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Missional Psychotherapy: A Hermeneutic of Mental Health Care in Christian Counseling

Victor Counted[1], Fernando Garzon[1], William L. Hathaway[1], Greg McKinzie[2], Rachel Stephens[1], and Leslie J. Francis[3]

[1] College of Health & Behavioral Sciences, Regent University
[2] Center for Advanced Theological Studies, Fuller Seminary
[3] Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research, University of Warwick, United Kingdom

In response to the call for integrative scriptural competence (Hathaway, 2021), missional psychotherapy offers a nuanced counseling approach that incorporates the spiritual dimensions of *missio Dei* (the mission of God) with human experiences to promote spiritual growth, holistic well-being, and personal transformation. Anchored to a Christian worldview that portrays God's redemptive work and the concept of *missio Dei*, this therapeutic approach acknowledges the individuals' calling to participate in God's work in the world. In this paper, we examine the theoretical foundations, practical applications, and potential benefits of missional psychotherapy as a therapeutic intervention, emphasizing its connection to missional hermeneutics. At the heart of this approach lies the foundational application of clients' spiritual beliefs into the therapeutic process, validating their inherent worth and purpose as part of God's grand narrative. We propose an existential missional paradigm for Christian counseling that facilitates this application by guiding clients through four tasks: personalizing, locating, engaging, and applying God's story to their lives. This framework accentuates the importance of connecting clients with their spiritual roots and the global Christian community, while maintaining sensitivity to their cultural context. The implications of missional psychotherapy transcend individual healing, as it cultivates a spiritually integrated approach to mental health care that concurrently facilitates personal transformation and active involvement in God's mission. The inclusion of fictionalized case examples illustrates the practical application of each task and demonstrates the adaptability of missional psychotherapy in addressing a wide range of psychological concerns and spiritual struggles.

Psychology and Christianity have a rich and complex relationship that has led to the development of various models and approaches (Hathaway & Yarhouse, 2021). Narramore (1973), Holmes (1975), and Collins (1977) were among the pioneering Christian scholars who first highlighted the potential benefits of integrating Christianity and psychology. Their work emphasized the importance of incorporating biblical principles into clinical practice and addressing the spiritual and psychological needs of clients.

Over time, several models relating psychology and Christianity have emerged, each with its own unique perspective and approach. One of the most renowned models is Collins' (1977) integration model, which emphasizes the com-

Author Note

Victor Counted
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0944-3775
Fernando Garzon
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5435-8591
William Hathaway
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8227-781X
Greg McKinzie
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6883-2634
Rachel Stephens
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2060-8729
Leslie J. Francis
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2946-9980

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Victor Counted, College of Health and Behavioral Sciences, Regent University, 1000 Regent University Drive, Virginia Beach, VA 23464, United States. Email: vcounted@regent.edu.

plementary nature of both psychology and Christianity in addressing the emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being of individuals. According to Collins, psychological and theological insights can be integrated at various levels, such as in the therapist's understanding of human nature, the causes of emotional and psychological distress, and the development of therapeutic interventions. Johnson's (2010) seminal text contrasted five influential approaches to relating psychology and Christianity: the biblical counseling model (i.e., Scripture as the ultimate source of truth and guidance), the levels-of-explanation model (i.e., psychology and Christianity operate at different levels of explanation and can coexist without conflict), the integration model (i.e., combining psychological theories and theological concepts into a unified framework), the transformational model (i.e., the rebuilding of psychology by spiritually transformed psychologists), and the Christian psychology model (i.e., developing a distinctively emic Christian approach to psychology that is grounded in biblical and theological principles). The Christian psychology model closely parallels the assimilative integration strategy (see Norcross & Goldfried, 2005) and fits conceptually for this special issue on Christian worldview. Thus, we have adopted this model as a lens for integrating missional theology and psychotherapy in this paper.

In recent years, the field of Christian psychology has grown significantly, emphasizing the need for emic psychological perspectives and more nuanced hermeneutics[1]—an interpretative activity—of psychology from an authentic Christian worldview[2] that is consistent with Scripture (Hathaway & Yarhouse, 2021; Hathaway, 2021). This approach seeks to ground psychological theorizing and techniques with foundational missional worldview assumptions and theology. It emphasizes the competent use of Scripture in the counseling process to address both spiritual and psychological needs. Hathaway (2021) contributed to the ongoing dialogue on models relating psychology and Christianity, acknowledging the need for a more nuanced hermeneutical approach that is grounded in Scripture. For example, hermeneutical approaches needing more nuance include challenging "key worldview assumptions underlying contemporary Psychology" and "the fleshing out and retrieval of a theologically sophisticated explicit Christian psychology that is nonetheless open to incorporating knowledge and insights from contemporary psychological disciplines" (Hathaway, 2021, p. 258).

Building on this recognition, we propose a new approach that unites psychology and Christianity in an interpretative framework, emphasizing the centrality of the scriptural narrative. This approach starts from the missional story of God, emphasizing the locatedness of the story, engaging the cultural context of the story, and applying the story to one's life. Wright (2006), for example, described the mission of God as the Bible's *grand narrative*. Missional theology, by definition, is a framework within Christian theology that emphasizes the mission-oriented nature of the Church and its role in the world. It resonates with Jesus' Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) to make disciples of all nations by emphasizing the Church's role in extending God's mission globally, through both evangelism and discipleship. It also aligns with Paul's call for transformation by emphasizing the renewing of minds to align with God's mission and purpose (Romans 12:2). Missional theology is based on the understanding that the Church's primary purpose is to carry out *missio Dei*—the idea that God is actively working in the world to reconcile and restore all creation to a right relationship with Him (Bosch, 1991). *Missio Dei* is a Latin term meaning the *mission of God*, a concept in Christian theology that emphasizes God's active involvement in the world. It refers to the belief that God is continuously at work in the universe, pursuing the redemption and reconciliation of all creation. This concept shifts the focus from mission as an activity of the Church alone to mission as primarily the work of God Himself. In this view, the Church's role is to join in God's mission, recognizing that God is already at work

[1] Hermeneutics refers to the art and science of interpretation, especially of texts. It is a methodological approach to understanding meanings and intentions in written, spoken, or symbolic forms. In a Christian context, hermeneutics often relates to interpreting the Bible, understanding its messages, and applying its teachings to contemporary life.

[2] A worldview is the perspective through which individuals interpret and understand the world around them. It includes beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape one's understanding of reality. A Christian worldview is shaped by teachings of the Bible and Christian theology, affecting how believers view the world, morality, and their purpose in the world.

in the world and seeking to align its activities with God's overarching plan for redemption and restoration. This theological framework serves as an approach that perceives God's mission as the essential element that deciphers the overarching story of the scriptural canon. Missional theology, for example, differs from other theologies in its primary emphasis on the Church's active engagement in God's mission to the world, in contrast to the doctrinal focus of Reformed theology or the social justice orientation of Liberation theology. Missional psychotherapy is a specific application of this approach, which seeks to integrate missional theology with psychotherapy. The integration of missional theology and psychotherapy has the potential to provide a unique and effective approach to Christian counseling.

A missional hermeneutics model emerges as a nuanced theological interpretative approach that combines the spiritual dimensions of *missio Dei* (the mission of God) with human experiences while maintaining a strong commitment to the scriptural narrative (see Kjode, 2022; Koshy, 2022; McKinzie, 2017). In the context of missional hermeneutics of care, the Bible not only serves as a testimony to and an outcome of God's mission but also invites biblical readers to participate in God's redemptive work, which includes comprehending and addressing human suffering and emotional challenges. This approach emphasizes the role of *missio Dei* in facilitating healing and personal transformation, further solidifying the Bible's central importance in the process (Counted, 2016).

In this paper, we seek to explore the missional hermeneutics of care as a distinct perspective for Christian counseling, highlighting its unique features, theoretical underpinnings, and practical applications. By examining how this approach merges the spiritual dimensions of *missio Dei* with human experiences while maintaining a strong commitment to the scriptural narrative, we aim to demonstrate the potential benefits and efficacy of missional hermeneutics of care for clients seeking psychological support within a Christian context. Furthermore, the paper will discuss various case examples, illustrating how this perspective can be implemented in different counseling scenarios to facilitate personal growth, spiritual development, and active participation in God's mission.

A Missional Worldview and Approach: The Foundation of Christian Worldview

A strong argument can be made that a Christian worldview starts with a missional mindset: an outlook centered on a deeper understanding of God's mission, seeking a more nuanced approach to faith and practice (Branson & Warnes, 2014). Bosch (1991) asserted that the essence of Christianity is rooted in the mission of God and that all aspects of Christian life and faith, including its worldview, are formed and informed by this mission. To put it in context, missional epistemology[3] is about understanding the world and our place in it through the lens of God's mission. According to Bartholomew and Goheen (2004), a missional worldview is essential for Christians to engage with their culture and society, as it provides a coherent framework for understanding and responding to the needs and challenges of the world. In this way, a Christian worldview is missional, shaping how believers interpret and interact with their environment. The missional orientation of the Christian worldview extends to a deeper and communal approach to understanding truth, particularly in relation to the Bible. According to Keifert's argument (2006), missional epistemology sees the community of believers as essential in shaping how knowledge is acquired and the Bible is interpreted. Instead of individual or isolated readings, this perspective values collective insight and discernment, recognizing that the community's shared experiences, dialogues, and reflections can lead to a richer and more contextualized understanding of Scripture. It promotes a sense of unity and collaboration in the pursuit of theological wisdom, aligning with the broader missional goal of engaging with and impacting the world as a collective body of faith.

Taken together, a missional approach is a way of seeing the world and the Bible from the story of God (Wright, 2006), which can be summarized in the context of *creation* (God created the heavens and the earth; Genesis 1); the *fall* (the entrance of sin into the human race; Genesis 3); *Israel* (God's promise to restore His people

[3] Epistemology is concerned with the theory of knowledge, with emphasis on the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge, including the knowledge of God. Therefore, missional epistemology in this sense is the understanding of knowledge and truth within the framework of God's mission.

through a nation; Exodus 6:1-8; Leviticus 26:40–45); *Messiah* (humanity was reconciled back to God through the suffering and resurrected Christ; John 1; John 3:26); the *Church* (Christ restores a broken world through the sending of his Church; John 3:16); *new creation* (God redeems us and gives us new life through the person of Jesus Christ and sends us out to the world to represent him through the agency of the Church; Matthew 28:19-20). In each of these narratives, there is a missional aspect at work—namely, God on a mission to bring all things back under the Lordship of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:27). These narratives, as well as the theological and ecclesial commitments that give rise to them, are the fundamental framework that undergirds a biblical worldview. Thus, a missional approach is essentially a way of understanding and living out the Christian faith within the broader context of the mission God has given humanity (Bosch, 1991). This way of thinking is inherently Christocentric, as it is rooted in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Guder et al., 1998). Therefore, the Christian worldview is fundamentally missional, emphasizing the communal, relational, and Christ-centered aspects of knowledge acquisition and interpretation. By adopting a missional epistemology, Christians are encouraged not only to interpret the Bible together but also to understand and interact with the world around them through a shared missional lens. This approach recognizes that truth and wisdom are not confined to religious texts but are also discerned through active engagement with the community and the world. It fosters a collective sense of responsibility and cooperation, aiming to bridge gaps between faith and daily life. As Christians weave together faith, culture, and lived experience, they can more effectively engage with the complexities of the world and bear witness to the transformative power of the gospel.

A missional approach to interpreting the Bible, known as a missional hermeneutic (see McKinzie, 2017; Wright, 2006), is grounded in the understanding that the biblical text has a story-arc to it: a story through which God acts to bring God's redemptive purposes to fruition in the world. From this perspective, missional hermeneutics specifies the purpose of the biblical text as the formation of the Church for mission, beyond mere communication of the meaning of the story. On a methodological level, the goal is not to interpret Scripture literally or grammatically but to understand the biblical text in the broader context of God's will for humanity and God's ongoing mission of redemption throughout the ages (Wright, 2006). In this way, the biblical text can be understood as a window onto the life of God and God's plan for humankind.

The concept of *mission* extends beyond a singular event or moment in time, encompassing the entirety of human history and the progressive narrative of roedemption throughout (Goheen, 2016). The Bible consistently conveys God's love for the world and God's desire for all humans to live in harmony with one another and with God (Wright, 2006). In this context, biblical interpretation aims to assist individuals in comprehending and fulfilling the God-ordained task of reconciling the world to God (Bosch, 1991). Central to this perspective is the recognition of Jesus Christ as the core of the redemption story and the transformative power of Jesus' teachings, which have profoundly influenced history (Hiebert, 2008). The notion that the Bible should be read and comprehended within the broader context of God's mission underpins the Church's understanding of the vocation of every Christian (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2004). This foundational principle also serves as the driving force behind various theological traditions that have informed contemporary approaches to theology (Van Engen, 1996) and psychological practice (Counted, 2016), especially recent desires for *epistemic authority* and *integrative scriptural competence* in the models relating psychology and Christianity (Hathaway, 2021).

Theorizing Missional Hermeneutics

Missional hermeneutics refers to a way of interpreting the Bible and Christian doctrine with a focus on understanding and participating in God's mission in the world (Wright, 2006). This approach to biblical interpretation emphasizes reading Scripture through the lens of God's redemptive and restorative action throughout history. It seeks to discern how biblical texts inform and guide the church's mission in contemporary contexts, with the goal of aligning believers' lives and actions with the overarching purpose of God's mission ("missio Dei"). A

missional hermeneutic of the biblical narrative diverges from other textual interpretive approaches as it focuses on the broader narrative of the Bible as a whole, rather than the specific details of individual texts. It embodies both the *sola Scriptura* and *solo Scriptura* of biblical interpretation by grounding its interpretive approach to the missional story of the Bible as the source of Christian faith and practice ("sola Scriptura"), while also reading and applying Scripture for guidance from God ("solo Scriptura"). Missional hermeneutic views the Bible as a unified narrative that reveals God's mission of love, healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life, ultimately directed towards the salvation of the entire world (Wright, 2006). Central to this approach is the role of Jesus as the embodiment of God's mission.

Missional hermeneutic scholars (e.g., Hunsberger, 2011; Wright 2006) posit that the interpretation of the Bible is inherently linked to the Church's mission in the world. They emphasize that the Scripture was created to fulfill God's mission to redeem and reconcile God's creation, and this purpose continues to shape its meaning and understanding throughout time. Consequently, the Christian worldview is fundamentally missional, seeking to bridge the gap between Scripture and daily life. By adopting a missional epistemology, believers are guided to derive implications and applications from the Bible that resonate with the everyday challenges and triumphs of our walk with God. This approach emphasizes the vital connection between biblical understanding and our mission in the world, fostering an interpretation that is not just theoretical but lived out in practice. It is about reading the Bible with an eye toward its transformative impact on personal lives, communities, and broader societal engagement, ensuring that the teachings of Scripture are dynamically integrated into the fabric of everyday existence, informing and shaping how we live out our faith.

Wright (2006) identified key tasks of biblical interpretation in a missional hermeneutic: framing the text within God's mission, locating ourselves in the mission, considering the broader context in which the text was written, and interpreting the text as a guide for our present-day mission. By engaging with these tasks, missional hermeneutics seek to interpret the Scriptures in a way that is relevant to contemporary cultural contexts.

First, missional hermeneutics aims to frame the text within the story of God's mission, revealing an overarching narrative of God's mission to redeem creation and restore communion with it. This guides the interpretation of the Bible, uncovering the implications of this narrative for our calling as Christians to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the world around us. Second, missional hermeneutics involves engaging readers in the text by placing them in the story and examining the historical and cultural context in which it was written to derive meaningful conclusions for contemporary application (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2004). Third, this approach considers how biblical texts model a radical engagement with the culture of their time (Goheen & Wright, 2016). The writers of the Bible addressed challenges facing their society, often presenting a counter-cultural vision, which demonstrates the transformative power of living out faith in an increasingly secular society. Lastly, identifying the missional purpose of each text is crucial to understanding its proper interpretation (Guder et al., 1998; Van Engen, 1996). The Bible's transformational message was intended to shape and transform the lives of its original audience, as well as society as a whole. Thus, determining the general mission for which each text was written is essential for fully understanding and interpreting its message.

By focusing on the above-mentioned tasks, a missional hermeneutic offers a comprehensive and contextually relevant approach to interpreting the biblical narrative, emphasizing the importance of understanding Scripture within the context of God's ongoing mission in the world. Missional hermeneutics also emphasize the importance of competence in the readings and interpretation of Scripture, recognizing that individuals as well as communities are called to participate in God's mission (Guder et al., 1998). Missional hermeneutics goes beyond merely allowing diverse perspectives; it sees engagement with alterity as methodologically essential. Consequently, this approach of interpretation fosters a communal understanding and engagement with the biblical text, allowing diverse perspectives and experiences to inform the interpretation process, making it a more rich and nuanced approach.

Furthermore, a missional hermeneutics framework underscores the significance of practical application in interpreting Scripture. This approach seeks to equip believers with the knowledge and understanding necessary to live out their faith and engage in God's mission faithfully (Bosch, 1991). By connecting the *missio Dei* to contemporary issues, missional hermeneutics helps believers discern how to embody the values and teachings of Scripture in their daily lives and communities. Missional hermeneutics also promote a sense of global awareness and responsibility, recognizing the interconnectedness of believers across cultures and contexts. As the Church participates in God's mission, we recognize the diverse experiences and perspectives of believers worldwide (Escobar, 2003). This recognition functions practically for missional churches' interpretation in several ways. First, it encourages the Church to engage with Scripture through a missional lens, cultivating a more inclusive and culturally sensitive understanding of the biblical narrative and its implications for contemporary Christian living. By addressing the unique needs and questions arising from various cultural contexts, the Church can develop interpretations and applications that are more relevant and meaningful to different communities. Second, the recognition of alterity prompts the Church to take active steps towards inclusivity, engaging with marginalized voices that may often be overlooked. This approach ensures that the Church's interpretation and mission are enriched by diverse insights and experiences, reflecting a more comprehensive and compassionate picture of God's kingdom. Finally, this practical recognition allows the Church to be more responsive to global issues, understanding how biblical principles might be lived out in different cultural settings. It empowers the Church to be more adaptive and innovative in its mission, forging connections and building bridges between diverse communities of faith. In other words, the recognition of alterity is not merely a theoretical concept but a practical tool that makes the Church more open, inclusive, responsive, and culturally attuned, allowing for a deeper and more nuanced engagement with the biblical text and leading to a more effective and empathetic Christian witness in a diverse and interconnected world.

Missional Hermeneutics and Psychotherapy

The integration of missional hermeneutics and psychotherapy emerges as a response to the growing need for therapeutic approaches that honor the spiritual dimensions of human experience and foster holistic well-being. Traditional psychotherapy, while effective in addressing psychological issues, often neglects the spiritual aspects of clients' lives, potentially limiting the scope of healing and personal transformation. This model is akin to Park's (2013) meaning-making model, which posits that the level of distress experienced is predicated on the extent of discrepancy between one's global beliefs and goals and one's appraised situational meaning of the event (also see Park & Folkman, 1997). Such a framework can provide valuable insights into understanding spirituality and meaning, bridging the gap between psychological and spiritual well-being. Meanwhile, Christian counseling, despite its focus on spiritual growth and mental well-being, sometimes lacks the theological congruence and competence to address fully the complexities of psychological concerns from a Christian theological worldview that reveals the redemptive and transformative message of the Bible in the context of individuals' unique experiences and struggles (Hathaway, 2021). Merging missional hermeneutics and psychotherapy offers a solution to this dilemma, providing a theologically grounded interpretation of our stories and practically applicable framework that recognizes the essential interconnectedness of psychological and spiritual dimensions in the therapeutic process. This integration not only enables Christian counselors to provide quality care that attends to the whole person but also empowers clients to find meaning, healing, and transformation within the context of God's redemptive narrative.

Missional hermeneutics can offer a nuanced framework for Christian counseling by incorporating missional hermeneutical tasks into the therapeutic process we refer to as *missional psychotherapy* (Counted, 2016), which involves guiding individuals to view and address their personal challenges, mental health issues, and life experiences in the context of God's mission (*missio Dei*). This approach focuses on helping individuals find purpose, healing, and growth by aligning their personal narratives with the

broader mission-oriented narrative of God's work in the world, emphasizing reconciliation, restoration, and a right relationship with God. This approach not only highlights the importance of Scripture and God's mission in individuals' lives but also provides a flexible and adaptive framework that can accommodate diverse Christian perspectives and traditions. By incorporating the hermeneutical tasks derived from missional hermeneutics, clinicians can develop a more holistic and contextualized approach to therapy that is grounded in scriptural competence, empowering clients to experience personal transformation and engage in God's mission in the world (Guder, 2000; Wright, 2006). This approach offers a compelling rationale for applying missional hermeneutics in the practice of Christian counseling, as it fosters a deeper connection between clients' spiritual beliefs, their understanding of Scripture, and their overall well-being. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the missional hermeneutic tasks and how they apply to Christian counseling.

Task 1: Personalize the Missional Story

In missional psychotherapy[4] (other variations of this therapeutic process could be termed *missional counseling* or *missional therapy*), the first task is to help the client personalize the missional story, making it an integral part of their own narrative. This process entails guiding the client to frame their life experiences within the broader context of God's mission for humanity, imbuing their lives with a sense of purpose and direction (Counted, 2016). To accomplish this task, several processes need to be engaged.

Identify the Client's Values and Beliefs. The therapist must start by exploring the client's values and beliefs about God, themselves, and the world around them. This provides a foundation for understanding how the client perceives their place within the broader missional narrative. A non-judgmental, empathic, hope-focused, and supportive approach is essential for building rapport and trust during this phase (Weld & Eriksen, 2007).

Explore the Missional Story. The therapist introduces the client to the concept of the mis-

Figure 1

PLEA Missional Psychotherapy Framework

sional story, providing a general overview of the biblical narrative and God's mission for humanity. This can be done by discussing key biblical stories or themes that convey God's love, redemption, and plan for the world. The therapist may utilize various techniques, such as storytelling, bibliodrama, or guided meditation, to help the client engage with the missional story (Pitzele, 1998; Spitz, 2015).

Connect the Client's Story to the Missional Story. Once the client has a basic understanding of the missional narrative, the therapist helps them identify areas of their life where their experiences align with God's mission. This may involve reflecting on moments of joy, pain, and growth, as well as exploring how the client has been impacted by their faith journey. By drawing connections between the client's personal story and the missional story, the therapist helps the client find meaning and purpose in their experiences (Pargament, 2011).

Identify Barriers to Personalizing the Missional Story. In some cases, the client may struggle to see themselves as part of the missional narrative due to past experiences, unresolved issues, spiritual struggles, or misconceptions about God and God's mission. Engaging such struggles is increasingly recognized as a component of psychotherapy (Pargament & Exline, 2022). The therapist should work with the client to identify these barriers and address them through various therapeutic interventions, such as empathic listening, cognitive restructuring, forgiveness work, or inner healing prayer (Tan, 2022).

Develop a Personalized Missional Vision. To solidify further the client's connection to the missional story, the therapist assists them in developing a personalized missional vision. This involves clarifying the client's unique strengths, gifts, and passions and exploring how they can be used to serve others and participate in God's mission (Van Engen, 1996). By identifying and utilizing these inherent qualities, clients can actively participate in God's mission and experience a deeper sense of fulfillment and purpose. The client is encouraged to create a personal mission statement or vision board to serve as a tangible reminder of their missional purpose (Delkeskamp-Hayes, 2010). An aspect of this process would require some discernment, a fundamental aspect of Christian therapy, as it acknowledges the necessity for individuals to attune themselves to divine guidance in order to make meaningful life choices (see Willard, 2012). Hence, collaboratively developing a missional vision requires assisting the client in recognizing God's voice and guidance within their life context (Benner, 2003). A well-crafted personal mission statement can act as an anchor, providing the client with a clear sense of direction and purpose, especially during times of uncertainty and doubt.

Throughout this process, the therapist must remain sensitive to the client's individual needs, cultural background, and beliefs. By helping the client to personalize the missional story and make it their own, the therapist equips them with a powerful narrative framework that can foster healing, growth, and transformation. The therapist also helps the client create a strong connection between their personal story and the missional narrative through this process. This connection can serve as a source of inspiration, motivation, and resilience as the client navigates the challenges of life.

Case Example. Jane, a 35-year-old woman, sought therapy due to feelings of emptiness and a lack of purpose in life. The therapist began by exploring Jane's understanding of the Christian faith and how it related to her life. They discussed key biblical stories such as the parable of the lost sheep, emphasizing God's patient search for every individual. Jane related to the lost sheep, having felt abandoned by her family. The therapist helped Jane recognize God's love for her, which reframed her perspective on her own worth. As Jane began to see herself as part of God's mission, she understood her experiences as part of a journey toward discovering her unique role in God's plan. This increased her motivation for change and her sense of purpose.

[4] The terms missional psychotherapy, missional counseling, and missional therapy, while varying slightly in emphasis, can be used interchangeably due to their common foundational approach that integrates the Christian understanding of God's mission with therapeutic practice. Each term, whether highlighting the clinical aspect (psychotherapy), the counseling process, or the overarching therapeutic approach (therapy), converges on the key objective of aligning individual healing and growth with the broader narrative of Christian mission. This shared emphasis provides the leeway to use different terms while ensuring a coherent framework, both in theory and practice.

Task 2: Locate Oneself in the Story of God

In the context of missional psychotherapy, the second task involves helping clients locate themselves within the broader narrative of God's mission (Guder et al., 1998). Unlike Task 1, which is about personalizing the missional story, Task 2 emphasizes the client's position within the broader scope of God's mission. This process aims to cultivate an awareness of the interconnectedness between the client's life and the larger missional story, fostering a sense of belonging and purpose. Locating oneself in the story of God entails recognizing one's role in the divine plan and understanding how personal experiences contribute to the ongoing work of God in the world.

One crucial aspect of this task is to help clients see their lives as part of a broader historical and theological narrative (Wright, 2006). By exploring key biblical events and themes, clients can gain insight into the unfolding of God's mission throughout history and appreciate the continuity between their own lives and the lives of biblical figures. This understanding enables clients to view their experiences not as isolated events but as part of the larger tapestry of God's redemptive work.

Another key component of this task is helping clients examine their cultural, social, and religious contexts (Hiebert, 2008). Clients need to understand how these contexts shape their beliefs and practices and how they can engage meaningfully with their surroundings in a way that aligns with God's mission. This process may involve identifying the cultural and religious norms that influence their understanding of themselves and the world, as well as discerning the ways in which these norms either align with or diverge from the biblical narrative.

In addition to exploring the broader historical and cultural contexts, locating oneself in the story of God also requires engaging in personal reflection and self-assessment (Tan, 2022). Clients must examine their values, priorities, and motivations, considering how these align with the biblical understanding of God's mission. They may need to confront areas of their lives or the sin in their life that are inconsistent with the missional story and explore how they can realign these areas with God's purposes as an expression of repentance. This process of self-examination and growth is crucial for clients to embrace fully their role in God's mission and experience the transformative power of the missional story in their lives.

Lastly, the process of locating oneself in the story of God involves cultivating a deep sense of community and shared mission with other believers (Fitch, 2011). Clients need to recognize that they are not alone in their journey and that their participation in God's mission is part of a larger, collective effort. By connecting with others who share the same missional vision, clients can find support, encouragement, and accountability in their pursuit of a missional life. This sense of communal belonging and shared purpose is essential for clients to fully embrace their role in the story of God.

Case Example. Mike, a 40-year-old man, was dealing with marital issues and sought therapy to strengthen his relationship with his wife. The therapist helped Mike recall the missional story embedded in Scripture, inviting him to personalize its relevance for his broader life and to consider how it could impact his marriage (task 1). The therapist then guided Mike to locate himself more specifically within this broad biblical narrative by exploring the concept of covenant in marriage. They discussed the story of Hosea and Gomer, highlighting God's unconditional love and commitment. Mike identified with Hosea, recognizing the need for forgiveness and grace in his own marriage. When Mike understood his role within God's mission, he became more committed to working on his marriage, adopting Christ-like attitudes and behaviors towards his wife, and actively participating in the restoration of their relationship as part of God's redemptive plan.

Task 3: Engage Suffering and Spiritual Struggles from a Missional Lens

While Task 1 is about personalizing the missional story and Task 2 involves locating oneself in the story of God, Task 3 addresses the way clients make sense of their struggles and life challenges within the context of God's mission. This task emphasizes the transformative potential of suffering and spiritual struggles when viewed through the lens of God's mission (Romans 8:28; Yalom, 1980). The process involved in this task consists of several key elements.

First, the therapist guides the client in exploring their suffering and existential concerns

within the context of God's mission. By examining the biblical narrative, clients can gain a deeper understanding of the purpose and meaning of suffering, as well as the hope and redemption offered through God's redemptive work (Genesis 50:20; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5; Pargament, 2011; Pearce, 2016). This exploration helps clients reframe their experiences of suffering and existential crises as opportunities for personal and spiritual growth and as part of their participation in God's mission.

Second, the therapist facilitates a process of theological reflection on the client's experiences of suffering and existential concerns. This involves engaging in a dialogue with the client about their beliefs, values, and assumptions regarding the nature of suffering, the presence of God in their lives, and the role of their faith in coping with suffering (McMinn, 2012; Pargament, 2011; Pargament & Exline, 2022). Through this reflection, clients can identify and challenge any unhelpful or distorted beliefs they may hold and replace them with more accurate, biblically grounded perspectives that are consistent with a missional understanding of suffering and human existence.

Third, the therapist assists the client in developing practices and strategies that enable them to cope with suffering and existential challenges from a missional perspective. This may involve teaching clients various spiritual disciplines (e.g., prayer, meditation, Scripture reading) that can help them cultivate a deeper relationship with God and find strength and comfort in the midst of their suffering (Foster, 2018; Tan, 2022). Clients' connection to God's mission is fostered when they integrate spiritual disciplines and coping strategies to navigate suffering while remaining aligned with their divine purpose. Additionally, the therapist may help clients develop practical coping strategies, such as seeking social support, engaging in meaningful activities, and practicing self-care, which can bolster their resilience and facilitate their engagement with suffering from a missional standpoint (Benner, 2003; Pargament, 2011).

Lastly, the therapist encourages the client to connect their experiences of suffering and spiritual struggles with their broader participation in the community of faith. This may involve helping clients identify opportunities to share their stories, to offer mutual support, and to engage in joint missional activities (this does not mean going on mission trips) with other believers (Hebrews 10:24-25; Wright, 2006). By participating in the life of the Church and the larger Christian community, clients can experience a sense of solidarity, purpose, and hope that can sustain them through their suffering and spiritual struggles (Yalom, 1980; Benner, 2003).

Case Example. Susan, a 28-year-old woman, experienced ongoing anxiety and depression due to childhood trauma. After helping Susan personalize the missional story (Task 1) and to consider how the missional theme included redeeming the sufferings in life (Task 2), the therapist helped Susan engage her suffering more specifically from a missional perspective, using the story of Joseph as a starting point. They discussed how God used Joseph's painful experiences to bring about a greater good, eventually saving his family from famine. This encouraged Susan to see her own suffering as a part of God's mission, where her pain could be transformed and used to help others. The therapist guided Susan in developing spiritual practices, such as prayer and Scripture reading, which helped her find strength and comfort in the midst of her suffering. As she engaged her pain through this missional lens, Susan began to experience healing and a deepened sense of hope.

Task 4: Apply the Missional Story to Your Story

In the fourth and final task of missional psychotherapy, the therapist assists clients in applying the missional story to their personal narratives. This unique task emphasizes the integration of the missional principles and insights gained from the previous tasks into the clients' daily experiences, decisions, and relationships.

The process of applying the missional story to personal narratives begins by encouraging clients to recognize the ways in which their overall experiences align with the larger narrative of God's mission in the world (Bosch, 1991; Smith, 2009). This may involve identifying the themes of redemption, restoration, and reconciliation that are present in both their personal stories and the biblical narrative (Wright, 2006). By drawing parallels between their life experiences and the biblical story, clients can develop a deeper understanding of their purpose and their role in God's mission.

Next, the therapist helps clients to identify areas of their lives where they may need to make changes or adjustments in order to live more fully in alignment with the missional story. This may include examining relational patterns, beliefs, or behaviors that hinder their participation in God's mission and working to replace them with healthier alternatives that promote spiritual growth and well-being (Hall, 2004; Hall & Hall, 2021; Pargament, 2011).

As clients begin to view their challenges through a missional lens (Benner, 2003), they can begin to see how their experiences may serve a larger purpose in the context of God's redemptive plan for the world (Romans 8:28; McMinn, 2012). This reframing process can provide clients with a sense of hope and meaning even in the midst of their pain and suffering.

To facilitate the application of the missional story to clients' personal narratives, the therapist may also utilize various therapeutic interventions and techniques that are rooted in the Christian tradition (McMinn, 2012; Tan, 2022). For example, the therapist may engage clients in spiritual direction, a practice that involves helping individuals discern and respond to God's guidance and presence in their lives (Benner, 2003). Additionally, the therapist may utilize prayer, meditation, or Scripture reading as means of fostering clients' connection to the missional story and facilitating their personal and spiritual growth (Foster, 2018; Tan, 2022).

Throughout this process, the therapist should be attentive to the client's unique cultural and spiritual background, ensuring that the application of the missional story is relevant and meaningful to their particular context. This may require the therapist to develop a deep understanding of the client's cultural and spiritual identity, as well as an awareness of their own cultural biases and assumptions (Sue & Sue, 2012).

Case Example. David, a 55-year-old man, struggled with addiction for many years, which had negatively impacted his career and relationships. After progressing through the previous tasks (e.g., personalizing the missional story, locating himself in the story, and engaging his struggles from the missional lens), David's therapist worked with him to apply these principles to his own journey of recovery. They explored the story of the prodigal son, focusing on the father's unwavering love and willingness to forgive. David recognized parallels in his own life and began to see his struggles as an opportunity for growth and transformation. By embracing his role within God's mission, David understood his recovery as part of a larger narrative of redemption. He found renewed motivation to pursue sobriety and personal change, which included reconnecting with his family and seeking ways to serve others in his community.

Integrating Personal Narratives with Divine Purpose

These tasks overlap because they are interrelated and often build upon each other. However, each task has a specific focus, and the case examples are intended to highlight these unique aspects. For example, Jane's case is an example of personalizing the missional story. Jane begins to see her life experiences, especially her feelings of abandonment, in the context of God's love and mission. Task 1 is about the initial connection of the client's personal story with the larger missional narrative. Jane's recognition of God's love for her, and her realization that she is a part of God's redemptive plan, exemplifies this personal appropriation of the missional story. In Mike's case, the focus is on locating himself within the broader narrative of God's mission. This is different from Task 1, which is about the initial personal connection with the missional story. Task 2 is about finding one's role in the larger divine plan. Mike's commitment to working on his marriage is an illustration of this, as he sees his role as a husband within the context of the biblical concept of covenant and unconditional love, akin to the story of Hosea and Gomer.

Susan's story in Task 3 focuses on engaging with suffering and struggles through a missional perspective. Susan's reflection on the story of Joseph helps her to see her own suffering, caused by childhood trauma, as part of a larger narrative where pain can be transformative and redemptive. This task is about reframing challenges and struggles within the context of God's mission. Lastly, David's journey is an example of Task 4, which involves applying the insights and principles of the missional story to one's personal narrative. This task goes beyond identifying and locating oneself within God's story (as in Tasks 1 and 2) or engaging suffering from a missional perspective (Task 3). It is about actively integrating these insights into daily life. David's

application of the principles seen in the story of the prodigal son to his own recovery and reconciliation efforts is a clear example of this. The progression from personalizing the story (Task 1), locating oneself in the broader narrative (Task 2), engaging suffering from a missional lens (Task 3), and applying the missional story to personal life (Task 4) is a journey that often sees elements of earlier tasks revisited or deepened as one moves to later tasks. It is also common for aspects of these tasks to overlap, as individuals continuously integrate their experiences with their understanding of God's mission.

Missional psychotherapy's distinct tasks align with the three major phases of support, learning, and action in the common factors psychotherapy literature (see Lambert, 2013). The first phase, support, resonates with the initial task of missional psychotherapy, where the therapeutic alliance is formed and clients begin to personalize the missional story, finding support in understanding their experiences through the lens of God's mission. The learning phase, which focuses on imparting knowledge and skills, corresponds to the second and third tasks of missional psychotherapy, where clients locate themselves within God's story and engage their suffering and spiritual struggles with a missional perspective, gaining deeper insights into their life's purpose and challenges. Lastly, the action phase, emphasizing the application of learned skills and knowledge, parallels the fourth task of missional therapy, where clients apply the missional narrative to their personal lives, actively integrating spiritual insights into their daily experiences and decision-making. This alignment illustrates how missional therapy incorporates and expands upon established psychotherapeutic practices, offering a holistic approach that includes spiritual, emotional, and practical dimensions of healing and growth.

Towards Missional Psychotherapy

The integration of missional hermeneutics and psychotherapy emerges as a response to the growing need for therapeutic approaches that honor the spiritual dimensions of human experience and foster holistic well-being. Traditional psychotherapy, while effective in addressing psychological issues, often neglects the spiritual aspects of clients' lives, potentially limiting the scope of healing and personal transformation. Drawing on the proposal for integrative scriptural competence (Hathaway, 2021), we introduce a missional hermeneutic of care that provides an emic new model of Christian counseling that is faithful to the story of the Bible as the foundation of Christian psychology.

Our missional model resonates with Park's (2013) meaning-making model, which asserts that distress is linked to the incongruence between global beliefs and the perceived meaning of specific events. Thus, emphasizing the importance of alignment between beliefs and experience provides the psychological and theological foundation that can be leveraged to explore spirituality and meaning within therapeutic contexts. The framework of missional psychotherapy also resonates with Viktor Frankl's logotherapy (Frankl, 1984), which is centered on the search for meaning, even in suffering. It extends this concept by guiding individuals to find purpose within God's overarching mission, addressing existential questions, and fostering resilience. Similarly, it aligns with Paul Wong's meaning-centered therapy (Wong, 2013), which emphasizes the significance of meaning and values in psychological well-being. Narrative therapy literature (see Freedman & Combs, 1996) also seems directly relevant to the missional psychotherapy's emphasis on personal stories and their integration into a larger divine narrative, mirroring the focus on how personal narratives shape identity and purpose.

Missional psychotherapy provides a framework for clients to reinterpret their life stories within the context of a broader, mission-oriented narrative. The proposed missional hermeneutic of care finds affinity with Rosmarin et al.'s (2013) trust in God therapy, which focuses on building faith as a therapeutic tool (e.g., greater trust in God leads to increased tolerance for uncertainty). This alignment creates an existential paradigm that not only emphasizes psychological well-being but also nurtures spiritual growth, laying the groundwork for a holistic therapy that addresses the full spectrum of human experience.

The tasks of missional psychotherapy, characterized by the acronym PLEA—*personalize*, *locate*, *engage*, and *apply*—are not merely sequential steps to be adhered to in a stringent order. These PLEA tasks should be seen as interwoven elements of a holistic therapeutic approach.

This approach emphasizes the importance of aligning religious/spiritual beliefs with the perceived meanings of specific life events, ensuring that therapy remains grounded in the real-life contexts of clients. Missional psychotherapy is particularly effective for individuals dealing with existential issues, spiritual struggles, and mild to moderate depression or anxiety linked to spiritual or existential concerns due to its emphasis on integrating personal narratives with the Christian story of redemption and mission. However, it may be less suitable for severe psychiatric disorders, which require more conventional medical treatments, and for clients who do not share Christian beliefs. The therapeutic change in missional psychotherapy is theorized to occur as individuals align their personal experiences and challenges with the broader narrative of God's mission. This approach suggests that psychological well-being is enhanced when one's life is viewed as part of a larger divine plan, offering a sense of purpose and direction. The PLEA framework, therefore, acknowledges the profound influence of faith as a therapeutic instrument (McMinn, 2012; Tan, 2022). For instance, a client who already has a strong sense of their place within the story of God may benefit more from engaging their suffering from a missional perspective before personalizing the missional story. Conversely, another client may need to start by personalizing the missional story to gain a foundation of understanding and purpose before they can effectively locate themselves within God's narrative. This integrated perspective allows for adaptability in the therapeutic process, tailoring interventions to the specific spiritual and psychological needs, experiences, and contexts of each client.

In practice, missional psychotherapy becomes not just a procedure but a dynamic and resonant process that addresses the intricate interplay between psychology, spirituality, and lived experience. Hence, therapists should be prepared to tailor their approach to each client's specific needs, drawing on the various tasks as appropriate to facilitate the client's growth and transformation (Pargament, 2011). This flexible approach allows for a more individualized and responsive therapeutic process, ensuring that clients receive the most relevant and effective support in their journey towards healing and spiritual growth (McMinn, 2012). Missional psychotherapy most closely aligns with the Christian psychology model. This alignment with the Christian psychology model stems from its foundational use of Christian theology and Scripture, not just as a guiding backdrop but as an integral framework within which psychological understanding is situated. Unlike models that prioritize Scripture as the sole source of truth (as in biblical counseling model), missional psychotherapy acknowledges the value of psychological science but contextualizes it within a distinctly Christian understanding of human purpose and destiny, echoing the emic approach of Christian psychology. This nuanced positioning allows missional therapy to offer a deeply integrated, faith-oriented perspective on psychological healing and growth.

The implications of this flexible, holistic approach to missional psychotherapy are manifold. First, it encourages therapists to be more attuned to the individual needs and concerns of their clients, fostering a deeper therapeutic alliance and promoting client engagement in the therapeutic process (Benner, 2003; Tan, 2022). By moving away from a rigid, one-size-fits-all framework, therapists can more effectively address the diverse spiritual and psychological needs of their clients within a missional context. Second, this approach allows for greater adaptability in the face of changing circumstances and emerging challenges in clients' lives. As clients progress through therapy, their needs and priorities may shift, requiring the therapist to adjust their focus and revisit tasks as needed (Pargament, 2011; McMinn, 2012). This dynamic, responsive approach ensures that therapy remains relevant and effective, even in the face of ongoing change and growth. Lastly, the flexible application of the four tasks in missional psychotherapy can promote a more comprehensive and transformative therapeutic experience for clients. By addressing clients' needs and concerns from multiple angles, therapists can help clients develop a richer, more nuanced understanding of their place within God's mission, empowering them to engage more fully with their suffering, spiritual struggles, and personal narratives of redemption (Benner, 2003; Tan, 2022).

Conclusion

Missional psychotherapy offers a nuanced approach to addressing spiritual and existential

concerns in mental health care. In this paper, we outlined the development and implementation of four missional psychotherapy tasks, incorporating theological and psychological insights to create a missional therapeutic approach. By personalizing the missional story, locating oneself within God's story, engaging suffering and spiritual struggles through a missional lens, and applying the missional story to one's personal narrative, missional psychotherapy offers unique pathways towards healing, self-discovery, and spiritual growth. The four tasks of missional psychotherapy should be seen as a dynamic and adaptable framework, rather than a rigid sequence of steps, allowing therapists to effectively address the diverse needs and concerns of their clients within a missional context. This approach has implications for therapeutic practice, fostering a more attuned, responsive, and transformative therapeutic experience for clients. Lastly, this paper serves as an invitation for further research, dialogue, and exploration of missional psychotherapy's potential to foster healing, spiritual growth, and transformation for individuals from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

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Authors

Victor Counted (PhD in Health Psychology, Western Sydney University; PhD in Psychology of Religion, The University of Groningen) is Associate Professor of Psychology in the College of Health and Behavioral Sciences and Director of Research and Sponsored Programs at Regent University, Virginia Beach. He is also a Faculty Affiliate of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, and a Fellow of the International Society for Science and Religion. His research examines various psychological processes (social, spiritual, environmental) that shape human flourishing across cultures.

Fernando Garzon (PsyD in Clinical Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary) is the Associate Dean for the College of Health & Behavioral Sciences at Regent University. A licensed clinical psychologist, he is also a professor in Regent's Doctor of Psychology (PsyD) program. Dr. Garzon's research interests include the development and evaluation of Christian accommodative treatment strategies and the exploration of indigenous lay Christian counseling models.

William L. Hathaway (PhD, Bowling Green State University) is the Provost at Regent University. He is also a professor in and former dean of the School of Psychology and Counseling at Regent University. He has written numerous articles and book chapters and is co-editor of Spiritual Interventions in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy.

Greg McKinzie (PhD in Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary) is an affiliate assistant professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. A former cross-cultural missionary (Arequipa, Peru) and currently a local minister (Murfreesboro, TN) who serves homeless and recently incarcerated individuals, Dr. McKinzie's research focuses on missional theology.

Rachel Stephens (PsyD in Clinical Psychology, Regent University) is Assistant Professor in the School of Psychology and Counseling and the Director of Doctoral Program in Clinical Psychology. Clinically, Stephens has developed expertise in working with college populations, especially those experiencing developmental trauma and abuse.

Leslie Francis (PhD, Cambridge; ScD, Cambridge; DD, Oxford; DLitt, Wales) is Professor Emeritus of Religions and Psychology in the Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal, and Research in the University of Warwick, England; Co-Director of the World Religions and Education Research Unit and Professor of Religions, Psychology, and Education in Bishop Grosseteste University, Lincoln, England; and Visiting Professor of Theology and Religion at York St. John University, York, England. He is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and an ordained Anglican priest, currently serving as Canon Theologian at Liverpool Cathedral, England. His research in empirical theology focuses on conversations between theology and psychology.