

## LESSON

## 3

JOINING HIS  
PURPOSES*Participating in  
the Missio Dei*

## IN THIS LESSON

*Reflection on Lesson 2: His Way**Central Theme: God's Mission Has a Church**Biblical Reflection: John 3:16-17; 5:24; 14:26; 16:7; 17:18; 20:21**Reading: Mission vs. Missions**Reading Reflection: The Church and God's Mission**Missional Action: Seeing and Responding to God's Missional Work*LESSON 2: *His Way*

1. Briefly share how you lived out the Missional Action from last week's lesson. How did it change or influence the way you understand the concept of living incarnation-ally?
2. What did you do to encourage proximity in your neighborhood? What did you learn?

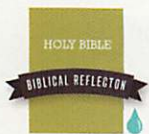
3. What did you do to encourage a sense of presence with those near you? What did you learn?
4. What did you learn about yourself? What might you do differently next time?
5. What reflections do you have on the other stories that were told in your group?



### *God's Mission Has a Church*

The phrase *missio Dei* is Latin for “the sending of God.” In English it is often rendered as “the mission of God.” *Missio Dei* language emphasizes that mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but rather the activity of God. The church is God’s instrument sent into the world to participate in his mission. Therefore, the church exists because of God’s mission, not the other way around.

1. What thoughts do you have about the church existing because of God’s mission instead of the church *having* a mission?
2. How might the concept of *missio Dei* change the way you think about the church?



John 3:16; 5:24; 14:26; 16:7; 17:18; 20:21

The classic understanding of the *missio Dei* involves three movements: God the Father sending the Son; God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit; God the Father, Son, and Spirit sending the church into the world.

1. Read John 3:16-17; 5:24. What do you learn about the sending nature of God and his mission from these verses? What questions do these verses raise?
2. Read John 14:26; 16:7. What difference do you notice between these two verses? In what ways do you think the Spirit empowers God's mission?
3. Read John 17:18; 20:21. Describe the setting for these two passages.



### *Mission vs. Missions*

The third key element in missional theology is the concept of *missio Dei*. An English rendering of this Latin phrase speaks to the “mission of God.” It is God who has a mission to set things right in a broken, sinful world—to redeem and restore it to what he has always intended.

Therefore, mission is not the invention, responsibility, or program of the church. Instead it flows directly from the character and purposes of a missionary God. In the words of South African missiologist David Bosch, “It is not the church which undertakes mission; it is the *missio Dei* which constitutes the church.” Or stated in a slightly different way, “It is not so much that God has a mission for his church in the world, but that God has a church for his mission in the world.”<sup>14</sup>

It is not only crucial to understand that God has a mission, it is equally important to understand that his mission is larger than the church. We in the church often wrongly assume that the primary activity of God is in the church, rather than recognizing that God's primary activity is in the world, and the church is God's instrument sent into the world to participate in his redemptive mission. Instead of thinking of the church as an entity that simply *sends* missionaries, we should instead view the church *as* the missionary. Among other things, this shift in perspective will bring about radical changes in two particular areas.

First, a *missio Dei* perspective will shape our thinking about the form and function of the church. Typically, congregations view missions as simply one program or activity among many other equally important functions of the church. Therefore, the missions *program* is seen alongside



those programs such as worship, small groups, men's and women's ministries, youth and children's ministry, and so on. When missions is viewed in this way, the main business of many mission committees "is to determine how to spend the mission budget rather than to view the entire congregational budget as an exercise in mission."<sup>15</sup> However, when the church begins to define itself as an agent of God's mission, it will begin to organize every activity of the church around the *missio Dei*.

Mission as the organizing principle means that mission goes way beyond being some sort of optional activity or program for our churches. It actually is the organizing axis of the church. The life of the church revolves around it. This is not to say that we don't do corporate worship, develop community, and make disciples, but that these are catalyzed by and organized around the mission function. Only in this way can we be truly missional. Merely adding serving events or special outreach days to our church schedules will not develop missional people nor make a missional church.<sup>16</sup>

To ensure clarity on this issue of God's mission as the organizing principle for all other activities of the church, let us state again that this does not minimize the need and importance of the other functions of the church. It is simply stating that no other function of the church can rightly be the organizing principle, or the reason we come together in the first place. Worship should not be the organizing principle. Community should not be the organizing principle. Even discipleship and evangelism should not be the organizing principles.

Instead, worship, community, discipleship, evangelism, and every other important activity of the church are properly understood and initiated only when viewed through the lens of mission. The images below provide an illustration for the move from "missions" as one among many functions of the church to "mission" being *the* organizing principle for all other activities or ministries of the church.<sup>17</sup>

M I S S I O N S	A R T S	C H I L D R E N	S M A L L G R O U P S	Y O U T H	T E A C H I N G	W O R S H I P
MISSION						
A R T S	C H I L D R E N	S M A L L G R O U P S	Y O U T H	E T C.	T E A C H I N G	W O R S H I P

The second significant shift that occurs with a *missio Dei* perspective deals with our starting point for mission activity. When we begin to see the church (individually and collectively) as the sent, missionary people of God, we no longer view the church as the jumping-off point when thinking about mission. Rather, we look for God's activity in our local setting as the place to begin our missional engagement.

Among other things, this means the nature and shape of mission cannot be decided beforehand, but must be discerned in relation to God's participation in a local context. Instead of front-loading mission plans and strategies with what we think the people in a community need, we begin by listening and learning what God is already doing. Only after discerning what God is doing in a particular setting do we then ask how God wants us to participate with him. Another way to frame this conversation is to consider the four D's of missional engagement.

## Discover

If it is truly God's mission and not ours, then we must discover where God is at work. The first step in discovering what God is doing is through listening. Individually and collectively we must cultivate our ability to listen well on three fronts—we must listen to God, the local community, and each other. It is simply impossible to ascertain the movement of God without carving out significant time to listen to his voice through prayer and Scripture as well as the voices of those we desire to serve.

## Discern

In addition to listening, participating in God's mission will involve the difficult task of discernment. Not only will we need to discern what God is already doing, but we will need to ask the follow-up question, *In light of my (our) gifts and resources, how does God want me to participate in what he is doing?* The fact is we can't do it all, which is true for both individual followers of Jesus as well as local congregations. But it is also true that God has gifted us all to do something! The point of discernment is to determine where and how to participate in God's mission.

## Do

This may seem obvious, but the process of discernment is useless if we do not obey what God is calling us to do. When God prompts us to participate in what he is doing in the lives of others, we must be obedient to respond.

A story told by one of our friends, Sam, illustrates these first three points. Sam purchased a house in a very impoverished part of town. His intentions were to create a mission house that would be home to several volunteers as they invested in the life of the neighborhood for the purpose of seeing community transformation take place. One of their first projects was the adoption of the local elementary school. The plan was to invest in the school by providing tutoring to students, serving the teachers, and providing simple maintenance for the school facilities. Who could argue with these great ideas?

One day Sam decided to share his vision for the school with Nacho, a man who lived just across the street. He had two children who attended the school, and surely he would be very pleased to learn of Sam's plans. However, as Sam began to share with him what they were gearing up to



do, Nacho asked Sam to walk outside to the sidewalk in front of the house. At that point, Nacho pointed up above their heads to the streetlight. He said to Sam, “If you really want to be a blessing to this neighborhood, then get that streetlight back on.” At first Sam was a little bewildered. It was in the middle of the afternoon on a hot summer day. *What’s so important about a streetlight?* Sam thought. Nacho began to tell Sam that when the streetlight was not on it wasn’t safe for the kids to play outside after dark. When the streetlight wasn’t on, drug deals would go down on the corner. When the streetlight wasn’t on, cars got broken into.

Nacho then told Sam that he had been trying to get the city to come out and fix that light for nearly a year. Sam called the city authorities, and that afternoon the streetlight was back on. There was apparently a language barrier that was prohibiting Nacho from making the proper city department connection.

After I [Brad] heard that story, I told Sam that he should refer to it as the “ITSS” story. It’s The Streetlight, Stupid! The point is that no matter how great our plans for a community might be, it may not be what the community really needs. We can’t assume we know. Instead, we must listen—listen to God and listen to the community. Then we must act.

## Debrief

Throughout the process of engaging God’s mission we must create opportunities to reflect on our missional involvement. Sometimes this may simply mean we need individual down time to reflect upon our activities. We may need to ask God to affirm our involvement, or to ask for clarity of direction. But it will also mean we must carve out time to reflect with others in our faith community. We need to hear what others are seeing and sensing concerning God’s activities and to hear the stories of how others are engaging God’s mission. In this way it is important for us to be in the position to offer feedback.

To participate in the *missio Dei* is to play a personal and vital role in the movement of God’s redemptive mission. God is inviting us into his missionary adventure.



- PART ONE



## Seeing and Responding to God's Missional Work

Throughout the week, identify at least three situations in which you ask the following questions:

1. Where do I see God at work? Where and how is God working in the lives of those around me? Where and how is God working in my neighborhood? What about my place of vocation?
2. In light of my gifts and resources, how does God want me to partner with him in what he is doing?

*How might you respond to these same questions from the perspective of your church?*

1. In light of your church's gifts and resources, how might God be calling your church to participate in the *missio Dei*?
2. What specific and unique gifts and resources has God given your local church?