UK.

A **Missional Community** is a group of 20 to 50 people who exist, in Christian community, to reach either a particular neighborhood or network of relationships. With a strong value on life together, the group has the expressed intention of seeing those they are in relationship with choose to start following Jesus through this more flexible and locally incarnated expression of the church. They exist to bring heaven to the particular slice of earth they believe God has given them to bless. The result is usually the growth and multiplication of more Missional Communities. These MCs are networked within a larger church community allowing for both a scattered and gathered church. These mid-sized communities, led by laity, are "lightweight and low maintenance" and most often meet 3-4 times a month in their missional context. Each MC attends to the three dimensions of life that Jesus himself attended to: Time with God (worship, prayer, scripture, teaching, giving thanks, etc), time with the body of believers building a vibrant and caring community, and time with those who don't know Jesus yet.

MCs first began as missional small groups (groups of 8-15 people) more than 20 years ago in England. After a few years it became clear they were small enough to care, *but not large enough to dare*. Missional growth, multiplication and momentum was rare with these smaller, more missional groups. Leader burnout was common. Quite honestly, it took several years for this to surface as a recurring problem that needed to be dealt with. After a few more years of experimenting, mid-sized groups, about the size of an extended family, emerged as a missional and discipleship vehicle that was capable of the exponential growth and depth we see today. As Missional Communities continued to develop further and as we began to research why, something exciting came to light: Every culture (and sub-culture) gathers and finds identity in groups the size of extended families. When natural genetic extended families break down, people of all races, ethnicities and backgrounds organically begin to re-create the extended family. Missional Communities were simply tapping into something hardwired into human DNA.

In Sheffield, England at St Thomas Church, what I started with a few hundred people in these groups of 20-50 people, each reaching out to various mission contexts, has turned into thousands upon thousands of people in Missional Communities...in a city where less than 1% of people attend church. Untold numbers of people are finding Jesus. MCs for the creative class. MCs for former Iranian Muslims. MCs for former gang members and murderers who became Christians. MCs for students studying at the university. MCs for new parents. MCs for people living in particular neighborhoods. MCs for the homeless. MCs for former prostitutes and drug addicts.

What Missional Communities do is find a crack or crevice of society and incarnate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to that specific culture of people by creating an extended family on mission together. And when this scattered church of Missional Communities gathers together as one large family, it is a picture of the coming Kingdom, or as Newbigin would say, "a sign, instrument and foretaste." Every color, age, race and religious background. That is what the 'gathered' worship service has been like.

Perhaps what is more exciting is that we have now seen it spread. Missional Communities aren't something specific to England, Europe or even South America. Now in the United States, all across the country, hundreds and hundreds of churches are beginning to see this kind of vibrant, missional life in their own contexts. Urban churches. Suburban churches. Church plants. Mega churches. Lay leaders are being released into their destiny to lead the church of God in his mission of rescuing and redeeming the whole world. These leaders refuse to believe that being a disciple and being missional are mutually exclusive; in fact, they see it as inseparable. Missional Communities are simply a vehicle to send these leaders out into their divine calling.

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