

## Tool #8: Guiding Characteristics of Local Mission

Every church is to be a witness, instrument, and sign of God's kingdom – but every church does this in a unique way. Each church will respond differently to the missional question, "How can our congregation embody God's character and carry out Christ's work in our particular context?" The types, scale, scope, and style of activities that churches undertake as an expression of local mission will be different. This diversity is part of God's plan for the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:14).

But some things are part of God's plan for every church. Without attempting to create a template for a church's mission, we can identify several core underlying principles. Below are a baker's dozen phrases that represent core assumptions about the external dimension of the church's mission, or its essential purpose in the world. This is not a list of activities (*what* a church does in mission) or theological motivations (*why* a church should engage in local mission), but characteristics (*how* a church engages in local mission). While the church's mission is essentially glocal (global + local) in scope, this list primarily describes ministry in the church's own community.

*How do the principles on this list capture your own congregation's missional character? Which two or three areas are priorities for growth?*

### Characteristics of local mission

1. The church's mission reflects **God's mission**. We have a mission because God has a mission (Col. 1:13-23). "God's 'agenda' is that all things be made new; that people and communities and the whole creation are redeemed and renewed so that they may fulfill their creaturely calling and develop according to God's intentions" (Jay Van Groningen, *Communities First*). As we draw closer to God's heart, we actively join in the unfolding story of God's restoration of His creation.
2. The church's mission is **kingdom-centered** (Matt. 4:17). The kingdom of God is where God is King, where God's will is done (Matt. 6:10). Through Christ, the kingdom is "at hand" as the arena of God's redemptive activity, where people can taste life as God created it to be; in heaven, the kingdom will be fully realized. The church is in the world as a witness, a model, and an agent of God's kingdom (e.g., Luke 9:2, Matt. 5:13-14, John 14:12). Kingdom ministry requires disciples who are, like Jesus, "completely yielded to and cooperating with the reign of God" (Jason Zahariades).
3. The church's mission is **Spirit-led**. We receive the Spirit of Christ to continue the ministry of Christ in our local and global context (John 20:21). Our own strength and initiative cannot produce God's kingdom (John 15:5). "We are desperate for God to show up and to do something that only He can get credit for" (Reggie McNeal). When we rely on God's guidance and power, God will be glorified in the church, as the Spirit does more through us than we can even imagine (Eph. 3:20)!
4. The church's mission is **rooted in love** (Eph. 3:17-18). We love others as, and because, Christ first loved us (John 13:34, 1 John 4:19). God's love for us, God's love for the world, our love for God, and our love for neighbors are inextricably interconnected (Mark 12:31-31, John 3:16). Discerning, enduring, overcoming love is inspired by faith and sustained by hope (1 Cor. 13:13, Col. 1:4-5, 1 Thes. 1:3, 1 John 5:2-4). Mission without love ultimately amounts to nothing (1 Cor. 13:3, Gal. 5:6). Keeping focused on our "first love" (Rev. 2:4) renews the joy, vitality and integrity of our mission.
5. The church's mission is **externally-focused**. The church does not exist solely for its own sake, but continually looks outward, seeking to find the lost sheep, free the captives, and rebuild the ruined cities. Since God "so loved the world" (John 3:16), He created a church for the world. We are a "sent" church (John 17:18). "The church is measured, not by its seating capacity, but by its sending capacity" (Len Sweet).

## **(Tool #8, continued) Guiding Characteristics of Local Mission**

6. The church's mission **stands with the poor and vulnerable** (not *only*, but *explicitly*). Scripture abundantly attests to the special place in God's heart for those who are poor, oppressed, alien or outcast (e.g., Deut. 15:7-8, Prov. 14:31, James 1:27). Like Jesus, the church can proclaim and demonstrate "good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). Serving God is inseparable from acting for justice and showing mercy (Mic. 6:8, Jer. 22:16). The church expresses love for Christ by caring for hurting neighbors near and far (Matt. 25:40, Luke 10:36-37).
7. The church's mission is **holistic**. We were created as body-mind-spirit *wholes*, designed to live in wholesome community. The gospel is at root spiritual, but it has implications for every dimension of life—social, physical, economic, and environmental. Thus we share the good news through word and deed, bringing together our witness and our good works, loving and empowering the whole person the way Jesus did (Matt. 9:5-7, 11:5).
8. The church's mission is **transformational**. "The endgame is kingdom transformation" (Bob Roberts, *Transformation*). This means going beyond winning souls to changing lives; beyond counting converts to equipping disciples; beyond meeting needs to nurturing dreams; beyond cultural relevance to cultural renewal; beyond superficial outreach to long-term, sacrificial investment in communities. When we love our neighbors this way, we too are transformed: we become more like Jesus, our King (1 John 3:2).
9. The church's mission is **contextual**. Mission is embedded in a specific context of people, place and culture. Our mission takes shape as we love, listen to, and share life with all the people God has designated as our neighbors. "It is only when the church is mixed into the very life and conversation of the city that it can be an effective force for change" (Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church*). The church engages its community as a partner in transformation, building on gifts, input and initiatives in the community that reflect the work God is already doing.
10. The church's mission is **incarnational**. Though imperfect, our lives are to embody the hope of the gospel. Christ's ministry is written into our hearts (2 Cor. 3:2-3). Through us, Christ makes his appeal to the world (2 Cor. 5:20). Christ lives in us, and Christ's love flows through us (1 John 3:23-24, Rom. 13:14). As "God with skin on" (Andy Rittenhouse, *Salt & Light*), we intentionally enter into the broken places and make ourselves available to persons seeking wholeness. We go beyond giving aid to giving of ourselves.
11. The church's mission is **relational**. God's love is uniquely revealed through the quality of our relationships (John 17:23). "The life of the Christian community is itself part of the 'good news'" (Inagrace Dietterich, *The Church and the Reign of God*). Authentic, wholesome fellowship offers the world a taste of the advancing kingdom. God is a relational God. Cultivating connections in the community and working collaboratively are not just a strategy for mission: Christ-reflecting relationships are the substance of mission.
12. The church's mission entails **mobilizing disciples**. In the old "missions" paradigm, churches appoint specialists for mission programs. In a missional paradigm, while specialists have their place, *all* Christ-followers are gifted and called to serve Christ's mission (1 Pet. 4:10). Churches equip and mobilize Christians for a missional life, daily seeking the kingdom and sharing God's grace in the world (Matt. 6:33, Eph. 2:10, 4:11-12). True disciples live with significance: "Our deeds become an element in God's eternal history" (Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*).
13. The church's mission **multiplies**. It grows like a mustard seed (Luke 13:19): "God takes our obedience in small things—and multiplies it into something far beyond our expectations" (Disciple Nations Alliance). Mission grows as we offer to God what we have and what we most love, to be used in kingdom service (John 6:9-13, 2 Cor. 8:5). Mission connects existing assets in the church and community with ministry opportunities. It is not the size of our ministry that matters most to God but our faithfulness in investing what God has entrusted to us, for His glory (Matt. 25:14-27).