



## Missional Communities: Clarifying Terms

**Missional communities** are foundational to the ministry of InterVarsity, but what do we mean when we use this term? Currently the key words that describe our initiatives in Planting, Growth, Evangelism, and Discipleship may vary between different areas, regions or leaders of these national initiatives. This document will clarify some of our key vocabulary and provide common language for national use.

### Introduction

*Jeff Yourison and Bret Staudt Willet*

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA is a missional organization, sent into the university world to form missional leaders and communities of members that witness to the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit. There are many words that could describe our posture and style, and this introductory paper describes our missional nature.

Missional communities are *incarnational*, *evangelistic*, and *apostolic*. These three characteristics are defined in depth in the following pages, along with implications for InterVarsity leaders and chapters.

1. *Incarnational*: living out the gospel in the world around us to reveal God's power and love
2. *Evangelistic*: helping skeptics and seekers begin to follow Jesus
3. *Apostolic*: sending out people and communities to plant the gospel in unengaged areas

### Definition

**Missional communities** form as groups of students or faculty members recognize that they are on campus for a reason. They band together, motivated by their relationship with Jesus to participate in God's mission for the campus, welcoming the incoming kingdom of God through both internal transformation and external work toward reconciliation, justice, and healing.

### Why is this important?

Students and faculty in missional communities realize that they are on campus not only to gain a degree for a career, but also to seek the good of the campus and the glory of God. They long to see the gospel advance among their peers and within university structures and cultures. Missional communities help leaders and fellowships to grow holistically. Members grow in Christ: *in* intimacy with God and others, *like* Christ in character, and *with* Christ in his mission.

These communities are not hidden, but actively exist on campus to create new opportunities for demonstrating and communicating the Good News of Jesus. A missional community is *sent* by God's Spirit. Scripture describes a variety of ways that God's people are sent out for his redemptive purposes in the world. These biblical stories may resonate with our experiences today. Sometimes a missional community may feel like God is sending them into barren exile, or sent for a particular work, or perhaps sent into the Promised Land of fruitfulness. Regardless of outcome or circumstances, experiencing a missional community sent by God is an opportunity to embrace with joyful obedience.

# Incarnational

Jason Jensen

## Definition

*Incarnational ministry* describes how we follow Jesus by living out the gospel in the world around us, its physical, social, and cultural realities. Incarnational ministry flows from incarnational spirituality, which expects God to reveal his power and love in the midst of these three realities.

## Why is this important?

Jesus loved our world by entering into it and identifying with us in our humanity. John 1:14 reminds us that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Therefore, in missional communities, we identify with others to whom God sends us. God reveals himself to us in flesh and time through Jesus—and we also reveal God’s presence and message to others through time together and in our physical and social presence with them.

*Incarnational ministry* means that we go to others and enter their world to authentically engage their interests, speak their language, etc. Missional communities are outward-oriented, entering others’ social space and being relevant to their context (rather than expecting them to “come in” and join us). On campus, incarnational ministry calls us to be the gospel in their social networks: in dorms, athletic teams, ethnic clubs, faculty forums, labs, online communities, and studios.

## Application for Leaders

- *In Christ in intimacy with God.* Develop a regular practice of prayer (preferably in community) within the physical and social spaces of those to whom you are called. Ask Jesus where he is already working and listen for a response. Ask Jesus in what way he wants to work in that culture, and listen again. Then take faith-filled risks to accompany Jesus in what he is doing.
- *Like Christ in character.* Incarnational ministry is by nature cross-cultural, and cross-cultural ministry requires keen awareness of one’s own culture, as well as some cross-cultural skills. Seek out mentors to help you develop these skills, especially if you are early in the cross-cultural journey.
- *With Christ in mission.* Become a student of the culture of the people group to which you are called (dorm, class, team, campus, ethnic group, etc.). Learn as much as you can about their language, activity, physical space or digital space. Then find ways to position your ministry *within* that culture as much as possible.

## Application for Chapters

- *In Christ in intimacy with God.* A chapter can begin to embrace incarnational spirituality through a variety of prayer experiences (e.g., prayer walking or prayer vigils). As you seek God together, look for the revelation of his power and presence, and expect him to guide you in your mission focus.
- *Like Christ in character.* For a chapter to take an incarnational approach to mission, it must know what groups, cultures, and subcultures are represented in the chapter, and then consider what groups, cultures and subcultures it is called to reach. This is an important conversation for leadership teams to have in order to develop the character of their own chapter.
- *With Christ in mission.* In whatever ways your chapter “gathers” together, consider locating your gatherings (small, medium, and large) as often as possible in the physical and social spaces most comfortable for the people you are called to reach.

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# Evangelistic

James Choung and Doug Schaupp

## Definition

**Evangelistic** is an awareness that the missional community does not merely exist for those who already believe, but invites skeptics and seekers to investigate and experience God so they can begin to follow Jesus with their heart, mind, soul and strength.

## Why is this important?

The love of Jesus compels us to love those who are far away from God (2 Corinthians 5:14). It's in the very nature of being disciples. Jesus commanded his followers, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). The Christian message was always meant to spread: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Missional communities integrate evangelism into all they do. Every structure and event has been tweaked and adjusted in order to be more welcoming for non-Christians and more fruitful in conversions. Evangelism and conversions are the "new normal." But it doesn't stop there; we seek God for *conversion movements*—conversions that lead to conversions. This includes spreading stories of conversions that inspire other missional communities to expect God to lead others to faith.

## Application for Student Leaders

- *In Christ in intimacy with God.* Ask God to experience his heart for the students and faculty on your campus who don't yet follow Jesus, and ask him to show you where you should be sent. It could be a student group, a dormitory or a particular friend.
- *Like Christ in character.* Be hospitable. Pay attention to your surroundings when you're in your classes, dorm, apartment, or just hanging out and find ways to welcome people, whether they are religious or not.
- *With Christ in mission.* Find other Christians who would like to partner with you and pray together for those you feel led to. Plan how you will reach out to these communities or friends, and take the first risky step of faith to put your plans into action.

## Application for Chapters

- *In Christ in intimacy with God.* Create regular times of prayer together where you ask God to open the hearts of your friends, classmates, dormmates, faculty members and campus administrators. Take time to listen to God's leading, debrief together and respond.
- *Like Christ in character.* Be hospitable. Pay attention to your small groups, large groups and other fellowship events and ask this question: Would skeptics or seekers feel welcome here? If not, what changes would you need to make?
- *With Christ in mission.* Plant new ministries in unreached areas. Ask: Who isn't in the room with us yet? Who is God leading us to next? Help leaders start small groups or other kinds of ministries in these new spaces. Don't wait for people to come to you; find ways to reach out to others in his name.

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# Apostolic

Shawn Young

## Definition

*Apostolic* describes the missional communities and the leaders that are sent out to plant the gospel in unengaged areas or people groups in order to establish new communities of Jesus-followers.\*\*

## Why is it important?

We have all been sent by Jesus. The word *apostle* literally means, “sent one.” (In fact, “mission” comes from the same biblical word.) The gospel of John shows that Jesus was deeply aware of his “sent-ness” when he stated, “*I am not alone. I stand with the Father, who sent me.*” He extended his sent-ness to the disciples. “*Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.*”

It’s our awareness that we’ve been sent in Jesus’ name that propels us outward with the hope of the gospel and the desire to see every people group gain access to God’s kingdom. We want our chapters to become apostolic environments, embracing a big vision, and empowering students and faculty to reach every corner of the campus and every campus in the city.

## Application for Leaders

- *In Christ in intimacy with God:* Understand your identity as one who belongs to Jesus and is being sent by Jesus. To whom has Jesus sent you? What community on campus has He given you compassion for? What would it look like to love, serve and live in the good news of the Kingdom with that community? Seek the answers to these questions in prayer, together with others in your chapter.
- *Like Christ in character:* Like Jesus, we see individuals as part of a larger “village.” As you develop your own Apprentices for leadership, try to meet their extended family and networks. Help them with spiritual conversations and prayerful encounters with these people. Practice network mapping with them often.
- *With Christ in mission:* Understand that Jesus was the first “Sent One,” sent by the Father with boldness and authority. Know that Jesus sends you with his authority and boldness to call people to take their next step towards Jesus. What kinds of invitations can you provide to others to help them take the next step towards Jesus? Practice calls to faith and model and debrief them with your apprentices.

## Application for Chapters

- *In Christ in intimacy with God:* A strong sense of calling (and being sent to the campus) comes from times in prayer around campus. Practice all kinds of prayer such as prayer walks, discernment prayer, or all-chapter prayer for places and communities on campus.
- *Like Christ in character:* The chapter accepts the spiritual responsibility and burden for the campus. How can each student and small group in the chapter identify and begin praying for their networks as a mission field?
- *With Christ in mission:* The chapter sees itself as an apostolic movement empowered and sent by Jesus to reach all corners of campus with the gospel. How are the vision, structures and people of the chapter focusing on reaching the entire campus as a mission field? Display a campus map at chapter events and use it to cast vision, launch new ministries, and deepen prayer for the entire campus.

\*\* Some church traditions differ on how the title or office of Apostle continues to function today. For our purposes in a campus ministry context, it’s most helpful to use *apostolic* as an adjective – describing the people, leaders and the mindset that exists in a missional community.