

Mission

This position paper for Faith Presbyterian Church was prepared by Pastor Jason D. Wood during December 2020 and was approved by the Session on January 11, 2021.

The semantic problem of “mission”

The word “mission” as used colloquially in the Church is a difficult word to define. While every congregation seems to use it, its semantic range tends to be a bit broad. Here are some reasons why:

- It is not a biblical word.

The word “mission” is never applied to the ministry efforts of Christ or His Apostles. Even its derivative, “Commission,” is a parenthetical addition to English translations of the New Testament, such as in Matthew 28.

- It is an over-used word within American Christendom.

Churches have “mission trips,” they send missionaries “on mission,” and weekly congregants are sent out on “mission” for God. The word itself seems to be very versatile, but simultaneously confusing.

- It is an over-used word within the business world.

In this entrepreneurial age, every business is urged to know why they exist and what they do. Enter the mission statement. Ironically, different business consultants disagree on what the word “mission” means in this context. Each has their own definition and usage.

Our solution

While we could be tempted to jettison the word “mission” as unhelpful, that is unnecessary. The key is to simply define how we will use it “in-house” for planning and budgeting purposes. This will not limit our usage in weekly practice. For these vision-related uses, we will define “Mission” in this way:

Mission describes any Kingdom efforts made in league with a missionary, the EPC, or another non-profit.

We will unpack that definition in the paragraphs that follow.

What are “Kingdom efforts”?

In the Gospels and the book of Acts, Jesus and the apostles consistently communicate the Gospel through **word and sign**: they preach the Gospel and the message is vindicated by the power of the sign that accompanies it. That sign is often a miracle (for example, the Transfiguration of Jesus, the resurrection, and the dividing of loaves and fishes). Sometimes the accompanying sign is as simple as an act of compassion. Sometimes it is as transcendent as a sacrament. Regardless, the principle holds that word joined with sign is the normative means by which the Gospel is communicated.

There are extraordinary circumstances in which it is appropriate for one to happen without the other: the word is preached without a sign or a sign is given without the word. But these are exceptions, rather than norms or ideals.

I find it helpful to use the language of “**message and effects of the Gospel,**” when talking about word and sign. We preach the Gospel and we seek to bring about its effects in the world, whether those effects be sanctification, worship, justice, or even feeding the poor. It is important for us to remember that the Gospel is not simply about individual salvation, but also the restoration of all things through the kingship of Jesus. Both elements are important, in order to preserve both orthodoxy and orthopraxy! If we forget the Gospel’s impact on sin-ridden *individuals*, we become liberation theologians that distort the Gospel. If we forget the Gospel’s impact on a *broken society and world*, we become bunker-mentality fundamentalists that distort the Gospel.

As we engage in both of these Kingdom activities (ideally together), we can expect these results: (1) people converted to Christ, (2) people rejecting Christ, and (3) the world looking more like heaven. It is truly our prayer that His Kingdom would come and His will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

Why and how will we engage with missionaries, the EPC, or other non-profits?

As a biblical and connectional church, we are called to engage with other Christians in the work of the Kingdom. In the worldwide body of Christ, we each have a part to play—some a brain, some an ear, and some hands and feet. As we work together for the Kingdom, we are able to fulfill our worldwide mandate to spread the good news to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18-20).

These relationships will be categorized in three different ways:

1. Patron: patron ministry relationships are our lowest tier of engagement and involvement. Our involvement with these ministries and non-profits involves **financial support and prayer**. Our expectation from those patron ministries is

regular reporting to an appropriate Court or Committee, so that we can be aware of their ministry on our behalf.

Current examples at FPC would include the Northlake Crisis Pregnancy Center, as well as Jeff and Veronique Kim in France.

2. Partner: partner ministry relationships may include financial and prayer support. But the essential element of this kind of relationship is **congregational volunteering and involvement**. Our expectation from partner ministries is (1) at least one annual opportunity to serve and (2) a regular, if only annual, visit from a representative of that ministry. We understand that foreign missionaries may not be able to meet those expectations as regularly.

Current examples at FPC would include Team 518 and the GROW Project in Beirut, Lebanon.

3. Parent: these are ministries that we birth from our congregation. Our involvement with these ministries and non-profits will no doubt involve financial support, prayer, and volunteering. The essential element of this kind of relationship, however, is the engagement of our leadership as guides and counsel to these budding ministries. We truly are **being midwives to a new ministry born from among us**. As with childbirth, our expectation for these ministries is that eventually they will become their own separate, self-sustaining ministries with which we would function as *partner* or *patron* in the future.

Currents example at FPC would include our Brazilian Church Plant and Three Pillars Ministry.

A biblical framework

Why do we have these relationships?

We have biblical precedents for patron and parent relationships. Patron relationships are demonstrated most clearly in financial gifts for the poor in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25-30; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-9:15; Rom. 15:25-30). Parent relationships, no doubt, are reflected in the efforts of church planting in the earliest days of the Church.

With whom will we have patron and partner relationships?

Following past decisions of the FPC Session, I believe it is wise counsel to consider the geographical and relational distance between missionaries, ministries, non-profits, and ourselves. With greater geographical and relational distance, it is more difficult for us

to have a good sense of whether their ministry of word and/or sign is biblical and effective. As such, we abide by these norms, which the Session has the authority to override, should the Spirit lead in special circumstances:

1. Internationally, we will only patronize or partner with missionaries and ministries approved by the EPC.
2. Nationally, we will patronize or partner with missionaries and ministries...
 - Approved by the EPC General Assembly or
 - With strong relational ties to FPC and its leadership.
3. At a regional and local level, we will patronize or partner with Christian missionaries and ministries...
 - Approved by the EPC General Assembly,
 - Approved by the Gulf South Presbytery or
 - With strong relational ties to FPC and its leadership.

*At the regional and local level, we can be more comfortable **partnering** with non-Christian ministries, like the Northshore Food Bank. Though it is an “effects-only” ministry separate from the Gospel message, we may engage these types of ministries with these hopes:*

- That their staff (and potentially those whom they serve) will experience the presence of Christ and His Kingdom through us,
- That our partnership will have a direct effect on the Kingdom in our backyard, and
- That God may use those organizational relationships for more intentional “message of the Gospel” ministries in the future.

As such, I recommend this additional qualification:

4. At a regional and local level, we may have **partner relationships only** with non-Christian non-profits. It is not our desire to function as patrons or parents of these types of ministries. That said, these partnerships should be considered extraordinary, rather than the norm.

In short, we need more than a financial relationship here. We need to have skin in the game and people on the ground (a) to represent Christ and His message and (b) to have some sense of accountability.

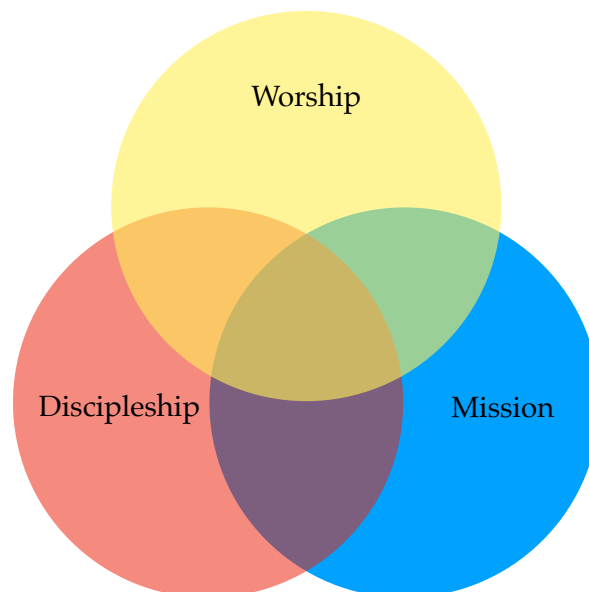
What will we parent?

While we desire to be sensitive to the direction of the Spirit, our primary “parenting” focus at the present will be on planting EPC churches.

How does Mission relate to Worship and Discipleship at FPC?

One glaring omission from this paper thus far is this question: what about evangelism? And what about providing service opportunities for congregants? Shouldn't those two topics be "front and center" in a Mission Position Paper? That depends on how we philosophically understand the relationship between Worship, Discipleship, and Mission.

In truth, worship, discipleship, and mission all overlap. When a disciple grows (discipleship), they worship God! When they serve others (mission), it glorifies God! In addition, keeping the Sabbath (worship) and serving others (mission) is an essential part of discipleship. In sum, they look at lot like this:



This position paper focuses on the blue portion of Mission. It answers the question, "With whom will FPC engage organizationally for the purposes of the Kingdom?" *But* the more important question for our Session concerns the purple section (where discipleship and mission overlap) and the brown section (where all three categories overlap). We will address this in the final portion of this paper.

Our failings in Mission and our plan forward

Two areas where FPC has failed significantly as a community and an organization are (1) evangelistic outreach and (2) integrating mission as an essential element of discipleship.

Evangelistic outreach

A quick look at our membership rolls and Session minutes over the last twenty years will demonstrate a painfully low number of conversions to Christ. Our growth as a congregation has not been through evangelism, but through transfers to the area and from other churches. This is a failure of discipleship (equipping congregants to share their faith), a failure of strategy (growing comfortable with simply swapping members), and most likely a failure to pray as we ought (Matt. 9:3; Luke 10:2).

Integrating mission as an essential element of discipleship

Our discipleship ministries in the last ten years have focused on three elements: Bible reading, prayer, and fellowship with other believers. When we attempted to integrate service as an essential element of discipleship groups, it failed miserably. This reality betrays a dysfunction in our organization and body.

Our plan forward

Five years from now, we desire these things to be true of our congregation:

- In five years, FPC will have a fully developed youth group, including discipleship, service, and fellowship.
- In five years, FPC will have developed new leadership through Elders intentionally engaging members in mentorship.
- In five years, FPC will have a reputation for good works due to our Mission work locally, regionally, and abroad.
- In five years, FPC will have a concrete growth plan, with space to support our ministries and growth to begin planting a third church.

If these dreams are to be realized, we need to address these two failures. We will not plant churches, we will not see conversions to Christ, and we will not have a reputation for good works, if we cannot address these underlying issues. Since that strategy falls outside the purview of this position paper, we will be brief.

Our plan forward must include:

1. A strategy for reaching the lost as a community,
2. A strategy for equipping our congregation to reach the lost and to serve, and
3. A long-term strategy for planting churches.

These strategies must be addressed by the Session in Quarter 1, 2021.