

The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry
by Craig Van Gelder, ed., W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich 2007.
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The new buzzword "missional" often means different things to different people. Trying to define it is like nailing jelly to a wall. According to "missional" advocates, it is about the very nature or essence of what it means to be church. It is a drastic shift in theology from the emphasis of churches to participate in fulfilling the Great Commission to an understanding that a Trinitarian God is involved in the world in which the church participates. Mission, therefore, is not just about a program of the church; it defines the church as God's sent people. The church participates in God's mission by living into and announcing the redemptive reign of God in Christ (the kingdom of God). The church, therefore, must not only proclaim the faith about Jesus; it also must participate in social justice to its neighbours. In order to reach our pluralistic society, the Gospel message proclaimed should use narratives, stories, and life examples in preaching. In addition, the church needs to pay closer attention to the needs of society and respond to its challenges.

The Missional Church In Context is the result of the 2005 Missional Church Consultation sponsored by Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. The background/theoretical chapters and case studies that make up this volume are the studies prepared for discussion at that consultation. In the first section there are four chapters that explore biblical, theological, and historical dimensions of how the church is to engage in a ministry within a specific cultural context. The second section of four chapters are case studies that provide readers with perspectives on how a missional understanding of the church can be brought to bear on a particular denomination and particular contexts. Should we embrace the theology of the "missional" church advocates? I don't believe so. Of course, we should act strongly for social justice, as well as keep in mind the cultural context when we proclaim the Gospel. But the pendulum in the missional view of missions swings so much toward the improvement of this world that the proclamation of the Gospel to lost sinners seems overlooked. But this is still the heart of our Gospel message: To have a right relationship with God, people must come to understand that they are lost and doomed to suffer the wrath of God unless they repent of their sins and trust Christ for their salvation.