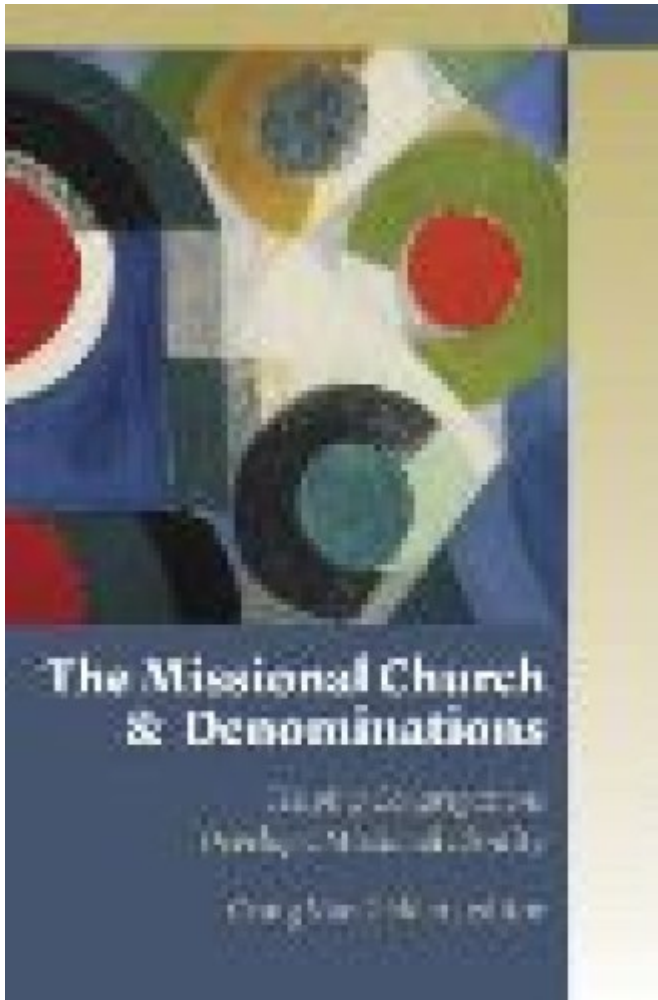


The Missional Church and Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity

reviewed by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [January 12, 2010](#) issue

In Review



The Missional Church and Denominations: Helping Congregations Develop a Missional Identity

Craig Van Gelder, ed.
Eerdmans

A classic 1970s study on the demise of railroads concluded that they went out of business because they thought the business they were in was railroads. It wasn't. The business they were in was transportation. Likewise, churches may decline or die when they think the business they are in is church. It isn't. The business they are in is God's mission in the world.

Under the leadership of scholars like Craig Van Gelder, George Hunsberger and Darrell Guder, a missional church movement has been brewing for several decades now. It traces its intellectual parentage to Lesslie Newbigin, who realized when he returned to the U.K. after years in India that the gospel needed to be distinguished from Western culture and that Western culture needed to be engaged more deeply and challenged more thoroughly by the gospel.

A quotation from the Church of England "Mission-Shaped Church" document, cited in *The Missional Church and Denominations*, captures the missional church spirit: "It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission that has a church in the world. . . . God is on the move and the church is always catching up with him. We join his mission."

There are two related themes here. One is that mission—being sent into the world with the word and witness of the gospel—is intrinsic to the church and Christian life. It is not an add-on, and it is not something to be relegated to a missions committee or missionaries or a line item in the budget. The church offers and embodies a story, a loyalty, a set of values and a way of life that are an alternative in the midst of the prevailing culture—or it ought to do so.

Leaders in the missional church movement claim that often the church has prized only half of the gathering-and-sending rhythm that is elemental to its life. Gathering, as in "Come to church," has eclipsed sending, as in "Go into all the world." The general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, who in a concluding essay traces the RCA's efforts to become missional, hopes that the church gets to the point where it is "not gathering in order to be sent, but . . .

because it has been sent.”

A second theme of the missional church movement is that the mission belongs to God: it is the *missio Dei*. The mission is not owned by the church; rather, the church participates in God’s mission and purpose, the redemption of God’s creation. Instead of the church arriving triumphantly and being in charge, the church is a servant or instrument of God’s mission and of the God who was there and at work before the church arrived. As contributor Todd Hobart explains it, the mission of the church is increasingly being understood as theocentric rather than ecclesiocentric.

The particular focus of this volume is exploring the possibilities for fruitful intersection between denominations and missional church thinking. In a time of considerable travail for many denominations, does the missional church approach and theology offer some direction and help?

In the first section of the book, four contributors help readers understand the nature of denominations in the U.S., from their origins in the 17th and 18th centuries to their development into their present form during the 19th and 20th. In the second half, five other authors explore how missional church theology might shape and guide five particular denominations: the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Evangelical Covenant Church, the Baptist General Conference and the Reformed Church in America.

In his lead essay on “unpacking the DNA of denominations,” Van Gelder contends that a corporate model and a rational organizational ethos have made denominations highly organized and purposeful but have left them short on theology and, more critically, short on God. Polity has triumphed over ecclesiology, and organizational imperatives have become more important than whatever God might be saying or doing. In this sense, the denominations’ current challenges hold within them a call to repentance. Because missional church theology consistently emphasizes the *missio Dei*—God’s mission, in which the church participates—this venture might be summarized as an attempt to rearrange denominational life so that God is at the center.

Missional church theology provides a significant reframing for denominations as they try to get over the habits of Christendom. Dwight Zscheile captures this nicely in his essay on the Episcopal Church: “The Christendom idea of domain, in which the church controls certain areas in order to provide sacramental service and pastoral

care to settled Christian populations, collapses under the much more expansive horizon of God's mission to bring restoration to all creation."

One might wonder if there is anything really new here or if missional church theology reflects a belated discovery of what more socially engaged or activist churches and denominations have long said. It is true that some congregations and denominations have long emphasized participating in what has been termed God's work in the world. What missional church thought may add is not only deeper theological grounding but a more wholistic approach to mission. Mission cannot be reduced to only social service or only saving souls. It is both and it is more.

To refocus their lives and resources on joining God's mission in the world rather than simply promoting or maintaining themselves, denominations need nimbleness—the capacity to be flexible and innovative—whereas now they tend to be rule-based and regulatory in nature. One denomination that has found resources for innovation is the Evangelical Covenant Church. Historically a church of Swedish immigrants, it has in recent decades caught the wave of new immigration. New church starts for immigrants from many countries have transformed the denomination and caused it to grow. Will other denominations prove capable of arriving at the clear sense of identity and purpose that fosters flexibility and innovation? Time will tell.