

What is God's mission in the world?

<https://www.theologyofwork.org/key-topics/the-equipping-church>

First of all, God's mission is to inspire people to work with the materials he provides to bring forth new and good creations and to order the natural world. The world God created is good, and when humans begin to work alongside God in creation, things become 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). Unfortunately, because of the Fall of humanity, the world comes up far short of God's intent, and the human condition ranges from very good (still, at times) to dismal or worse. Nonetheless, over the entire course of history—concentrated first in the nation of Israel, centred on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and continuing in God's people today—God gives people the grace to return to him. He heals the World's brokenness, and he opens the way to fully restore his original intent for the world, including humanity's role of co-creativity with him. Both the creation of the world and its redemption by God's grace are therefore the mission of God.

Christians participate in the mission of God through every activity of life that expresses God's creativity, sustains God's creation, and cooperates with God's redemption. The church—including church-related organizations—is the one body exclusively dedicated to advancing the mission of God, so all Christians are part of the church. Of course, the church itself is not the kingdom of God, and church work is not the only way believers go about the work of advancing God's kingdom. As Dallas Willard put it, 'The church is for discipleship, and discipleship is for the world'.^[1] Gathered in churches, Christians advance the mission of God through a wide variety of activities. Scattered into an amazing variety of workplaces, we have opportunities to advance the mission of God through daily work in every sphere of society. Anglican Bishop D.T. Niles of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) pointed out that 'the Church is the only society which exists for the benefit of its non-members'.^[2] The church comes into contact with non-members primarily through its people's daily interactions with people in their places of work.

The result is that churches do the mission of God themselves, *and* they equip Christians to do the mission of God in other spheres of life and work. The latter role—equipping Christians for work outside church bodies—is essential, because unless Christians are trained and supported for it, our work is likely to have little positive effect toward God's mission. Churches that support Christians at work find themselves on a journey in mission. Their focus has expanded from concentrating on what God is doing in the church to include what God is doing in the world. They also help church members gain a glimpse of the God who goes before them into their workday worlds and invites them to operate as partners in God's work there.

Among churches that have undergone this shift in perspective, different theological emphases may be seen.

For some churches, it is an expansion of their existing evangelistic emphasis. They now more deliberately recognise workplaces as a strategic priority in their evangelistic outreach. After all, this is where most people spend the majority of their time and where Christians are most often in close contact with non-Christians.

For other churches, understanding God's mission has involved embracing a broader view of mission that involves participation in the creating, sustaining and redeeming work of God the Father, Son and Spirit. Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, for example, has developed a remarkable faith and work programme dedicated to 'the renaissance of Christian cultural engagement in New York City'. They understand that God's mission includes 'culture making,' in the city at large, in addition to calling people to come to Christ through the church.[3] Churches embracing this understanding of mission are often shaped by the influence of thinkers such as John Stott and Lesslie Newbigin. Stott's influence has helped some from conservative evangelical backgrounds to add a new concern for serving others and caring for creation through their work, in addition to introducing people to Jesus.[4] Lesslie Newbigin warned churches in the West against separating personal spirituality from the way we live and the issues we address at work and in the community.[5] Miroslav Volf, coming from an eastern European Pentecostal background, adds an emphasis on work in the spirit.[6]

For some other churches, understanding God's mission in the world has meant re-thinking their perspective on our destination of salvation. These churches have discovered that salvation in Christ is not the escape of souls from this world, but the transformation of the world to become the kingdom of God on earth (Revelation, chapters 21 and 22, see "[A Tale of Two Cities \(Revelation 17-22\)](#)"). This restored world will be brought to fulfilment when Christ returns to earth, and the work we do today contributes to the restoration of the kingdom of God in eternity. Thus, work has an inherent or eternal value on a par with evangelism and worship. Darrell Cosden's book *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work*[7] is a good source for exploring this topic in biblical and theological depth.

One source that may be useful to churches exploring how to better equip their people for daily work is the Theology of Work Project's [Theological Foundations](#) outline.

It is encouraging to find these common concerns among church leaders and thinkers from such diverse backgrounds. In spite of many differences, in each case the starting point is the understanding that mission starts with what God has done and is doing, including not only what we do at church, but also our everyday work at our jobs, at home and in voluntary service in the community.

God's mission is not primarily about getting people more involved in what churches are doing, but getting churches more involved in what God is doing in

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One British church leader describes what is happening in his church this way: 'This whole-life discipleship stuff is getting under the skin a bit – in our midweek prayer meeting one of our ladies prays for the prosperity of the city, then in the following morning leadership prayer meeting there it is again – we're praying for businesses in Milton Keynes, for our unemployed to not just find jobs but know where they are called to serve God and fulfill that calling in his strength. Deloitte's, Ernst and Young, Home, Milton Keynes Job Centre, Santander, Alanod, Accenture, MK Hospital, Bradwell School, BT, Keune & Nagel, Stowe School, Invensys PLC...Lights are on; salt is getting some taste to it!'[8]

the world. It is a shift in emphasis from attracting crowds to church meetings towards equipping and supporting followers of Jesus for their work in the world. This is not to suggest that gathering for worship and church meetings is not still important to these churches. Rather these churches recognise the importance of both gathering Christians together and sending them out to do the work of God in the world. Sending people out has become a more serious attempt to forge stronger links in people's experience between Sunday and Monday in order to help them become more effective participants in God's work in the world.