

What is mission?

If your mission committee is responsible to recommend to the session how it will lead the congregation in mission through giving, then you better be able to recognize “mission” if you tripped over it! You do not want to give money to something that is *not* “mission.” It is a matter of integrity and stewardship. So what is a good definition of mission?

That is a good question, but the answer is very difficult. In fact, we should begin with the understanding that we will never be able to provide a completely satisfying definition of mission. Mission integrity requires constant vigilance in “reforming” our understanding of mission.

The first place to start in understanding mission is, of course, the Bible. (See the essay, “What does the Bible say about mission?”)

Probably the most complete book for understanding what mission is was written by David Bosch and is titled *Transforming Mission*. (All references mentioned will be found in “Websites and Bibliography.”) One of the great privileges and joys of my life was attending the one-week seminar at the Overseas Ministries Study Center (New Haven, CT) in 1991 when David Bosch outlined his book fresh off the press. He died tragically in an auto accident just a year later.

On pages 8 – 11 of *Transforming Mission*, Bosch gives a 13-point interim definition of mission. Other great students of mission have also made important contributions to understanding mission, and we still do not have anything that could be considered “final” or “orthodox.” So that should relieve your mission committee of any sense that it will ever get it all right!

But that does not relieve us of the responsibility to be careful what we call and fund as “mission.” Let’s look at Bosch’s list, and then I will suggest some other good but less massive resources which your committee might use for its own education.

1. The Christian faith is intrinsically missionary. God has a plan of salvation for all people which is realized in Jesus Christ. Mission is not optional for Christians or your church. Salvation is to be proclaimed to all people.
2. Missiology (study of mission) is a branch of theology (study of God). It is not a disinterested or neutral project, but rather, it assumes a commitment to Christian faith. But this does not allow for uncritical examination of Christian mission. In fact, thinking about mission should be held to the highest standard.
3. Therefore we can not be too self-confident about our understanding of mission. Ultimately mission is undefinable.

4. Christian mission seeks to understand the relationship between God and the world. This relationship is found in the story of the Bible which is most interested in the person of Jesus.
5. The Bible can not be treated simply as a storehouse of truth, therefore there are no “laws of mission.” Mission exists in tension between “divine providence and human confusion.” Mission is messy.
6. “Christian existence...is missionary existence” because the church is by its very nature missionary. There is no such thing as a real church without mission.
7. There is no geographic definition of mission. We can not distinguish between “foreign mission” and “home mission” because America is also a mission field.
8. “Mission” refers to “God’s mission” or self-revelation in the world. “Missions” (plural) refer to the “missionary ventures of the church” in specific times and places. We can not simply equate our “missions” with God’s “mission.”
9. Mission involves “the whole church bringing the whole gospel to the whole world.” There is no area of life that escapes the gospel. We can not divide the world into “spiritual” verses “material.”
10. God has created this world and cares for it and for us more profoundly that we can ever imagine. God is deeply troubled by injustice, oppression, poverty, violence, etc. The church’s missions will address these offences to God’s good creation. No area of life is beyond God’s interest.
11. Mission includes evangelism which is “the proclamation of salvation in Christ to those who do not believe in him.” Salvation involves repentance and conversion and becoming part of Christ’s church.
12. God cares profoundly about the world, but the gospel is not simply an affirmation of our best hopes for how the world should be. The gospel can not be completely identified with any social or political program. The church can neither be concerned only with this world nor can it separate itself from the world, as if only heaven is of importance to God.
13. The church is a sign (pointer, model) of what God wants the world to be. The church is a sacrament (anticipation, foretaste) of what God wants the world to be. The church is not the same as the reign of God, but neither is it unrelated to the reign of God. The church is called out of the world in order to be sent into the world.

I would suggest that every mission committee needs to maintain an ongoing conversation about the definition of mission. There are some good resources that you could use. Maybe you could agree to spend 15 minutes at each meeting discussing some aspect of mission. You might ask your pastor to help. You could use one of these essays or choose from the following resources (starting with the easiest and going to the more difficult):

- “Thoughts on Mission: Theological Touchstones” was prepared by Scott Sunquist, Vera White, and Don Dawson at Pittsburgh Seminary and Pittsburgh Presbytery. This is not a comprehensive definition, but it describes 10 “touchstones” (testing the purity of our mission activity) for local churches involved in mission. “Touchstones” is available on a CD Power Point and has a study guide.
- Lesslie Newbigin’s little book *Mission in Christ’s Way* is only 40 pages and it is divided into 4 chapters. It is a Bible study based on John 20:21 and other texts.
- The World Council of Churches produced in 1982 an excellent seven-page statement called “Mission and Evangelism – An Ecumenical Affirmation.” It is not particularly easy, but it is brief.
- Stephen B. Bevans describes six elements of mission in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (April, 2003, pp. 50-53)
- Lesslie Newbigin’s book, *The Open Secret* is a 214 page classic which is accessible to the thoughtful lay person. Your pastor could lead your committee through the 10 chapters and you would have a broad understanding of mission.
- George Hunsberger speaks of “being the witness (community), doing the witness (servant), and saying the witness (messenger)” You can read about this in *Missional Church*, edited by Darrell Guder, pp. 102 – 109.
- Max Warren’s *I Believe in the Great Commission* spells out in 190 pages and three sections (New Testament, history, today) what the Great Commission means.
- David Bosch’s *Transforming Mission* is massive (585 pages), thorough, and dense with information and ideas. However, it is readable and will give you the most comprehensive overview available in recent years.

“Perspectives” is an excellent comprehensive 30-session course on mission which is offered in many locations by the U. S. Center for World Mission. It is regularly offered in western Pennsylvania and across the US and around the world. www.perspectives.org