

Are Georgia Baptists Missional?

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Most leaders have added a new word to their vocabulary in recent days—*missional*. As church leaders strive for relevant and purposeful ministry, the cry to become missional has become increasingly popular, especially among younger and so-called emerging leaders.

Popularized in the early 1990's by Charles Van Engen of Fuller Theological Seminary, the term *missional* originally represented the essence of “being church.”¹ In recent years, however, the cry to be missional has grown to encompass a wide range of leadership philosophies with an emphasis on how Christians are to “be” the church instead of simply “doing” church. The popularity that this concept has achieved is easily seen, as countless books, seminars, and leadership groups commonly include the term *missional*.

With a hunger to have relevant and purposeful ministries, many young church leaders have added their voices to the cry to become missional. Their desire is to be the incarnational presence of Christ to their communities, establishing networks and discovering avenues to impact their worlds with the gospel. Longstanding partnerships and established structures, such as state conventions, are often chided as being outdated and cumbersome, while ministry programs that do not fly the missional banner are marked with the dreaded label of denominationalism.

But have Georgia Baptists indeed fallen into denominationalism? Is this state convention an outdated and overweight bureaucracy that has outlived its usefulness? Or is it more accurate to say the Georgia Baptists, for the last 185 years, have truly enabled leaders and churches to become the incarnational presence of Christ in communities across this state? Could it be that Georgia Baptists have been missional even before the term was ever used?

“Being” the church instead of “doing” church, as most missional leaders desire, is not a new concept. Even Jesus differentiated between the two in the Gospel of Matthew when He said, “you *are* the salt of the earth,” and “you *are* the light of the world.” Jesus did not use the term *missional*, but He clearly understood the difference between doing and being. To claim that the missional revolution is a modern paradigm shift shows a disregard for the evangelical witness through the centuries and an ignorance of the teachings of Christ.

The diverse ministries led by Georgia Baptists since 1822 have helped churches across this state continue the missional purpose given by Jesus to the Body of Christ, namely to be salt and light in a lost and dying world. Emerging leaders who crave new strategies and innovations are quick to discount state conventions as aging dinosaurs, but

¹ Milfred Minatrea, *Shaped by God's Heart*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004, p.10.

the cursory dismissal of proven partnerships sounds more like individualism rather than a rejection of denominationalism.

Are Georgia Baptists truly missional? Just ask any college student who has been mentored at a university by a Georgia Baptist campus minister. Just ask any alcoholic dad who has a second chance at life because of the Penfield Christian Home. Just ask any Hurricane Katrina victim who has been supported by the labor or gifts from Georgia Baptist churches. Just ask any teenager who was called into Christian ministry at a SuperWOW. Just ask any child who has received Christ at Vacation Bible School. Just ask any person whose life has been touched and whose heart has been changed by the ministries of Georgia Baptists. Each of them will say that the incarnational presence of Christ was made real to them through the missional work and witness of faithful Georgia Baptists.

The thirst for those searching for a missional approach to leadership can be quenched by partnering with existing Georgia Baptist ministries and networks that already flow from a missional stream. Instead of rejecting proven strategies and established structures, leaders who desire to be missional should cooperate with Georgia Baptists who clearly understand the difference between “doing” church and “being” the church.

Are Georgia Baptists missional? Almost every day and in every corner of this state, Georgia Baptists are impacting their communities in life-changing and meaningful ways. They are indeed missional. Always have been. Always will be.