Missional discipleship: Discerning spiritual-formation practices and goals within the missional movement

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Abstract
The missional church movement has emerged as a voice calling for a return to the church’s inherent missionary nature and identity. As a part of that call, “discipleship” has been identified as the key to success of the movement as well as the success of the Western church as a whole. However, “discipleship” and related terminology are devoid of conceptual clarity due to terminological imprecision. To this point, no single work has identified a tangible concept of “missional discipleship,” and this lack of precision leaves missional leaders with no clear goal of spiritual formation. Without a clear goal, a clear and intentional spiritual-formation plan and process is ever elusive. When missional literature on spiritual formation is observed as a whole, however, and common themes are identified, a tangible concept of missional discipleship materializes. The purpose of this article is to identify spiritual-formation practices and goals as found within missional literature, and develop a tangible concept of “missional discipleship.” Therefore, the results of this study bring forth the following proposal: Missional discipleship is the experiential process of identity formation which results in a disciple who exhibits tangible evidence of mission, community, and obedience in his or her life.

Keywords
missional discipleship, missional spiritual formation, missional movement, spiritual-formation philosophy and practice

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As a movement grows and gains traction among an increasingly broad audience, internal and external pressure upon the movement can influence the movement’s goals (Zald and Ash, 1966), which in turn can lead to decreased conceptual clarity and increased terminological imprecision. So it is with the missional church movement. The inherent diversity of the movement has ushered in increasing perplexity in the definition of certain concepts within the movement. Indeed, the term “missional” has become troublesome in and of itself due to its diverse application. This lack of exactitude is echoed in the concept of “spiritual formation,” due in part to a lack of clarity in regards to what is meant by “disciple” and “discipleship.” Much like the term “missional,” these terms are victims of terminological imprecision; even though they are commonly used terms, the understanding of the concepts these words represent is far from common. This lack of precision leaves missional leaders with no clear goal of spiritual formation; and without a clear goal, a clear and intentional spiritual-formation plan and process is ever elusive.

Within missional movement literature, “discipleship” is pinpointed as key to the success of both the missional movement and the Western church as a whole (Breen, 2011; Hirsch, 2006; Cole, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative to develop a tangible concept of missional discipleship that can be used by missional leaders to develop spiritual-formation plans and processes for their respective communities of faith. No single work has of yet delineated spiritual-formation practices and goals from a missional perspective in a way that produces the tangibility desired. When the missional literature examined in this study is observed as a whole, however, and common themes are identified, a tangible concept of missional discipleship materializes. The purpose of this article is to identify spiritual-formation practices and goals as found within missional literature, and develop a tangible concept of “missional discipleship.” Therefore, the results of this study bring forth the following proposal:

*Missional discipleship is the experiential process of identity formation which results in a disciple who exhibits tangible evidence of mission, community, and obedience in his or her life.*

**Identifying the scope of the literature**

One standing at the threshold of the intersection of spiritual formation and the missional movement finds voluminous works that are often interconnected, yet not directly related. For this discussion to be fruitful, parameters must be set for focus, management, and relevance. Therefore, it is appropriate to discuss the parameters used to identify “missional literature.”

Alan Roxburgh stated, “The word ‘missional’ seems to have traveled the remarkable path of going from obscurity to banality in only one decade” (as cited in Van Gelder and Zscheile, 2011: 1). The missional movement is diverse and resistant to boundaries; this has allowed for variations in ways the term is used and understood. Van Gelder and Zscheile (2011) wrote that “‘missional’ displays an inherent elasticity that allows it to be understood in a variety of ways” (p. 3). This elasticity allows a variety of diverse
theologies and philosophies to be labeled “missional” in spite of what differences might exist, and this diversity is reflected within the literature. The scope of this study was limited to literature congruent with the “Reconstructionist” missional category as identified by Doornenbal (2012) and the “Missional” stream discussed by Sine (2008), and in this article, any use of the term “missional” will refer to this typology.1

Through the course of the movement’s development, variations are also reflected in application and theology. There is certainly value in examining the theological underpinnings of the missional movement, and one area of further study that could be helpful to this conversation is an examination of the deeper theological influences that shape the spiritual-formation practices and goals as found in contemporary missional literature. Additionally, as leaders of the missional movement developed a theology of spiritual formation, they were certainly influenced by those who have come before them in this arena. The impact of spiritual-formation thinkers who would not be considered a formal part of the missional movement must not be ignored or diminished. However, the focus of this study is to identify tangible practices and goals of discipleship within the missional movement, rather than how those practices and goals came to be.

**Missional discipleship**

In September of 2011, Mike Breen, founder and leader of “3D Ministries,” sent shockwaves throughout the missional church movement with a blog article entitled “Why the missional movement will fail.” This provocative title was used to draw attention to what Breen considers the make or break element for the missional movement: discipleship. Breen (2011) wrote,

> The reason the missional movement may fail is because most people/communities in the Western church are pretty bad at making disciples. Without a plan for making disciples (and a plan that works), any missional thing you launch will be completely unsustainable. (para. 8)

Breen is not alone. Throughout the missional movement, leaders are identifying discipleship as the key to success not only for the missional movement, but for the church as a whole. Discipleship is identified as the cornerstone of a renewal process that will restore growth, health, and relevance to the Western church that is struggling in its current context. Hirsch (2006) described discipleship in the church as the “single most crucial factor that will in the end determine the quality of the whole” (p. 102), and Cole (2010) argued for the disciple being the top priority for the church, suggesting, “We need to be about reproducing healthy disciples, leaders, churches, and movements, in that order” (p. 53). Discipleship, therefore, is the building block for the missional church, and the missional movement, when reduced down to the smallest unit, is found in the disciple.

The implication, therefore, is that those leaders who desire to lead communities of faith with a missional ethos must focus their attention and efforts on discipleship. If the concept of discipleship is so vital to the missional movement and the church at
large, then there must be a clearer understanding of the spiritual-formation practices and goals.

Defining the term “disciple” in a Christian sense should be easy enough; a disciple is a follower of Jesus. However, when further extrapolation of the expectations and characteristics of a disciple is sought, the results are not so obvious. Furthermore, the concepts of discipleship and spiritual formation are wrought with disparities based on the theology and philosophy of the people defining those concepts.

Indeed, there is within the missional literature a plethora of definitions associated with the term “discipleship.” Consider some overt definitions found in missional literature:

- “Discipleship is following Christ into participation in God’s mission in the world in the power of the Spirit.” (Van Gelder and Zscheile, 2011: 148)
- “If all the volumes written about what it means to be a follower of Jesus had to be reduced to three words, my three words would be live, love, and leave. What does it mean to live like Christ, love like Christ, and leave what Christ left behind?” (Putnam, 2008: 9–10)
- “A disciple is more than just a convert. A disciple is also more than just a student, although this concept is closer. In the world of Jesus’ day, education was not carried out in the impersonal classroom setting so familiar to us today. The discipleship relationship was so all-encompassing that disciples even picked up the mannerisms of their teacher. They became, in effect, small reproductions of their teacher through the intimacy and constancy of their relationship with him.” (Pratt, 2012: 133)
- “A disciple is not someone who stays the same. A disciple is someone struggling to live a life of heartfelt love and obedience to the Father, living and dying for the higher purposes of God’s kingdom.” (Halter and Smay, 2010: 94)
- “The essential task of discipleship is to equip believers to embody the message of Jesus.” (Frost and Hirsch, 2011: 163)
- Discipleship is “catechesis, spiritual formation, Christian nurturing, and mentoring, but it also includes compassionate service and missional engagement, particularly since many of these acts shape and form people as they grow in grace.” (Maddix, 2013: chapter 1, para. 1)

While a common definition of “disciple” and “discipleship” is not overtly found in the missional literature, this does not indicate a lack of commonality. When the literature is considered as a body, several themes emerge that provide a foundation for an understanding of discipleship and spiritual formation from the missional perspective. Three specific themes are prevalent: discipleship as identity, discipleship as a process, and discipleship as an experience.

**Discipleship as identity**

The Western church is in the midst of an identity crisis (Van Gelder and Zscheile, 2011). The missional movement was born out of a theological focus that recognized
the centrality of the *missio Dei* in Scripture and resulted in the call for the church to return to her missional nature and design. This reconstruction will align the focus and intentions of the church with the God who partners with them for his purposes and glory. The missional movement desires to remind the church of her true identity, thus influencing the practices and forms of the community of faith.

So it is with missional discipleship. The identity crisis of the church corporately has influenced the identity of the individual disciple in palpable ways. When the church as a body knows not what she was designed to be, the people of the church are duly lost in regards to identity. Therefore, discipleship loses its specificity and tangibility and fades into the ether of the blurry context that is the community of faith. In *Missional Church*, Hunsberger (1998) explained, “The religious loyalties that churches seem to claim and the social functions that they actually perform are at odds with each other. Discipleship has been absorbed into citizenship” (p. 78).

In the midst of this identity crisis, the focus of spiritual formation has become information and behavior; expectations have often been reduced to attending church-produced Bible classes and behaving in a moral fashion by community standards. While information and behavior are certainly important aspects of spiritual formation, the concept of missional discipleship is built on the presumption that they were never meant to be the end, but rather the means by which transformation takes place. Breen and Cockram (2011) wrote, “Discipleship isn’t a random assortment of facts and propositions and behaviors, discipleship is something that is you to the core and is completely incarnated in you” (chapter 3, para. 50). In other words, disciples are made when information moves from a surface knowledge to affecting the believer from the inside out, in addition to behavior moving from something that is external in nature to activities and actions that spring forth from the very being of the believer. True discipleship takes place when we move beyond information download and behavior change to true transformation of who we are in Christ. Our identity is changed as God recreates us in Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17) and as we are continually transformed by the renewing of our mind (Romans 12:2).

Missional spiritual formation, therefore, is identity formation that relies on the Holy Spirit. While God’s people have responsibilities as they follow Christ and submit to him, identity is transformed from the inside out by the work of God. As Zscheile (2012) described, “It is crucial that we understand Christian spiritual formation as Spiritual formation—formation in and by the power of the Holy Spirit” (p. 16). The role of the Holy Spirit in identity formation reminds us that discipleship is not something God’s people can manufacture unassisted. Spiritual formation is not an effort or goal of God’s people as much as it is a response to God’s activity in our lives as explained in Scripture. In classic theological style, the indicative of our identity results in the imperative of our knowledge and behavior; who we are in and through Christ informs how we live. As Frost and Hirsch (2003) expounded,

> Core to a messianic spirituality is the understanding that God changes us by changing our identity, our sense of self-definition. It really is that simple. In Christ, we are new creatures; we are inheritors of the kingdom; we are God’s children; we are saints (holy ones). These are
not just little tags used to describe the same reality we knew before we were saved. They are identities we take on when we are made alive with Christ (Rom 6). Having undergone union with Christ in regeneration, we are then called to live out our basic identity shifts that took place in that event. If we are made into saints by our relation with Jesus, then we are exhorted to live consistently with that identity. (Chapter 9, para. 6)

Discipleship as identity means that spiritual formation is not viewed as an accessory to life, much like one would add a hobby or a second job to your life’s schedule. Instead, it is focused on, and springs from, the very being of a follower of Jesus. Spiritual formation is the continual aligning of the disciple’s life to the intentions of God as he works in and through that life. Discipleship as identity means spiritual formation doesn’t just help us know what God intends for us to know or to do what God intends for us to do; instead spiritual formation helps us become what God intended us to be. “For the follower of Jesus, discipleship is not the first step toward a promising career. It is in itself the fulfillment of his or her destiny” (Hirsch, 2006: 103).

Discipleship as a process

The influence of Christendom and the attractional model of drawing people into church programs commonly used by the Western church have given the impression that the church has “become both a consumable and a service provider, a vendor of religious goods and services” (Hirsch, 2006: 44). Consequently, the church has become less of a community of believers and more of an “event.” Phrases such as “What time does church start?” and “Would you like to go to church?” have caused many to subconsciously equate church with an appointment on the calendar. The program and event-based nature commonly found in the Western church has reduced what were once regular, everyday activities for the church (i.e. fellowship, outreach, service) into occasional, manufactured functions.

The concept of discipleship has not escaped the effects of the church’s habitual manufacturing of events. Spiritual formation in the Western church has often adopted the event- and program-based model employed by the church at large. One is considered a “disciple” at their conversion event; baptism produces disciples. Spiritual growth is expected to take place through Bible studies, Sunday School classes, and other church groups/events.

The missional concept of spiritual formation, however, does not envision discipleship taking place primarily in planned programs and events, but instead sees discipleship as a more organic process. Discipleship is not something that is “completed” after a series of classes or studies, but rather is a process that continues in perpetuity as the Christ-follower submits his or her life to God. Similarly, the discipleship process is not a linear progression, but rather a journey with twists and turns as well as peaks and valleys.

The ongoing process of discipleship. Missional discipleship is an ongoing process in which the disciple’s identity is transformed in partnership with the Holy Spirit in ways which the follower of Christ will more closely resemble the one he or she is following.
The process is ongoing because the battle with the selfish and sinful struggles of the broken world continues to plague God’s people and will continue to do so until Christ returns. Of course, if the disciple is being transformed to something, this means that he or she is being transformed from something as well. The practicality of this transformation requires time and continued perseverance. “It often takes years for Jesus to clean out the house of competing ideologies and behaviors” (Putnam, 2008: 64).

The process of discipleship, although never really “complete” while the disciple remains on this earth, is nonetheless progressive. Even though the process will certainly take time to develop, discipleship as a process means that there are measurable advances in spiritual formation. Cole (2008) explained,

Salvation is about a transformed life, a becoming. Regeneration is an ongoing process of the Holy Spirit working in our lives, so that each of us should be more like Christ this year than we were the year before. Our lives should reflect more of the grace and truth found in Christ next year than they do this year. (p. 49)

Therefore, as discipleship continues as a process, the progress is measured against the example par excellence of Christ.

The non-linear process of discipleship. Spiritual formation does not take place in a predictable pattern. There are no “12-step programs” that can be employed to guarantee the end product of a mature disciple. McNeal (2009) explained, “Maturation is messy. It takes time. It doesn’t occur linearly. Maturation occurs in an atmosphere where accountability is expected and practiced. In this environment, people are coached, challenged, and celebrated in their journeys” (p. 100).

Missional discipleship is not only a partnership between God and the disciple, spiritual formation also includes a disciple-maker. This is, of course, by God’s design, and disciple-making was Christ’s commission to his followers (Matthew 28:18–20). The disciple-maker acts as the coach in the non-linear process of discipleship, a role that Jesus exemplified. Speaking of Jesus guiding the non-linear process of discipleship, Putnam (2008) expounded,

There was no program, no over structured process, no book, no curriculum; He simply chose twelve guys and lived life with them. He lived His life in front of them, and they observed Him living and loving. No large organization, merely a natural, simple, organic process of living life together. (pp. 34, 35)

This organic flow of “living life together” is a key component to missional discipleship, both for the maker of disciples and the disciple being formed. It allows both the disciple-maker and the disciple to adapt to the ebb and flow of the process and be responsive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The non-linear nature of the missional discipleship process is due in part to organic life-events that provide the opportunity for spiritual formation and maturity. Frost and Hirsch (2003) suggested that “‘spiritual growth’ often takes place in contexts of pain,
struggle, doubt, and the unknown” (chapter 6, para. 5), and Breen and Cockram call these life-events “kairos.” They explained, “Kairos is when the eternal God breaks into your circumstances with an event that gathers some loose ends of your life and knits them together in his hands” (2011: chapter 6, para. 5). When these events surface in the normal course of life, the disciple-maker, the disciple, and the Holy Spirit combine to make sense of the moment from God’s perspective. The processing of those events according to the truth of Scripture and the leading of the Holy Spirit matures the disciple.

**When does the process start?** Alan and Debra Hirsch (2010) wrote, “We suggest that we should all simply disciple people everywhere. And we should see discipleship as a process . . . including pre-conversion discipleship and, if God does his thing, post-conversion discipleship” (p. 149). It is important to point out that within the missional movement, discipleship does not begin at the point of conversion, but rather at the point when a Christ-follower builds a relationship with another. Certainly a Christ-follower can and should be a part of the spiritual formation of other believers; this is one of the great characteristics and purposes of the church. However, discipleship is not limited to those “already saved.”

Therefore, the missional concept of discipleship envisions spiritual formation and identity transformation originating before someone comes to faith in Christ, rather than after. Until that faith decision is made, it is the responsibility of the disciple-maker to represent Christ and exemplify what it means to live as a citizen of God’s kingdom. Halter and Smay call this phase of the discipleship relationship the “Discovery Zone.” They explained,

> The Discovery Zone is a sphere in which truth can be seen before it is spoken, where a new authority figure becomes trusted, and where people are able to weigh Christ’s values over their own. In other words, where they can choose to “prefer” Christ’s Kingdom ways over their own ways. (Halter and Smay, 2008: 65)

The pre-conversion nature of this concept of discipleship integrates evangelism into discipleship. For the missional movement, evangelizing is not a separate act in and of itself, but rather something that takes place naturally in the process of discipleship, and being that the process is non-linear, the gospel is shared in a contextual way as the Holy Spirit leads. This integration is a key component to the missional concept of spiritual formation. This integration also allows a seamless transition from pre-conversion spiritual formation to post-conversion spiritual formation; continued development and growth is a natural outflow of an already-established relationship.

**Discipleship as an experience**

While discipleship as identity and discipleship as a process, as seen in the missional literature, serve to recalibrate the concept of what discipleship truly is, discipleship as an experience addresses what the missional movement sees as a significant shortcoming in the contemporary Western church: how discipleship is accomplished.
McNeal (2003) posited, “The approach to spirituality in the modern church has been to adopt the world’s educational model . . . The result of the modern church’s form of spirituality is a North American church that is largely on a head trip” (p. 55). In other words, spiritual formation has been reduced to information download. This model of spiritual formation springs from the age of modernity in which reason is held in high regard, and the rational model of education accepted and used in the general culture spilled over into the church. This model, however, has not produced disciples who in turn produce churches effective at making more and “better” disciples in the current culture.

Missional discipleship, therefore, is more than information download. “Missional churches are not satisfied simply to transfer biblical knowledge. Their goal is members’ obedience to spiritual revelation. It is not what they know, but what they live that counts” (Minatrea, 2004: 53). Helland and Hjalmarsö (2011) agreed:

We don’t merely believe our way into spirituality. We must practice our way. Knowledge without action stunts spiritual growth. We can listen to sermons and attend good Bible studies, but until we put Christian truth into practice, little transformation will occur. (p. 93)

Therefore, more than the modernist concept of learning and information download, missional discipleship sees spiritual formation as something that is experienced; information and practice are synthesized to offer learning and growth opportunities that move from beyond the brain to the heart.

The missional movement sees the necessity for this synthesis of information and practice for a couple of reasons. First, it is understood that the human being uses various methods of learning. Breen and Cockram (2011) explained, “There seem to be three different ways that we learn, but unequivocally, we learn best when there is a dynamic interplay between all three at one time: 1) Classroom/Lecture passing on of information 2) Apprenticeship 3) Immersion” (chapter 3, para. 3). For the missional disciple, these three learning styles are used in concert to spark growth and maturity. Perhaps the most convincing argument the missional movement makes for this type of experience as discipleship is that Jesus seemed to use the same method when he made disciples:

Jesus’ preparation style wasn’t your typical classroom prep; it was on-the-street training, doing things he was going to ask them to own and initiate on their own after he was gone.

His prep was hard at times—they struggled, got angry, wanted to quit, got confused, and self-analyzed—but they grew! (Halter and Smay, 2010: 114)

The second reason the missional movement sees the need for the synthesis and practice in spiritual formation is the ever-emerging postmodern cultural context in which the church exists. The shift from modernity to postmodernity brings with it a shift in what spiritual formation must be to effectively make more and “better” disciples. As Cole (2010) suggested,

Today, people are looking to experience what is important, not just hear about it. This is becoming an experiential culture . . . The pattern of the modern church used to be: believe,
behave, and belong. Today we must see a new pattern where people first belong, then behave, and finally believe. (p. 33)

Missional discipleship, therefore, includes some of the traditional aspects of spiritual formation, but expands to include more experiential aspects as well.

In addition to the epistemological reasons for the concept of discipleship as an experience, the spiritual aspect of discipleship is seen as a matter of experience. As previously discussed, the Holy Spirit plays a vital role in spiritual formation; therefore, vital to missional discipleship is the ongoing experience of God working in and through the disciple through the power of the Holy Spirit. The missional movement sees the disciple experiencing the spiritual formation of the Holy Spirit in two primary ways: through community and mission.

**Experience in community.** Breen and Absalom (2010) wrote, “God has hard-wired a truth deep within us: it is not good for us to be alone (Genesis 2:18). We are designed not only to live in community but also to be at our most fruitful there” (chapter 2, para. 1). A central plea of the missional movement is a shift from individualism and isolationism in the church to a renewal of community. Community is understood as God’s design for the church, both for edification and for mission. Therefore, discipleship as an experience takes place in the context of community. The influence of the Enlightenment, and consequently, the democratic and individualistic context of the modern church, has downplayed the necessity and benefit of community in spiritual formation. The missional movement, however, seeks to remind the church of the power of community. Dietterich (1998) proposed in *Missional Church*,

The modern emphasis on the autonomous self too often ignores, or even denies, the formative power of the various communities in which we participate . . . Our identity and our vision are both taught and caught from our interaction with others in diverse social groupings. The question is not whether we will be socialized, but what kind of society will have its way with us. (p. 155)

The reality of identity formation, and therefore spiritual formation, is that the communities we participate in play a paramount role in that formation, regardless of the identity of the community. Therefore, it is vital that the missional disciple be an integral part of a community where the Holy Spirit is working in and through God’s people so that the experience of that working will contribute to spiritual formation.

Conversely, if the disciple retreats to individualism and isolationism, the withdrawal from community will prevent spiritual formation from taking place as God intended; in concert with other believers and the Holy Spirit: “We cannot find or form our identity nor our personality in isolation from one another. Our social interactions play a critical role in identity formation” (Hirsch and Hirsch, 2010: chapter 7, para. 10). Missional discipleship, therefore, must include learning in community. The synthesis of information and practices in the context of community provides for a holistic experience of discipleship as God intended; a partnership with God and with other disciples.
Experience in mission. The missional movement is identified as such because of its call to a renewed focus on mission and the return to the missionary vocation of the church and of God’s people. “Mission is not just what the church does; it is what the church is” (Barrett, 1998: 128). Based on the concept of *missio Dei*, God is seen as a missionary God by nature. Additionally, that God is the originator and motivator of mission is found in the missionary nature of God’s revealed word, the Bible. When approached through the lens of the missional hermeneutic, the Bible’s revelation and prescriptions are framed in the overarching theme of mission.

A missional disciple finds his or her true, God-intended identity as he or she is engaged in God’s mission with the community of faith. For the missional movement, the identity of the disciple is inseparable from the identity of the missionary; one cannot be one without being the other. Alan and Debra Hirsch (2010) pointedly exclaimed, “The fact is that you can’t be a disciple without being a missionary: no mission, no discipleship. It’s as simple as that” (p. 29), and Breen and Absalom (2010) echoed, “If you aren’t missional, according to Jesus, you aren’t a disciple” (chapter 2.6, para. 9). Therefore, a missional experience is the epitome of being a missional disciple; there is no dichotomy between the two.

Not only is experience in mission an expectation of missional discipleship, it is also a tool of spiritual formation. It is in the life and practices of mission as a part of the community of faith that God shapes and molds the disciple from the inside out. Everts (2012) explained, “When the Missional Christian goes and joins God in the city, it causes her to grow and be changed. It provides precious glimpses of redemptive work so heartbreakingly beautiful, so humble and powerful, that we are left forever changed” (p. 157). As the disciple interacts with the community and the Holy Spirit for the purpose of God’s glory and the partnership of his redemptive mission, that disciple is formed and reformed to more resemble Christ. God works in the disciple as he works through the disciple. “Missional theology emphasizes that the practices do not only bear epistemological weight, but they also offer a kind of knowledge of God available only through participation in God’s reconciling activity in the world” (Conner, 2011: 92). Experiencing mission as a part of Spiritual formation is also based on the example of Christ as he formed his disciples. Guder (2004) described Jesus’ example:

Jesus personally formed the first generation of Christians for his mission. After that, their testimony became the tool for continuing formation . . . The life of the New Testament churches was centered around their missional vocation and their formation to practice it. This is what discipling was all about. (p. 62)

The content of missional spiritual formation, therefore, consists of information and experiences that take place in the vocation of mission. The revelation and prescription of Scripture have a twofold benefit: it is useful for the spiritual formation of the self, and in turn, useful for the spiritual formation of others. It is in the active engagement in the spiritual formation of others, however, that spiritual formation truly takes place in the self. As Frost and Hirsch (2003) proposed,
Like Jesus’ first followers discovered, learning occurs when we need to draw on information because a situation demands it. This isn’t to say that there shouldn’t be formal teaching times, but these formal occasions will allow the teaching to be related to the missional experience gained by the church itself. (“Church in Missional Mode,” para. 14)

Summary

Thus far in the study, it has been shown how a synthesis of the missional literature reveals that discipleship is seen as identity, a process, and an experience. Discipleship as identity indicates that spiritual formation is not an external endeavor that shapes a disciple, but rather the formation of the very being of the disciple. This identity is formed by a relationship with God through the Holy Spirit in which God both directly forms the identity of the disciple, as well as through a partnership with other disciples for the sake of one another’s formation. Discipleship as process rejects any program- or event-based model of spiritual formation as a sole method, and instead relies on formation that occurs over time in a non-linear fashion as God uses the organic events of life to shape the disciple. Discipleship as a process also acknowledges that spiritual formation, and therefore the God-given task of “making disciples,” is a process that takes place both pre- and post-conversion. Discipleship as an experience acknowledges that spiritual formation is more than information download, and requires practice and activity to be effective. For the missional disciple, this process of spiritual formation cannot escape the contexts for which God designed formation to take place: the context of community and the context of mission. It is in the space of “one another” as the body of Christ fulfills its missionary purpose that disciples will be matured as God intended.

The concepts of discipleship as identity, a process, and an experience help clarify the concept of discipleship as defined within the missional movement and inform how a community of faith should develop missional spiritual-formation efforts. These characteristics can help missional leaders evaluate their communities of faith, identify inconsistencies with the given characteristics, and adjust corporate spiritual-formation practices accordingly. However, not only should leaders be concerned with corporate spiritual-formation practices, it is also crucial that leaders are able to evaluate the spiritual-formation progress within the people they are leading. If the concepts of missional discipleship are active in the individual disciple’s spiritual formation, various “life components” will emerge as evidence of spiritual formation. The evidence of these components or the lack thereof within the life of a disciple will aid in evaluating missional spiritual formation. The components of mission, community, and obedience along with their respective missional distinctions, therefore, provide the substance of spiritual formation.

Life components of a missional disciple

For the missional movement, spiritual formation is so inseparably linked to life vocation, action, and practice that certain components emerge as indicators of spiritual
While spiritual growth and maturity are difficult to quantify, the presence of these components in a person’s life show that they are engaged in a life that makes spiritual growth and maturity possible. The three components necessary to the life of a missional disciple as seen in the missional literature are mission, community, and obedience. Each of these general components is further defined by common characteristics found in missional literature. Before those characteristics are discussed, however, it is helpful to note that not only do mission, community, and obedience appear consistently throughout the missional literature as expected components of the life of the disciple, but some missional leaders have used variations of these three components as the organizing principles of their missional communities.

For example Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, leaders of the missional network “Missio,” have identified their missional communities as “incarnational communities.” Each of those communities has three main components in their life and rhythm: communion, community, and mission. At the intersection of these three, incarnational community is found:

Communion represents “oneness”—those things that make up our communal connection and worship of God. Community represents aspects of “togetherness”—those things we share as we form our lives together. And mission represents “otherness”—the aspects of our life together that focus on people outside our community. (2008: 148)

Similarly, Mike Breen, of the missional organization “3D Ministries,” identified one unit of community as a “huddle.” Based on the life and example of Jesus, these huddles are organized around three relationships: up, in, and out. Breen and Cockram (2011) described these relationships:

Jesus lived out his life in three relationships: Up—with his Father; In—with his chosen followers; Out—with the hurting world around him. This three-dimensional pattern for living a balanced life is evident throughout Scripture. It can inform us in how to experience fruitfulness in our ministry, our relationships, and our personal spiritual walk. We see these three dimensions in Jesus’ lifestyle throughout the Gospels. (Chapter 7, para. 1)

Both of these specific models align well with the components identified. The “Mission” and “Out” aspects of the model align with the mission component, the “Community” and In” aspects of the models align with the identified community component, and the “Communion” and “Up” aspects of the models align with the component of obedience.

It should also be noted that just as the discipleship concepts of identity, process, and experience find overlap in the life of the disciple, the life components of a missional disciple overlap as well (see Fig. 1). Each of the three components interacts and affects each of the other, and it is in that overlap that spiritual formation is found.

**Mission**

The term “mission” finds a similar lack of definitional clarity as the terms “discipleship” and “missional.” Within the missional movement, “mission” refers to the *missio*
Dei and the reality of human beings being both the focus of God’s redemptive mission, as well as partners in the carrying out of that mission. As the Father sent Jesus to fulfill his salvation plan, Jesus sent the church to carry out that mission after his ascension (John 20:21). As a component of the life of a missional disciple, “mission” gains clarity within the missional literature. A missional disciple is to have a component of mission present in his or her life that is non-compartmentalized, incarnational, and holistic.

**Non-compartmentalized mission.** When mission and discipleship are inseparable for a disciple’s identity, no longer is mission just something we do, as if it were one of many duties given to us by God. McNeal (2009) wrote,

> Missional is a way of living, not an affiliation or activity. Its emergence springs from a belief that God is changing his conversation with the world and with the church. Being missional involves an active engagement with this new conversation to the point that it guides every aspect of the life of the missional believer. To think and to live missionally means seeing all life as a way to be engaged with the mission of God in the world. (p. xiv)

Simply put, everything in life has missional connotations for the missional disciple. Mission happens in every sphere of life as the disciple lives out his or her identity as a missionary sent on behalf of the missionary God. Missional disciples will be “devoted to their work, knowing that they can be called by God to work in a factory or a law firm or a school or the home” (Frost, 2006: 177). Life is mission for the missional disciple.

**Incarnational mission.** A key concept in the missional movement is the skepticism of the attractional church model in regards to biblical congruency as well as social effectiveness in a postmodern, post-Christian culture. Instead, the plea is to use the incarnation of Jesus as the model for our missionary efforts. Guder (1999) explained,
When we speak of the incarnation, we are speaking of the unique event of Jesus Christ, as witnessed to in the scriptures. But the obvious must be stated. That event begins at Christmas and leads all the way to Pentecost. Every chapter in the earthly life and ministry of Jesus is essential to his sending, and to ours. (p. 11)

Using the example of Jesus, therefore, reinforces the sent aspect of God’s people as they engage the world for his glory and mission. Just as Jesus was sent to the world for the sake of the world, and just as he lived closely with those he was sent for, we too are to engage the world in a similar fashion. Hirsch (2006) expanded,

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 a genuine identification and affinity with those we are attempting to reach. (p. 133)

Holistic mission. At the center of God’s redemptive mission is the salvific event of the cross. It is that event which is the center of salvation history, and it is the death and resurrection which allows people to be reconciled to God. But God’s redemptive mission goes beyond the important gift of salvation to redeem all of the world that is broken. As God’s people become citizens of the kingdom of God, they partner with him to bring redemption to those broken places. Hunsberger described the fullness of God’s redemptive mission:

A definitive answer to the question, What is the reign of God? cannot be given. But we can at least sketch some of its contours by listening to the Old Testament’s prophetic forecasts of the coming day of God and the prophets’ expectations of God’s intended future for the world... Shalom, the overarching vision of the future, means “peace,” but not merely peace as the cessation of hostilities. Instead, shalom envisions the full prosperity of a people of God living under the covenant of God’s demanding care and compassionate rule. In the prophetic vision, peace such as this comes hand in hand with justice. Without justice, there can be no real peace, and without peace, no real justice. Indeed, only in a social world full of a peace grounded in justice can there come the full expression of joy and celebration. (1998: 90)

The holistic nature of God’s redemptive mission means that not only are missional disciples concerned with taking Jesus to people who are separated from God for the purposes of salvation, but also that they bring the peace of God wherever redemption is needed. The missional disciple, therefore, is concerned with issues of justice, the marginalized in society, stewardship of the earth’s resources, for example, just as he or she is concerned with bringing salvation to those who need it.

Community

As previously discussed, human beings were built with the need for community. In regards to biblical history, God always worked on behalf and for a community or a people, rather than individuals. This emphasis on community is found throughout the
concept of discipleship in missional literature, and is present in all three of the discipleship concepts previously discussed. The missional disciple understands that his or her identity, spiritual-formation process, and spiritual experiences are meant to take place in the context of community by God’s design. The church, therefore is first, a community. Hunsberger (1998) explained,

Before the church is called to do or say anything, it is called and sent to be the unique community of those who live under the reign of God. The church displays the firstfruits 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. (p. 103)

Therefore, the community includes what Alan Hirsch (2006) identified as communitas, which is a community that has developed camaraderie and koinonia fellowship through joint sufferings, celebrations, and accomplishments. The community itself is fundamental for the shaping of the disciple’s identity as it becomes a context of transformative experience. Throughout the spiritual-formation process, community is present, interactive, and formative.

The community also exists for the sake of the context in which it is found. To fulfill its God-intended purpose, the community must be engaging the world in God’s redemptive mission, and will therefore be what Halter and Smay call “Inclusive Community.” The concept of “Inclusive Community” is based on the early church, as Halter and Smay (2008) explained: “For the ancients, Christian community was unique, intriguing, and attractive primarily because it called for inclusion of all people. The Christian movement was the only place where women, children, and people of non-Jewish origin could all be together” (p. 70). As previously mentioned, spiritual formation is for all people, not just the already-converted. Therefore, not only will community in the missional disciple’s life include other missional disciples, but it will also allow space for others who have not yet come to faith in Jesus.

Obedience

Christian spiritual formation in the missional movement has at its core conformity to the example and person of Christ through active and continual obedience (Hirsch and Hirsch, 2010). The missional movement certainly has no monopoly on this concept. Therefore, it is helpful to note the special nuances and emphases of obedience for missional disciples in the areas of the Bible, love, and missional imagination.

Obeying the Bible. Little has been said up to this point in this essay regarding the place of Scripture in the spiritual formation of a missional disciple. This is not because the missional movement discounts the importance of Scripture; quite the contrary. The Bible is the foundational source for the form and function of the church as envisioned by the missional movement. So it is with missional discipleship. Guder (2004) described
the role of the Bible as follows: “the Bible must continue to confront, to convert, and to transform the community for faithful witness. It is the instrument God’s Spirit uses to bring about renewal: ‘our inner nature is being renewed day by day’” (p. 62).

Obeying the Bible, therefore, contributes to the “experience” aspect of missional discipleship. As the disciple obeys God’s word, the Holy Spirit continues to conform them to the image of Christ. The more the disciple engages in the practice of obedience, the more growth and maturing can take place. Additionally, obedience of the Bible is tied to community and mission in that “the message is never disembodied. The word must always become flesh, embodied in the life of the called community” (Guder, 1999: 22).

**Love and obedience.** A consistent emphasis throughout missional literature in regards to biblical obedience is the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and its subsequent emphasis by Jesus in Mark 12:28–31. Alan and Debra Hirsch (2010) explained the centrality of this concept:

> Jesus explicitly places the Shema at the epicenter of what it means to be a true disciple—to love God, to love others, and to live this out authentically in God’s world. We believe that we must simply take Jesus at face value here; he is saying that “Shema spirituality” is core to the outworking of our discipleship—our life under God. (p. 28)

The twofold command to love God and love others is central to both community and mission within the missional movement. A missional disciple who places the Shema at the center of his or her obedience efforts will remain connected to God and to others in love and in action.

**Missional imagination.** The role of God as the originator and motivator of mission shifts the relationship between the church and mission from the church having a mission to the mission of God having a church. If God is indeed the originator of mission, and if he expects his people to join him in that mission, then the missional church and missional disciples must be in tune with the Holy Spirit to determine where and how God is working. For the missional movement, the manifestation of mission is not uniform, but rather contextual. Roxburgh and Boren (2009) explained,

> Successful missional life in one context may be an utter failure in another . . . Missional engagement is not homogeneous; there is no one-size-fits-all pattern. Instead we must enter the local community and sit with the people to enter and be shaped by their narratives in order to ask the question of what God may be up to in that context. (p. 85)

Obedience for the missional church and the missional disciple then requires not only attention to the clear teachings of Scripture, but also a discernment of the Holy Spirit’s activity in the lives and rhythm of the church. When missional imagination is developed by the community, spiritual-formation efforts will be more fruitful in that the church and disciples will be joining God where he is already working rather starting
an endeavor and then asking God to bless it. Missional imagination dismisses one-size-fits-all models and instead engages both the Holy Spirit and the surrounding culture to discern how best to fulfill God’s purposes.

**Conclusion and summary**

The purpose of this article was to synthesize spiritual-formation practices and goals as found within missional literature to develop a tangible concept of “missional discipleship.” The common themes found within the literature allow this definition:

*Missional discipleship is the experiential process of identity formation which results in a disciple who exhibits tangible evidence of mission, community, and obedience in his or her life.*

If the importance placed on discipleship within the missional movement is to be reciprocated with congruous action within communities of faith, then that action must be augmented by a clear concept of missional discipleship. The proposed definition is consistent with the recurring spiritual-formation nuances and themes found within missional literature, and therefore, this tangible concept of missional discipleship can be the focal point for the systemic development of spiritual formation within communities of faith.

This synthesis and definition do not provide an instructive model for spiritual formation. Therefore, church leaders who desire to engage in spiritual formation that is harmonious with the missional movement, theology, and philosophy, must use this definition and the nuances discussed to contextualize spiritual formation for their given context. This contextualization not only provides flexibility of actual spiritual-formation methods depending on a given context, but it also is self-affirming in that contextualization allows local spiritual-formation practices to depend on the identities, processes, and experiences that are unique to specific communities of faith.

It is also important to note that the synthesis of spiritual-formation practices and goals found in the missional literature does not provide for a step-by-step curriculum-type spiritual-formation program within communities of faith. The elements of identity, process, and experience must all work synergistically and simultaneously to provide the opportunity for the spiritual growth and maturity of the disciple.

The concepts of discipleship as identity, a process, and an experience inform how a community of faith should develop spiritual-formation efforts. The components of mission, community, and obedience along with their respective missional distinctions, however, provide the *substance* of spiritual formation. A missional community should use these components both for spiritual growth and as evaluators for the progress of spiritual formation of both the community as well as for the individual. The expectations of missional disciples, therefore, are taught, modeled, and experienced within the community of faith in a deliberate and intentional way. The process of spiritual formation can be adjusted and the foci of spiritual-formation efforts can be shifted based on the needs of those in the community and the presence of the various components or the lack thereof.

Each of the discipleship concepts of identity, process, and experience, as well as the life components of mission, community, and obedience with their given nuances are common threads of spiritual formation discovered in the missional literature. Considered
separately, they are simply elements of missional philosophy that speak to various theological concepts held within the movement. But when these concepts and components found in the missional literature are combined and allowed to work together synergistically in a community of faith and in the life of a believer, they construct a tangible concept of missional discipleship. With this concept of spiritual formation in focus, communities of faith will be able to match the importance given to discipleship within the missional movement with tangible spiritual-formation practices and goals congruent with the missional movement.

Note
1. Both Doornenbal (2012) and Sine (2008) provide excellent and thorough analyses of the scope of the missional conversation. The “Reconstructionist” and “Missional” types identified by Doornenbal and Sine, respectively, represent the centrist genre of the missional movement. Many who have boldly sounded the call for a renewed emphasis on discipleship for the missional movement and the church (such as Breen, Hirsch, and Cole, among others) can generally be found within this genre.

References


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