

Missio Dei Is Missio Trinitas

Theological and Biblical Foundations for Inter-Congregational Collaboration in Mission and Formation

1 Introduction

One of the most important theological (re-)discoveries of the twentieth century ecumenical and missional movements is *missio Dei* (“the mission of God”); grounding the mission of the church in the character of God as a missionary God. The concept is limited, however, when writers use it to shape contemporary theology of mission but focus on one aspect of God: the Father as the sending God, or Jesus as the model of incarnational mission, or the Spirit as empowerment for mission. Moreover, the concept is limited if not considered as a foundation for *missio ecclesia* (“the mission of the church”) and the spiritual formation of believers. This article therefore explores, the implications of *missio Dei* as *missio Trinitas* for Christian communities in mission, if we can grasp what it means to share the *whole* life of God – Father, Son and Spirit – with the whole world through the whole church. In the form of a question, it asks, what difference does *missio Trinitas* make to Christian communities and their collaboration for mission and formation?

The article thus explores the richness of a theology of the *missio Dei* from an explicitly trinitarian perspective and its implications for congregations and their collaboration. Analysis of *missio Dei* and recent trinitarian theology in the missional church literature leads to consideration of implications for divine agency, spirituality of mission, holistic mission and the mission of the whole people of God. Ultimately, with critical adoption of Mike Breen’s argument that the missional movement is preoccupied with individuals being sent on mission because it focuses on

God as an individual involved in mission, it will be argued that the concept of *missio Trinitas* (“the mission of the Trinity”) is more fruitful for communities serving on mission.

2 *Missio Dei* as *Missio Trinitas*

South African missiologist David Bosch, in his seminal work *Transforming Mission*, explains how the church derives from *missio Dei*:

Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God ... in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity ... The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father, sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit ... expanded to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world ... a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission ... There is a church because there is a mission, not vice versa.

Bosch 1991:390

Note the distinctly trinitarian basis for *missio Dei* that Bosch underlines. He recognized that history had displaced the early church’s Trinitarian emphasis on mission with a focus on soteriology (saving people from damnation), or culture (introducing people from the East to the privileges of the Christian West), or ecclesial concerns (viewing mission as the expansion of the church, or of a particular denomination) (1991:389).

Fortunately, the twentieth century saw a rediscovery of mission as an activity of God. Bosch (1991:368–393) recognizes some Barthian influence in this move, picked up at the 1952 Willingen International Missionary

Council. But in the latter half of the twentieth-century, *missio Dei* was grasped by almost all church branches – in Catholic mission theology of the Second Vatican Council, Eastern Orthodox, many evangelicals and the missional church movement. For example, Catholic mission theology of the Second Vatican Council in *Ad Gentes* (1965) announced: “The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary, since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit”. Lesslie Newbigin, and the Gospel and our Culture movement and missional church movement he inspired, bemoaned an ecclesio-centric (“church-centric”) view of missions and advocated a theocentric reconceptualization of mission – grounded not as an activity of the church but in God’s initiative of sending (Guder 1998:4). Wheaton College missiologist Ed Stetzer maintains there is a consensus across different streams of the church: “*missio Dei* has become the milestone concept of the twentieth-century’s theology of mission” (2016:96).

Missio Dei is not just an abstract or philosophical doctrine, but one with practical and focusing implications for revitalising the mission of the people of God. But it invites Christian communities to go deeper, this article suggests, into another doctrine that can sometimes be treated as abstract and philosophical – the Trinity. Thus we discuss the implications not just of *missio Dei* but of *missio Trinitas*. Colin Gunton comments that everything “looks different when theologised with and through the doctrine of the Trinity” (2003:22). What difference does the Trinity make for mission and formation, and congregations cooperating with one another and with the God of mission and formation?

Some words need adjectives or possessives to emphasize their nature, especially if that nature has been forgotten or neglected. For example, “missional” when used in the term “missional church” should be considered redundant. Church is by nature missional. If everyone understood the term church correctly then we would not need the

“missional church”, as if there is any other kind of church. But “missional”, rather than being superfluous, helps remind us of an important aspect (or essence) of church. Similarly, “Dei” in “*missio Dei*” is in some ways redundant. Mission is part of the character of God. There is no other Christian mission other than what finds its source in God. If everyone understood the source of mission correctly, we would not need to emphasise “*missio Dei*” as if there could be any other Christian mission. But “Dei” reminds us that mission belongs to and derives from and is essentially God turning attention to the world and remaking it.

We could also say that it is not necessary to expand *missio Dei* and talk about *missio Trinitas*. There is no ultimate semantic difference between *missio Dei* and *missio Trinitas*. *Missio Dei* is mission Trinitas. The God of *missio Dei* is trinitarian. When we talk about *missio Dei* we are always referring to the mission of the God of the Bible who is Father, Son and Spirit. Hastings asserts that our understanding of Trinity emerges from the mission of God, and that “we say that the *missio Dei* is only true because of the *missio Trinitas*” (2012:251). However, *missio Dei* can unfortunately be understood focusing on one aspect of God: God as Father the sending God, or Jesus as model of incarnational mission, or the Spirit as empowerment for mission. Using the term “*missio Trinitas*” invites us to emphasize God’s trinitarian nature and what this means for mission.

Missio Dei cannot be understood other than as a *Missio Trinitas*. Neither is *missio Dei* prior in logical development to the Trinitarian unveiling. The Creator God, the Covenant God of Israel, has been unveiled in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the eschatological presence of the Spirit. The Creator Covenant God *is* Father, Son and Spirit. That is our primary ontological reality. This ontological primacy of the Trinitarian unveiling must shape epistemology and everything that Christian communities do, say and think. N T Wright (2013) argues that the apostle Paul redefined the primary Jewish theological elements of creational

monotheism, election and eschatology in the light of the first century inbreaking of the Kingdom of God in and through Jesus and the Spirit's eschatological outpouring. Paul was not rejecting Jewish understandings of Yahweh's work, but he "rethought, reworked and reimagined them around Jesus the Messiah on the one hand and the Spirit on the other" (Wright 2013: 612). Those truths of creational monotheism and election are chronologically prior to the Trinitarian unveiling. Yet the unveiling of the Trinity illuminates the logic of election and creational monotheism (centrally in Pneumatological Christological categories). *Missio Dei* and its functional implications cannot be understood prior to or without understanding Trinitarian relational ontology. To what extent then, and where and how, are Christian communities shaped by *missio Trinitas*, and what difference does it make? In what ways does the God of mission invite congregations to cooperate both with God and with each other in mission, and in formation for mission? This article identifies a range of missional church literature that references *missio Dei* and especially *missio Trinitas*, including writing which is seminal in the missional movement by Alan Roxburgh, Craig Van Gelder, Mike Breen, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. The remainder of the article considers how this selection of missional church literature is shaped by *missio Dei* and more specifically *missio Trinitas*, and the implications *missio Trinitas* points towards.

3 Missional Church Discussion

My introduction to missional church was through Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch's *The Shaping of Things to Come*. They urged recalibrating church around mission, and going back a step further to rethink mission around Jesus. Thus, they started with Christology, let that inform missiology and in turn shape ecclesiology (Frost and Hirsch 2003:16, 209). Frost explains they were intent to urge church leaders not be fixated with "getting church right" and to recalibrate with reference to Jesus in the gospels, as

suggested by the title of their later book *ReJesus* (2009). Hirsch underlined this in *The Forgotten Ways* (2006:143):

Not only our purpose is defined by the person and work of Jesus, but our methodology as well. These set the agenda of our missiology. Our missiology (our sense of purpose in the world) must then go on to inform the nature and functions, as well as the forms, of the church.... It is absolutely vital that we get the order right. It is Christ who determines our purpose and mission in the world, and then it is our mission that must drive our search for modes of being-in-the-world.

They were eager, Frost wrote, to go back to the first principles of Jesus' ministry and teaching, and let that (re-)shape a way of being in the world as church (Frost, Foreword in Hill 2017:x).

However, basing ecclesiology and missiology purely on Christology can neglect the contribution of Trinitarian theology. This is where the church is at risk of a "deficient trinitarianism" (Flett 2009:6). Without a Trinitarian foundation, missiology and ecclesiology will risk being underdeveloped. Hence the key question for this project: what are the implications of *missio Dei* being *missio Trinitas*, and what difference does this make for mission and church?

I start with Frost and Hirsch because they helped inform and transform my missional thinking, and they are seminal missional writers influential in my Australian church context. Yet their influence is not limited to Australia, and for the last two decades there has been an expanding interest in missional church frameworks by various writers. Van Gelder and Zscheile (2011) helpfully map missional church discussions as a tree of different branches that have grown globally since the seminal work of *Missional Church* (Guder 1998). This article focuses on how different branches particularly treat *missio Dei* and *missio Trinitas*.

There are two streams of how Trinitarian theology influences missiology and ecclesiology (Bevans and Schroeder

2004:286–304; Van Gelder 2007a:28– 30) Firstly, there is an understanding of the *sending* work of God: the Father sending the Son, the Father and the Son sending the Spirit, and the Trinitarian godhead sending the church (Bosch 1991:390). The other Trinitarian stream deals with the interrelatedness of three persons within the Godhead and how this social reality is reflected in church (Zizioulas 1985). God in three persons models community life and invites people into the life and community of God, or more poetically perichoresis; the movement (or dance) of God (La Cugna 1991:272; Volf 1998). My intention is to consider the strengths of both streams, and in particular foreground the social Trinity which is not as developed in the missional literature. Some missional writers have begun to engage Trinitarian theology. But often Trinitarianism is mentioned as important without delving into its implications. For example, Hirsch's discussion of the Trinity in *The Forgotten Ways* is limited to the triune Creator-God and the theological consistency of learning from organic systems, which God created (2006:180–181). Surprisingly, Hirsch does not draw on Trinitarian reflection for his discussion of community and *communitas*, or mission more broadly, both for which the Trinity could be a fruitful resource of inspiration.

Frost suggests that the first essential feature of any missional community, whether it looks like traditional church or any form of fresh expression of church, is Trinitarian theology as a framework and glue of the community (2006:145–156). He warns against hierarchicalism and downplaying the triunity of God, but is yet to develop these implications further (Frost 2006:146– 147; Frost 2007:45–50, 93). Frost and Hirsch both welcome the Christ-centred “sending” aspect of Trinitarian theology, but preferred to approach the Trinity through Christology and focus on the monotheism of the Shema and Jesus is Lord (Frost and Hirsch 2009:137–138).

Social Trinitarian theology, or perichoresis, was popularised in some emerging churches

by Baxter Kruger (2002) and more broadly by Pete Ward's *Liquid Church* (2002). Gary Simpson (2007:75–83) outlined how *missio Dei* has permeated the missional church but the more recent social Trinitarianism was slower to reach, much less permeate, emerging or missional churches. Missional churches helpfully focus on the mission of the church based on a fresh understanding of Jesus, but can risk an underdeveloped ecclesiology if they practically ignore the Trinity (Cronshaw 2009:58–62).

Graham Hill argues that Trinitarian theology is essential for churches to be truly missional: “Each member of the Trinity plays a role in the triune God's missional action and nature (2017:263).” It is not the case, however, that God merely “goes on mission”. The Creator Covenant God in Trinitarian Communion is mission; and each divine Person expresses the Triune God's mission in the perichoretic economy. Hill is concerned, however, that Trinitarian discussion is not widespread in missional literature. He adapts Karl Rahner's critique of theology in general: “Should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious [missional] literature could well remain virtually unchanged” (Rahner 2001:10–11; in Hill 2017:264).

4 Missio Trinitas Implications

This brings us back to the central and overriding question of this article: what difference does *missio Trinitas* make to Christian communities and how congregations cooperate with God and one another? There are five significant truths that the mission and missional church literature suggest as implications of *missio Dei* and more specifically *missio Trinitas*. *Missio Trinitas* places the primary responsibility for mission with a Trinitarian God, invites the church to join God in the dance of (co-)mission, moves mission beyond church programs to a spirituality of mission, turns church attention *to a whole gospel* for the whole world, and calls all Christians into

mission as communities rather than individuals.

4.1 Missio Trinitas Places the Primary Responsibility for Mission with a Trinitarian God

An initial difference missio Dei makes is freeing God's people from bearing ultimate responsibility for mission. Mission is not a matter of human agency but firstly divine agency. The initiative is not with Christian communities and their members. They are commissioned to participate in what is first and last both divine self-unveiling and divine cosmic new creation. It is missio Trinitas into which the people of God are invited. Mission is not ecclesiocentric but theocentric. Mission is not an activity of the church but the essence of the nature of God. It is an economic implication of God's trinitarian being. This is more than saying mission is an attribute of God, as if mission is one part of God's nature alongside other aspects. Instead, mission is inherent in the "economic Trinity" and therefore far more than an attribute of the Creator. Mission is the narrative of the Trinitarian unveiling. In Trinitarian unveiling the "economic Trinity" is the very means by which the Creator God unveils the "immanent Trinity". Hence mission – that is the "economic Trinity" – is the means by which the "immanent Trinity" is unveiled. Furthermore, that unveiling of the immanent Trinity in the economic Trinity is in essence the inauguration of the Kingdom of God. The Creator Covenant God's trinitarian unveiling is in essence "mission", and the Trinity invites people into relationship and community with God and with one another (Moltmann 1993). Forgetting that narrative of the Trinitarian story of God in mission leaves the church thinking they are responsible for mission.

Van Gelder and Zscheile (2011:4–8) suggest that a number of renewal movements of recent decades (e.g., church growth, church effectiveness, church health) focused on the purpose and mission of the church, and then explored what churches and leaders can do

differently. This can lead to focusing on human agency. The missional church conversation, in contrast, starts with the church's identity and nature. However, even missional church literature can assume the church's identity as missional and move too quickly to focus on how the church organizes itself or what the church does on God's behalf. The focus shifts too quickly from Spirit agency in the church to human agency and responsibility. Missio Dei reminds the church that the primary responsibility for mission stays with God: "The primary agency for mission moves to divine initiative through the ministry of the Spirit as the larger framework within which our human response takes place" (Van Gelder and Zscheile 2011:8).

Lest human agency eclipse missio Dei, it is important to remember in our theology and practice of mission that God bears the ultimate responsibility. The role of human agency (missions) finds meaning and inspiration in the Trinitarian divine agency of God (the higher order mission of God). That Trinitarian divine agency is essential foundation for Christian communities. Realizing conceptually that the divine agency for mission is thoroughly Trinitarian helps the people of God be aware of their adopted fellowship in the primary Triune Communion of Father, Son and Spirit. Comprehending their graced fellowship in the divine life consequently reorients their participation in the mission of the Triune God. The role of human agency finds its meaning within the divine being of God and is familial. It is then obvious, and liberating, that the church does not bear primary responsibility for mission.

Since missio Dei is mission Trinitas, this divine agency for mission is Trinitarian. Mission is firstly the essence of the nature of God as Trinity, not primarily an activity of the church. In other words, it is not ecclesiocentric but Trinitarian-centric. As missio Trinitas, mission is "God-originated, Christ-centred and Spirit-empowered" (Engel and Dyrness 2000:37). There is inspiration and focus for the people of God in each of those truths. It is liberating for mission not to

be strategic plan-originated, church-centered and leadership-empowered. Mission appropriately starts with God (the Father), is centered in God (Jesus the Son) and empowered by God (through God's Spirit). Just as mission is not primarily an activity of the church, it is not just an activity or function of one or two Persons of God. Inspiration, focus and help for mission comes from a Trinitarian God. Complete and ultimate agency for mission is with the Trinity (not with humans and/or even the church). Moltmann's assertion of where mission lies is explicitly Trinitarian: "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church" (1977:64; cited by Bosch 1991:390). Thus we are not merely moving from human to divine agency in general, but specifically to Trinitarian agency.

Lesslie Newbigin, perhaps more than any other single writer, has helped highlight the challenge of mission to the Western world. Newbigin admitted he originally was too focused on the church's mission. He had a paradigm change from seeing the primary "agent" of mission as the church, to a fully Trinitarian understanding. He bemoaned what he came to see was a "church-centric" view of missions that was too exclusively founded on the work of Christ (rather than also the Father and Spirit's role). Yong suggests that just as Barth revitalized the doctrine of the Trinity for theology in the twentieth-century, Newbigin retrieved Trinitarian theology for mission theology (2015b:148). Yet Yong argues that Newbigin still proposed more of a Christological than pneumatological trinitarianism, in the context of twentieth century theology that was shy of the Holy Spirit (Yong 2015b:150–151). It is important to grasp the divine agency of mission, but in Trinitarian holism and not be *overly* focused on the authority of the Father, or the work or example of the Son, or the filling of the Spirit. Newbigin was ahead of his time in suggesting how a Trinitarian mission holds together God's complete work: "proclamation" of the Kingdom (in the

Father's authority), "presence" of the Kingdom (through the Son) and "prevenience" of the Kingdom (through the Spirit who "goes before" the church) (Newbigin 1963:31–34). The implications of Newbigin's proposals regarding the Trinitarian responsibility and inspiration for mission are still being worked out.

4.2 Missio Trinitas Invites the Church to Join God in the Dance of (Co-) Mission

The second difference that *missio Dei* makes is that although mission belongs to God, God invites the people of God to cooperate in mission. Mission is firstly God's responsibility, but the church still has a responsibility; to be available to cooperate in God's mission. The commission that God gives the church is actually a co-mission, something that the church does together with God, cooperatively. Moreover, congregations are invited to cooperate together with God in this co-mission, and to be formed by a Trinitarian God for this purpose. Mission, then, can be conceptualized as all of what God is doing in the world to remake it according to God's purposes, with which God invites the people of God to cooperate.

Van Gelder appeals for the church to freshly recognize divine agency in mission, yet calls the church to orientate itself around God's activity. The Triune God, he says, is the primary acting subject rather than the church. However, the church participates in God's mission – as sign that God's redemption is present, foretaste of what redemption will be like and instrument to carry the message into local contexts all around the world (Van Gelder 2007a:19; echoing Newbigin 1978). *Missio Dei* gives the church the privilege of cooperating with God in these missional ways.

It is reassuring for the people of God that ultimate responsibility for mission lies with God as Trinity, but also that it is the privilege of the church to be included in joining the Trinity in mission; sharing the whole life of God with the world. A Trinitarian mission,

moreover, is broad in its scope. The Trinitarian dance of God is seeking to remake the world, and invites the church to join in the dance. Pete Ward uses perichoresis to explain how the Trinity's relationships draw God's people into "the divine trinitarian dance of God" (2002:49–55). But the dance of God is not just a relational connection but a missional cooperation. God as Trinity cooperates together in the dance of mission. The Trinity invites the church to join this dance. Together with God and in step with God, God and the church together invite the world to come back into sync with God's purposes. Mission, said Newbigin, is logically best viewed "as the proclaiming of the kingdom of the Father, as sharing the life of the Son, and as bearing the witness of the Spirit" (1978:31, 20–72). The co-mission that God's people are privileged to join with involves the work or dance of all of God – Father, Son and Spirit.

Craig van Gelder emphasizes divine and Trinitarian agency, arguing that: "A trinitarian understanding is now the common starting point for thinking about God's people in the world, about the church, and about how the church participates in God's mission in the world" (2000:11). He explains how the mission of the church depends on God as creator of the church, who sends the church to participate in mission (through the power of the Spirit and based on the work of Christ):

God as a creating God also creates the church through the Spirit, who calls, gathers, and sends the church into the world to participate in God's mission. This participation is based on the redemption that God accomplished through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a redemption that was announced by Jesus as the "kingdom of God" ... the "redemptive reign of God in Christ".

(Van Gelder 2007a:18; drawing on Van Gelder 2000:74–76)

Trinitarian convictions anchor the mission of the church since it is created and sent by God,

redeemed by Christ and empowered by the Spirit. The foundation or agency of mission is Trinitarian.

4.3 Missio Trinitas Moves Mission beyond Church Programs to a Spirituality of Mission

Missio Dei is not an organizational "model" to plug into a church or Christian community to make it work better. At a conceptual level, missio Dei reminds the Church that it is missionary in its very essence and nature, originating as it does in the mission of God. At this level, the challenge for the church and congregations and their engagement in mission is more about imagination and theology, rather than programs and models. It is a paradigm change that churches need to adopt that will influence all they do, rather than a program they need to implement. Thus, Neill suggested: "The age of missions is at an end; the age of mission has begun" (1966:572; cited in Bosch 1991:391). Frost and Hirsch similarly assert that the essence of "missional church" is not a particular style or format or program of church, but adopting a posture of mission for the whole church, always remembering that the mission is God's (2003: 39–40). The role of human agency (missions' programs and activities) finds its meaning within the divine agency of God (the higher order mission of God). Missional revitalization is not about adding more activities, but adopting a posture of mission. Van Gelder (2007b) suggests the key for focusing on divine agency is to invite congregations to discern together what God's Spirit is up to and seek to join in with that, rather than starting with ideas about strategies and innovations. Moreover, we can add, the invitation is to cooperate as congregations in discerning and acting together with God for the mission and formation for which we are called to cooperate with God.

At a relational level, the challenge for churches and their engagement in mission is more about spirituality and familial relationship with God as Trinity. It is an invitation of formation. Missio Trinitas is more than a posture of mission as another

tool for organizational renewal. It is a relationship that influences all they do, or a divinely given familial responsibility rather than institutional requirement or organizational restructuring. The church is missionary in its essence and nature, originating as it does in the very ontological Communion of the holy love of God as one God and three persons in perichoretic indwelling as Father, Son and Spirit. The church is called to and exists in that co-inhering indwelling. Thus the challenge for a church is not merely to adopt a mission posture but to live into its relationally missionary identity. The Trinitarian Creator God enlivens, leads, sustains and with holy love encircles the church and invites her to join the Trinitarian God in the dance of New Creation which is mission.

The primary identity of God's people in Christ is relational rather than legal or institutional. A spirituality of mission reflects an ontological co-inhering of the church in Christ in and through the co-inhering life in the Spirit empowering flourishing mission, rather than a functional institutional underpinning of church mission. The Trinity is a relationship to experience through participatory indwelling, not just a doctrinal concept. The last Adam incorporates the church into the life of the Trinity. By abiding in Christ the church is birthed into mission, guided in mission, sustaining by the Spirit and having its very life inhabited by the Spirit – in mission. Identifying as sons and daughters of a Heavenly Father birthed into life in Christ by the Spirit helps the church escape an institutional mindset of church. Instead, the primary focus for the church's engagement in mission is the gift of hospitality both given and received. The familial life of hospitality of Christian communities invites those who might be strangers to dine and even to love together with them. That is the gift of New Testament ecclesiology and outworking of a missional spirituality.

Missio Trinitas arguably frames not just a posture for mission but a fully grounded spirituality for mission. Mission in

Trinitarian perspective is not just about church programs but about how God is recreating the world and empowering the church through the indwelling Spirit to cooperate with that. American missiologist Gregory Leffel (2017) explains that John 17 launches the idea of perichoresis, and a perichoretic or Trinitarian spirituality for (co-)mission:

As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.... I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:18, 20–21, 23)

“Perichoresis” literally means “mutual indwelling” or “interpenetration”, and that idea is central to a Trinitarian understanding of mission. God as Trinity functions in “mutual indwelling”, and Jesus’ prayer is that his disciples will join that movement and mutual sharing. God shares life among the Godhead with one another, but then also shares life with followers of Jesus who together with God (or more appropriately God together with them) shares life with the world. The other place John alludes to mutual indwelling as a spirituality of mission is with Jesus as the Vine and disciples as the branches, explaining that as disciples dwell in God and God in them, they will bear fruit (Jn 15:1–8). But John 17 alludes more to the mystery of God's Trinitarian life that the church is invited into. It is, as Leffel (2017) suggests, an attitude, a frame of mind, a submission of faith, a practice of conscience and a guiding paradigm that the church dwells in God and God in them, with the end purpose that others will be invited to join as well, so that in the end “God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28b NIV; Leffel 2017).

John expresses the end purpose of this mutual indwelling or spirituality as: “so that the world may believe ... [and] know that [God] has loved them” (John 17:21, 23). Missio Trinitas thus recalibrates the church away from a programmed and managed approach to mission. It invites the people of God into an abiding relationship that nourishes mission. Mission arises foundationally from participation in the very life of God as Trinity. This indwelling of the Spirit in the church is life creating. N. T. Wright observes, “The spirit was not, for Paul and his contemporaries, a ‘doctrine’ or ‘dogma’ to be discussed, but the breath of life which put them in a position to discuss everything else – and more to the point, to worship, pray, love and work” (2013: 710). This perspective is a thorough-going spirituality of mission. To be “missional” is first and foremost a spirituality. The mission of the church begins with, is focused by and is fueled through participation with God.

Hastings suggests that the greatest secret to co-missioning is “to be experientially participating in the triune God”; as God’s people are intoxicated with God, they will more likely want to vibrantly share the life of God with the world (2012:116). Ultimately the activism of co-missioning is not separable from deep spirituality; missional acts are carried out in participation with what God is doing. The needs for mission in the world are not something Christians need fill with guilt-driven motivation and unbounded activism. These gaps are already filled by the work of Christ and the activity of the Spirit, and the church then fills these gaps “*as one with Christ by the Spirit* in participation with the mission of God” (Hastings 2012:259, original emphasis). Being missionally wide derives from deep worship of the triune sending God. The Trinity is firstly experienced in worship and then lived out with mission. It is immersion in the life of the Trinity that will lead inevitably to being missional (Hastings 2012:104–105).

Trinitarian fullness, moreover, is what best helps sustain the church for the challenges of mission. Missio Dei is limited when writers

use it to shape contemporary theology of mission but focus on one aspect of God; for example, God as Father the sending God, or Jesus as model of incarnational mission, or the Spirit as empowerment for mission. Different renewal movements may invite the church to be captured by the Father heart of God, or have their imagination fueled by the Jesus of the gospels, or be inspired and empowered by the filling of the Spirit. But a fully-orbed spirituality of mission needs all of God, in order to generously share the whole life of God Father, Son and Spirit with the world. Sharing the fullness of a Trinitarian God with the world begins for the church in worship of God, as Braaten argues:

This Trinitarian grounding of mission should make clear that God and not the church is the primary subject and source of mission. Advocacy is what the church is about, being God’s advocate in the world. The church must therefore begin its mission with doxology, otherwise everything peters out into social activism and aimless programs (1991:127).

Missio Trinitas moves mission beyond church programs to a spirituality of mission, but it also shapes a servant church that offers a whole gospel for the whole world.

4.4 Missio Trinitas Turns Church Attention to a Whole Gospel for the Whole World

If God is interested not just in the church but the whole world, then missio Dei invites the church to focus on God’s interest in the whole world. Bosch explained that the emerging ecumenical consensus around missio Dei has called all streams of the church to greater attentiveness to the world and its need for holistic mission (1991:368–510). The missions activities (plural) of the church in the world are derivative of the mission of God (the singular primary reference point). In other words, missio Dei is wider than missio ecclesia. This should not be overextended to suggest that mission excludes the church, as some have asserted, but it also means that mission is not limited to church ministries. It is the movement or

turning of God to the world and its need for redemption, “in ordinary human history, not exclusively in and through the church” (Bosch 1991:391). Thus, Bosch concluded his section on *missio Dei*: “It is inconceivable that we could again revert to a narrow, ecclesiocentric view of mission” (1991:393).

The scope of *missio Dei* reflects a Kingdom or reign of God perspective in fostering God’s purposes for all creation. It reflects God’s commitment to the common good of all humanity and the world. Bosch underlines that “To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love” (1991:390). He continues: “In its mission, the church witnesses to the fullness of the promise of God’s reign and participates in the ongoing struggle between that reign and the powers of darkness and evil” (1991:391; drawing on Scherer 1987:84). The implications and breadth of mission, therefore, includes evangelism but also justice, liberation, dialogue and more. It is not just about church planting and saving souls (though that language problematically feeds into Gnosticism), but holistic or integral mission. (Bosch 1991:391, 368–510). Building on Bosch, the foundational volume of the missional church movement states, “Mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation” (Guder 1998:3–4). This sense of all-Creation embracing mission is informed by the kingdom of God: “God’s good news for all the world” (Guder 1998:10). The consequential invitation for the church as new community is to discern what the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is implementing in new creation since its startling invasion in the ministry, cross and resurrection of Christ (Hays 1996: xvii, 193–200).

The church’s role, within a *missio Dei*/ *missio Trinitas* perspective of cooperating with God in fostering the reign of God, is to discern where God is at work in the world and in history (Bosch 1991:391–392). Some

church consultants adopt this framework to foster missional revitalization or congregational transformation and encourage churches to practice attentiveness and discernment as key spiritual disciplines.

In a series of volumes focused on revitalizing churches, Canadian missional consultant Alan Roxburgh urges cultivating a congregational attentiveness to what God is doing in the neighborhood and world around the church. If *missio Dei* turns the attention of a church to the whole world, then it needs a keen openness to discern what God is doing beyond the church. Roxburgh’s *Missional Map-Making* prioritizes this basic posture beyond strategic planning as a starting point: “To cultivate a people in our local churches who are asking questions about what the Spirit is up to in their neighbourhoods requires a church environment where people feel safe enough and encouraged to learn to listen to God and one another as a basic habit of their lives” (2010:137). Part of the problem that he suggests in *Missional* (2011 – note without “church” in the title) is that the missional conversation has become preoccupied with church, rather than focusing on what God is up to in the world. He argues that the shortcoming of most appeals for church growth and renewal, and emerging or missional church reimagination, is that responses are misguided when they focus on church survival and leadership. Roxburgh (2015) helpfully seeks to foreground the agency of God and discerning what God’s Spirit is already doing in the world around us, while empowering the whole people of God to get involved in that agenda. As Bosch suggested, when Christian communities adopt mission from God’s perspective, and understand that God is concerned for the whole world, then clearly mission will affect all people in all of their spheres of activity (1991:391).

Mission shaped by a Trinitarian framework clearly focuses the church on a holistic or integral understanding of mission addressed to the whole world. Mission focused on one person of the Trinity, for example the work

of sacrificial atonement of the Son, can narrow an understanding of mission. Jesus came to save sinners, but also to bring salvation and redemption to the world in a cosmic sense. But thinking also of God the Father or Creator's role in bringing the world back into God's purposes, and the Holy Spirit's role in sustaining and remaking the world, helps turn the church's attention to a whole gospel for the whole world. *Missio Trinitas* includes evangelism but also compassionate service, advocacy for justice and care for creation. Graham Hill reflects: "God welcomes us into his Trinitarian embrace. And he invites us to join in his redeeming and restoring activity in individual lives, social systems, the world in general, human history, and the eschatological age to come" (2017:297). The whole being of God is active in remaking the world according to God's purposes in all these senses. The Lausanne movement has picked up on the inspiration of *missio Dei* and *missio Trinitas* in their vision of "The whole church, taking the whole gospel, to the whole world" (Lausanne II, 1989).

Hastings (2012:98) explains that when people are brought into communion with the triune God, they are assured of eternal life in Christ but also fully recover the dignity of personhood – which, as with the community of the Trinity, is characterized by love of God and neighbor and creation. In Trinitarian mission, therefore, there is no tension between evangelism and social action:

Trinitarian missionaries will be concerned with both proclamation of the saving message of Christ and the development of persons to their fullest human potential by means of education and health care, and with the transformation of communities so that converts might discover the dignity of work, healthy community and creation care.

Hastings 2012:99

A Trinitarian mission is broad in its scope. The Trinitarian dance of God is seeking to remake the world, and invites the church to join in the dance. This includes evangelism because the relational nature of God as

Trinity invites people into right relation with God's self. It also includes mercy ministry and advocacy for justice because God as creator, redeemer and sustainer is committed to helping people experience new creation, redemption and sustaining in the whole of their lives, not just dualistically for their "souls". It also includes

mission as hospitality, since God as Trinity is hospitable to people and invites the church to follow that example in welcoming people of all backgrounds to belong and experience community. *Missio Trinitas* also underlines the importance of creation care. Amos Yong (2015a) maintains that pneumatology has been neglected, or marginalized, but has been "rediscovered" by the Pentecostal movement, including more recently with pneumatological theologies of creation. Creation care needs pneumatological, Christological and patristical facets. All three persons of the Trinity were involved in creation, and all are involved in redemption and indeed in the renewal of creation (Yong 2015a:169–175). Leffel (2017) aims to change the minds of church leaders (or convert them) on the imperative of moving from a Christo-centric to Theo-centric (and Trinitarian) mission, not to downplay Christ but to avoid a narrow gospel:

Make no mistake: Christ is the head of the church, and he will always be at the center of what we do. Having said this, we tend to reduce our gospel witness to the invitation to be born again. Our focus is on the blood of Christ, the call to repentance, re-birth in Christ, and the nurture of our relationship with him. This tends to make Christian faith individualistic. What we lose is the relational emphasis of a full-blooded Trinitarian witness, as well as God's greater concern for the fullness of all human life, for reconciliation between peoples, for justice, the health of the planet, and a vision for what the world will become when God brings it to consummation. i.e., the whole gospel ... back to missional spirituality.

Missio Trinitas reminds the church that God is the ultimate sharer of life and habitual gift-giver in creating, redeeming and sustaining the world – for all the needs of shalom for people and creation.

4.5 *Missio Trinitas Calls all Christians into Mission as Communities rather than Individuals*

Missio Dei reminds us of the agency of God in mission, with which the church cooperates in adopting a posture of mission and focusing on a *whole gospel* for the whole world. Moreover, missio Dei calls the whole people of God into mission. Just as the Father sent the Son, everyone who follows Jesus is “sent” by him into their world and neighborhood. Jesus’ words “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (Jn 20:21) can apply not just to the first disciples, but to all disciples.

Bosch explored how mission is ministry by the whole people of God, or the “apostolate of the laity” sent into the everyday life of their world (1991:467–474). This is a significant shift away from ministry as being monopolized by ordained men. Those called as leaders are to accompany and empower the whole people of God for mission: “Laypersons are no longer just the scouts who, returning from the ‘outside world’ with eyewitness accounts and perhaps some bunches of grapes, report to the ‘operational basis’; they are the operational basis from which the missio Dei proceeds” (Bosch 1991:472). The invitation to cooperate with mission and all of what God is doing in the world to remake it according to his purposes is not for a select few professionals, but for the whole people of God. This is part of the reversal in thinking about church and mission: from sending a few missionaries to all being sent missionaries (Frost and Hirsch 2003:39–40).

When missio Dei is conceptualized as missio Trinitas, which it already is, it also calls the whole people of God into mission as communities and not just individuals, and as communities and congregations cooperating together. Missional leader Mike Breen,

founder of 3DM (an organic movement fostering discipleship and mission), welcomes the contribution of missio Dei to the missional conversation. Yet he suggests that churches are falling short of missional effectiveness when they focus on individual missionaries being sent to influence their neighborhoods, workplaces and schools. He argues part of the problem is Western individualism, and the other part of the problem is the theology of a singular God, underlined by talking about missio Dei. God is one but Breen seeks to remind missional church leaders that they see God’s unity expressed in the diversity of three persons. Even when Jesus was baptized and began his ministry, the Spirit descended on him and a voice from heaven said “This is my Son” – the Father speaking identity to him and the Spirit empowering him for mission. It was a “family on mission”, a model that Breen urges churches to adopt. The commission for Jesus’ mission was to “family business”. Similarly, when churches today are inspired by missio Trinitas, then instead of focusing on individual missionaries they can send “families on mission” to represent God (Breen 2014a).

“Families on mission” are not just parents and their children, but those in church communities sharing in life and mission together. This is the kind of community that Breen says exists in the Trinity and ideally is reflected in churches or families on mission. Unfortunately, churches in the Western world are enmeshed in Western culture. This too often includes all-pervasive individualistic perspectives which also influence mission. Because Western culture is so thoroughly individualistic, then even a term such as missio Dei, which should implicitly be understood in Trinitarian terms, can be understood individually. This leads to emphasis on individualistic mission. Breen (2014b) observes:

While the Missio Dei doesn’t cause individualistic mission all by itself, it does get co-opted by Western individualism. For this reason we are suggesting that beginning

to talk about the *Missio Trinitatis* and being “Families on Mission” could be a helpful way of evolving and nuancing the conversation in a way that better equips people to truly hear the theology in a way that leads to a methodology consistent with it.

In this, Breen would agree with Volf, that Free Church ecclesiology – with its innate volunteerism, individualism and focus on Christology – tends to drift away from Trinitarian perspectives (Volf 1998: 196–197; Hill 2017:278). Volf asserts ecclesial communion ought to reflect Trinitarian communion, and just as divine beings in God are inseparable, Christians should not live in isolation and independence (Volf 1998:191–220; Hill 2017:136–137). *Missio Trinitas* reminds the church of the community within God that the church models itself on, and invites reflecting that with practicing mission as communities or “families on mission” rather than individual “lone ranger” missionaries (Breen 2014b).

Just as the call to mission is for communities and not just individuals, so too the call is for communities and congregations to cooperate together in discerning and acting with mission *Trinitas* rather than merely acting as a congregation individually.

Table 1. Implications of *missio Trinitas*

Missio Trinitas:

- places the primary responsibility for mission with a Trinitarian God
- invites the church to join God in the dance of (co-)mission
- moves mission beyond church programs to a spirituality of mission
- turns church attention *to a whole gospel* for the whole world
- calls all Christians into mission as communities rather than individuals
- calls congregations to cooperate both with God and with one another in mission and formation.

5 Conclusion

Missio Dei, and grounding the mission of the church in the character of God as a missionary God, is one of the most important theological (re-) discoveries of the twentieth-century ecumenical and missional movements. The concept is limited, however, if focused on one aspect of God as sending God, or model of incarnational mission or empowerment for mission. When considering mission, it is important to consider the Trinitarian nature of God and therefore of mission. *Missio Dei* is thoroughly Trinitarian, by definition. Focusing on mission *Trinitas* (rather than thinking of *missio Dei* apart from the Trinity) helps expand the church’s understanding of and confidence in mission. *Missio Trinitas* places the primary responsibility for mission with a Trinitarian God, invites the church to join God in the dance of (co-)mission, moves mission beyond church programs to a spirituality of mission, turns church attention to a whole gospel for the whole world, and more faithfully leads to a method of communities rather than individuals serving on mission. Focusing on *missio Trinitas* helps expand the understanding of and confidence in mission for Christian communities and for congregations cooperating together in mission.

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