

Establishing Missions Convictions

Sending Church Element #2 - Establishing Missions Convictions

By Bradley Bell

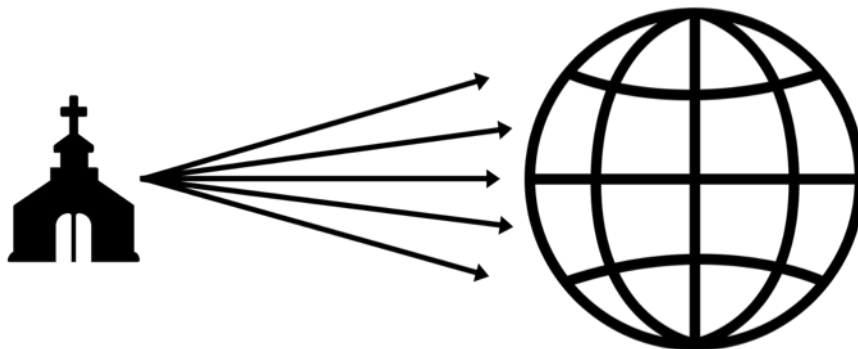
When Nathan Sloan was given the reins to build vision and strategy for global missions at Sojourn Community Church, one of his first tasks was, surprisingly, writing a document.

Were there a million other things to be done? Absolutely. Developing short-term missions, caring for the missionary family that had already been sent out, exploring partnerships with mission agencies, thinking through a budget proposal, identifying new missionary candidates, creating a strategy for local outreach to internationals, and establishing a class for missions—just to name a few. So why give priority to, of all things, a writing project?

Because it wasn't just any writing project. It was the invaluable sketches of what would become the church's "missions convictions". These convictions would serve as an atlas for everything that Sojourn would do—and wouldn't do—with the precious limited resources that God had entrusted them (i.e. people, funds, time, energy, skills, etc.).

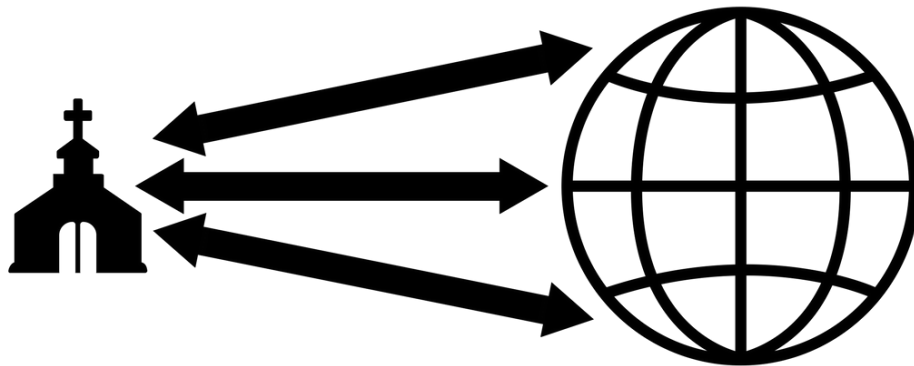
Sloan wanted to avoid operating according to a "shotgun strategy" in sending. This occurs when churches reactively agree to every good mission opportunity and spread their resources broadly. Though there may be excitement in "engaging" all over the world, when you look closely at the results, such churches are often settling for a shallow impact. More flags can be displayed in the sanctuary—ironically at the cost of less disciples made and less ongoing, reciprocal relationships with missionaries.

Shotgun Strategy in Sending



Sloan instead wanted to adopt a “rifle strategy” in sending. This is possible when churches establish missions vision and strategy, then proactively focus their resources only on opportunities that contribute to their vision and strategy. Although there may be less breadth and variety in the church’s engagement, it usually leads to deep, long-term impact—the kind of impact that more likely leads to the multiplication of disciples and ongoing, reciprocal relationships with fewer missionaries

Rifle Strategy in Sending



Sloan knew that strong biblical convictions would help Sojourn aim and fire their strategy accurately. But before he could say with confidence, “This is what Sojourn does in missions,” he wanted to work out, “This is who Sojourn is in light of God’s mission.” He was asking the question, “Based on who we are as a unique expression of the body of Christ, what are our key convictions that will guide us in missions?”

Nathan will admit that he didn’t come up with this idea on his own. It actually sparked from the example of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In the early 1990’s, pastors John Piper and Tom Steller saw the need to establish core convictions that “drive the missions engagement” at Bethlehem. They developed fourteen convictions that still guide the church today (see Upstream’s document titled, “Examples of Missions Convictions”).

If you read Bethlehem’s “Driving Convictions behind Foreign Missions,” however, you’ll quickly notice that Nathan didn’t just copy Bethlehem’s pioneering work. Instead, he turned to the Scriptures and wrestled with what they had to say about a church on mission, a “sending church”. He compared that to Sojourn Community Church, taking into consideration its DNA, culture, gifting, context, etc. The result was seven convictions that would strategically guide Sojourn in global missions (see Upstream’s document titled, “Examples of Missions Convictions”).

Today, Sojourn has nine missions convictions (Sloan recognized a couple needed to be added over the years). They appear at the beginning of almost every key document and presentation of Sojourn's missions engagement, serve as the starting point for education and training in missions, and regularly inform strategic decisions.

At Upstream we constantly guide churches to take the time to establish and/or clarify their unique missions convictions. Whether they are a church plant etching out who they want to be, or an established church with years of missions activity, each will benefit tremendously from this informative, unifying framework.

Key Things to Consider

Establishing missions convictions that are well-contextualized to a local church is not an overnight process. It takes time, reflection, and dialogue. Before even making a rough draft, the church needs to conduct biblical- and self-reflection. As you do so, here are some key things to consider:

- *Who from your church should be part of this process?*
- *What does the Bible teach you about your church's missions identity and practice?*
- *What are the most important passages your church clings to in regard to God's mission and your place in it?*
- *Does something similar to missions convictions already exist at your church?*
- *If no, why not?*
- *If yes, what part of it informs/applies to convictions in missions?*
- *If theology informs practice, then what does your church's missions engagement thus far say about your theology?*
- *Who or what thus far has been the primary influence on what your church focuses on?*
- *What does your church feel most compelled to accomplish in the world?*
- *What is your pastor's/pastors' greatest passion(s)?*
- *What is the DNA of your church?*
- *What are your church's obvious strengths and resources?*
- *What are your church's obvious weaknesses and limitations?*
- *Has your church operated according to a shotgun strategy or a rifle strategy?*
- *How has that strategy been successful? How has it failed?*
- *Does your church react to good missions opportunities or proactively pursue the best, most strategic missions opportunities?*

Step-By-Step Process

There really is no perfect way of developing healthy missions convictions. However, based on our relationship with many sending churches, we have taken note of key steps that make for a healthy process. We encourage you to consider the following:

1. Determine who will be part of the process.

Missions convictions are something that will be shared by the entire church, therefore the process should involve multiple people. In fact, it likely carries too much weight for one person to determine alone. Probably not everyone needs to be involved, but at least a small group. This will allow for a wider perspective on the missional message of the Bible and the culture of the church.

2. Intentionally spend time in Scripture and prayer.

Resolve to make this a spiritual exercise more than a programmatic one. Without the leadership of the Holy Spirit, it is very unlikely to arrive at effective missions convictions anyway. Just as the global mission of the church at Antioch was propelled through the fasting and prayer of its elders, seek God, ask him to lead your church, and listen to what he says. Pay close attention to the biblical theology of mission spanning Genesis to Revelation.

3. Check to see if your church has any similar documents that already exist.

Take time to research your church's mission and/or vision statements, core values, membership covenant, constitution and bylaws, strategy, etc. Chances are, they will inform you on some level about the church's existing convictions, spoken and unspoken. This is an important first step toward understanding your church's culture, values, and desires, which should help shape its convictions in missions.

4. Read several examples of missions convictions from other sending churches.

Since many sending churches have gone before you, read their missions convictions and inquire about how they went about the process. For this purpose we compiled five church examples for you in the document titled, "Examples of Missions Convictions". We don't recommend copying anyone's convictions word-for-word, not because of plagiarism, but because every church is different. Nevertheless, feel free to use and modify the parts of their convictions to which you strongly identify.

5. Gather your team.

Together with those who have taken responsibility for developing your church's missions convictions, share reflections and insights from your study of Scripture, prayer, church

documents, and examples of missions convictions. Also take time to discuss your church's culture, utilizing the questions from the above section titled, "Key Things to Consider".

6. Use a whiteboard to brainstorm a list of potential missions convictions.

Allow your team to share their thoughts about specific missions convictions. As with any brainstorming session, don't hold back, even if ideas seem misplaced or repetitive. You can revise them in later steps.

7. Allow the team leader to edit the list into a first draft.

The team leader (or missions leader) can then take the list of potential missions convictions and begin to work through them. Look for common themes. Combine ideas that are essentially saying the same thing. Remove anything from the list that is clearly disjointed from biblical mission or an honest assessment of your church's identity. Narrow the list into a solid first draft.

8. Share the first draft with key church leaders and members.

While the missions convictions are still in process, take them before key leaders and members in the church who aren't part of the team. These are people of influence and insight, who might include the lead pastor(s), returned missionaries, deacons, missionary candidates, ministry leaders, etc. Allow them to speak into the draft, which will bring greater ownership when the convictions are finalized.

9. Repeat steps 5 through 8 as many times as needed.

Continue honing your list and producing fresh drafts. When you're getting close to a finalized list, assign team members to write a paragraph of explanation for each missions conviction. This will help clarify the meaning behind each conviction, and keep them from becoming too long and detailed. Since you'll be using them for sending vision, education, and strategy, you want them to be simply-worded and easy to remember.

10. Solidify your final list and begin to share them.

When you arrive at a satisfying list of mission convictions, take time as a team to think through how you want to use them. Put them in an appealing format and make them available online and in print. Incorporate them into any missions training (Sunday School classes, small group discussion, short-term mission trips, sermon series, etc.). If you don't yet have any missions training, now is the perfect time to start! Consider starting a simple class that walks church members through your new missions convictions.

Frequently Asked Questions

What's the point of having missions convictions?

Missions convictions challenge you to develop a biblical theology of missions and to know your church well enough to apply that theology. They lay a foundation that ultimately guides how your church will envision and strategize your missions engagement, ensuring that you are most effectively utilizing the unique and limited resources God has given you. This will help your church choose the most strategic missions opportunities over a myriad a good missions opportunities.

How many missions convictions should our church have?

There is no ideal number of missions convictions. However, most churches narrow them down to 8-15 convictions. Less than 8 may signify being too general, while more than 15 probably means being too specific. Remember, the point of having missions convictions is well-defined clarity that can inform vision and strategy.

Can our church use missions convictions from another church?

Absolutely, though we do not recommend adopting them all word-for-word. Since no two churches are exactly the same, no two lists of missions convictions should be exactly the same. This also reflects the difference between embracing a model and embracing spiritual conviction (see Sending Church Element 02). The process of forging missions convictions should be a spiritual journey in itself.

How are missions convictions different from our church's core values or mission statement?

For some churches there may be little or no difference. But for most churches, core values and missions statement are more general than missions convictions. However, they should certainly inform and shape the missions convictions.

What if our church leaders and/or members do not approve of the missions convictions?

All is not lost. It is likely you have discovered a significant point of hindrance in your development as a church on mission, whether that is a lack of understanding or a bottlenecking leader or member. Even if the missions convictions were accepted, you would likely still have to address this obstacle before they could be fully applied.

Can one person establish mission convictions by themselves?

We recommend that your church make the development of missions convictions as communal as possible. Although it can be completed by the designated missions leader(s), and probably with greater efficiency, it is likely the convictions will not represent the entire church well nor be adopted by the entire church.

Is this an activity just for our missions leader(s), or others in the church too?

We encourage you to seek to establish not simply a missions program, but a missions culture. A missions culture informs and involves the entire church, making every leader a "missions leader" and giving every member "missionary identity". Therefore, involve as many leaders in the church as are willing to participate. They will likely adopt greater ownership in the process, not to mention provide key insight.

Should our church's culture inform the missions convictions, or the missions convictions inform our church's culture?

Both. Good mission convictions are contextualized to the church's identity. In establishing mission convictions a church is essentially saying, "Because we're only one church among many

churches, and we don't have to be everything, here are the things we are most passionate about and want to drive our members toward..." On the other hand, however, good missions convictions call the church toward a common vision, a vision that is (hopefully) "God-sized". This can propel a church toward what could be true of them, forming new aspects of God-honoring culture.

Once our missions convictions are established, can they be changed?

There are seasons for churches to maintain (see Sending Church Element 13) and seasons to innovate (see Sending Church Element 17). We encourage churches to remain focused on their established missions convictions to avoid mission drift. However, they should also be assessing themselves regularly. In so doing, it will likely become evident if convictions need to be added to the list, or perhaps even if one needs to be taken away or revised.