

Shared Theological and Missiological Commitments for Church Planting in Mennonite Church USA

God is a sending God.

God loves the world and sent his son into the world not to condemn the world but to save the world.

In church circles we tend to forget that the object of God's love and redemptive purpose is not the church but the world. God seeks to save the world from sin, injustice and evil. God sent Jesus into the world to free the world from darkness and to offer abundant life.

Jesus invites people to new life and draws them together to become kingdom communities which he sends into the world.

The resurrected Jesus sends his friends into a broken, hurting world to continue his work. Jesus calls and transforms people and knits them together as sisters and brothers who love each other and live in communities of grace, peace and joy. These communities are witnesses to God's new order where Jesus is Lord, in the midst of the crumbling old order of sin, injustice, and domination. Jesus' followers carry on this task with a deep sense of humility, remembering that the church is a community of sinners being redeemed by God's grace.

We trust the Holy Spirit to form, guide and sustain these missional communities.

As the risen Christ sends his disciples he breathes the Holy Spirit upon them. Missional communities are not formed by human intentions and effort alone. Instead missional communities are yielded to the empowering and transforming work of God's Spirit that instructs, guides, and sustains them.

Visible kingdom communities are God's preferred strategy for bringing healing and hope to every person and to the world.

Christians join God's mission in many ways: through marriage counseling, good preaching, letter writing campaigns and acts of compassion, just to mention a few. But God's primary strategy for impacting our world is by birthing and nurturing kingdom communities. Like yeast in the dough, these communities permeate and transform the world around them. It is through the church that God wants to make known God's plan of reconciliation to the people and systems of the world (Eph. 1:10, 3:10).

Kingdom communities live incarnationally: In Jesus, the word became flesh and dwelt among us. Likewise, Jesus-centered communities will enter deeply into relationships with neighbors. Churches that are planted need to not only proclaim the good news, but be good news. New churches will incarnate the reign of God through practices of mutual aid, love of enemies, and servant leadership. This will take new churches to places where sin, hatred, poverty, alienation, and oppression await redemption.

Kingdom communities engage their context with the good news of Jesus Christ: Social, cultural, geographical contexts are diverse by definition. Church planters will be students of the culture and will “learn the language” of their particular context. New church communities will look and act different in different contexts. As apostles to the world, we engage our current changing contexts with Jesus’ whole gospel in creative and relevant ways.

When entering a new context, church planters will pay attention to what God has already been doing in that place. This includes approaching existing Christian communities with an open and charitable spirit, a desire to be in relationship and a willingness to cooperate in God’s kingdom work.

Kingdom communities bear witness to the transforming power of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection: Jesus empowers sinners to become children of God, members of a new spiritual and social order. Through word and deed, members of his body communicate God’s new possibilities with power and conviction. In and through Christian community, we and our neighbors encounter the living Christ who loves, forgives and continually transforms us.

Kingdom communities make disciples and continue the work of Jesus in their setting: Jesus-centered communities shape and form people to be more like Jesus. When they abide in Christ, they carry on the sin-forgiving, bread-breaking, enemy-loving work of Jesus, their savior and master. They invite those around them to join them in following Jesus in a community of faith. New church communities seek the welfare of the city where they are planted and seek to bless the community around them.

The church equips God’s people for planting kingdom communities.

This involves:

Calling out church planters and testing this call: Church planters sense a call to join with God’s Spirit in forming new worshipping communities. This call is tested and confirmed by their faith community and supporting or sponsoring congregations. Leaders who are called to initiate new faith communities are willing to take risks and make significant sacrifices to pursue this calling.

Practicing spiritual disciplines and continued theological reflection: Church planters are committed to grow in their faith through regular Bible study, prayer, spiritual accountability and other disciplines. Church planting can be carried out effectively by those who have various levels of theological training.

Ongoing study and training broadens one's understanding of God's reconciling mission in the world, strengthens one's skills, and deepens one's reliance on the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

Forming teams: Church planters are encouraged to form a team of co-workers. An effective team brings together many gifts and is able to connect with a range of people. Enduring, vibrant congregations that reflect the Spirit of Christ are often led by a team of people who share leadership roles, rather than by one charismatic and powerful leader. Care must be given to nurture this team as a discerning spiritual community and to work well with conflicts which naturally arise.

Entering partnerships and accountability: New church plants find their place in the broader body of Christ for mutual support and accountability. These communities and their leaders intentionally nurture relationships with local congregations, area conferences, mission agencies and denominational staff. Strategic partnerships enhance possibilities of success and provide opportunity for mutual blessing in pursuing God's kingdom vision.

These shared commitments grew out of conversations about church planting at the fall 2013 Constituency Leaders Council of Mennonite Church USA. During the following year, conference ministers, church planters and coaches as well as mission agency and denominational staff participated in the drafting and editing of these commitments.