

Tool #7: What Is the Church's Mission?

What is the mission of the church? How can your church express God's character and saving actions in the world? Discuss your church's understanding of mission in terms of the three theological dimensions described below. (For more on mission, see chapter 7 in Churches That Make a Difference.)

Jesus sent out his disciples with a message: "The kingdom of heaven has come near!" (Matt. 10:7) Through its mission, the church shares in the ongoing story of God's kingdom breaking into human history. This mission has three basic components: The church is to be a *witness* to God's kingdom, an *agent* of God's kingdom, and a *sign* of God's kingdom.

1. The church witnesses to God's kingdom by proclaiming the Good News of Christ.

Believers offer testimony to the Good News of salvation by faith in Christ (Acts 1:8). To skeptics, the church preaches Jesus as the way, truth and life (John 14:6); to those on the margins of society, the church shares the Savior who brought good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed (Luke 4:18); to oppressors and offenders, the church speaks out on behalf of God's justice and righteousness (Amos 5:24); to those ensnared by violence and prejudice, the church tells of the reconciling work of the cross (Titus 3:3-5). All receive the invitation to Christ's forgiving, healing, reconciling, transforming love (2 Cor. 5:20). We proclaim the truth of Christ in love to those outside the church, in evangelism; we also proclaim God's Word within the church, in preaching, teaching, and worship. We witness to the kingdom not only with our words but with our deeds -- our lives are to be a reflection of the living Word (2 Cor. 3:2-3)

2. The church is an agent of the inauguration of God's kingdom by continuing the work of Christ.

Paul addresses Christians as "co-workers for the kingdom of God" (Col. 4:11). The church shares God's compassion for those in need, God's righteousness indignation at injustice, and God's holy wrath over violations of moral law. In response, the church follows God's example of active intervention. Through acts of "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6), the church becomes God's instrument for bringing about transformation in individuals, communities, cultures and nations. (The church is not God's *only* instrument for social change, but it is a crucial one). In our fallen world, we may only partially realize God's will "on earth as it is in heaven." Yet the church brings glory to God and prepares the way for the full reign of Christ by doing the transformational work of the Kingdom. The church's deeds of love and power anticipate the coming final restoration of the cosmos (Col. 1:20).

3. The church is a sign of God's kingdom by modeling the Good News in the body of Christ.

In his earthly ministry, Christ planted the seeds of a new Spirit-filled community who would continue to live out the Kingdom principles that he proclaimed and demonstrated. The early Christians showed they were different from the world in their attitude toward material things, in their hope and courage in the face of persecution, in their holy living, in their compassion for poor, disabled, and other marginalized persons, in the unity between different social and ethnic groups, in the way they treated their enemies, and above all in the way they loved one another. The unity and love shared by the church body shows the world who Jesus is (John 17:21). The church's fellowship gives the world a foretaste of God's kingdom. "Whoever sees me, sees the Father," Jesus said (John 14:9). In the same way, as one church member put it: "Before people read the Bible, they will read you first."

Questions for reflection:

- a. Does your group agree on this theological model for mission? What would you change?
- b. Which dimension of mission is most prominent in your church, or has the highest priority?
- c. Which dimension is the weakest, or receives the least attention, in your church?
- d. What are areas of potential change and growth in your church's understanding of mission?