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## The Missional Church in Perspective

### MAPPING TRENDS AND SHAPING THE CONVERSATION

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011)  
by Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile

#### A Book Review by Jack De Vries

There is a lot of confusion about what is meant by “the missional church.” Lots of books have been written on “the missional church.” Pastors and church leaders ask me: “You talk about the importance of the church being missional! What do you mean?” Well if there is anybody who can help give definition to what is meant by “the missional church” it is Craig Van Gelder. His most recent book, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, co-authored by Dwight J. Zscheile, is an attempt to do exactly what the title suggests: put the missional church in perspective.

Craig Van Gelder is not a stranger to the missional conversation. When the watershed book *The Missional Church*, edited by Darrell L. Guder, came out in 1998, Van Gelder was one of the contributing authors. This initial conversation got the church to rethink its essential nature. “The missional church conversation presents an alternative way to think about the church, one that focuses on God’s mission as determinative for

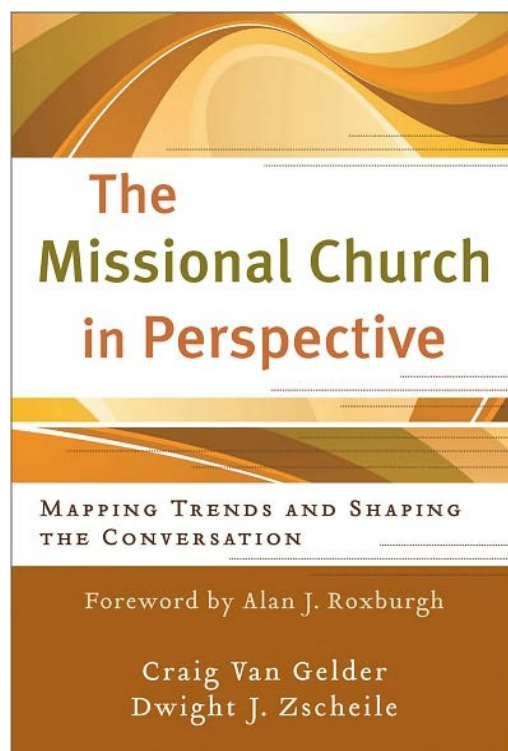
understanding the mission of the church.” (9) But now a decade and some later the authors of *The Missional Church in Perspective* “believe the time is right to bring greater clarity to the missional church conversation.” (12) As Alan J. Roxburgh writes in book’s foreword: “This

book grapples with the evangelical call of the church to be God’s sign, witness, and foretaste in massively shifting, changing, morphing worlds.” (xiv)

Van Gelder and Zscheile have divided the book’s content into two parts. Part 1 deals with the history and development of the missional conversation. This first part has been primarily authored by Van Gelder. Rightly so! He has been so much a part of this conversation over the past decade. Part 2, written primarily by Zscheile, looks forward into the future and suggests a number of

perspectives that extend the missional conversation.

I found Part 1 very helpful in mapping the missional church conversation of the past decade or so. Now I admit I love history – but that is not the only reason I appreciated these first three chapters. I strongly believe that any positive forward movement in the church requires a deep appreciation for and an understanding of the past, where we have come from. For example, the authors describe the underlying pinning of the whole idea of the *missio Dei* in relation to the reign



of God. They mention how “Newbigin understood the work of the Triune God as *calling* and *sending* the church through the Spirit into the world to participate fully in God’s mission within all creation.” They go on to point out that “this participation, for Newbigin as well as for Barth, is tied to the doctrine of election and is pivotal for both of them in understanding the identity of the church in relation to God’s mission. God’s pattern through the Biblical narrative is to choose the one for the sake of the many, the particular for the sake of the universal.” (38) We see this in the calling of Abraham and Sarah, *blessed to be a blessing* (Genesis 12). We see this in the calling of Christ followers to make disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28).

In the second chapter the authors revisit the seminal book *Missional Church*. If you have not read this book, in this chapter you will find a concise as well as exhaustive overview of the argument of this book. It highlights the six movements which were at the heart of the argument of *Missional Church*. But the authors are quick to point out that there are still some concepts which were undeveloped and some theological issues that were unresolved. Four are identified:

- **Trinitarian Missiology:** the integration of the sending work of God in relation to the work of the Son and the work of the Spirit (52-55)
- **Missio Dei and the Reign of God:** how the generalized understanding of *missio Dei* is related to the mission of the church (55-59)
- **Church and Culture/World:** the relationship between the church and the culture/world (59-61)
- **Worship, Sacraments, and Ordination:** a reshaping of worship, sacraments and ordination from a missional perspective (61-62)

The authors also identify a number of unexamined issues in *Missional Church*. The fact is that “whatever the reason, a conversation utilizing missional language has exploded during the past decade.” (65) One can only conclude, the missional church conversation needs to continue.

This ongoing conversation is the primary focus of Part 2 of *The Missional Church in Perspective*. The last word has not been said or written in this missional church conversation, but the authors at least suggest key biblical and theological resources for extending the conversation. Some of these suggestions I found quite helpful as I consider what God is doing in Australia in and through the church.

For example, the Western trinitarian emphasis on God’s sending in the initial missional conversation could “foster a view of mission as the isolated actions of individual Christians or individual churches on behalf of God, rather than the participation of the church in the Triune God’s life and movement within all creation.” (106) The authors suggest that “the mission implications become clearer if the church sees its own life not as an *imitation* of the Trinity but as a *participation* in the life and mission of the Trinity.” (109) This movement from imitation to participation “offers a much more helpful framework for conceiving of the relationship between God, world, and church.” (110) “Participation invites us into what God *is doing* and *will continue to do* as God’s promises in Christ are brought to fulfillment.” (111) This has huge implications for the church, as the authors point out: “...we are called into a process of communal discernment and creative experimentation grounded in the Word of God as our imaginations for God’s world are shaped by the Spirit in our own communities and in conversation with our neighbours.” (120) Just

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*The church is gathered by God’s Spirit and called through its corporate witness to proclaim that, in Christ, God is shaping a new life for the world. - Paul Hooker (95)*

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get your head around this last quote – the implications for how we do missions as a church are legion. The focus is brilliant. The focus is not on us, but on God – not on what we are doing, but what God is doing in the world. As Christians we are invited to participate in what God is already doing in and through Christ by the power of the Spirit.

If you pick up a copy of *The Missional Church in Perspective* and expect to find a model of what the missional church looks like, you will be deeply disappointed. The authors point out: “There is no model for what a missional church looks like. Rather, missional church needs to be defined by the church’s dynamic participation in the Triune God’s movement in the world. ... It takes on different expressions at different times and places. Missional church is a habit of mind and heart, a posture of openness and discernment, and a faithful attentiveness both to the Spirit’s presence and to the world that God so loves.” (149)

*Missional church is a habit of mind and heart, a posture of openness and discernment...*

Allow me to give an illustration of what this faithful attentiveness looks like, an example offered by Reggie McNeal, quoted in this book:

Each member of the staff of one church was instructed to go to a coffee shop, sit on a park bench, or stand in a mall parking lot and pray a simple prayer: “Lord, help me to see what you see.” They were to listen for an hour to the voice of God and then reconvene to share what they had heard. This simple outing radically changed their outlook as they realized that what was in the heart of God was much bigger than typical church concerns. They began to see broken families, homeless people, at-risk children, stressed teenagers – all people they were not engaging with their church ministry. (150)

The authors add: “When this attentiveness is grounded in an imagination for God’s presence and movement in the world, our eyes are opened with compassion. We connect with God’s passionate care for all creation.” (150)

*The Missional Church in Perspective* is not necessarily an easy read. In fact, most of Van Gelder’s books are not typical bedside reading material. These are the kinds of books which makes one think deeply about theology and the Bible. And this is why such books ought to be required reading in every pastor’s library. The missional church is not just a passing fad; it gets at the very heart of God – the *missio Dei*, God’s mission in the world. Missional church conversations need to happen at every level of the church – in the pastor’s study as he prepares to lead God’s people in worship and the Word, in councils and sessions as they wrestle with God’s calling on their lives; in church committees, classis and synodical meetings, as these seek to expand the gospel impact the church is having on the world and culture. So let the conversations begin; let the conversations continue. All of this to the glory of God and for the sake of the world. “May the Spirit lead us all into deeper engagement and participation in the Triune God’s life and the life of God’s world.” (169)

#### The Authors:



**Craig Van Gelder** serves as tenured professor of congregational mission at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, having taken this position in 1998 following ten years as professor of domestic missiology at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, MI.

Ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1984 and the Christian Reformed Church in 1990, Van Gelder combines a practical and academic interest in helping congregations engage in mission. Much of his practical interest stems from working as a consultant for over two decades in assisting congregations in strategic planning and processes of organizational change. He continues to engage in some consulting work in addition to his teaching responsibilities.



**Dwight Zscheile** joined the Luther Seminary faculty in 2008 as assistant professor of Congregational Mission and Leadership, after serving as an adjunct instructor in church leadership at Luther Seminary in 2007 and 2008. He completed the Doctor of Philosophy degree at Luther Seminary with a focus on congregational mission and

leadership in 2008. He is also the associate rector at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, St. Paul.