

What's Wrong with "Missions"?

Recently I received an email from a mobilization colleague with the subject line "Beware the word 'missions.'" In the email, Dave said he is finding "missions" a negative label for an event. Many people stay away from "missions" events. Why?

In spite of all the good statistics of the global growth of Christianity and the global involvement of the North American church, missions in the local church often seems more like a stepchild than a favorite son. Why is this?

Missions enthusiasts often get mixed signals from church leaders. They sense it but wrestle with understanding it. The pastor seems very proactive and committed to world missions on specific occasions but is strangely silent about it for long periods. Missions projects, partnerships, and events are promoted, but not as far in advance, as extensively, and with as high quality as is done for primary church interests. Fund appeals for missions causes do not seem as enthusiastic or genuine as appeals for other things. The leaders say they would really like to increase missions giving, but the new budget shows increases for adding staff instead.

The congregation is generally unaware of this internal ambivalence among the leaders. However, they sense what is most important to the pastor and key church leaders and they tend to respond most positively to those things. The programs, events, and initiatives that are most wholeheartedly, enthusiastically, and compellingly promoted and modeled by church leaders tends to draw the greatest response from the people. In large measure, the leadership of leaders is what causes building programs to succeed. Programs and initiatives that are promoted by others and merely endorsed by church leaders receive much less responsiveness from the people.

World missions often feels like a stepchild because subconsciously, that's the way congregation members perceive it in their leaders. Why are leaders so internally conflicted? Think about this scenario with me.

A California pastor - I think it may have been Ray Ortlund - is credited with starting the purpose-driven church movement with his statement, "It is not enough for the church to be faithful. It must also be effective." This was amplified by Rick Warren in his excellent and highly influential book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*. Warren said that all ministry derives from purpose. To accomplish this you must

1. Define your purposes.
2. Communicate those purposes to everyone in your church—on a regular basis.
3. Organize your church around your purposes.
4. Apply your purposes to every part of your church.

Either by design or instinct, many churches have moved in this direction. As church leaders develop the direction for the church, they commonly refer to purpose, mission, or vision - and sometimes all three. Here are some working definitions (there are other definitions) for these terms:

Purpose - Why we are here. (Your purpose is your "big aim" or your "North Star.")

Mission - The big task that will accomplish the purpose

Vision - What will it look like when we get there. Vision is a clear mental picture of the future that God desires

This commonly works out in a church something like the following:

Our purpose is to glorify God. That is a given. It is scriptural. It's incontrovertible. It's the beginning of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. It is part of almost every church purpose statement. It is often followed by, "by" in which it is described what things we must do (our mission), to glorify God.

The church's mission is most often considered to be the Great Commission, sometimes accompanied by the Great Commandment, either using those terms or words representing those terms. For example, for many authors the core of the Great Commission is "make disciples." So making disciples often is included as the mission part of the purpose statement. Making disciples includes reaching people who are unchurched or unbelievers, bringing them to Christ, integrating them into the church, helping them grow as Christians, and getting them involved in service and witness. The official statement may contain "the world," often at the end, and it may be understood by some as the whole world and by others as "our world."

The natural vision that arises out of glorifying God by making disciples is a mental picture of a church growing in depth and numbers, where people are blossoming as believers, loving one another, serving in the church, and building relationships with their unchurched neighbors. The programs and activities intended to produce this vision may include seeker-oriented services and events, discipleship programs, fellowship opportunities, evangelism training, service activities in the community, and recovery ministries for people with dysfunctional backgrounds, ungodly habits, and the debilitation resulting from previous sinful lives. People are recruited to serve in the many church ministries.

So we have:

- **Church Purpose: God's glory**
- **Church Mission: Make disciples**
- **Church Vision: An expanding church of growing disciples**

This rubric represents a great many churches that are considered successful, probably including the pastor's friends and mentors. Pastors are heavily influenced by other pastors. Because they receive a lot of direction and reinforcement, as well as competition, from each other, popular paradigms tend to be self-reinforcing.

Where does "missions" fit into this picture (vision)? Well, it doesn't fit very well, especially international missions.

The very nature of missions is to develop and deploy resources away from our church. Many pastors and church leaders find themselves ambivalent about this. It is perhaps natural for a leader to recognize that programs and activities that do not directly contribute to the purpose of an organization are a distraction to the people and a drain on the organization and to try to change, minimize or eliminate such activities. The pastor and leaders want substantial involvement in world missions, but that desire is undercut by the awareness that strong giving to missions is likely to undercut funding for other opportunities that contribute directly to the church mission and vision. They sense a responsibility for

world missions, but the deploying of resources elsewhere does not contribute to the purpose, mission, and vision of the church in their minds.

It is not surprising that reaching the rest of the world for Christ often seems in competition with opportunities closer to home. What does seem strange is that God's global purpose becomes a stepchild rather than the central thrust, a competitor rather than a contributor to the church's mission. Perhaps part of it relates to the way the purpose, mission, and vision take shape in the leaders' minds.

Let's go back to our working definitions:

- **Purpose:** **Why we are here**
- **Mission:** **The big task to fulfill why we are here**
- **Vision:** **What it will look like when we get there**

Suppose we wrote out what we understand to be God's purpose, mission, and vision for his Church? It might look like this:

- **Purpose:** **God's glory in all the earth (Num 14:21, Hab 2:14)**
- **Mission:** **Disciple all the nations (Mt 28:19)**
- **Vision:** **People from every tribe, tongue, and nation surrounding the throne and worshipping the lamb (Rev 5:9, 7:9)**

If your church leaders developed a purpose, mission, and vision statement for your church based on the above,

- How might it be different from what you have now?
- How might that affect the commitment of church leaders to world missions?
- How might it affect your church priorities, programs, and activities?
- And how might that affect the interest of your congregation?

Purpose: _____

Mission: _____

Vision: _____

