



An Interview with Noel Robinson

**NOEL WAS INTERVIEWED BY
MISSIONAL FOCUS EDITOR
CAROL CLARKE**

CC: Please can you introduce yourself and your ministry?

NR: I am a worship leader, worship pastor, songwriter, producer, trainer and teach around worship. I have been leading worship for approximately 35 years, have written many songs and released 7-8 albums. I have recently recorded a brand new album. I am very much someone who encourages songwriting of generations. I am also into multiculturalism, in how it pertains to church. I have led worship in churches that are high Anglican, right through to Pentecostal and everything in between.

I am a student of worship, including worship expressions, the theology of worship, Old Testament and New Testament. As a musician, I have been playing the guitar from the age of 6, studying classical music at the Royal College of Music. I also studied jazz and jazz improvisation. In between that, there are different genres of music from Latin, gospel, pop and contemporary I am familiar with. In terms of musical styles, I would describe myself as eclectic.

CC: How would you define missional worship and what do you believe sets it apart from the kind of traditional worship practices?

NR: This is quite an interesting title to give, 'missional worship.' When we look at the word missional, it is an adjective. When we look at the word mission, it is an assignment, or something that you must do. It is also something that you must be. Therefore, when you put the two words together, 'missional worship', and when we are dealing with worship, we are talking about the whole expression of humanity, and

our humanity in worship. Matt. 22:37 says, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the Old Testament context of worship. Therefore, everything you did was about the act of worship. So, when we start thinking about missional worship from a 21st century context, it involves the songs you sing, the impact on the lives that are lived, and encourages individuals to do the missional part of our Christianity and faith.

Missional worship in the 21st century would be songs that encourage the believer to walk out their Christian faith in their community and culture, bringing the culture of heaven into the culture of earth. There is also another aspect, that is 'global missional construct' where the church at large, becomes the political voice of heaven. Politics and heaven do not go together, but we become the Kingdom voice in issues concerning humanity, such as local civic issues, national issues, or even international issues. In Rev. 19:10, it says that 'the spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus.' This means that Jesus has a testimony about what is going on, not only a testimony about you, but He is speaking about what is happening in the world, where there is poverty and in nations that are far away from God.

Then how do we as believers become the mouthpiece and voice of God? We become the actions of heaven in those spaces whether they are political, civic or moral, and that's why mission is a wide subject. But when applied to our daily praxis, it is being impactful in our world, and communities. The songs then help to endorse, empower and fuel that fusion of doing, hearing, taking steps of faith and seeing Jesus in it all.

In history, one of the greatest denominations to arise in the 19th century, was The Salvation Army, founded by a man called William Booth. But if you listen to some of the songs they sang and follow the work of The Salvation Army and William Booth, you begin to understand that their missional songs birthed our education system. Their missional songs birthed what we call 'Sunday school', which is teaching young children the Word of God. Their missional songs birthed so many things that really helped to deal with what was going on in 19th century England. There were many orphaned children roaming the streets and lacking an education. People in this nation were suffering from poverty and lack in so many areas, such as health. But here comes William Booth, who begins to galvanise the church, to become the answer to many of the problems in the streets and in the community. That became a big missional focus which in the 21st century we can continue.

There is not much difference between that and standing in church, singing songs to God and singing about God because it all involves us worshipping the Lord with our heart, mind, body and soul. It means, we don't just worship God, but we become the voice of God in our communities. I do believe that our worship must not just be vertical, but there's a horizontal context to it, which becomes missional. Also, we must not forget that one of the tenants of our faith is, 'faith without works is dead.' (James 2:17) 'Work' is the missional part of what we do.

CC: Can you give an example of how missional worship has led to acts of compassion or community engagement in your context?

NR: In my context, one of the things about missional worship has been

how we empower the church to become The Great Commission. How does our worship and what we do impact The Great Commission? Jesus said 'go into all the world and preach the gospel; and lo I am with you always' (Mk. 16:15, Matt. 28:20). 'Lo I am with you' doesn't come into effect until we go, and 'going' is also 'being'. There is a sense where we must be what God says and we must be the goers. As believers, our calling is not just to sit at the feet of Jesus and have clubs where we gather and encourage each other, but there is something very powerful about 'doing' and God showing up. It becomes fuel for our worship. When we become the witness of the message of the gospel, through showing kindness, love, compassion, and mercy, we bring the Kingdom of God alive in our missional worship, which is not in a book or in our heads.

CC: In what ways has missional worship shaped the sense of community and purpose in your congregation and what actions has it inspired?

NR: One of the great things about the church I go to (City Gates Elim Church, Ilford), is that we have a pastor that is an evangelist. He is always outward looking for souls and how we can make an impact. We have a nursery attached to our church, which is a practical thing. We also have outreach ministries, that operate on the streets we live in; we are in a community that has a small red-light district. There are ministries that go out to meet women on the streets, sharing love and the message of Christ. We also have a range of clubs, that take care of people who are retired so they are not left behind in the journey of the church. We also have youth clubs to engage young people on the local estates who are going through various issues. We have about 80 ministries flowing out of the church.

Our latest thing is a coffee shop that is open at normal hours, where people can come in, sit down and work. It is like a high-street coffee shop in our church's lobby. We also have a mini supermarket with goods that are sold at a cheaper price to people in our community, who are unable to do a lot of shopping in the bigger supermarkets. We sell everything from tomatoes, onions, rice, potatoes, cornflakes, milk and sugar. The shop is doing well, and we recently won an award from the local council. The missional context here is very apparent here and I think there is something very powerful about churches being the expression of the various things in our community.

CC: Do you think contemporary worship songs include sufficient focus on mission?

NR: Yes, because there is an aspect of mission that must be internalised. We must position ourselves to be missional and we cannot take away the songs that position us. For example, a simple well-known song is, 'everyone needs compassion, the kindness of the Saviour; shine your light and let the whole world see, we're singing for the glory to the risen King; Saviour, he can move the mountains, our God is mighty to save, He is mighty to save.' These are declarations and very missional. I





believe we are in that season where our songs are deliberately personal to empower people to stand in marketplaces and be missional. I don't think the focus on mission in contemporary worship is missing. I think it is there, but we must follow the journey of how an individual believer goes from what I call Psalms 24. 'Who shall go up to the mountains of the Lord? Pure hands, pure hearts.' Then it says 'Lift up your heads, you gates, be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in.' This is proclamation and that journey must be seen. Individual and personal worship finds itself in outward expressions and witness. So, I don't think it is missing but we do need songs that are intentionally missional.

The expansion for me would be that we want to get our churches singing songs of mission that open the revelation of who Jesus is, the revelation of what people should be or could be; the possibility that you could be a witness in the earth; the possibility that signs, wonders and miracles can flow through you; the possibility that a kind word from you can change someone's life; the possibility that your actions or acts of kindness, such as giving money to your neighbour or sharing food can make them think about who God and Jesus is – this is missional.

I would also argue there is a disconnect between what we sing and who we are. Oftentimes we like to sing songs like, 'though, I walk

through the valley of the shadow of death. You're with me.' But when we sing those songs and others such as 'send the light, the blessed gospel light, let it shine from shore to shore,' what does from shore to shore mean? In the context of England, it means that our East Coast which is East Anglia, our North Coast which is Scotland, our South Coast which is the Southernmost part of England, and the West Coast, which is Wales, means God wants us to shine our lights in these areas.

It may mean going to those places, or being missional may mean giving money to send people to those places instead. The fact that you cannot go personally, but can give someone £100 for mission or ministry, to take the message of the gospel to other parts of the world, is missional giving and is part of worship. We can all play a part through giving of ourselves, our substance, finances and all the things lent to making the gospel message of the Kingdom and being missional believers in our own world.

CC: Some churches are not practising what we are describing as missional worship. What do you believe is preventing them?

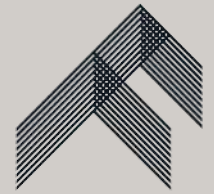
NR: People think about resources and sometimes resources are the most difficult thing to find. But I remember growing up, we didn't

have food banks, but harvest moments where everyone was encouraged to bring something to church on Sunday. This food was gathered in harvest and at the end of service, people would come and take something they didn't have, and we called it 'Harvest Sunday.' This was the original food bank where we set aside time in the week for people to bring food, storing it up for families who were struggling.

Evangelism and being a witness are the easiest because we are around people every day and our lives become the witness of Jesus. So, we don't need resources, we just need boldness to tell the story, and I think we need to start doing that because churches in many communities are declining with members. I think that part of the missional context has died.

When a church is doing something, it is evident that life is flowing. A body is not dead until the blood stops flowing, and I think the lifeblood of churches is missional, and the expression of that is sung worship, and all those things that make up a church service. I believe we are entering a season where, if a church is not missional in what they do, then the question is what is the purpose of the church in that community? Are they fulfilling the purpose for which God has placed them in that community?

CC: Thank you, Noel, for your time and contribution to this Missional Focus.



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