

# ReforMission: Churches that Changed Their Minds

*Adapted from the When Everything Is Missions Podcast, Season 2, Episode 1.*

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BY **MATTHEW ELLISON**  
& **DENNY SPITTERS**

**Matthew Ellison**, President of Sixteen:Fifteen and **Denny Spitters**, Vice President of Church Partnership at Pioneers co-authored the book, *When Everything Is Missions*. Visit [www.wheneverythingismissions.com](http://www.wheneverythingismissions.com) to learn more or purchase the book.

During the Reformation, the medieval church discovered that the gospel did not need to be redefined—it needed to be rediscovered. In the same way, our idea of missions need not be redefined, it merely needs to be rediscovered. Let's hear from three churches that went through a process to rediscover missions. We interviewed:

**Larry Hansen**, Missions Pastor,  
Calvary Murrieta, Murrieta, CA

**Andrew LaCasse**, Assistant Pastor,  
Calvary Murrieta, Murrieta, CA

**Michelle Thompson**, Global Team Leader,  
Northview Christian Church, Danville, IN

**Trent Hunter**, Pastor for Preaching/Teaching,  
Heritage Bible Church, Greer, SC

**MATTHEW ELLISON:** Charles Spurgeon said: "Every Christian is either a missionary or an imposter." Michelle, I wonder if teaching that everyone is a missionary has ever been communicated at your church?

**Michelle:** I would say as much as even 10 or 15 years ago I did hear that. And I really think a lot of it is because people don't understand the difference between a missionary and an evangelist. Somebody who is supposed to be crossing cultural barriers or a language barrier is a missionary. An evangelist isn't necessarily crossing any cultural/language barriers.

**MATTHEW:** What do you think the motivation is for calling everyone a missionary? What's behind the idea from your perspective?

**Michelle:** Well, we're supposed to spread the Good News. I think it elevates that sense of responsibility in people's minds. If they think of themselves as a missionary, they will maybe actually take the initiative and try to share with their friends and neighbors.

**DENNY SPITTERS:** Trent, has this been an issue at all at Heritage?

**Trent:** I think if you go person to person and you asked them about what missions is, they would start talking about the ends of the earth and the globe. I think if you were to look at our budget and answer the question, it might be answered this way: "It's everything in terms of gospel advance outside the walls and the property of this church."

« A fuzzy definition yields a fuzzy execution. »

We had all kinds of missions partners: a local child evangelist, a motorcycle ministry, a state side church planting. All that was under the rubric of missions. A fuzzy definition yields a fuzzy execution. Over time, if you don't have a shared agreement congregationally it has consequences.

**DENNY:** Larry, how about at Calvary?

**Larry:** Maybe 20 years ago that philosophy was here. Currently, the majority of the folks here would not be thinking that everyone is a missionary. But it took several years for us to undo that kind of teaching and thinking. We really tried to help the folks understand that the value of being evangelistic and sharing Christ with your neighbor *is* the work of the Church and it *is* what we should be about. It's different than being sent cross-culturally. We should also be about showing the love of Christ to our friends, family and neighbors.

« The value of being evangelistic and sharing Christ with your neighbor *is* the work of the Church. »

**MATTHEW:** Another factor here is that we've lowered our standards for what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Feeding bellies, taking care of orphans, evangelism, are the work of every disciple at all levels in your own culture. Since that wasn't happening, we said, "Well, let's call everyone a missionary because they'll take the job more seriously."

**Larry:** And thank you folks who are out there actively doing that. We appreciate you. They're motivated *and* showing Christ's love in their own culture.

**MATTHEW:** That's a great comment and something we should emphasize. It's not either or. It's both and. It's neighbors and nations. But when you lump it all together, inevitably the nations get the short end of the stick.

**DENNY:** Let's talk a little bit more about forces, decisions, or circumstances that brought your church to a place where you recognized a need to reevaluate your understanding and definition of missions.

**Michelle:** When I looked at budgets before I was involved, it was a lot of domestic campuses, Christian colleges, maybe one or two foreign ministries that were in Mexico or Europe. Most of our budget decisions were being made on what people's pet projects were. Our short-term mission trips were anything that made us feel good about *ourselves*. We wanted to change that.

**Trent:** We kind of backed up into the question of definition. There were a number of things in our church that were working for us and also working against us. Our church was founded by a group of really mission minded saints who had an aggressive, risk-taking aim of 50% of the general budget going to global missions. It never quite got there, but there was always this culture of watching that percentage. It also led to some "creativity" in order to increase the mission budget percentage. We found we had a hard time explaining why we're making one decision and not another. Our difficulty was our definition of missions.

**DENNY:** What is God's Spirit leading us to do? What do we focus on? Churches often don't wrestle with this and assume everybody is on the same missions page. What was the missions process like at Calvary?

**Andrew:** I grew up at Calvary and I'm now on our missions board. I get to see things from a leadership perspective. I have seen the missions culture change. Missions was really a part of our church heritage; however, we gradually became more about the unreached and the nations. We had heritage and legacy, but our focus was lacking. We started asking some tough questions and had to kind of deal with the answers. The answers weren't always what they should be, so we moved forward with a missions vision process and then a defining process.

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**DENNY:** What were the pain points?

**Larry:** As we pulled our mission team together, there was confusion on definitions with just five leaders in the room. We recognized that if there was some confusion among us, there was confusion in the church body. What people heard first was that everything we had done for the last 30 years was wrong. We had to re-communicate our message to help people. We weren't saying what we had done was wrong, but that we realized that we were working in areas that were 95% reached. There was a little pushback and confusion. Once we honed the message with coaching from 1615 and brought it to the church it was received very well.

**MATTHEW:** What I've realized is when you challenge the idea that not everyone's a missionary, those are fighting words and people are thrown off balance. It's a prayerful process that requires patience by saying, "Let's let our mission definitions be shaped by the Bible, not by cultural trends, preferences, or prejudices, but by the God of all the nations."

« We have to be open to where the Holy Spirit is leading us. »

**Michelle:** Within our team we were able to quickly come to a definition that we agreed on. That was because we had gone through some studies as a team before we ever started the coaching process with 1615. It didn't take too much to get the team all on the same page. But where we really had difficulty was with our church leadership. There were places where our team wanted to clearly articulate our vision, but our elders said, "If you make it that specific, you are going to stifle the Holy Spirit. We have to be open to where the Holy Spirit is leading us."

**MATTHEW:** I appreciate your transparency Michelle! I often hear folks saying "Listen, we want to be open to the Holy Spirit leading people wherever they want to go." But as they look towards the least reached, the nations that don't have the gospel, they're afraid that they will be restricted. I often ask, "Do you mean the Holy Spirit is sending nine out of ten missionaries to places where the church has already been planted?" We need our moorings in Scripture and we need to allow the Bible to shape and inform our missions decisions and actions.

**Trent:** We were invested in our process for about 18 months. It was prayerful. It was inclusive. We had our original missions committee plus key elders and deacons and a few others with missions vision. There was pain in the process. We found out how much alignment we had, but then we'd hear "Don't we need to be focusing on local missions before we focus on global missions?" Or "God communicates through our good works." This was a nod to humanitarian works without gospel witness. We no longer needed that conversation. Our new shared definition of missions is to proclaim Christ in order to establish reproducing indigenous churches among the world's least reached peoples. This provides shared agreement for conversation in any given room regarding global missions, and gives us energy, especially at a core leadership level.

**MATTHEW:** I think a lot of churches don't take the time to develop a biblical understanding and definition of missions. Their engagement in missions is not intentional, it's reactive. They either respond to needs and requests or outsource missions through proxy. There often isn't a proactive vision. Churches need to have that Acts 13 season of worshipping, fasting, praying and saying "God we want to be a church that follows in the footsteps of this audacious church in Antioch." What sacred cows were exposed in this process?

**Larry:** We reevaluated projects and people we supported to see how they line up with our values and our strategic vision. We began communicating with missionaries in the field. When we removed several from our financial support it actually went better than we hoped. The field worker had a better grasp of the church and the direction we were going. Some were very supportive, others were hurt (including church members), but having those conversations was the start to dealing with sacred cows.

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We were careful to differentiate between “reached” and “unreached” and began looking for like-minded partners. We were introduced to some very unique peoples and places where we now have an established foothold. Our pastor Brian, Andrew and I were with one of these groups. We were able to press in with a local pastor and do some physical care, life skills and evangelism and then came back and shared the experience openly with the church body. The church immediately responded prayerfully and financially.

**MATTHEW:** That’s really good! I think without intentional, biblical, proactive vision, you end up just responding to requests and that will not lead you to an intentional action. Trent, now that you have this biblical definition of missions that is shared, have you seen people suddenly start neglecting their neighbors and the community?

**Trent:** Our love for our neighbors and our desire to see the gospel grow in our immediate community is obviously where the adoption of “everyone’s a missionary” comes from. It’s the reason why some are hesitant about such an immersive refocusing of our global missions. I can offer one anecdote where global intentionality seems to be breeding local intentionality. After our global mission series, one young mom has initiated a relationship

with a manager at a local low-income housing development near our church. She’s very interested in ministering to single mothers in this complex and is now thinking, “If there is one thing I can do locally, I want to do this!” She’s now relating obedience to Christ’s missions mandate to her community as a responsible Christian. The international awareness it seems, is breeding some local awareness. As a pastor, missions intentionality and global awareness translate into muscle reflexes that also work locally.

**DENNY:** At Calvary, what have you seen in this regard as the nations have been lifted up intentionally to your church body?

**Andrew:** Globally we’ve had so many people who really want this vision. They were just waiting for us to offer them something that big and needed a channel to go through. They were so excited to be involved with that vision. A lot of people are already doing local ministry, but when we talked about the nations and focused in on unreached peoples, many people realized that there was something dire, urgent and larger in scope than just reaching out in our own community.

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**MATTHEW:** What do you say to the church which has an “everyone is a missionary” philosophy, but sees a need to change?

**Michelle:** You’ve got a long road ahead. The transition is hard. It can be painful. It’s been a long process and we’re still not all the way there. There have been times I have just been ready to throw in the towel and say, “God, I am done.” But every single time I’ve been ready to do that, God does something. I take the towel and I wipe off my brow and my tears and I say, “Okay, He is worthy. I’m not going to quit. We’re going to try again. We’re going to go back and we’re going to scale this wall. God’s got to act but we’re going to do something because He is worthy.”

**DENNY:** Larry, what word of encouragement would you offer to churches that are saying "everybody's a missionary?"

**Larry:** I would encourage them to celebrate the servants among them who are actively doing something for the gospel. We want to recognize those who are actually serving so that as you encourage them to move and change, you will build from a foundation of unity instead of a position of separation. We saw that happen and we've seen amazing and miraculous things accomplished due to that unity.

**MATTHEW:** That is a great word Larry. For a lot of people, change is perceived as loss and suddenly they might be realizing their understanding of missions was mistaken! They may take it personally or feel slighted. Unity is vital as is encouragement. Trent, you're a teaching pastor. Speak to other senior and teaching pastors that have a very loose understanding of missions.

**Trent:** The first thing is to soak in the Scriptures and let Scripture answer this question for you. In Luke 24 Jesus says, "These are My words. I spoke while I was with you, that everything written about Me in the law of Moses and the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled." And then He opened their minds and said, "It is written that the Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead. And that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in all nations beginning from Jerusalem." Every nation, every people is in that redemption story. The gospel mission is embedded into the whole story of the Bible. Let the Word lead you; use the Word of God to lead your people.

**DENNY:** We are so encouraged to hear you say that! We often try to find our missions strategy from other churches... not the Bible. We want a quick solution, so we ape missions like "they" do it. But each church has its own unique DNA in missions. Churches don't do missions well because they don't think about missions well.



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**MATTHEW:** Here are two questions for a takeaway: "What is God's position on missions?" How does He define missions? It is critical and essential to allow your church's understanding to flow out of the answer to these two questions. Thanks to each of you for sharing - we are cheering you on! 