

## What does it take to make mission missional?

By Joel Shenk

Not everything the church does in the name of mission or outreach is missional. A group of friends and I recently brainstormed a top-ten list of things churches think are missional but actually aren't:

10. Outdoor worship services
9. Ecumenical worship services
8. Prayer walks
7. Serving a meal to the homeless
6. MCC school kits and relief kits
5. Community fundraisers
4. Small groups
3. Contemporary worship
2. Knocking on doors and handing out tracts
1. Inviting people to church

“What!?!” you may ask. “How is inviting someone to church not missional? And what do you have against small groups?” I in no way mean to suggest these aren't good or important things. I for one love the way our congregation collects school kits for MCC every year. I further agree that many of the things on this list are ways of offering care to those in need. Many of these things represent a service to others. Many of these things show Christ-like love and compassion. Some of these things are even done in public. It doesn't mean they are missional.

**To be missional is about recognizing what God is up to in our lives and in our communities, and then responding in faith to the movement of God's Spirit.** To be missional requires that in order for our light to shine, our hearts and habits must be transformed more and more to be like Jesus. In its very essence, to be missional is to intentionally make disciples of ourselves and our neighbors.

In the book *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, the late Mennonite missiologist and seminary professor Alan Kreider paints a picture of the early church that is virtually the exact opposite of many churches today. Kreider documents how the early church's mission focused on making disciples. New believers attracted to Jesus or to the church went through a lengthy multi-year process of catechesis and character formation. The goal of this process was for candidates to undergo a transformation that resulted in new habits and dispositions. Only then was a person baptized and admitted into the worship life of the church. The effect of this approach was that it cultivated a culture of discipleship that ensured robust witness to the reign of God in Christ. That's missional.

My, how times have changed. Many churches today are concerned primarily and sometimes solely with how to get more people to attend worship. They think about ways to make their worship services attractional, seeker-sensitive, family friendly, contemporary, relevant, or any other of a host of buzz words. I don't think any of those words could be used to describe the early church, and yet its growth and witness was phenomenal.

Many churches today simply want to get people in the doors, or get more young people to serve on committees, in the hopes that they will develop into mature disciples of Jesus. But as Alan Hirsch

warns, “If you start with mission, you get the church. But if you start with the church you don’t always get mission.”

**It’s not that the top ten things I listed at the beginning are bad, or that they can’t be missional. But often it requires some important shifts in how we approach them.** Are your small groups really deepening discipleship and drawing others in? Or are they a platform for friends to eat and pray together? (Again, not a bad thing, just not missional.) Does your volunteering at the local food pantry or homeless shelter result in the spiritual transformation of both served and server? If so, praise God! If not, then we should acknowledge that it is an important act of charity, but not missional. Does your worship form patient, loving, kind, and joyful people in a world of outrage and hostility? Or does your worship merely cater to the consumeristic patterns of empire?

Taking a hard and honest look at those questions is one of the first necessary steps on the road to becoming missional. We will be doing this together as a Conference at our fall regional gatherings on Oct. 17 at Lockport Mennonite Church, Oct. 24 at Oak Grove Mennonite Church in West Liberty, Oct. 26 at Salem Mennonite Church in Kidron, and Oct. 31 at Beech Mennonite Church. Please join us for a time of rich discussion.