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The 10 Life-Giving Laws of a Missional Church

Alex Absalom on the 10 things that you must hard-wire into all that you do — if you want a church that actually goes and makes disciples!

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made with
Beacon

Introduction

- Would you love to see your church grow more adept at missional living?
- And do you long to be better equipped to lead out missionally (whatever your position at your church)?
- And... would you like to have greater understanding of what helps build a missional culture?

THEN you are reading the right resource!

My name is Alex Absalom, and along with my wife Hannah we've overseen the planting of over 120 mid-sized missional communities in the past decade... and that's solely in the local churches where we've been on the team!

I've also had the privilege of speaking to thousands, and personally coaching hundreds, of church leaders and leadership teams. This has meant coming alongside men and women like you, hearing their stories, sharing in their joys and struggles, and testing out what strategies and practices work best in the most contexts.

Out of all those thousands and thousands of hours of work comes this resource – which I'm giving to you FREE, because I want YOU to succeed!

These 10 laws are true whether you are planting from scratch or transitioning an existing church – and they impact every size of church, in every type of cultural context, whatever the specific call from Jesus is upon your church.

While obviously the 10 laws won't magically change everything, they will give you a great framework for thinking through where your current culture might be undermining what you are trying to do.

I'd love to hear from you about how you are applying one of these laws – you can tweet me at any time [@alexabsalom](#), or contact me via [this contact page](#) from [dandelionresourcing.com](#).

Finally, in the Next Steps section at the end I'll give you 3 ways in which we can connect more. My passion is to help leaders like you be supported and resourced to further develop your missional life.

But more on that later! For now, let's jump into Law #1...

Your friend in ministry,

Alex

P.S. I always like to see a photo of the person who is writing, so here's one of Hannah and me from the summer of 2016...



We were back in London, England, visiting family and friends. This shot was taken in the amazing rooftop garden-park at the top of the 'Walkie-Talkie' skyscraper (so named by the locals due to its unfortunate shape!)

LAW #1: YOU MUST BE ALL ABOUT LOVE!

Have you ever been involved in an event or program where all that's talked about is completing your assigned task list?

How did that feel?

And how long did it take for you to lose all sense of why you are actually going after this goal in the first place?

Such a hard-driving approach absolutely won't work if you are trying to build a missional church!

Here's why:

Love for Jesus and love for neighbor must be front and center in a missional culture.

Jesus famously summarized the commandments as loving God with every part of ourselves, and then to love our neighbor as we do ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40).

Since patterns of growth can be slower at first, you and your team need:

- A sustaining devotion that is drawn from your primary identity as children of the Father
- Ongoing empowerment by the Holy Spirit for mission begins with you falling deeply in love with Jesus

Out of that love for God flows our love for our neighbors, friends, family and colleagues. Our mission is not in the abstract; the people we are sent to have names!

Remember:

Your mission focus is always a who,
rather than a what.

The fear of 'scalp-hunting' is overcome when we root all of our activities in love - for specific people whom we are called to reach with the Gospel at this particular time and place.

APPLY THE LAW:

Are there specific practices you can adopt to ensure that love for God remains front and center in your missional activities?

When are you most tempted to view your neighbor as a project to complete rather than as a friend to love?

LAW #2: YOU MUST HAVE RUTHLESS SPECIFICITY ABOUT YOUR MISSION VISION

Too many Christians can't answer specifically to whom they are called to be a witness over the next 12 months.

It is as if they feel that tying things down into specifics is to quench the Holy Spirit, or to devalue the range of their friendships – when the exact opposite is true!

By focusing in on where you and your household have...

- The most favor
- The lowest hanging fruit
- The greatest opportunity
- The clearest open doorway

... then you will significantly increase the likelihood of stewarding for the greatest return what the Father has given you.

In case you don't think such pragmatism is Biblical, consider these examples:

- Jesus tells us to look for where the fields are ripest for harvest around us today (John 4:35).
- He instructs us to look for and focus on the Person of Peace – one who is relationally open to you and spiritually open to Jesus in you (Luke 10:5-9).
- He wants us to stay in that relationship as it becomes a gateway into their community, and not to waste time on those who are not receiving you at this time (Luke 10:10-11).
- Paul demonstrated that he too understood the power of focusing in, when he made clear that he did not run aimlessly, and that his blows were struck to hit home and not to waft in the air (1 Corinthians 9:26).

Ruthless specificity on our mission vision – at every scale of church life – creates focus and clarity. By knowing who, by name, you are called to reach enables you to make far better decisions about your mission strategies, and thus your tactics.

I call this the peaceful ability to say no!

There will always be far more opportunities than resources, so clarity on mission vision enables you to confidently say no to things that are godly, positive, healthy but just not quite right for your situation.

And you can say this no with a sense of underlying peace, since you can positively express who you are specifically called to be reaching, and thus can make all the little detailed decisions with them in mind.

For instance...

1. When will you meet?
2. What will you eat?
3. What sort of music will you play?
4. What sort of serve opportunities will most resonate with them?
5. What would good news look like to them and their friends?

Be encouraged by this truth:

**You and your household can not possibly reach the whole city by yourselves,
but you can easily reach a specific few people.**

As you think about where you live, work and play, consider which neighborhood or network of relationships you and your household are called to be primarily investing at this time.

Remember: there is no wrong answer to this question, but Jesus does call us to be pragmatic and disciplined in our response.

APPLY THE LAW:

To whom specifically are you called to focus your mission efforts over the next 12 months?

In your place of mission, are there things that need to be stopped so that you can be more deliberate in reaching your People of Peace?

LAW #3 - YOU MUST PRIORITIZE AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Following Jesus was never meant to be a solo activity. Discipleship is a team sport. And Jesus has designed churches to shine to the world by the quality of their life together.

Jesus gives the world one basis on which they can judge us as disciples: how well we love one another (John 13:35).

In other words, he knows that people hunger to be accepted and valued, to have their better selves called into being, and to walk in right relationship with both God and people.

The best witness for the Gospel is authentic Christian community.

The Early Church knew and built on this truth.

- In spite of being a persecuted minority on the fringes of society, the first 300 years of the church saw the number of Christians grow to become more than half of the Roman Empire by AD350!
- Aside from the first few years in Jerusalem, this growth took place almost exclusively in homes.
- These were extended households centered on Jesus, where relational networks loved and enfolded friends and neighbors into the community of faith, and eventually into the Kingdom.

If we translate those lessons to our lives today, this means that:

- We need to rediscover the power of building communities of believers who share a common mission vision.

- This could be to a specific neighborhood (geographically defined) or network (sociologically defined).
- The leaders of the group are the ones who set the one mission vision, which they call others to join them in reaching.

The key is that there is one mission focus to which all are committed, rather than multiple individual missions for which the group acts as a support.

The problem is that this is that true community requires a shared purpose and identity, which comes from one specific mission vision, which the leaders call others to serve.

It will be one where Jesus is at the center, but anyone can come and join in, wherever they are on their spiritual journey – there is no holiness or doctrine test for entry.

These communities must operate with a high value on welcome and acceptance, so that friends can come as they are and experience Christian community before they are expected to believe what we believe.

APPLY THE LAW:

Are you in a missional community that shares a common mission vision?

If not, how can you plan to be in one within the next 6 months? This will involve either starting one, or serving another person's vision for a season.

LAW #4 – YOU MUST BECOME A CENTERED SET CHURCH

Too many churches define themselves by who is 'in' – those who have passed the test and are part of the group – and by who is 'out'.

The boundary might well be something in itself that is good, such as...

- Choosing baptism
- Completing a membership class
- Signing a doctrinal agreement
- Speaking in tongues, etc

...or sometimes it is something that is unhealthy or even sinful (“Do they speak/dress/ look like us?”).

This country club mentality will quickly create Christian consumers (because membership has its privileges!), but will tend to do a poor job of forming disciple-making disciples.

Such bounded set churches inevitably pour their best energy into policing their self-erected boundary, rather than into equipping disciples to go as missionaries.

Whilst clearly church leadership has specific requirements and expectations that not everyone will meet (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1), it is a mistake to conflate this with our understanding of who can be drawn into the broader community of the church.

Our witness as Christians should allow anyone to come alongside us and begin to learn from Jesus, even if in just one area of life.

Yet this will fail if our friends are worrying that we are a bunch of judgmental bigots who are waiting for any chance to smack them down for the junk in their lives (of which they are probably all too aware).

A centered set view of church says:

- Jesus is at the center of life
- This includes my relationships/ work/ money/ parenting etc.
- Here is the source of all that is good, so let's come to him in community for that water of life
- Our invitation to non-Christian friends is, *"Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ"* (1 Corinthians 11:1)

This in no way should undermine our call to holiness as followers of Jesus – part of our very attractiveness is our distinction from our culture's mores. Yet at the same time, we stop being the ones to decide in what order God needs to remove the specks of sawdust in their eyes!

As followers of Jesus, we are not meant to be afraid of other people's sin.

APPLY THE LAW:

What (unstated) boundaries do you have in your view of who can come into the church as they are today?

How can you keep growing in holiness while also growing in the warmth of your invitation to friends who live far from Jesus?

LAW #5 - YOU MUST RESET YOUR SCORECARD FOR SUCCESS

The classic measure in the US and Europe of a church's health has been three things:

Attendance on Sundays
Baptism numbers, and
Collection size.

These ABCs are valid things to count, but it is a mistake to view them as the ultimate yardstick of success.

If I asked you, 'What business are you in as a church and as a Jesus follower?' then hopefully your answer would be something to do with going and making disciples (Matthew 28:19).

As we ponder the nature of success as a church,

- We need to ensure that our personal and corporate scorecard is built around this disciple-making goal that Jesus has given to us
- We should recall that success as Biblical Christians means that we are making disciple-making disciples of Jesus
- And whilst discipleship maturity is more qualitative than quantitative, there are things that we can measure

These might include certain practices that we are taking on together, which are set up in such a way that every individual can create personal goals for growth in the context of what everyone else is doing.

For instance:

- What am I learning from Jesus as I read the Bible and worship?
- How many people outside of my household am I eating with this week?
- When did I last offer, 'Can I pray for you?'

There are many similar metrics that you could write for your context. However, underneath those specifics is one overarching measure, which I would suggest is:

How many people do we have in disciple-making relationships?

What is interesting about this metric is that it might include some people who would never have made it onto the ABCs, and could exclude some who are covered by it!

But if we believe that...

- Our primary calling is to make disciple-making disciples of Jesus
- Discipleship is more about than imitation than it is about information
- Apprenticeship rather than the classroom is a far better picture of discipleship

...then we need to rethink what we are measuring, what we are most celebrating, and what we are focusing on for our future growth and goals.

APPLY THE LAW:

What is most celebrated as Kingdom success in your church?

What is most celebrated as Kingdom success in your household?

LAW #6 – YOU MUST GIVE UP COMMAND AND CONTROL MODELS OF LEADERSHIP

Whilst most businesses have long moved on, many churches expect those with the power (whether your ecclesiology has this as the Senior Pastor, the Elders, the Bishop, the Church Council, the Church Voting Body, the Presbytery, or whatever) to issue instructions that others then obey.

Such a centralized approach will war against a missional culture, since it will create rigid structures that focus on policies, precedents and procedures, for fear that Something Might Go Wrong. Paul would never have been released as a missionary to the Gentiles under such leadership (Acts 13:2-3)!

**A missional church looks for power and decision making to be decentralized
out to those on the missional frontiers of the church.**

For instance, instead of someone telling the Pastor, “We should have a group to reach young moms” and him having to cook up a plan, the response of the pastor should be more titled towards, “How can we empower and equip you to follow this dream that Jesus seems to be birthing in you?”

Supporting structures in such a culture will need to be lightweight, flexible and fluid, with a focus more on values and culture rather than tasks and specific events.

- Thus we coach people in the values of creative worship, rather than simply giving them handouts of 4 pre-planned worship tasks to copy.
- The latter can be useful, but only in the light of first empowering leaders with the values we are seeking.

Now you may be thinking that you'd like your church to be like this! But there is a cost – best summed up by the principle of having freedom to fail.

In order to give up command and control models of leadership (whether you are the leader or not), missional churches must be comfortable with valuing failed experiments!

We must be able to celebrate when someone tries something that doesn't work out how we hoped – because that grace is a wonderful picture of the Gospel lived out, and will create a genuinely innovative missional mindset.

If everything that your church does succeeds, then you are not doing things right!

APPLY THE LAW:

When personally are you more comfortable with command and control leadership?

How can you better celebrate failure, so that more innovation takes place in the future?

LAW #7 - YOU MUST SEEK OUT ACCOUNTABILITY

In a missional church, lots of new life will begin to bubble up all over the place. This is something to be treasured, and often cannot immediately be properly measured or quantified, or it will be quenched at birth.

Nevertheless, smart missional leaders love accountability. The reason they do so is they recognize that it plays a counter-balance in a decentralized and highly empowering system.

This accountability will come in many forms, but if you want something that is easy to multiply (and where the pastor isn't the bottle-neck) then:

- Gather small groups of leaders and emerging leaders
- They aim to offer one another encouragement and challenge
- You look at both character (heart) and skills (head and hands)
- It is by the invitation of the leader only

Each church needs to think through what structures will help provide a framework where this ongoing and consistent accountability can flourish.

The other ingredient is to seek out input from apostolic leadership. This will be both from within the congregation, and also from outside of that local church, and is a vital component that prevents both complacency and excess.

In Ephesians 2:20, Paul reminds us that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, referring to the APEST (apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, teacher) functions that he lists in Ephesians 4:11. In *The Forgotten Ways*, Alan Hirsch puts the importance of apostolic input like this:

“The reason is that the apostle (as the very name apostello suggests) is the one most responsible for, and capable to both design and lead, the ‘sentness’ of the church.”

I realize that this might be an unfamiliar area of understanding for some, and so encourage you to check other resources that provide a foundation for understanding how each of the APEST functions feed our missional life. See, for instance, a series of talks I did that are listed on my blog at dandelionresourcing.com, and the amazing and thorough book *The Permanent Revolution* by Alan Hirsch and Tim Catchim.

APPLY THE LAW:

How can you be more accountable as you seek to grow as a leader on mission?

Where do you need to grow in your understanding and openness to healthy and mature apostolic input, both from within and beyond your local church?

LAW #8 – YOU MUST BE NATURALLY SUPERNATURAL

“When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.”(Luke 9:1-2)

Have you noticed how often Jesus sent the disciples out to heal the sick, cast our demons, and proclaim the presence of the Kingdom?

REMEMBER: Jesus teaches us to demonstrate the Kingdom as much as to declare it!

This is not to under value the proclamation of the Gospel – rather, we are to be obedient and to share it in the same way that Jesus and the disciples did. We are to be a naturally supernatural missional people.

This is how Paul operated as well. *“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.”(1 Corinthians 2:4-5)*

Our problem is that we are so competent that we have the skill set to plan, organize, structure and run so much missional life to a really high standard – unwittingly squeezing out the life and unexpectedness of the Holy Spirit’s ministry!

Let’s make sure that we are living in such a risky way that unless the Holy Spirit steps in, we are going to look like Muppets!

As we live as missionaries amongst our friends and neighbors, whenever we encounter things such as...

- Sickness
- Job needs
- Work problems

- Financial shortage
- Sleep problems
- Family and relationship blockages
- Relational healing
- The need for a timely prophetic word

... then we should first-of-all be dependent upon God's sovereign work, rather than upon our careful planning.

Of course, this is not to say that planning and being organized are bad (clearly that would be nonsense, and certainly this is not a charter for laziness either!).

However, bear this in mind:

Our organizational skills should always be an expression of our faith,
not a substitute for it.

APPLY THE LAW:

On a scale of 1-10, how comfortable are you with living a naturally supernatural life?

Who can help you grow in this area, so that you can be constantly demonstrating the power of the Gospel as you go through your daily life?

LAW #9 – YOU MUST HAVE A COMMON VOCABULARY

One of the remarkable things that I have noticed in churches that are effective in mission is that each one has its own core common vocabulary.

In other words, they have created or adopted certain phrases that act as a shorthand for their most important values and behaviors. They are very intentional and deliberate about their use of language, recognizing its power to shape and form culture.

Some might argue that this can be excluding to newcomers, but the fact of their strong growth would seem to counter that. Probably non-Christians expect there to be new words, so possibly it is more an issue for existing Christians joining!

The key lesson is that you can intentionally use language to unite rather than to divide, and to show and unpack the things that are most important to your disciple-making, particularly as you go on mission.

Obviously you will need to identify what are the most important aspects of your own church's vocabulary, but to illustrate the idea, you might choose to talk a lot about:

- Person of Peace (Luke 10:6)
- Looking Up, In and Out (Up to God, In to one another, Out to the wider world – Luke 6:12-13)
- Prioritizing the Next Generation (Matthew 19:14)

You will be able to think up many more, but the point is clear: pick your language of disciple-making, or it will be picked for you!

Whatever your actual words, never underestimate the power of a common vocabulary to bring greater unity and clarity to your disciple-making.

APPLY THE LAW:

Do an audit of the language that is most commonly used in your church. What does it communicate about your values and practices?

Are there any areas where you need to craft some specific words to help you communicate more effectively?

LAW #10 – YOU MUST STILL VALUE YOUR SUNDAY GATHERINGS

A common myth in the missional conversation is that Sunday worship services are not much use. “We are in our missional communities, and that is so much more faithful to the New Testament” is the (possibly) unsaid implication!

This seems to be a mistake, particularly if you are seeking to transition an existing church into a more missional disciple-making culture.

Your Sunday services (I realize for some that might mean some other days too) do some aspects of disciple-making better than any other size of gathering.

- When we are in our hundreds and worshipping Jesus, there is an amazing sense of inspiration about that experience (Acts 13:2).
- As we hear stories of Jesus at work, we realize how our little personal story fits into the bigger story of what God is doing across our church, our city and the world, and how all of those fit under the grand story of God as revealed in Scripture.
- And then there is the proclamation that comes as the Bible is preached, and we hear from gifted men and women who have been given the skills and time to prepare insightful and challenging messages to which we can respond .

Yet in a missional church, the purpose of Sunday services goes through a shift.

In a more traditional view of church, they are seen as the pinnacle of the spiritual week – perhaps with the sermon as the mountaintop moment! Thus the service becomes an end in itself, to which all paths lead, including our metrics. Discipleship is thus focused on an event.

In a missional church, whilst we probably do almost all that we did previously, the service and sermon are now a means to an end: to equip everyone to go in greater faith, hope and love back into their respective places of mission and witness.

Effective discipleship is focused on a process, not an event (Philippians 3:17).

So I strongly urge you to highly value what can happen on Sunday mornings, as a key part of how you make disciples and fuel the missional movement that God is building amongst you.

APPLY THE LAW:

What is the purpose of your Sunday services at the moment?

How can you cast vision to those on the missional frontier that Sunday services have great value to what they are trying to achieving?

NEXT STEPS – HOW TO CUSTOMIZE YOUR PATH FORWARD

This short eBook has hopefully given you some...

- creative concepts for processing
- new ideas for adoption, and
- fresh encouragement to go further in areas where you are already doing well.

The journey of building a missional church is not a simple one, but is one upon which more leaders and churches are embarking. There are many wonderful resources available, and books that will help shape your thinking.

Each year I speak with hundreds of dynamic church leaders across the nation, and find that there is a growing desire to build churches that are smartly missional, equipping disciple-making disciples of Jesus.

Maybe you are one of these faith-filled leaders – and perhaps you are...

- Transitioning an existing churches
- Planting new expressions of church life
- Serving across a number of churches as a leader in a denominations or network of leaders.

It is a truly exciting time to be alive in church leadership!

But there's one question I receive more than any other. Can you guess what it is?

“Who has the experience to coach me in missional church practicalities?”

Even the strongest leaders are looking for this, because they know the power of investing in seasoned coaching and input.

There are so many practicalities to wrestle through, particularly in the everyday details of leading missional communities – and I might be the coach to help you.

At this point, let me share with you a little of my experience, to help you gauge if I might be the right guide for you and your situation. In short, I've...

- Served in 5 churches in 2 countries where missional communities have become a key part of that church's growth
- With my wife Hannah, personally started and led 5 missional communities
- Directly overseen the start of 120+ missional communities since 2007 here in the 3 US churches where we've been part of the team
- Helped coach 3 new campuses that sprung from missional communities, as well as a number of church plants
- Since 2003, coached numerous church leaders and churches in making the missional shift. This has involved discipling groups, on-site consultations, phone and video calls, speaking at conferences, countless workshops and seminars, preaching, church weekends, helping build customized programs, and so on
- Authored several key missional books, including the most downloaded eBook from Exponential.org (*The Viral Gospel*), and the 2016 Zondervan release *Discipleship That Fits*

In order to help serve you better, I've created two options to guide you in your next steps – both personally and at your church.

Option 1: Individual Coaching

If you would welcome a season of in-depth personal investment in you and your leadership, Dandelion's individual coaching packages are for you.

- Direct, personal coaching with either myself (Alex Absalom), my wife Hannah, or an agreed upon team member
- Meeting on an agreed schedule over a number of months, through video conferencing or on the phone
- Focused on helping you achieve specific and measurable goals that we set together at the start of our process

Along with your completion of our coaching preparation form, we will use our initial session to talk through an overview of your current situation, and where you are most wanting to grow. We will then agree a boutique coaching package for you, that will provide a healthy structure for our interactions.

The cost will vary according to the frequency and length of our times together, but are priced very competitively.

To find out more, please [follow this link](#) to the online form on the Dandelion website, or go to dandelionresourcing.com/coaching-request/

Option 2: Church Consulting

- Invest in a fully customized consultation process, shaped around you, your leadership team, and your church's specific needs
- Utilizing a mixture of on-site visits, video conferencing with your team, and open-access phone calls between the senior leader and Alex Absalom

Would you like your church to grow into her calling as a disciple-making community? Do you long to see the move into missional communities take place in a way that is healthy, sustainable and reproducible? How might your church family experience more of the present-day empowering of the Holy Spirit, through training and modeling that is born out of much experience, solid Biblical theology, and a low-hype manner?

If any of these areas are high on your prayer list for your church, then having an experienced church consultant walk alongside you in this next season could be a hugely significant next step.

I have worked with many churches and leaders, and would love to hear your story, and your hopes for what might be next in the story of what Jesus is doing through you. Together we can then talk through different options, coming up with a mutually agreed process, specific goals, and tangible next steps that will help birth the vision that you have.

This is about setting the direction for your church not just for the next year, but laying foundations that will carry you into the next decade. This is an investment too important to ignore!

Your initial conversations with me come at no cost, as we decide together whether this is a partnership that God wants to make. Out of that I will write a formal consultation proposal, which is ideal to share with your church leadership/ elders/ board etc. References are also available upon request.

To find out more, please [follow this link](#) to the online form on the Dandelion website, or go to dandelionresourcing.com/consulting-inquiry/

THE 10 LIFE-GIVING LAWS OF A MISSIONAL CHURCH

A one page printout of the 10 laws that will help YOU build a more missional church!

LAW #1 - You Must Be All About Love!

LAW #2 - You Must Have Ruthless Specificity About Your Mission Vision

LAW #3 - You Must Prioritize Authentic Christian Community

LAW #4 - You Must Become A Centered Set Church

LAW #5 - You Must Reset Your Scorecard For Success

LAW #6 - You Must Give Up Command And Control Models Of Leadership

LAW #7 - You Must Seek Out Accountability

LAW #8 - You Must Be Naturally Supernatural

LAW #9 - You Must Have A Common Vocabulary

LAW #10 - You Must Still Value Your Sunday Gatherings

Your Next Step

To move forward as a missional church, and to explore coaching options that will guide you in this process, please click this link to explore options from Alex Absalom and Dandelion Resourcing.

<http://dandelionresourcing.com/contact/>