In a Western culture where almost all things are relative, and claims of truth can be proclaimed continuously to no avail; a life immersed in living with God through the principles of his kingdom, filled with his promised presence, will stand out as radically different from those around it. Filled with this power and hope such a life will hold an attraction to many people seeking for an authentic and transformational spiritual experience. If that life is also partnered with God in his mission of redemption it will be overruling the powers of Satan and sin wherever it is confronted (Matt 16:18-19), which will draw many to want to know Jesus in the same way. This is the way God’s kingdom works. It is also the intention underlying the growing movement of missional churches and communities within and without the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Much of this important discussion for the church arises out of Leslie Newbigin’s experience of returning home to England after three decades of missionary service in India and recognizing that most people in society were finding the Christian church irrelevant to everyday life. Alan Roxburgh says Newbigin realized “the once mission-sending nations of the West were in need of a radical re-missionizing” (Roxburgh and Boren 2009:9). Newbigin’s response to this can be seen in his works such as The Open Secret: Introduction to a Theology of Mission; The Gospel in a Pluralist Society; The Household of God; and Sign of the Kingdom. He and many others such as Darrell Guder, Reggie McNeal, Alan Hirsch, Alan Roxburgh, M. Scott Boren, and Eddie Gibb have been instrumental in defining the paradigm of “re-missionizing” the West. Through their work certain characteristics have arisen which help to define the missional church.

The missional church is not about the church, but about God and what he is already doing in the world. The missional church is God’s people understanding that “God is up to something in the world that is bigger
than the church even though the church is called to be sign, witness, and foretaste of God’s purposes in the world” (Roxburgh and Boren 2009:20). Rightly understood, “It is not the church of God that has a mission. It’s the God of mission that has a church” (20). The very nature of God is mission. Therefore, those who profess to follow him will also be missional in their nature. This has a direct influence on how they interact with the world around them.

The missional church is not about “doing” church in the traditional practice of an event. Nor is it about doing church in the sense of going to a specific building. It is about being the church. Being the church is about people, God’s people partnering with God in the life they are living, realizing they are the church. It is about the work of redeeming and developing people to be like Jesus (McNeal 2003:69-91). God’s ecclesia are a people, not an event or a building, they are “called out and empowered to join him in his redemptive mission in the world” (McNeal 2003:147). Therefore being the church also involves the characteristic of being apostolic, sent to meet with God where he is working around us. It assumes that God is not to be found in a single building, on a specific day, or time; but that he is working throughout the earth in every life, at all times, and in all places. God is pulling, and sending us into a partnership with him in the lives and communities around us.

“As the Father has sent me, so send I you” (John 20:21) is a call to all believers. It is not an optional add-on to the Christian life. It is the Christian life. As God draws and pulls us toward him, we are prompted by the Holy Spirit to look for where he is working and what he is already doing around us. Then he sends us to reveal his grace and presence in those places. The church exists and functions where God’s people are living, working, and playing. In this paradigm God’s people are released (McNeal 2003:43-68) from doing church, sent to meet God in everyday life and to work alongside him. As Erwin McManus declares, you become “Jesus the businessman, Jesus the teacher, Jesus the Starbucks coffee barista” (McManus 2011).

The church “at its core is the reality that God’s people are a sign to the world of who God is. This missional nature cannot be subdivided into internal activities for insiders and external activities for outsiders. All the church does and is should live out God’s life in the midst of the world; missional people should practice God’s life before a watching world... Being missional is about all of it, not part. This is the missional imagination. All of God’s people are on a mission to engage their surrounding neighborhoods, not just a few who are sent outside the church to do something called missions” (Roxbough and Boren 2009:54).

In this incarnational engaging of the people in our neighborhoods we
move beyond just handing out a tract, or inviting neighbors to a church program. Incarnational ministry echoes the incarnation of God into humanity, through the person of Jesus Christ. Incarnation in the missional sense fosters an organic unfolding of the movement of God’s Spirit in the relationships between believers and others, rather than the forced revelations of much of the proclamation evangelism that takes place in Christian circles today. It is an intentional entering into someone else’s life, for the sake of revealing God to them, as the Spirit directs. It is for the sake of continuing the Abrahamic promise of God’s followers being a blessing to all nations. Alan Hirsch highlights how “if God’s central way of reaching his world was to incarnate himself in Jesus, then our way of reaching the world should likewise be incarnational. To act incarnationally therefore will mean in part that in our mission to those outside of the faith we will need to exercise genuine identification and affinity with those we are attempting to reach. At the very least, it will probably mean moving into common geography (space) and so set up a real and abiding presence among the group. But the basic motive of incarnational ministry is also revelatory—that they may come to know God through Jesus” (Hirsh 2006:133). The missional church intends that those outside the faith will come to know Jesus by seeing him in us.

This revelatory nature of the missional church in everyday life is tied to the Pauline teaching of God’s followers being ambassadors of the kingdom of God (2 Cor 5:16-21). In becoming a follower of Jesus, one becomes a member, receptor, and ambassador of his kingdom. The kingdom of God dwells within the true follower of Jesus Christ. Dallas Willard sees how distinctly different this kingdom culture is to other cultures of this earth (1998:21-33, 126). Missional believers now operate under a different culture than those they live in. Their culture is that of God’s kingdom. This kingdom is radically different from the cultures of this earth. Missional believers exhibit a radically different way of life as this kingdom culture and power indwells and transforms their own life, unveiling with greater and greater accuracy and power the life of Jesus (2 Cor 3:16-18). Missional believers are students of the culture in much the same way as a missionary going to a foreign country seeks to understand the culture he or she is being sent to, yet not to counter that culture, but to first see where God is at work in it. Then the missional believer joins God there so that through the believer God would be clearly seen. It is still God’s work and always God’s mission. We receive the blessing and responsibility of being his ambassador to reveal how his life-changing kingdom operates.

This means the missional church recognizes the Missio Dei (a term that seems to have gained prominence since Newbigin’s emphasis on re-missioning the West began thirty years ago) as primary. It is the understand-
ing that the Spirit of God has been at work in the world from the very first moments of creation. When Adam and Eve first sinned, God’s redemptive work began. With sin’s entrance through humanity, where redemption and the cross had already been planned for (Titus 1:3), the mission of God was actualized. This plan of redemption was first initiated by God, and continues to be God initiated, until such a time as the plan of redemption is complete, and sin is no more (Rev 21:1-6). The church then is a group of people being the place where the mission of God is most evident and experienced, by themselves and those outside the faith. The church must enter into an intentional way of life seeking to discern and participate in, through everyday life, the plan of redemption with God. The missional church is not a new model to accomplish this task. Whereas the Western church has placed the church as the center of God’s mission, the missional church seeks to return to a more biblical paradigm where each person, in the faith or not, is the focus of God’s mission. The missional church desires to change the societal perception that the church is for the church (McNeal 2003:12) and help people see that God, and his people are for the world. This is not just from a public relations standpoint, so that churches grow. It is from the belief that God can, will, and intends to restore the world and his people to his original intention for them.

To understand this, the world must see Jesus living more clearly through his believers. Missional believers know the church must become what the church was intended to be, by God, for this to happen. To reveal God to the majority of Western society today the church must move from an attractional “come and see” attitude to an incarnational “go and be” attitude; from doing church in a single centralized location, to being the church, God’s ambassadors, revealing the kingdom of God in our midst, in every place the people of God are.

There can be nothing clearer in Scripture than the nature of missional living. God himself is missional. He has one clear mission, to redeem humanity from sin and restore humanity to God’s original intention for them. It was God who created the world and all that is in it. When humanity chose not to trust God as Creator, a separation (Isa 59:2) was caused between humanity and God that God has been seeking to restore ever since. Sin has placed humanity in a situation where, despite the noblest of efforts, human beings cannot remedy the problem by themselves.

When this sin first entered the world, God immediately came searching for Adam and Eve (Gen 3:7) and has not stopped working on the earth for the redemption of humanity since. Abram is called out of Haran and sent to a “land which I [God] will show you” (Gen 12:1), to be made a blessing to all nations. Not only does God seek out those people on this earth not following him, but he also asks his followers to do the same.
“The church was created to be the people of God to join him in his redeemative mission in the world. The church was never intended to exist for itself. It was and is the chosen instrument of God to expand his kingdom” (McNeal 2003:15, 16). Joseph is sent to Egypt before his brothers because God sought to “preserve life” (Gen 45:5). In the defining story of the Old Testament, God steps into history on behalf of his people, rescuing them from Pharaoh through the Exodus. Even here his people are rescued for a purpose greater than themselves. They are to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:6) in Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey. The same promise of being a blessing that was made through Abraham (Gen 12:1-3), Isaac (Gen 26:3, 4), and Jacob (Gen 28:10-15) is to be fulfilled by the children of Israel in the land God had promised to them. Amazing miracles take place in this act of deliverance, culminating in the splitting of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh’s armies. Within days God’s people have lost faith in him, are worshipping another deity, and wishing they were back in Egypt. Still God pursues them with grace, never giving up his redemptive mission on those who are willing to give up on him. The story continues through the Old Testament. Because of his love for the world and his disobedient children, God at different times sends judges, prophets, priests, and kings to woo his children back.

The New Testament begins with God sending his own son. Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises of God. Where each descendant of Adam and Abraham had failed, Jesus would succeed. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ is the central act of the New Testament, and all of history, defining that God would go to the greatest lengths necessary to redeem humanity. In the life of this God-man, Jesus, we see the mission of God. Not only for us who believe, but also for those who do not. Jesus lived thirty-three years on the earth before giving his life as a sacrifice. He spent three and a half years in public ministry. He described his life as the kingdom of God coming into the midst of humanity. To see Jesus was to see God the Father. To listen to Jesus, or spend time with him was to hear and see what life was intended to be, what your life could be, and what it should be. Christ’s life was a visible picture of a life partnered with God in his redemptive mission. That picture was, and is, the example for everyone who confesses Christ as Lord, as to what our lives can be through Christ. “God has designed it so that when people have seen God’s ‘peculiar’ people, they have in a real sense caught a view of God” (Guder 1998:104).

God uses the event we know as the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to redeem humanity; and through that event to reveal the power and promise to restore God’s kingdom rule and his image within humanity. In John 1:14 (“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us”) we see the fulfillment of God’s desire to be with his people. However,
God does not stop with just being with his people. His desire is for their full redemption and restoration into his image. He then unveils a process by which a person can be both redeemed and restored. Jesus and his New Testament followers call this process being a disciple. As the life and ministry of Jesus unfolds through Scripture he instills within his initial followers and each believer since, the mission to join him in the redemptive and restorative power of living in the kingdom of God today (Matt 28:18-20). Although the regular contemporary notion of “accepting Jesus” often refers only to the act of being forgiven by Christ; biblically, anyone who accepts his atonement is also accepting the mission and purpose of Jesus as well. Such a person is called a disciple and is expected to live in every way in Jesus’ name, including joining God in his redemptive mission. As Paul says,

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. (2 Cor 5:17-20)

Understanding the kingdom of God and the reign of God is crucial to a truly missional mindset. It is God’s strength that achieves the restoration of humanity. It is God’s wisdom that leads it. It is the Spirit of God that empowers believers to live out that mission. It was Jesus the Son of God who embodied the rule of the kingdom in human form. To see the life of Jesus was, and is, to see what the kingdom of God looks like. Under the reign of God, mission is not an activity of the church or a program. It is the very nature of who the church is. “Jesus believed it was his mission to embody the reign of God by living under its authority” (Guder 1998:103). So too must his followers if they are to be imitators of Christ (Eph 5:1) in all things. The kingdom of God is the biblical definition of how God’s missional nature plays out on earth. It describes how he works as he accomplishes his mission. It describes the power available to transform those who choose to become a part of the missional team of God. It describes the authority, responsibility, and power they then have as ambassadors of the kingdom, as they partner with God in redeeming the world. God’s plan for humanity is much bigger than just forgiveness and redemption. It is about unambiguous Christlikeness in the heart and life of every believer while living on this earth with a full realization coming in heaven. Complete restoration into the image of God is his plan and promise for today and eternity. The power and principles of the kingdom of God are
the only resources able to accomplish this task. God’s effective will created and sustains everything in the universe, animate or inanimate. Without his reign life would cease to exist. The kingdom of God is the operating system of life as we know it. Those not living in it live fragmented and discordant lives. Those who recognize its availability and enter into it experience the “abundant life” Jesus promised. Heaven is not so much a place as it is the result of the undiluted and uninterrupted reign of God. That is why the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of the heavens, can be within us. Heaven, or God’s uninterrupted reign can be the air we breathe, meaning the condition under which our life with God is lived. God gives the church his mission of living and proclaiming this kingdom reality in all that they are. With this gospel in mind, Jesus, both the living picture and proclaimer of this good news of the kingdom of God, says to every believer “as the Father has sent me, so send I you” (John 20:21).

“Therefore, the church’s own mission must take its cues from the way God’s mission unfolded in the sending of Jesus into the world for its salvation. In Jesus’ way of carrying out God’s mission, we discover that the church is to represent God’s reign as its community, its servant, and its messenger” (Guder 1998:102). Through the power of God’s kingdom, “the church displays the first fruits of the forgiven and forgiving people of God who are brought together across the rubble of dividing walls that have crumbled under the weight of the cross. It is the harbinger of the new humanity that lives in genuine community, a form of companionship and wholeness that humanity craves” (103). The church, that is the people of God themselves, becomes the promise of the gospel (104). It is this visible and living picture of Christ in his people that God seeks and the world desperately needs.

The kingdom of God has always existed, and will always exist (Ps 145:13; Dan 7:14). Dallas Willard notes how the gospel of the Old Testament from Creation through Moses, from the Psalms (145-150 especially), through the prophets (Isa 63:12), was “Our God Reigns,” and this was something everyone knew (Willard 1998:26). But now, through Christ, there is a new accessibility to all who believe (26).

Jesus came among us to show and teach the life for which we were made. He came very gently, opened access to the governance of God with him, and set afoot a conspiracy of freedom in truth among human beings. Having overcome death he remains among us. By relying on his word and presence we are enabled to reintegrate the little realm that makes up our life into the infinite rule of God. And that is the eternal kind of life. Caught up in his active rule, our deeds become an element in God’s eternal history. They are what God and we do together, making us a part of his life and him a part of ours. . . . He inducts us.
into the eternal kind of life that flows through himself. He does this first by bringing that life to bear upon our needs, and then by diffusing it throughout our deeds—deeds done with expectation that he and his Father will act with and in our actions. (Willard 1998:27)

Missional believers understand this amazing promise is not just for a few. Our mission is to help others rely on Jesus in such a way that they can enable that very same reintegration of the little realms that make up their own lives, into the infinite rule of God. God has invaded our perceived reality with true reality. He is bringing into focus through his interactions with humanity and especially through the embodiment of his kingdom in Jesus Christ, what life is all about. He is making clear how the universe was originally intended to work and the principles he intends to restore it to in time. He is also making available the resources by which anyone who wants to let God govern their living and dying today, can do so. That resource is the Holy Spirit and life in the Spirit, and he calls all of this the gospel of the kingdom of God.

The gospel of the kingdom of God is the eternal gospel of Revelation 14. It is the same gospel we are commissioned by Jesus to take to “all nations” (Matt 24:14 and 28:19-20). The proclamation of that gospel is the eternal mission of God’s people. Just as the reign of God has always existed from time past, so it will in the future. “Every nation, tribe, language and people” (Rev 14:6, 7) are in need of experiencing what God has done for them. The missional believer is the messenger through whom God announces the availability of this kingdom, to all humanity, just as Jesus Christ did.

To accomplish this kingdom living the believer must be willing to live as Jesus did: incarnationally, being sent as God’s people throughout history have always been sent. For Jesus, instead of “Come and see!” it was “Go get ’em!” Instead of withdrawing from people for fear of contamination, he ate with them. This was horrifying to the Pharisees. They shrieked their charge against him: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2, NIV). Instead of insisting that people clean up in order to come to God, Jesus preached that God accepts people as they are so that, in the light of his love, they can come to their senses and clean up their act . . . He gave himself away to poor people, sick people, unclean people, the disadvantaged, and disenfranchised from the religion of the privileged. (McNeal 2003:28, 29)

The missional church seeks to restore the principles above so that people become, not what the church does, but who the church is. Mission is who God is, it is a part of his nature, so it is a part of their nature as well.
Because Jesus did, the missional church intentionally seeks as a community, to be changed by the reign of God in their midst, and for the reign of God in them to make them catalysts and agents of change in the places and cultures they inhabit. They intentionally interact with their communities as Christ did, with its people, its leaders, looking for where God is already at work, and then joining him there. They are missionaries being sent to all who need to be changed by God’s redemptive mission to humanity. The church being missional will “translate the gospel so that the surrounding culture can understand it” (Guder 1998:114). This missional expression of church is how the Christian church will be able to bless the secular and postmodern cultures of the Western world, being and making disciples of all nations.

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