

# EMQ

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*WHAT IS POLYCENTRIC  
MISSIONS?*

**P. 08**

*A FRAMEWORK FOR A NEW  
ERA OF MISSIONS*

**P. 35**

*POLYCENTRIC MISSIONS  
SHOULD INCLUDE THE  
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**P. 49**



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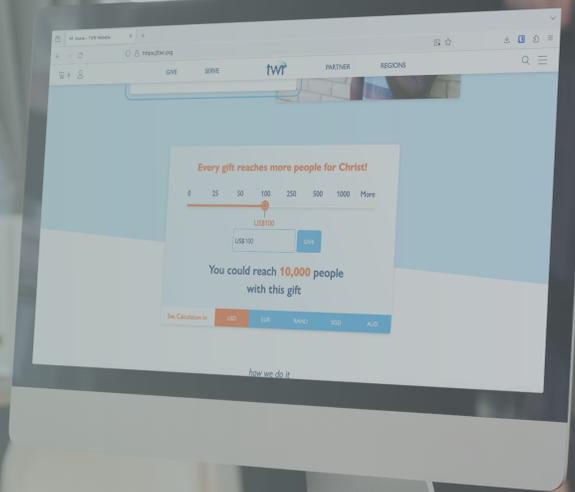
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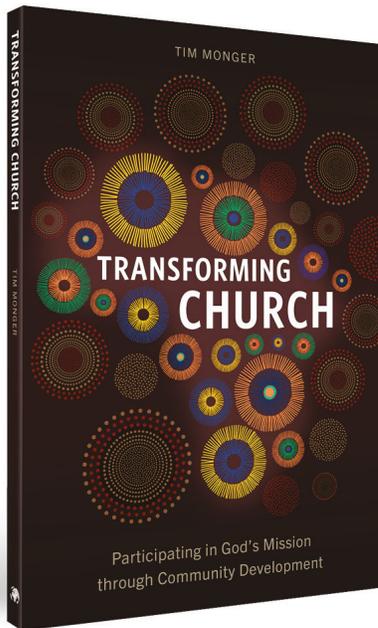
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# Contents

- 08 **What is Polycentric Mission?**  
ALLEN YEHL
- 14 **Missions in the Network Society**  
ELDON PORTER *and* JOSEPH HANDLEY
- 19 **Building God's Kingdom Together:  
Partnering with People on the Move**  
JOY KIM *and* JAEWOO KIM
- 22 **Missionary Sending: Keeping  
Christ at the Centre**  
JON FULLER
- 27 **God's Mission Doesn't  
Have a Reverse Gear**  
HARVEY KWIYANI
- 31 **Training for Polycentric Mission**  
MARK HEDINGER *and* KATE WISEMAN
- 35 **A Framework for a New  
Era of Missions**  
CRAIG GREENFIELD
- 40 **Building Bridges Between Local  
Churches and New Neighbors**  
SARA MILLER
- 44 **The Nigerian Church and  
Global Missions**  
ADEOLUWA FELIX OLANREWAJU
- 49 **Polycentric Missions Should  
Include the Church**  
ELLEN LIVINGOOD, MATTHEW PHILIP,  
*and* SCOTT WHITE

7 **Editor's Pen**  
As You Go, Make Disciples Everywhere

## Extras

54 **Loren Cunningham's Legacy:  
Transforming Missions**  
CHARIS JACKSON *and* LYNN GREEN

58 **Leading with Beauty**  
GRANT KLINEFELTER

62 **Missionaries as Needy Patrons**  
TAMIE DAVIS *and* MOYRA DALE

67 **God's Mission Story  
Centers on Fellowship**  
COLLIN CORNELL

## Reviews

72 Jackson Wu and Ryan Jenson's *Seeking  
God's Face*. Reviewed by L. LYNN THIGPEN

73 Darren Todd Duerksen's *Christ-  
Followers in Other Religions*. Reviewed by  
ALLEN HOWELL

74 John Piper's *All That Jesus Commanded*.  
Reviewed by RANDY L. JACKSON

75 Lucy S. R. Austen's *Elisabeth Elliot:  
A Life*. Reviewed by CAMERON D.  
ARMSTRONG

76 Wang Yi's *Faithful Disobedience*.  
Reviewed by RICHARD COOK

77 Tom Steffen and Cameron D.  
Armstrong's *New and Old Horizons in the  
Orality Movement*. Reviewed by JEROME  
S. CEPEDA

78 Tim Welch's *New Funding Models for  
Global Mission*. Reviewed by LOUISA  
EVANS

79 Mary Lou Codman-Wilson and Alex  
Zhou's *Supracultural Gospel*. Reviewed by  
BRENT H. BURDICK

80 A. S. Ibrahim's *Reaching Your Muslim  
Neighbor with the Gospel*. Reviewed by J.  
RUPERT MORGAN

81 Emanuel Prinz's *Movement Catalysts*.  
Reviewed by DAVID GREENLEE

82 Cedric E. W. Vine's *Jesus and the  
Nations*. Reviewed by ED SCHEUERMAN

83 Mark D. Baker's *Centered-Set Church*.  
Reviewed by WILLIAM R. GREEN

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# Editor's Pen

**F**or a few years, my husband and I lived next door to a large YWAM base in South Africa. It had staff and students from more than 20 countries. One staff member, from Nigeria, lived behind us. Daniel's<sup>1</sup> ministry included evangelism with the Cape Malay community.

He had been a devout Muslim but became a believer after having a vision of Jesus while in advanced Islamic theological studies in the Middle East. That experience followed by a divine encounter with a Christian back in Nigeria changed the whole course of his life and moved him toward becoming a missionary.

In South Africa, the Cape Malay community comprises the largest group of practicing Muslims in the country.<sup>2</sup> And Daniel easily made friends that opened doors to debate the tenants of Islam and share about Jesus. His access was exceptional in large part because of his background, culture, race, and nationality.

Daniel is not alone. Around the world more and more people from Majority World nations are diligently working as missionaries in near and far places. At the same time, the world's peoples are moving – everywhere! Economic hardships and unrest have displaced hundreds of millions of people.<sup>3</sup> Unreached and unengaged peoples are now on the doorsteps of local churches in otherwise reached nations. The skills cross-cultural missionaries acquire are increasingly needed in even rural American towns.

God is on the move. As Sam George, the Lausanne catalyst for diasporas, says, "Movement is a part of the Christian story." Christianity is not a religion with one center. It is polycentric, and so is its mission. Missionaries from everywhere are going everywhere. And the mission field, itself, is also moving just as dynamically. Sam's paraphrase of Matthew 28:19 fits this context well: "As you move about, make disciples everywhere."<sup>4</sup>

This issue is devoted to exploring how polycentric missions is happening, today. Articles delve into how the concept of polycentric mission developed. They consider what this means for missionaries, mission agencies, and missions training. They also investigate the ideas of sending and reverse mission, as well as the history of the Nigerian missions movement, engaging with diaspora peoples, and where the church fits in polycentric missions.

Our extras section includes a tribute to global mission catalyst Loren Cunningham, a reflection on the power of stories, a look at patronage, and an exploration of fellowship in God's mission story. ■

*Heather*

## As You Go, Make Disciples Everywhere

HEATHER PUBOLS *Editorial Director*



1. Pseudonym used for security purposes.
2. Ephraim C. Mandivenga, "The Cape Muslims and the Indian Muslims of South Africa: A Comparative Analysis," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 20, no. 2 (October 2000): 347-352, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/215232810>.
3. "Leveraging the Migrant Diaspora – SDG Media Zone at the 78th Session of the UN General Assembly," September 18, 2023, <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1f/k1fdqhptoo>.
4. Sam George, "People on the Move and God on the Move: Reimagining Missions," presented at the Missio Nexus Mission Leader's Conference, Orlando, FL, September 27, 2023, <https://missionexus.org/people-on-the-move/>.



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# What is Polycentric Mission?

The term polycentric mission has become popular. While the term has a more recent origin, the concept can be traced to the inception of the church. In its earliest days, no one place held authority. The West became a Christian center for a millennia, but now we see a return to polycentric Christianity that goes from everyone to everywhere.

The concept of *polycentric mission* is currently in vogue. But where did it originate? And is it a new concept? Because I wrote the book *Polycentric Missiology*,<sup>1</sup> many people have asked me whether I coined the term. The truth is more complex and requires a historical overview as well as unpacking a fuller definition.

## CHRISTIANITY WAS POLYCENTRIC ORIGINALLY ... AND IS AGAIN

*Polycentric* simply means *many centers*, and this aptly describes God's global mission. Starting with Israel, we can see God's polycentric plan taking shape. The promised land was missionally located at the crossroads of three continents – Asia, Africa, and Europe. After the birth of the church recorded in the book of Acts, Christianity spread tri-directionally from there to Asia Minor (aka Turkey), Ethiopia in Africa, Greece in Europe, and even as far as India.<sup>2</sup>

The early church continued this tri-continental idea with the original five Patriarchates (the seats of the five bishops). Those were in Rome (Europe), Constantinople (Eurasia), Antioch (Asia), Jerusalem (Asia), and Alexandria (Africa).

Many global faiths claim one geographic center. Muslims claim Mecca. For Judaism, it's Jerusalem. In Hinduism, Varanasi is the center. Mormons see Salt Lake City as their center. And while Rome may be a center

for Catholics, global Christianity has no center. From its earliest days, the Christian DNA contained no geographic center, no ethnic majority, no linguistic monopoly, and no holy language.

Twentieth century Catholic historian Hilaire Belloc famously said, in reference to Christianity, "Europe is the faith and the faith is Europe." But his assessment was incomplete. For about a millennium (approximately AD 800–1800), the West became the bastion of Christianity.<sup>3</sup> This happened when Islam's growth pushed Christianity from its birthplace in the Middle East to the west toward Europe.

This reached its peak during what Yale church historian Kenneth Scott Lotourette called the "Great Century of Missions."<sup>4</sup> William Carey, known as the father of modern missions, wrote his great work *An Enquiry* in 1792. It inspired missionaries to launch the nineteenth century as the greatest spread of Christianity up to that point in history, seeing Christianity reach every corner of the globe.

Many regard the twentieth century as a reversal of fortunes for Christianity, as secularism, modernism, and the ideas of the "Masters of Suspicion" (Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud) held sway. But as Gordon-Conwell Seminary President Scott Sunquist points out in his book, *The Unexpected Christian Century*, it was only in the *West* that

Christianity declined that century.<sup>5</sup> In the Majority World (Africa, Asia, and Latin America), the Christian faith went from being received from nineteenth century Western missionaries to being indigenous to those lands.

As new centers developed, Christianity returned to first century polycentrism. This was, therefore, a reformation not a revolution as Christianity originated in non-Western lands. It is the Romans 9–11 idea: Jews were the original branches, Gentiles are simply the ingrafted olive shoots, and if all Jews eventually converted to Christianity, it would be more of a *converted back* rather than a *converted to*. Similarly, Majority World peoples were the original Christians, and Westerners were the ingrafted ones. So in many ways, Christian faith has returned to its birthplace.

The nineteenth century was the great century of the Majority World *receiving* missions, but the twentieth century was the great century of the Majority World making Christianity their own again. Now, the twenty-first century is the great century of the Majority World *sending* missions. With these realities in mind, I subtitled my book, *Polycentric Missiology*, with "from everyone to everywhere." The implications of missions no longer being "from the West to the rest" are staggering.



PHOTO BY GAELLE MARCEL, UNSPLASH

## IMPLICATIONS OF POLYCENTRIC CHRISTIANITY

Sub-Saharan Africa is arguably a new center of Christianity sitting in contrast to a highly secularized Europe. As a result, we are seeing phenomena such as the largest church in London being Nigerian (Kingsway International). “Reverse mission”, with Christians from the Majority World taking the gospel to places where it once flourished, has become common.

Majority World church leaders now outnumber Western church leaders, and they set ecclesial agendas for formerly Western denominations such as the Anglican Church or the United Methodist Church. Because the Majority World tends to be more morally conservative, the ecclesial agendas are often

countercultural (as opposed to Western Christianity which often follows the latest cultural trends).

While Western Christians tend to be more Christocentric, Majority World Christians are more likely to be Pentecostal. This shift from the Second to the Third Person of the Trinity does not need to provoke anxiety as Jesus explained that a shift to the Holy Spirit does not decenter Jesus but glorifies the Son (John 16:7–15).

Missions is now done out of poverty and powerlessness rather than out of riches and strength. This decouples missions from colonialism and better reflects the realities of the early church. Because many Majority World missionaries do not have the financial resources of the West, they may not necessarily

From its earliest days, the Christian DNA contained no geographic center, no ethnic majority, no linguistic monopoly, and no holy language.

fly to the other side of the world for missionary service, but sometimes are more active within their own country or region in breaking dividing walls. So

while crossing international borders is less common, focus remains on crossing cultural and ethnic boundaries.

The Majority World does not think in as binary terms as the West (e.g., complementarianism vs. egalitarianism, Calvinism vs. Arminianism, paedobaptism vs. credobaptism, premillennialism vs. amillennialism, etc.), so more women are highlighted as leaders. They accept anyone who is willing and empowered. With the percentage of Christian women worldwide outnumbering men, this creates a wealth of human resources in the Majority World, even if they lack material or financial wealth.

However, this surplus in numbers is not yet matched with opportunities

to grow in depth (training, education, resources, discipleship, rather than evangelism). The Majority World does not have adequate seminary education, leading many to go to the West for education. But this is unsustainable. It's expensive and relationally costly as students often have to leave their families and ministries behind for years on end. Western seminaries also often do not have a curriculum that is applicable to Majority World home contexts.

### ORIGINS OF POLYCENTRIC MISSION TERMINOLOGY

Who coined the term *polycentric mission*? Multiple people developed this concept simultaneously. To give a

parallel example, where did modern Pentecostalism come from? Many will point to the Azusa Street Revival starting in 1906 in Los Angeles with African American preacher William Seymour.

However, Walter Hollenweger, a Swiss theologian and the first Secretary for Evangelism in the Division of World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, came up with his (coincidentally named) polycentric theory in his book *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Hendrickson, 1997).

In it, he says that the Holy Spirit was moving in multiple places around the world simultaneously seemingly with no obvious connections to each



South Asia: Missionary Cade Rutledge, left, talks with a group of children.

PHOTO COURTESY OF IMB

other. Multiple *Pentecosts* sprung up in Wales (1903–04), India (1904–05), Chile (1906–07), Korea (1907), in addition to the famous one at Azusa Street, all around the same time.

Similarly, the phenomenon of *polycentric mission* appeared in multiple places. Who influenced whom is difficult to presume or track, although it is equally likely that the Holy Spirit inspired all of us in the same time period.

One of the first mentions of this appears in 2013. The theme of the Sixth International Munich-Freising Conference held in July that year was “Polycentric Structures in the History of World Christianity.” This developed out of what has come to be known as the “Munich School of World Christianity” which aims to rewrite Christian history as not just one of Western dominance. The conference proceedings were collected into a published book a year later.<sup>6</sup>

In October 2016, my book, *Polycentric Missiology*, came out. At the same time, the World Evangelical Alliance-Mission

Commission (WEA-MC) met in Panama<sup>7</sup> with the Global Consultation theme “Mission in Many Voices: Polycentric and Polyphonic Mission.”<sup>8</sup> This was not coordinated or planned.

Inspired by my book, Joseph Handley (president of the mission organization A3<sup>9</sup>), wrote his PhD dissertation on “Polycentric Mission Leadership,” and defended it successfully on February 11, 2020. His dissertation has since been published as a book – *Polycentric Mission Leadership: Toward a New Theoretical Model for Global Leadership*.<sup>10</sup>

On September 8, 2020, the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS) held their annual Montagu Barker lectureship. The theme was “Polycentric Theology, Mission, and Mission Leadership.” The four speakers invited included Joe Handley, Mary Lederleitner, Kirk Franklin, and me. All of these lecture papers have been published as articles in a recent journal issue of *Transformation*.<sup>11</sup> My focus was on new theologies that naturally emerge

from polycentric Christianity, and my paper was entitled “Majority World Theologies.”<sup>12</sup>

In April 2021, Goethe University Frankfurt started a series of Zoom lectures on “Polycentricity and Plurality of Premodern Christianities.” Since then, they’ve done a Zoom lecture once a week showcasing paper presenters from all over the world. In fact, because the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the acceptance of Zoom conferences, a more global and polycentric group participated particularly from places with fewer financial resources.

On June 9, 2023, Australian missiologist Graham Joseph Hill began a series of blog posts about polycentric mission. In his first post in the series, he wrote about the five integrated approaches to transforming World Christianity and Mission, Theology, and Ministry. He dubbed them the P.I.P.P.I. (Polycentric, Integral, Pentecostal, Polyvocal, and Intercultural).<sup>13</sup> Together he calls the church’s future a “holisticostal” approach.



PHOTO BY MARC EWELL, COURTESY OF WGA

Thailand: A multicultural group of missionaries prays together during an event.

New Zealand Māori Jay Matenga, the now head of the WEA-MC, and I connected at the next WEA-MC Global Consultation in Chiang Mai (Thailand) in January 2023. He and his team chose the theme of the gathering which was “Our Missions Future: Local Impact, Ripples, and Waves.”<sup>14</sup> Out of it will come the volume “Polyfaceted Mission.”

All of these ideas seem to be converging in the fourth Lausanne Congress (L4) which will take place on September 22–28, 2024, in Seoul, South Korea. L4 is employing a *polycentric process* of listening and learning in determining what the Holy Spirit is saying to the global church. The key questions asked in this multi-year discernment process are:

- What are the most significant remaining gaps or remaining opportunities toward fulfillment of the Great Commission?
- What promising breakthroughs or innovations do you see that can accelerate the fulfillment of the GC?
- In what areas is greater collaboration most critical in order to see the fulfillment of the GC?
- Where is further research needed?
- To whom else should we be listening as part of this process?

Their *polycentric process* leads to the Lausanne *agenda*. The *polycentric agenda* leads to the Lausanne *events*. And their *polycentric events* lead to their Lausanne *actions*. The Seoul 2024 theme is “Let the Church Declare and Display Christ Together.” This seems to center on unity and proclamation. But the *togetherness* aspect implies polycentricity – that every voice is important and needs to be heard and expressed.

What all of this makes clear is that no one person or continent can claim to own the term *polycentric mission*. It is a shared reality that is well-attested globally and is not just the invention of one person or group. This gives good credence to the importance of the phrase.

## ... no one person or continent can claim to own the term polycentric mission.

### WHAT'S NEXT?

Nigerian author Chinua Achebe famously quoted an African proverb which states, “Until the lion has its own historians, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”<sup>15</sup> Today, we’re beginning to hear from the lion. New voices, previously silenced by lack of access or resources or not being afforded a seat at the table, are participating in leading and shaping global Christianity. This includes not only underrepresented ethnicities and nationalities, but also women who constitute the majority of the global church.<sup>16</sup>

Polycentric missions is taking many forms and doesn’t look the same in every context. When I was at the WEA-MC Global Consultation in Chiang Mai in January 2023, one gentleman confronted me about this. He asked, “If you are saying that mission should be from everyone to everywhere, does this mean that a Christian from Afghanistan should go overseas to, say, Europe to preach the gospel?”

He was very clear that he did not think that was a good idea. Mainly, he thought “brain drain” (or perhaps more accurately, a “soul drain”) would be a disservice to Afghanistan which already has so few Christians. He explained that Christians in a country with very few Christians should stay where they are. Their country needs zealous believers. Resources to go elsewhere may be out of reach. And training for effective cross-cultural ministry may be hard to access.

These obstacles are real and need to be taken seriously. However, the global body of believers needs opportunities to interact with Afghan believers. Without engagement with believers from coun-

tries in which Christianity is a very tiny minority and/or persecuted, the global church becomes impoverished. It loses the opportunity to learn and grow from believers well acquainted with suffering.

Another example we can look to is from Albania – the only Muslim-majority country in Europe. From Albania came none other than Mother Teresa. She left her country to go to India and become one of the most famous missionaries in the world. That kind of impact can multiply. Mother Teresa’s ministries have gone global via her organization Missionaries of Charity. It is never about one person, but how God can multiply one person’s influence.

Jesus’s impact was mainly locally to Jews (“Jerusalem”), but he called his disciples to go to their multiethnic neighbors (“Judea and Samaria”). Then Paul and his compatriots went overseas (“the ends of the earth”). In the same way, anyone anywhere can inspire a movement which goes everywhere, no matter where they are, as long as they have a microphone (whether that be a church, an organization, a platform, or a publisher).

It might be that someone like missiologist Lamin Sanneh can leave his home country of The Gambia, take a faculty post at Yale University, get published by Orbis,<sup>17</sup> and influence the Christian missions world more broadly this way. Certainly, West Africa could have used him locally, but only in the Lord’s sovereignty can the bigger picture be seen of larger impacts through the world and through history.

Timothy Tennent observed that Christianity is the only religion in the world in which the Scriptures are not written in



Selçuk, Turkey: A cross is carved into the capital of a column from the ruins of the ancient Basilica of St. John.

the language of its founder.<sup>18</sup> Jesus spoke Aramaic, and the New Testament was written in Koine Greek, the commercial language of the Eastern Mediterranean in his time. The notion of the translatability of Christianity – even from its start – shows the polycentricity of the faith.

Are the holy Scriptures meant to be in Hebrew or a pagan language? Both. Is God located in heaven or on earth? Both (via the incarnation, which itself was a translation from deity to human). Are God's people on pilgrimage via the Exodus, or arrived at the promised land/heaven? Both. To live is Christ, and to die is gain. As polycentric mission becomes more and more a reality, we will see amazing fruits being born. It is an exciting time in Christian history to be alive. ■

1. Allen Yeh, *Polycentric Missiology: 21st Century Mission from Everyone to Everywhere* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016). My book was voted one of the top ten missions books of 2016 by the *International Bulletin of Mission Research*.
2. Indians call their earliest church tradition "Mar Thoma" which is Aramaic for "St. Thomas" who purportedly was the one who first brought the gospel there. Imagine the surprise of the Portuguese Jesuits who landed there in the sixteenth century and realized that Indians had had the gospel longer than them!
3. This, of course, implies that Christianity was alive and well outside of Europe for the first eight centuries of its existence. See Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How It Died* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009).
4. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 8 vols. (New York: Harper, 1937–1945).
5. Scott W. Sunquist, *The Unexpected Christian Century: The Reversal and Transformation of Global Christianity, 1900–2000* (Baker Academic, 2015).
6. Klaus Koschorke and Adrian Hermann, eds., *Polycentric Structures in the History of World Christianity* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014).
7. There is an interesting history behind this. The landmark Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference, the "birthplace of the modern ecumenical movement" from whence was birthed the twin movements of the World Council of Churches and the Lausanne Movement, infamously left out Latin America from its proceedings. The Latin Americans, miffed, created their own Panama 1916 conference in response to their omission. The WEA MC's Panama 2016 conference was a centenary celebration of the Panama 1916 conference.
8. MC Global Consultation, "The Panama Statement," October 8, 2016, <https://weamc.global/the-panama-statement/>.
9. A3 was formerly known as Asian Access, and before that LIFE Ministries. Handley was the successor to Doug Birdsall as President of Asian Access when Birdsall transitioned to being Chairman of the Lausanne Movement.
10. Joseph W. Handley, Jr., *Polycentric Mission Leadership: Toward a New Theoretical Model for Global Leadership* (Oxford: Regnum, 2022).
11. Marina Behera, ed., *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 38, no. 3 (July 2021), <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/trn>.
12. Allen Yeh, "Majority World Theologies," *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 38, no. 3 (June 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/02653788211027344>.
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# Missions in the Network Society

The world is more interconnected than ever before, and the way we do missions is being redefined as a result. Individuals are connecting in collaborative networks which is impacting the way we lead. This, in turn, is changing the role of Western mission sending agencies. What does this mean for the future of missions?

Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric is famously quoted as saying, “When the rate of change inside your organization is less than the rate of change outside your organization, the end is in sight.” Over the last two decades, we have witnessed unprecedented changes. Sociologists say we have moved from the post-industrial age to what is now referred to as the “network society.” The Spanish sociologist, Manuel Castells, predicted this new reality in his book, *The Rise of the Network Society*.<sup>1</sup>

For Evangelicals, our reality within the network society is further nuanced by three factors. The first is that today there is a church in every single country of the world. Christ said he would build his church, and he is doing that. The second factor is technology. Not only can we hear from the church in every country, but believers in different parts of the world can connect virtually with other believers all over the world.

And the third factor is what the United Nations refers to as the *Migrant Diaspora* – approximately 281 million people have moved or are in the process of moving from their historical context of origin.<sup>2</sup> The combination of these factors is redefining how missions or cross-cultural ministry happens.

Individuals from around the world are now connecting in constantly emerging collaborative spaces that we refer to as networks. Influence is happening differently – it is not centralized. This is redefining leadership. And these, as well as other factors in today’s polycentric and networked world, leave traditional Western mission sending agencies with a choice to either significantly change or risk obsolescence.

## THE PROLIFERATION OF COLLABORATIVE NETWORKS

Our new reality allows for believers from around the world to connect, learn from, process challenges, and then find ways to collaborate. These collaborative networks are not organizations. Instead, they are constantly evolving networks that reflect the unity of the global body of Christ.

A network is a space where autonomous entities come

together around a shared passion or challenge. A well-run network constantly births partnerships – intentional points of collaboration between known entities that commit to work together to accomplish something not one of them could accomplish on their own.

Hundreds of networks based on geography or issues emerge constantly. When Christ followers from different cultures come together in these networks, practitioner sourced expertise emerges. Challenges can be addressed in dynamic dialogue among diverse groups across different fields of expertise.

Many challenges require multi-network collaboration creating collaborative ecosystems for ministry practitioners. For example, there are at least 13 unique networks, representing numerous practitioners and organizations, that intersect in some way around the Ukraine crisis.

No one network can provide leadership for all the distinct challenges associated with this or any situation. In a collaborative ecosystem, each network learns about the unique contributions of the other networks, what their constituents are able to offer, and where collaboration can be encouraged to take place around particular challenges.

## LEADING DIFFERENTLY

The foundational principle for any Christian seeking to lead other Christians has not changed. As children of God, we are all followers of Christ. He is the head of the church, and we seek to walk in obedience to him. The top priority of any Christian leader should be to help those they seek to lead to understand how Christ is working and how they can follow him most effectively.

Yet our world today has become unimaginably complex. The fact that there is a church in every country of the world, that there is technology that facilitates global connections, and that we are witnessing the largest diaspora movement ever recorded in human history is revealing sources of expertise and new ideas that we have not seen before.

## Many challenges require multi-network collaboration creating collaborative ecosystems for ministry practitioners.

Perhaps the most significant implication for us is that we can now hear the voices of Christ followers from every country of the world. They are the ones who know how Christ is working in their context and how he is working in and through them in the face of their challenges.

This changing context requires that leaders lead differently. In the past, those in official leadership roles were often the primary source of information and guidance. Today, leadership occurs more through influence than title. And it happens through multiple channels.

People can find great information and make outstanding connections from anywhere in the world. Leaders in this context don't seek to have all the answers. They lead best when they provide information and connections that help those in their sphere of influence be more effective in whatever they are seeking to do.

In a polycentric world, networks have become the place where practitioners can connect with anyone anywhere interested or involved in a particular area of focus. For example, to learn about what God is doing in Central Asia,

connect to a network with this focus, and you will meet believers from the region and from around the world that are focused on that area.

To connect with others who feel called to minister in India, the gathering of the India Missions Association provides opportunities to meet leaders from the Indian churches and mission organizations that are already engaged with the unreached in India.

Those with a passion for serving refugees are connecting into the various parts of the Refugee Highway Partnership network to learn from others and discover ways to collaborate around particular people groups that are now scattered around the world. There are over 750 collaborative networks globally that provide spaces for believers from around the world to be able to connect with each other around shared passions.

Organizations that embrace this new reality can intentionally channel their staff into various networks or even catalyze or facilitate networks. As a result, they see partnerships with others develop that enable them to accomplish together what they could not accomplish on their own. This creates an attractive environment where individuals, ministries, and organizations serve one another and can more organically respond to God's call.

And networks are also intentionally connecting with other networks to create collaborative ecosystems for their constituents around particular challenges. One example of a network leadership hub is A3 (formerly called Asian Access). They bring leaders together from across different networks and denominations to learn from one another in collaborative learning communities.

These collabs meet quarterly for anywhere from an extended



Thailand: Events that connect global leaders unleash the creative power of decentralized influence.

## In a polycentric world, networks have become the place where practitioners can connect with anyone anywhere interested or involved in a particular area of focus.

weekend to a 4-day week in retreat like settings. As the participants get to know each other, build relationships and trust, they often forge powerful collectives addressing church multiplication or systemic issues their communities and nations face to improve society.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, the hope is to see collaborative communities fostering innovation, sparking deeper personal growth, and uniting the body of Christ in their countries.

A3's leadership ecosystem also follows a network structure. This polycentric model empowers each country to lead in ways that work best in their cultural context. The primary thing holding these loose networks together is a shared sense of vision, values, and mission. The model flows from a missiological principle developed by Paul Hiebert about centered sets.<sup>4</sup> Most everything else is decentralized allowing each local entity to foster connections and collaboration as best fits their local situation.<sup>5</sup>

### CORE THEMES OF POLYCENTRIC LEADERSHIP

In researching this, and other similar models, I (Joe) discerned six core themes (or traits) that are indicative of this type of network or polycentric leadership system.<sup>6</sup> Leaders practicing these six themes are better able to foster environments where

people grow, develop, and flourish.

Polycentric leaders are built on a charismatic foundation. This theme shows its greatest strength in the spirituality of the leaders and the depth of their walk with Christ. This reliance on Jesus at the core is what inspires others. And it displays itself most readily in the character of a leader. People follow leaders they trust and are reliable. When leaders display integrity in their approach to ministry, trust is built that strengthens the commitment to engage.

They are also relational in their approach to ministry. Friendship and bonding become the lifeblood of who they are, and in that environment, community (a third theme) is formed. In this communal setting, commitment to one another and to common cause or mission is emboldened. As they walk with one another, hold each other accountable both personally and across their networks, they become a tight knit band of leaders willing to tackle significant giants in mission.

This ecosystem lends itself to collaboration (a fourth theme). As leaders spend time together, play together, learn together, and grow, they discover common vision and are inspired to do things together that they could never envision when alone. This common vision coalesces in a collaborative community inspired by God to serve him in what can be powerful social enterprises.

Speaking of enterprises, entrepreneurship (fifth theme) is released in these ecosystems as well. Since the collaboration is voluntary and not controlled from outside or from the top down, there is freedom to pursue dreams that are shared together. Thus, a bottom up or collective leadership is energized to fulfill a local vision inspired by the Lord in their countries.

Finally, this leadership model is strengthened by diversity. When the ideas being reviewed and shared together come from across a wide variety of sectors, individuals, cultures, and denominations, they both unite the body of Christ and weave together the best ideas from a variety of backgrounds and settings. The ideas are refined through the lens of multiple layers of thinking ensuring that the best of the collective can be tapped for the mission of God in each region.



Singapore: A3 leaders from Mongolia and Cambodia brainstorm ways to develop training staff inside their countries who can equip emerging leaders.

PHOTO COURTESY OF A3

## THE CHALLENGE FOR TRADITIONAL WESTERN SENDING AGENCIES

The Western model of missions has traditionally been built around sending workers to other parts of the world. Since the local church could not manage the various services associated with sending missionaries, mission agencies were developed to assist them in doing that. And it was through this process of sending out missionaries that individuals joined a particular agency that generally worked independently of other organizations. Western mission agencies are designed to send out their missionaries to do their agendas.

But our new global reality is redefining the value an agency brings to the church. The services associated with sending missionaries are now available in multiple and often more economic formats. The greatest need that churches now have has moved from sending workers to helping churches engage well in ministry contexts. How workers are sent, from anywhere in the world, is no longer the main challenge.

The most attractive agencies, today, intentionally receive qualified workers from anywhere in the world and connect them with other parts of the body of Christ in the context of effective ministry. The ability to connect well with the challenge or cause has replaced the value of becoming a member of a particular agency.

One of the newest kinds of networks we see developing today are those that are focused on people groups that are globally dispersed. We find these around the Uigyar, Rohingya, Pash-tunes, etc. These networks gather information as to the different ministries and churches that are reaching out to the diaspora of the particular people group. They have contact details of churches and ministries in the different countries as well as a listing of resources that different ministries have developed.

They facilitate discussions between believers from around the world around particular challenges associated with the particular people group. These networks also seek to empower those that God is using to reach a particular people group by helping them to function in greater unity on a global scale. Mission agencies that serve the members of the local church well are either developing and managing these networks or engage well with those networks that already exist, so that they can best serve the local church's effort in cross-cultural ministry.

The transition from being an agency that sends out workers to one that receives workers well into what God is already doing globally is not an easy task. Most Western mission agency leaders are connected in some way to the sending structures which are sustained by a *tax* (or *assessment fee*) on the support raised by the missionaries they *send*.

This *tax* provides for salaries for those serving in the offices as well as for the expenses associated with their leadership roles. This has led to extremely high support requirements required to sustain a structure that no longer has the value that it once had. While some agencies have downsized their sending structures others have not.

Leading change is difficult, and this is particularly so in this situation since those with the authority to make the changes are those that would be most negatively impacted by the changes.

... our new global reality is redefining the value an agency brings to the church.

But local churches, around the world, are looking for help to get their members connected around particular challenges and issues. Some of this is being provided by networks, but mission agencies are also beginning to play a significant role in this effort.

One example of this type of transition is the partnership forged by A3. Years ago, realizing they lacked the capacity to fulfill their vision as a sending agency, they formed what became an award-winning partnership focused on Japan. SIM became the sending organization to leverage an economy of scale and A3 became the receiving mission for missionaries eager to serve in Japan. The partnership extends well beyond two organizations though. Networks of churches across Japan are involved, and missionaries serve under local Japanese leadership.<sup>7</sup>



Singapore: A3 leaders from different countries celebrate new ideas they've generated toward improving marketplace leader development in their respective locations.

## CONCLUSION

Our world is changing. This is having a significant impact on global missions, but what has not changed is that Christ continues building his church. We are privileged to be witnesses to some of that. And our new global reality is allowing for the different parts of the body of Christ to be able to connect with each other, explore together what Christ is doing, and commit to work in unity in collaborative ventures around difficult and complex issues.

As leaders look to best leverage their time, treasure, and talents for God's kingdom in this VUCA world, tapping the wisdom from network and polycentric forms of leadership can better foster innovation, collaboration, and mission effectiveness. More importantly though, is the theological truth of our Lord seeking unity for the body of Christ: "that they might be one [so that] the world may know..." (John 17:21–23). ■

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# Building God's Kingdom Together: Partnering with People on the Move

For 30 years, Clarkston, Georgia has welcomed so many immigrants and refugees from around the world that it is known as the most culturally diverse square mile of the US. With 90 different people groups, including many that are considered unreached and unengaged, the community provides unique opportunities for domestic cross-cultural missions. It also offers a chance to engage in ways that challenge assumptions and blind spots.

In 2011, war broke out in Syria, and Syrian refugees began resettling. Ten years later, we saw images of people sitting shoulder to shoulder inside packed airplanes – even some dangling on the outer parts of the plane – leaving Kabul, Afghanistan to go to places of safety. For the same or similar reasons, people from Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Myanmar, Eritrea, Nepal, and other parts of the world fled from their home countries to foreign lands. Many of these refugees made their way to our town – Clarkston – a community of just under 10,000 located northeast of Atlanta, Georgia.

Over the past 30 years, Clarkston's welcome of so many people has given it the reputation as “the most ethnically diverse square mile” of the US. In less than 2 square miles, more than 90 different ethnic groups, speaking more than 60 languages, peacefully coexist. People from everywhere are coming here. Clarkston is a living illustration of the nations arriving at our back door.

Many come from *unreached* and *unengaged* people groups. This attracts short-term mission teams from US churches interested in domestic cross-cultural missions opportunities. This was especially popular during COVID-19 travel restrictions, but the trend continues. Teams come to share the gospel and help vulnerable people.

Yet they also come with common misunderstandings and blind spots expressed in things such as:

- “We've come to preach the gospel to these refugees.”
- “I didn't realize that refugees could be Christian.”

- “Why do refugees live in apartments and houses like normal people? Why do they own cars?”
- “For the first time, I realize that refugees are just people like us.”

Instead, this is what is true about our neighbors, friends, and colleagues:

- Not all refugees resettling in the US are Muslims or atheists. In 2016, about 40% of refugees resettled in the US were confessing Christians.<sup>1</sup>
- Not all refugees live in temporary tents or shelters.
- Not all refugees are poor. They work hard to rebuild and sustain their lives in a foreign land.
- Refugees are *people on the move* seeking safety. They are human beings created in the image of God. It is a temporary status of a person, not a label that defines them permanently.

Local cross-cultural missions to displaced people is one way God is growing his polycentric Church. However, participation with him in ministry to people on the move must be approached with wisdom. We challenge those engaging in local cross-cultural missions to consider the following perspectives.

## FROM EITHER-OR TO BOTH-AND

Churches in traditional Western contexts often see themselves as *senders* of the gospel and other resources. Then they see the people they serve as the *receivers*. When churches put themselves

in a position of a sender only, it's hard for them to be open to the posture of a receiver. And when churches consider others as receivers only, it's hard for churches to imagine that people on the receiving end can meaningfully contribute.

It's time to think differently about *sending* and *receiving*. We suggest that churches consider themselves as both senders and receivers of the gospel and other resources. In God's kingdom, no ethnic group has the whole truth and all the resources, no language group contains all the glory, and no culture possesses all the beauty of God's kingdom. Churches open to send and receive can collaborate with peoples from different cultures and build the kingdom of God together with mutual contributions and healthy reciprocity.

### FROM EMPOWERMENT TO CREATIVE PARTNERSHIP

A common perception is that immigrants and refugees lack resources and need to be helped and empowered. This reveals an underlying assumption that refugees and immigrants lack power. Japanese-American artist Makoto Fujimura explains another view of resources, "I am often asked, 'How does one create movement?' In order to start a movement, you need three elements: (1) an artist type with creative capital, (2) a pastor or community organizer type with social capital, and (3) a business type with access to material capital."<sup>2</sup>

A refugee community may initially lack material capital (financial resources); however, their abundant creative and social capital can easily be overlooked, under-valued, and neglected. When these resources go untapped, they can be lost along with all the potential synergy and momentum they can offer. But when these unique local resources are appreciated, they can enrich missions efforts. In fact, Christ-following refugee communities offer tremendous cultural knowledge and perspectives that can build bridges to broader communities of *glocal* diasporas.

We recently took a small group of urban US church leaders to the Karen church in Clarkston. The Karen community come

from Southeast Asia, and conflict forced many to flee to refugee camps in Thailand. From there, a number resettled in Clarkston where they started a vibrant church. On the day we visited their church, a heavy rain was pouring outside, but young people were playing volleyball and badminton, not minding being soaking wet.

Inside the church, youth were selling organic, home-cooked meals to church members and visitors to raise funds for upcoming youth retreats. One of the youth leaders said that the youth had also raised money to help the church pay for their recently purchased facility.

Church leaders were impressed with the number of young people involved and their positive energy. They also took note of the creative ways they gathered resources even though most church members, as recent refugees and immigrants, were not financially stable.

We need to reconsider our ideas of empowerment. Who are we trying to empower and why? People on local cross-cultural missions trips may assume that empowerment looks like them sharing their leadership, power, and resources with others. But perhaps we need to see empowerment as moving in two directions. This means we should also expect to be empowered by others to discover our blind spots, grow our imaginations, and learn how to utilize resources we don't know how to use that may lie dormant.

### FROM CONTEXTUALIZATION TO CO-CREATION

Sensitivity to diverse cultures is a core part of mission agency training. Mission workers learn to be cautious and to avoid Western dominance in their approach to missions. They also intentionally seek ways to contextualize the gospel as they engage cross-culturally with different global peoples. But could there be something more than contextualization that we are missing?

Cindy S. Lee, a spiritual director and a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, says, "Contextualization ... still assumes that the Western way is the standard way, and all other ways



Clarkston, Georgia: Joy Kim leads a multicultural group in a Proskuneo Arts and Worldview community art program. The program encourages diverse groups of young people to co-create.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAEWO KIM

are creative deviations .... We are not taking Western norms and adding ethnic expressions. We are going back to what the missionaries should have done in the first place, to allow our experiences of God to be fundamentally changed by sitting and learning from one another.”<sup>3</sup>

Co-creation is the lifestyle of our worshiping community in Clarkston. Initially, we learned to co-create through learning songs from one another and writing new songs together in different languages, styles, and forms represented by the cultures in our community. We became friends through our mutual exploration of artistic expressions such as visual art, dance, drama, music, and stories and co-creation of new expressions that authentically reflect all of us together. We incorporated creative elements of co-creation in our weekly worship and in our community art programs that reached out to the broader community of Clarkston.

We continue to build our community and reach out to others with whom God connects us through co-creation. Then we share life and walk the journey of faith and healing together. We co-create safe and creative spaces to build bridges between peoples from different cultures to sit and listen and learn from one another. We see transformation happen in all of us and healing and reconciliation is experienced through the relationships that have been built over time.

We’ve built life and community together as co-creators with God and with one another. Together we participate in God’s mission in ways that we have never imagined. As we partner with God in his mission, we co-create kingdom reality here on earth as it is in heaven in our community of diverse believers and seekers.

## TOWARD RECIPROCAL TRANSFORMATION

We love the story of Cornelius meeting Peter. In this story, no one has the whole gospel. No one has the whole story. No one has all the pieces of the puzzle. No one has the complete vision. Cornelius is being transformed by meeting Peter. Peter is being transformed by meeting Cornelius. Cornelius needs Peter. Peter needs Cornelius. One person is not only either the giver or receiver. Both give and both receive. They are both hosts and guests. They both follow the Holy Spirit. They are both curious enough to cross their cultural comfort zones and take risks to see what God is up to.

Beyond empowerment and contextualization, we need creative partnership with the people on the move. We need to take the posture of a learner to grow and be transformed together. Human beings, in any vulnerable situation, still possess the image of God in them. If we think of them merely as targets to be reached, or vulnerable ones to be empowered, it becomes difficult for us to imagine them as our friends, partners, and leaders.

## CONCLUSION

In our small town, we are witnessing the glimpse of God’s diverse kingdom on earth every day. Our friends and partners from around the world are eager to share their cultural and spiritual resources in abundant and radical hospitality.

Our central American friends are teaching us how to passionately follow Jesus without turning back. Refugees in

Clarkston from Southeast Asia and South Sudan are inviting us to join with them in locally initiated missions back to the communities from where they came.

A vibrant Arabic speaking church with people from Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt is regularly worshipping together with us. And we are observing a growing number of Afghan believers starting house churches.

In his book *Marginality*, Jung Young Lee says, “The creative core, which is the new center, seeks the people, while the false center is sought by them. That is why the creative core or the new center cannot be found by people who seek it .... Therefore, *God is not central to those who seek the center, but God is center to those who seek marginality because the real center is the creative core, the margin of marginality.*”<sup>4</sup>

Instead of seeing people on the move who are often in the margins of the society they resettle as the vulnerable ones to be empowered, we want to see them as creative centers filled with rich diverse resources for God’s global and polycentric mission. Our desire is to move toward reciprocal and creative partnerships with those in the margins, and to see Revelation 21:26 being fulfilled in our mission endeavors.<sup>5</sup> ■

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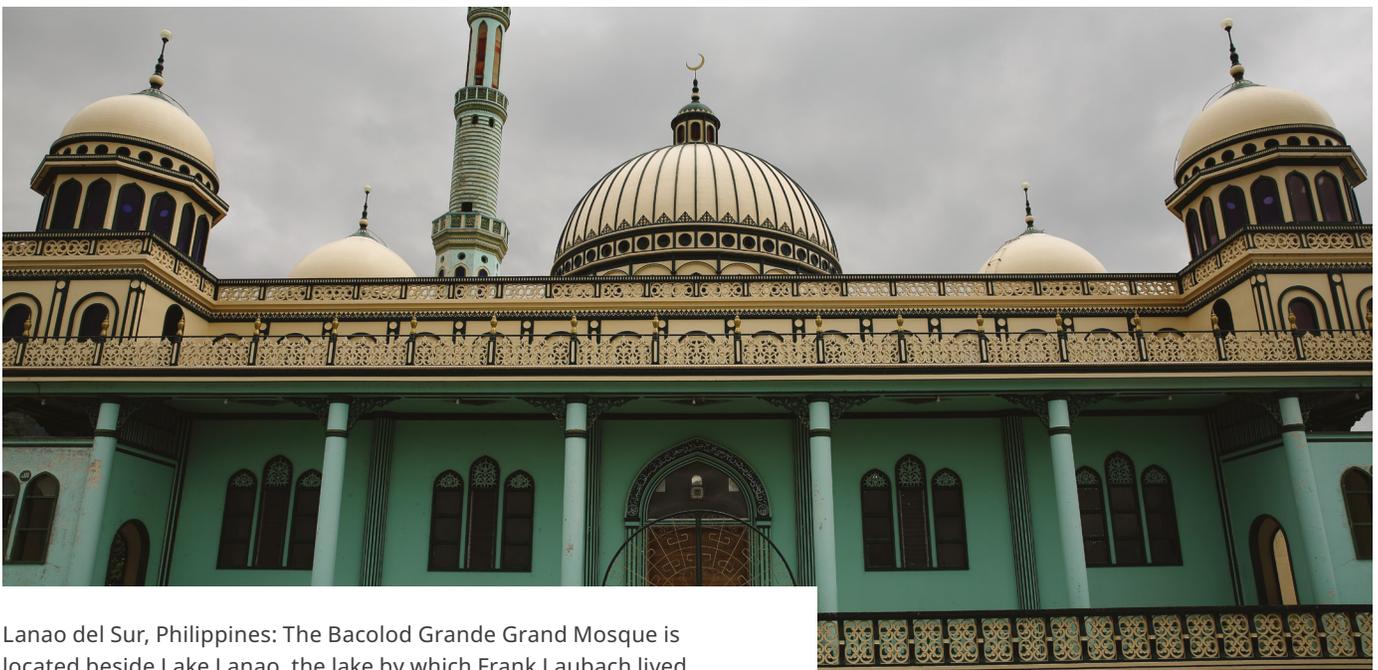
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# Missionary Sending: Keeping Christ at the Centre

What does it mean to *send* and be *sent*? Understanding sending as deeply rooted in the intimacy of an abiding relationship with Christ, (reflecting his relationship with his Father) has reminded me how often I forget that it is God who sends, not me.

In 2016, I was approached by a group of international mission agency leaders to put together a consultation in North America on the topic of mission and sending. After many years in Asia, I was still finding my way in the Canadian scene but agreed to take on this challenge. The consultation eventually took place in 2013. However, by that time the focus had shifted from sending, to being fit for the challenges of the future. That shift was driven in large part by my somewhat shocked discovery that there was little interest amongst Canadian mission agency leaders in a consultation on *sending*.

In the years since, I've spent a lot of time reflecting on the constellation of concerns around *missionary sending*, along with many who have written on colonialism, indigeneity, and mutuality. Jay Matenga referred to that concern in his 2020 "Leader's Missions Forecast" when he wrote, "... the margin of tolerance toward the imposition of one world's ideas onto another world's reality has reached zero."<sup>1</sup> How has missionary sending become so tainted with suspicion? Do accusations of colonialism undermine generations of missionary work? What does it mean to *send* and be *sent*?



Lanao del Sur, Philippines: The Bacolod Grande Grand Mosque is located beside Lake Lanao, the lake by which Frank Laubach lived.

PHOTO BY ZEKE TUCKER, UNSPLASH

## SENDING AND THE ONE WHO SENDS

In the early 1990s, my wife and I found ourselves in a Muslim village on an island in the southern Philippines. We'd been sent by faithful churches and friends as the first workers to live among to this people group. After five years, three languages and eight moves, we finally arrived in a small Muslim community. Village life was challenging with three small children and no electricity or running water, but our Muslim friends and neighbours were a great help. They just weren't particularly interested in hearing about Jesus.

Each morning, I would rise with the Muslim call to prayer, reading my Bible and praying while the men attended morning prayers in the mosque. After months of this, God interrupted my morning routine with a simple question, "What are you doing?" I was hurt. "I'm trying to live for you, Lord," I said but the question kept coming until it slowly dawned on me that my morning devotions were more about impressing my Muslims friends than about intimacy with Jesus. Devotion had become strategy.

Being sent must find its deepest meaning in being in love with the one who sent me. How had I managed to leave Jesus behind in my pursuit of his mission? Like many before me, I'd obeyed Jesus' commission (Matthew 28:18–20) to make disciples of all nations, to proclaim his kingdom "... to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8). At an Urbana gathering in 1981, when I'd felt Jesus' say, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" (Isaiah 6:8), I'd stood up, filled out a card and embraced the apostolic life. Now, looking back at those Scripture passages, I realize that I overlooked or underestimated how deeply relational they were.

Isaiah responds to God's call for someone to send, from a place of loss after the death of King Uzziah, and at a time of impending peril from the surrounding nations. He responds to his commissioning for a ministry to those who are "... ever hearing but never understanding," (Isaiah 6:9) with a cry, "For how long, O Lord" (6:11). In a time of turmoil and loss, the assurance of God's continued sovereign presence in his life and ministry was essential to his sending.

Being sent must find its deepest meaning in being in love with the one who sent me.

The great commission passages of Matthew 28 and Acts 1 are rooted in the disciple's confusion and grief over Jesus' death, resurrection, and impending departure. Christ's commitment to be with them always was not just a promise of strategic direction but an assurance of continued presence for the journey ahead. The power and authority being promised was deeply rooted in the disciples'

journey together with him along the dusty paths of Palestine. Their commissioning flowed out of his promise to be with them.

Hudson Taylor was famously described by missionary historian Kenneth Scott Latourette as, "... one of the greatest missionaries of all time, and ... one of the four or five most influential foreigners who came to China in the nineteenth century for any purpose."<sup>2</sup> Taylor's passion for the gospel, compassion for millions of Chinese living inland, and commitment to incarnationally living have shaped generations of missionaries, including me. But Taylor's most lasting legacy is arguably none of these, as important as they are.

I first encountered *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*<sup>3</sup> when my dorm parent gave it to me because I was reading too many Louis L'Amour novels. I approached the dusty old book with distaste, reading it only because I had to tell my dorm parent the "secret" before getting back to my western and science fiction novels. At fourteen though, I fell in love with the book, have reread it dozens of times and still go back regularly to chapter fourteen, "The Exchanged Life." Taylor's life and work flowed from a deep and abiding love of Jesus, something expressed in his lesser-known reflections on the Song of Solomon.

In the secret of His presence  
How my soul delights to hide!  
Oh, how precious are the lessons  
Which I learn at JESUS' side:  
Earthly cares can never vex me,  
Neither trials lay me low;  
For when Satan comes to vex me,  
To the secret place I go!<sup>4</sup>

## SENDING AND POWER

If we can leave Jesus behind in our pursuit of his mission, we can also make too much of ourselves. Mantenga's concern about the danger of imposing one world's ideas on another, happens when we become enamoured of our ideas, our identity, our power.

My wife, Marilyn, and I were blessed to work closely with a local Filipino pastor and his wife. Herbert and Ame moved into our village, where Ame taught in the small preschool we started. We also worked with the village leadership on a water project.

One day, Herbert and I needed to see the local mayor about our project. We joined the long line of people waiting at the Town Hall, but one of the mayor's staff waved us to the front of the line. We were ushered into the office, served coffee, and assured of the mayor's support for our project. Leaving the office, I was embarrassed passing the long line of others waiting.

As we walked away, Herbert turned to me and said, "Don't let it bother you. We know your heart, so don't be too proud to let God use you being a foreigner for his purposes." Herbert was, and is a dear friend, whose wise and gentle challenge has stayed with me.

Rightly navigating the complexities of colonialism does not mean denying who I am or abdicating any devolved power. Rather, it requires placing my identity fully in the context of

a living relationship with the one who sent me. The God who chose me, who sent me, knows me fully and intimately. As Herbert pointed out, the issue wasn't my skin colour but who I was serving.

In *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church*, James Pluedemann says, "In Christ no one should have an inferiority complex, nor should anyone have a superiority complex .... All of us in the body of Christ, no matter what our formal position, must love and obey the Lord while we honour and submit to one another in love."<sup>3</sup> Herbert reminded me that day that being "in Christ" allowed me to redeem our colonial reality for Christ's redemptive purposes.

We see this paradigm at work when Jesus appeared to the disciples hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish leaders. He said to them, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). As with the missionary sending passages we've already looked at, this passage needs to be read in the context of fear and loss, but also in light of the disciples' relationship with Jesus.

Jesus comes to them in the midst of their grief over his death, their confusion at rumours that he is alive and their fear of the authorities. He declares his peace to meet their fears and he commissions them into his Father's sending relationship, confirmed by his gift to them of the Holy Spirit. He gives them no great plan or strategy, but he draws them into the intimacy of his relationship with the Father and the Spirit. The context has not changed but the disciples are transformed by the Spirit's expression of the Father's sending, to the point where the Jewish authorities "... took note that these men had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

## SENDING AND RECEIVING

Understanding sending as deeply rooted in the intimacy of an abiding relationship with Christ, (reflecting his relationship with his Father) has also reminded me how often I forget that it is God who sends, not me. As a mission mobilizer, I embraced the role of a sender, doing everything I could to help others be everything God

... being "in Christ" allowed me to redeem our colonial reality for Christ's redemptive purposes.

has called them to be. Too often though, I inflated my role as sender, forgetting that ultimately, it is God who sends.

In fact, a right understanding of God's sending, inevitably places us in the role of receiving. It's impossible to send well if you aren't willing to also receive. When we see ourselves only as senders, and presume that the others are the mission field, that arrogance robs us of the opportunity to receive God's grace through other's mission toward us. This corrosive Christendom posture never reflected the biblical model of sending, and it has become increasingly less tenable in our polycentric world. I learned this lesson from Ate Delor<sup>6</sup> and a small, struggling Filipino church.

We first arrived on our island for trade language consolidation, before moving to a Muslim community. Ate Delor opened her home to us, despite her busy life as a single mother and respected professional. Ate Delor refused to speak English with us, forcing us to use our limited new language skills. For a year, she and the small church she attended, cared for us, putting up with our many cultural and language mistakes. It was through Ate Delor's relationships that God opened up a Muslim community, which became our new village home.

Those early months in the village were difficult, filled with loneliness and fear. We arrived at church one Sunday after a particularly hard night of illness and troubled dreams. Ate Delor listened patiently and, with the church, prayed for

us before we headed home. A few hours later, we heard a motorbike wind through the coconut trees into our village.

Ate Delor thanked the *taxi* driver, handed us a gift of bananas, and asked if she could stay to visit. She played with our six-month-old daughter, chatted with the neighbours and helped Marilyn around the house. Without electricity or phones, we knew that getting home meant a long walk and that Ate Delor needed to be at work in town on Monday morning. To our surprise, she informed us she was staying the night. She slept alongside our little one, slipping out early in the morning to look for a motorcycle taxi into town.

Looking back, I recognize what a gift Ate Delor and that little church were for us. We had been sent to the Philippines by five wonderful North American churches, but it was this little *Antioch* church that stood with us for the final stretch of our incarnational journey.

As Filipino Christians, they had their own fears of Islam, based on hundreds of years of conflict between Christians and Muslims. Despite those fears, they received us with great generosity, embraced our vision, prayed for us, and supported us on our journey. Ate Delor's



Mindanao, Southern Philippines.

PHOTO BY ZEKE TUCKER, UNSPLASH

## This act of graciously receiving us developed into a mutual understanding of God's sending, a partnership in the gospel...

choice to be with us in the village that night was only one of many ways in which this church stood with us.

This act of graciously receiving us developed into a mutual understanding of God's sending, a partnership in the gospel to use Paul's words (Philippians 1:5). As in Philippi, this partnership was based on a shared confidence of God at work (1:6), a shared experience of God's grace (1:7), all rooted in Paul's "Christ Jesus affection" (1:8). Paul arrived in Philippi to share Christ with those

who did not know him, but in time the Philippian church came to share his calling. They received both him and his message, becoming co-workers in the gospel, sharers in God's sending.

Reflecting on the support we received from that little Filipino church, I find myself wondering how willing am I to receive those whom God is sending to Canada as missionaries? Do I recognize that we need help from Nigerians, Koreans, Filipinos, and many others to reach our neighbours and friends?

Like that little church, am I willing to be a generous, sacrificial receiver of others whom God is sending? Their welcome came with a cost, when God called their beloved pastor Herbert and his wife to join us in the village. As mentioned earlier, Herbert continues to lead the work after many years, fruit of a mutual sending and receiving before God.

### SENDING AND UNITY

It's impossible to reflect on missionary sending without asking, "Why is it that God's sent ones, so often end up in conflict with each other?" In John 17, we are invited with the disciples into the intimacy of Jesus' relationship with the one who sent him. He says to his Father,

"As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18) and then he prays for us that we may, "... be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23).

If the very foundation of missionary sending is an abiding relationship with the one who sends us, then we must accept the challenge with Paul to embrace the "... unity of the Spirit" because there is "... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." The is the calling which we have received (Ephesians 4:1-4), the mission on which we are sent.

Years ago, I was travelling in a closed (or creative) access country. I had been invited to join the tenth anniversary celebration of a local NGO with whom we had placed some personnel. At a celebration banquet, a local government official spoke glowingly of these foreigners who had come from many different countries to sacrificially serve his people.

He went on to say, "I was very impressed that you could partner together when you came from such different cultures, but as I worked with you, I realized that you fought all the time. What surprised me is that you didn't quit but forgave each other and found a way to continue working together."

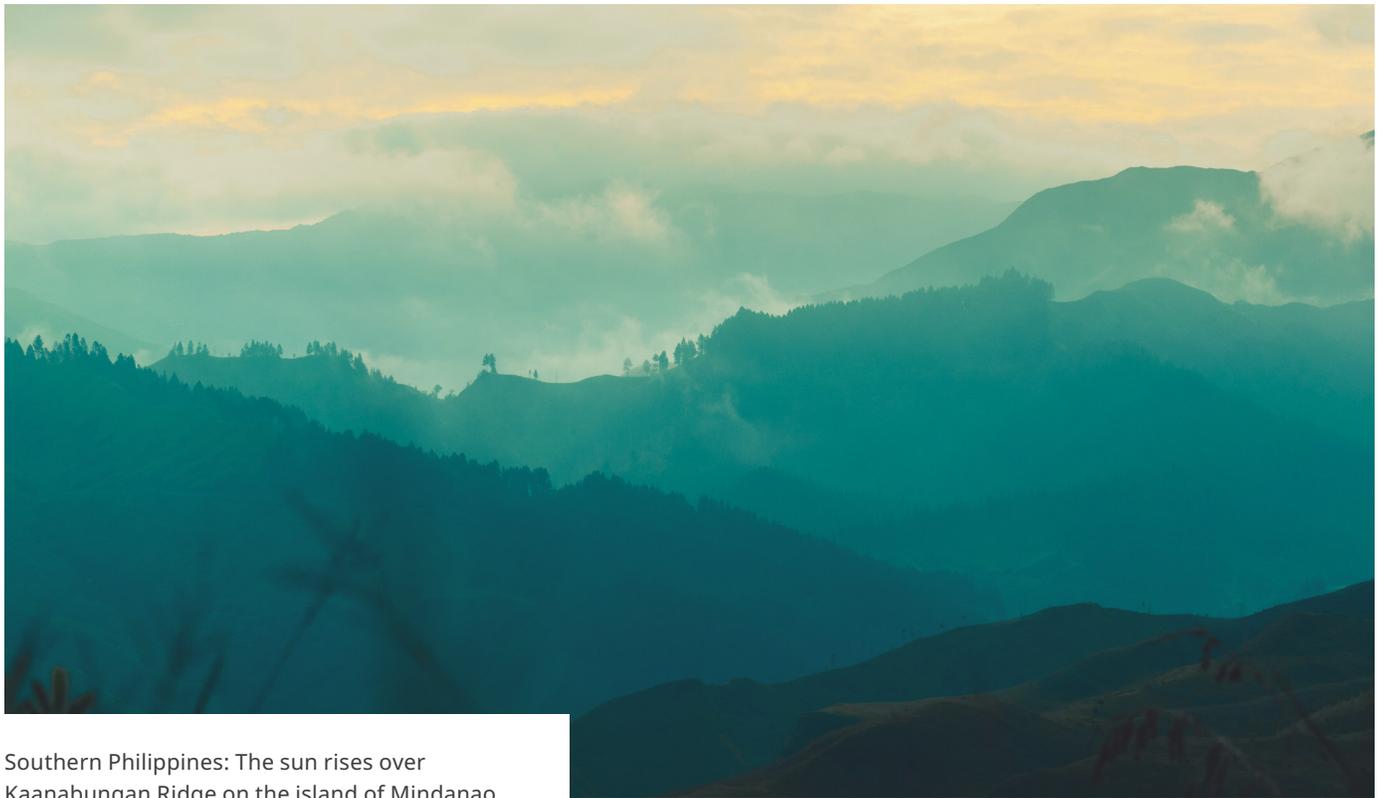
He paused and then asked, "I know what you believe. My grandparents believed what you believe, and I can see the evidence of its truth in how you live." Talking with the team afterwards, they pointed me to their times of worship and prayer together as the centre of their hard-fought unity.

### WITH TIP ON SIGNAL HILL

After 12 years of life and ministry in the southern Philippines, God used a medical emergency to bring us home to Canada. Reflecting on those years, Marilyn and I struggled with a sense of failure. As far as we knew, none of our Muslim friends had chosen to follow Jesus. Had we heard God wrongly? Were we not sent? In the rush of evacuating, our team of Filipino co-workers, threw us a *despidida* or farewell party.



Southern Philippines: Jon, Marilyn, and their two children travel together on a motorcycle.



Southern Philippines: The sun rises over Kaanabungan Ridge on the island of Mindanao.

Marilyn and I shared our gratitude for all the team had meant to us, and our questions about whether we'd accomplished anything. One of our friends smiled and said, "Kuya Jon' and Ate Marilyn, God used you to teach us two things; first that Christians could live with Muslims, and second, that we Filipinos could do it better than you!"

I treasure that moment still for its generous honesty and for the deep relationships from which it came. While this wasn't our plan for mission, we felt God clearly say, "This is why I sent you." That moment of intimacy with our sender, was a gift of peace.

Frank Laubach garnered global acclaim for his literacy work, developed while living and working as a missionary amongst the Maranao Muslims of the southern Philippines in the early 1900s. Laubach and his dog, Tip, became companions and guides for me as fellow sojourners with our Muslim friends. Dallas Willard reflected, "Frank Laubach wrote of how, in his personal experiment of moment-by-moment submission to the will of God, the fine texture of his work and life experience

was transformed."<sup>8</sup>

I stumbled on a collection of Laubach's letters written to his father and collected in a little book titled *Letters by a Modern Mystic*. He wrote, "If there is any contribution that I have to make to the world that will live, surely it must be my experience of God on Signal Hill."<sup>9</sup> Looking out over the Maranao people to whom God had sent him, Laubach wrote, "Clearly, clearly, my job here is not to go to the town plaza and make proselytes, it is to live wrapped in God, trembling to His thoughts, burning with His passion."<sup>10</sup>

Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you" (John 20:21, GNV). Frank Laubach captures that truth when he writes, "Tip and I and God were together tonight on Signal Hill."<sup>11</sup> To whatever Signal Hill you are sent, be there together with God. ■

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# God's Mission Doesn't Have a Reverse Gear

*Reverse mission* is often used to describe Majority World mission movements, particularly ones to Western countries. But this way of describing mission carries baggage that encourages certain mission movements to be seen as more or less than others.

There is a great deal of controversy around the term *reverse mission*. Some scholars love it. They say it is an easy descriptor for the missionary movement that starts in Africa and ends up in the West. Other scholars find it difficult to justify, saying it has too much colonial and racist connotations. Whatever the case, it is here. It is still in popular use in some academic circles, though it is clearly in decline, having peaked in the years between 2010 and 2015. This decline may reflect a growing awareness of some of its shortcomings.

## ORIGINS OF THE TERM, REVERSE MISSION

The term *reverse mission* emerged in the early 2000s, mostly among sociologists, phenomenologists of religion, and historians of Christianity (and not necessarily among mission scholars and practitioners). A Nigerian scholar, Matthew Ojo, popularised it in his 2007 essay, defining it as “the sending of missionaries to Europe and North America by churches and Christians from the non-Western world, particularly Africa, Asia and Latin American, which were at the receiving end of Catholic and Protestant missions as mission fields from the sixteenth to the later twentieth century.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2011, a Korean missionary in Europe, Hun Kim, defined *reverse mission* as non-Western churches returning with the gospel to societies that initially brought the gospel to them.<sup>2</sup> Some African scholars – prominent among them is a Nigerian Baptist pastor in London, Israel Olofinjana – have preferred to use *reverse mission* (and *reverse missiology*) instead of *diaspora mission* and *diaspora missiology*.

In his 2010 book, *Reverse in Mission and Ministry: Africans in the Dark Continent of Europe*, Olofinjana says “African Christians ministering in the UK now are directly or indirectly a harvest of seeds sown by the early missionaries to Africa.” A small circle of African theologians have followed Olofinjana to write about the significance of *reverse mission* in Europe.

Olofinjana himself has led the charge by publishing several blog posts and speaking in seminars about how “there is indeed such a thing as reverse mission and reverse missiology.” By *reverse mission*, Olofinjana and his colleagues mean the missionary work of African Christians in the West – and this is really an *African* conversation. They have sometimes included

Asian and Latin American Christians in *reverse mission*, but they largely focus on African Christians in Europe or North America in their definition.

Olofinjana justifies keeping *reverse mission* because European mission in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was actually mission going forward. Now that African Christians have come to Europe and are attempting to engage in mission among the people who sent missionaries to Africa a century or two ago, this is *mission in reverse*. Right from the start, it was used mainly to describe the missionary work of African Christians in the West.

Some African scholars were among the first to use it to describe the work of their own denominations and others similar to them in the West. It was noticeably not used for the Asian and Latin American mission movements working in the West who had already been active in Europe and North America for decades. Asian scholars preferred the term *diaspora mission/missiology* while Latin Americans simply talked about *mission*. Thus, *reverse mission* has been almost exclusively used in connection with the growing presence of Africans in the West, beginning in the 1980s but intensifying in the 1990s.

## WHY I DON'T LIKE IT

While I understand what the term is trying to describe, I find it impossible to use. *Reverse mission* can imply that whatever missionary work Africans are doing in the West is a reversal of what Westerners did in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But we know it is not. In a literal sense, it is not clear what *reversing* the missionary work of Europeans would look like. Thus, the term *reverse mission* does not render itself an easy definition. However it is defined, I do not see any evidence that Africans are *reversing* mission.

Of course, anyone interested in mission history will know that the current Western context is very different from that of nineteenth century Africa. At that time, Western missionaries not only preached the gospel to Christianise the continent, but they also sought to civilise it. To many missionaries, African religious systems had to be demolished by any means necessary and, in their place, Christianity (understood back then as a superior monotheistic religion) was to stand.



Cameroon: Misparine Mungvu (left) and Bime Jeneth (right) trained for cross-cultural missions at Cameroon Baptist Theological Seminary. Both intended to use their training to work as cross-cultural missionaries and Bible translators.

Africans were to be compelled to adopt aspects of Western culture as a mark of civilisation. If this was mission then, we can agree, today, that Africans are definitely not attempting to reverse it in Europe in the twenty-first century. They are not looking for a political colonization of the West or to civilise Westerners. Unfortunately, when many Europeans hear *reverse mission*, they think *reverse colonialism* and are suspicious of Africans trying to use religion to dominate Europe.

*Reverse mission* also implies that there is a forward movement in mission that is *normative* – in this case, that it flows from the West to Africa. If mission starts in any country in Africa, and flows to the West, it is going in an unusual (unexpected, and maybe unacceptable) direction and must, therefore, be labelled *reverse mission*. As some have argued, it brings the gospel to the land that sent it to Africa in the first place. Mission, in this kind of thinking, is what white people do in Africa and the rest of the world. *Reverse mission* is, then, what the rest of us do.

We know that the gospel came to Europe from Turkey (Acts 16). Yet, when Europeans take the gospel to Asia Minor or the Middle East, it is not *reverse mission*. Why then is it *reverse mission* when Africans work in Europe and not when Euro-

peans work in Turkey? If non-Western mission to the West is *reverse mission*, then what should we call non-Western mission to non-Western contexts?

Finally, I often get concerned when I hear Africans celebrate that they are the missionaries that God has sent to the “dark continent of Europe.” Beneath this belief that God has called Africans to evangelise Europeans, one can sense the same colonial attitudes that shaped much of Western mission in Africa. I have a friend who runs cross-cultural mission courses under the title, “Who are the Heathen Now?” He is reminding Europeans that 200 years ago, the heathen were in Africa, but now Africa is largely Christian, and the heathen are in Europe.

Of course, to some extent, this is understandable. When most Africans think of mission, it is usually what the Europeans did in Africa that comes to mind – the whole thing, built on that attitude of “we are better because we are Christians.” That is what they saw and know. Unfortunately, as it has become clear in the past two decades, most African churches in the West are unable to evangelise beyond their own people. It seems to me that, in addition to the lack of cross-cultural will and skills, the fact that some Africans think being Christian makes them superior to Westerners plays a big role in their failure to evangelise in Europe and North America.

Consequently, most African congregations in the West are made up of fellow Africans, usually from the same country. Some are actually full of people from one ethnic community. *Reverse mission*, or whatever we call it, is not happening. It may happen in the next decade, or with the next generation, but today, generally speaking, Africans are not evangelising Westerners.

Yet their presence in the West is making a difference. In several European cities, Africans are the most visible representation of Christianity. For instance, Christians of African

It is my conviction that God’s mission is always moving forward no matter where it starts and ends.

heritage comprise most church attenders in London. They are generously running numerous food banks. When they gather for prayer, for instance, at the Festival of Life where more than 50,000 Africans gather for a vigil in London, we are confident they are having spiritual impact.

However, all this work has not translated to converting many Westerners to the Christian faith. Most of the large churches in the UK are African. A Nigerian pastor, Matthew Ashimolowo, leads the Kingsway International Christian Centre in London which claims to have more than 12,000, mostly Nigerian, members. Until the breaking of the war in Ukraine, the largest church in the entire Europe was The Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations,<sup>3</sup> led by another Nigerian pastor, Sunday Adelaja.

It is for these reasons that I argue that *reverse mission* is a misnomer for what African Christians are doing in the West. It is not serving any good and is best discarded from our vocabulary. Both in the Scriptures and in church history, there is nothing that points us to believe that God *reverses mission*.

In addition, most Africans do not think of themselves as missionaries. Africans often use *pastor* and *evangelist* as key labels for their work, even when what they are doing is clearly mission work. They reserve the term *missionary* for Westerners, especially white Westerners (this is what colonialism can do to a people).

It is my conviction that God's mission is always moving forward no matter where it starts and ends. God may send US missionaries to Africa while, at the same time, sending African missionaries to the US. All of this is God's mission, and it is all mission moving forward. I am persuaded that there is no *reverse gear* in God's mission.

The same God who sent missionaries from the *West to the rest* is now also calling people from the *rest* to come and serve in the *West*. This is not *reverse mission*. It is simply *mission*. As followers of Christ, we need to normalise this. Mission can be from any continent to any other continent. People engaging in mission work come in all ethnicities and from all over the world.

### CAN WE JUST CALL IT MISSION?

Language matters. By calling one thing *mission* and another *reverse mission*, we are creating a false dichotomy that does not benefit us in any way. There is no reverse gear in mission. God's mission is always going forward, from the UK to Nigeria and from Nigeria to the UK. It is the same for American missionaries who go to the Philippines just as it is for the Filipino Christians who go serve in America. God's mission is always going forward.

If the labels are necessary, we can use other identifiers such as African missionary work in the West, or Asians mission to the United States, or even South Korean missionaries in Kenya. In doing so, we acknowledge that God can call anyone to serve in mission anywhere in the world. The same God who calls Westerners to mission also calls black and brown people from the Majority World to that very same mission.

The God who sends Westerners to Africa also calls Africans

## The same God who calls Westerners to mission also calls black and brown people from the Majority World to that very same mission.

to serve in Europe. As a matter of fact, every convert to Christianity is called to be co-workers with God in God's mission in the world. God alone determines where to call people. Some serve in their own neighbourhoods. Others serve overseas. Yet they are all serving in the same mission – God's mission.

Many African Christians may still think of mission as something that is *reserved* for Westerners. Many do not call themselves missionaries even when they do great missions work. The term *mission* for them is too closely connected to whiteness.

I have heard many ask, "Can a black person be a missionary?" As such, many Africans engaging in the work of mission simply identify as pastors and evangelists if they serve in the ministry. Otherwise, they are simply Christian teachers, doctors, lawyers, and many others, who are zealous about sharing their faith with others.

When it comes to evangelism, African Christians are often loud and in-your-face. A great deal of African Christians' theology of salvation is urgent – we have to evangelise as many as possible for greater rewards in heaven. It is also communal – heaven will not be fun without one's community (extended family, village, friends, etc). Their African worldview that does not separate the sacred from the profane encourages them to evangelise in all kinds of places, even in places here in the West where Westerners fear it is illegal to preach.

### EVEN BETTER: LET US FIND NEW TERMS

If many of the African Christian leaders living and working in the West were to be acknowledged and affirmed in their missionary work, the landscape of Christian mission would change significantly around the world. However, some Westerners do not think of black and brown people as equal missionaries to them.

Some have said that this is the Century of African Christianity. For several reasons, I believe it will also be the Century of African Mission. First, an overwhelming majority of African Christians are young. The median age of an African Christian is around 18 years old and falling. Second, Africans are quite mobile, both internally in the continent but also to other continents. Third, Africa has experienced a huge revival in the past 50 years, and there are no signs that it will stop soon.

All these conditions make me believe that we are only seeing the early signs of the African missionary movement (and, I pray, for Asian and Latin American movements as well). This means

there is time in the next few decades to resolve many of the concerns we currently have, like the lack of missionary training.

But what about the term *mission* or *missionary*? There is a fair critique of the term *mission* going around for a few years now. Scholars like Michael Stroope, David Niringiye, and Eddie Arthur have attempted to encourage us to consider new terms as *mission* has too much colonial baggage. A term that is gaining traction is *witness*. People engaging in mission are said to be *witnessing for Christ* (following Christ's words in Acts 1:8).

In the context of thinking about *reverse mission*, (which, in my mind, has even more baggage), I wonder whether we can then speak of *African witness* in Europe and *North American witness* in Africa. It seems plausible. It would make sense to many African Christians who engage in the work of witnessing for Christ in their day-to-day lives. It removes the need to be sent by a mission agency and the requirement for any qualification but the power of the Spirit and an eagerness to share the gospel with others.

## IMPLICATIONS

The centre of gravity of Christianity has shifted to the Global South. Together, Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia are now home to almost 70% of Christians in the world. By 2050, Africa alone will be home to more than 40% of Christians in the world.<sup>4</sup> The implications of this emergence of world Christianity on mission are massive. Will the Christian mission's centre of gravity also shift to the south?

Brazil, Nigeria, South Korea, and several other countries are now among those who send the most missionaries. Will this trend continue? If it does, what will it look like? Where will their missionaries go? We know that most migrations are intra-continental. There is no reason to believe that mission will be different.

Even if we focus only on the African missionary movement, we have to reckon with the fact that many African missionaries serve in Africa, in countries adjacent to their own. Few of them serve in other continents. And even for those that do go to other continents, Western countries can still remain financially out of reach. For example, the Redeemed Christian Church of God has missionaries in 197 countries around the world. The Church of Pentecost has missionaries in 150 countries. Very few of them reach Europe and North America. This can also be said of Asian and Latin American missionaries. Those whom we call *reverse missionaries* – who end up serving in the West – are a very small part of the great work of mission that God is doing in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

When the centre of gravity of mission shifts to the Majority World, what theological/missiological resources will we need? The language of "mission from six continents to six continents," or that of "mission being from anywhere to anywhere else," has been around since the 1950s.

Unfortunately, many of the dominant models of mission today, shaped by Westerners for other Westerners as they are, are not easily applicable to non-Western missionary work. Most of the tools and resources we have are also shaped by Westerners for other Westerners working outside the West. As

such, they are too tied closely to geography – mission happens in certain parts of the world, and not in others. With this comes the need to go from the West to the rest of the world. Thus, mission is something that Westerners do elsewhere.

Mission models can also be infused with a worldview that

## There is no doubt that God also calls poor Christians and nations to mission, but what does that look like?

presupposes the superiority of a Western worldview and the dissemination of its culture to the nations. In this perspective, converts still have to believe and behave like Westerners to be truly converted. Otherwise, more missionaries need to be sent. This mindset leaves no room for non-Western involvement in missions.

But the biggest issue is that these models depend excessively on money. It seems that only rich nations can effectively participate in God's mission in the world. Indeed, how can the financially under-resourced churches of sub-Saharan Africa, for example, afford to send missionaries overseas when they actually need financial support to survive?

There is no doubt that God also calls poor Christians and nations to mission, but what does that look like? As the West races toward being a mission field, it is my prayer that God will make clear how these obstacles can be overcome so more non-Westerners can engage in mission everywhere including in the West. ■

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# Training for Polycentric Mission

Polycentric mission brings the joy of multiplied expansion, and at the same time, the challenge of how to bring together the wealth of diverse cultural perspectives on missions theory and practice. In a world where mission is not only “from everywhere to everywhere,” but “from everyone to everyone,” missions training is evolving to respond to these joys and challenges.

Jesus told Peter (and us) that he would build his church, and nothing would prevent him from accomplishing that goal (Matthew 16:18). In Revelations 7:9, the apostle John explains that at the end of the age, people from “every tribe, tongue, people and nation” will give Christ the praise and worship he deserves.

In Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus says that God will use people in the process of reaching all those peoples and languages. He is at work in and through his people to bring about the purposes that he has in mind. But what God *didn't* tell us was *how* he was going to do this. We do see small glimpses, however, of how he is bringing these plans to fruition. In the world of missions, one way we can see this is in *polycentric mission*.

Introducing the 2016 World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission (WEA-MC) Global Consultation, Bertil Ekström and David Ruiz foresaw and captured well what polycentric mission entails:

“In a polycentric world of mission, the many kinds of bearers of the Gospel are only important because of the message they carry and bring to other places. Going from East to West, from South to North, or just circulating in the same region, the multiple and diverse missional structures have all the same challenge: to bring hope to a chaotic and needy world with an integral Gospel in a relevant way for the people of our days. ‘From everywhere to everywhere’ may be a worn-out expression but it is more reality today than ever before. In the 21st century, Mission has many centers and goes from ‘all nations to all nations.’<sup>1</sup>

Seven years later, at their 2023 Global Consultation, the WEA-MC expanded on that picture, using the image “of pebbles dropped into a pond which create ripples that spread from multiple impact points (centres) and intersect with one another. Where gospel impact is felt in one area (the pebble dropping),

the effects ripple out, and as they interact with ripples from other centres it causes waves (points of difference, tension and conflict). So we get, “local impact, ripples and waves” in a polycentric (multiple centres [sic.] of authority) world.”<sup>2</sup>

Polycentric mission brings the joy of multiplied expansion, and at the same time, the challenge of how to bring together the wealth of diverse cultural perspectives on missions theory and practice. In a world where mission is not only “from everywhere to everywhere,” but “from everyone to everyone,” missions training is evolving to respond to these joys and challenges.

## THE CONTEXT OF POLYCENTRIC MISSION TRAINING

The ripples of gospel activity extending from these diverse, multiple centers are not happening in a vacuum. They are part of an evolving cultural moment across the globe that is shaped by factors such as rapidly changing technology, educational approaches, and communication.

Technology has allowed training to shift from a *pre-field* model to an *on-field* model. There are now numerous ways to learn, present ideas, develop skills, and shape attitudes within the worker’s context, aided by timely feedback and support – even from a distance. Such digitally-enhanced training was not available even a few years ago. Furthermore, worldwide, we see a growing demand for continuing education. This, too, is being facilitated by technology.

Next, the internet has increased access to ideas but has also increased the need for discernment. Many of those ideas are excellent; but many are horrible. The environment in which we see polycentric mission growing is one that needs careful monitoring. And while English is still a valued common language within the mission world, many new polycentric sending structures are operating increasingly in home languages.

Finally, an increasing awareness of the physical and emotional effects of stress and trauma, as highlighted by

the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasized the need for effective member care. Around the world, sending organizations are now offering training in member care issues such as mental health, resilience, team dynamics, Third Culture Kid (TCK, missionary children) health, TCK education, and the care for aging parents.

### THE BLURRING LINES OF THE PAST

We have much to celebrate about the mission training of the past. It equipped thousands of the Lord's workers for his service. Yet while it was built on sound biblical and pedagogical foundations, in many cases, an emphasis was placed upon acquiring cognitive skills and theoretical understanding, thus demonstrating a western perspective.

Personal and spiritual formation, or engaging in practical, hands-on application within the intended, or potential ministry context were typically secondary. It was often assumed that theoretical ideas presented in a classroom in the missionaries' homeland or a training center within a different culture would lead to effective practice and resilience in a future host culture.

In our polycentric world, however, mission training needs to be flexible about place, time, and process. This recognizes the diverse learning preferences shaped by multiple cultural backgrounds.

We are now witnessing a variety of missions training approaches, including vastly different ones, merging together. Traditional *boundaries* are blurring, and new relationships are clearing the way for new opportunities and approaches. This is happening in several ways.

Training timelines are becoming less rigid; pre-field, on-field, and post-field training is becoming continuous, lifelong equipping and learning. Short-term and long-term missions

are harder to distinguish as repeat trips across borders become common practice.

Traditionally, a teacher was often thought of as *the sage on the stage*. But now, a teacher is more like *a guide on the side*. They are becoming facilitators, coaches, and mentors. Trainees are moving from being dependent learners to being independent self-directed learners. They can identify the gaps in their understanding that need to be filled so that they can be equipped with the skills and resources they need to engage in God's mission to his diverse world.

Formal and non-formal training approaches are moving closer together, reducing the divide between theoretical learning and learning through practical application, and between academics and practitioners. The division between *competency-based* and *accredited* training is breaking down as competency-based programs become increasingly recognized and validated.

As technologies develop, the traditional choice of face-to-face training in preference to online training is less clearly defined. Video conferencing and other technologies now offer opportunities to create digitally enhanced, hybrid learning communities that bring together the best of both worlds.

These changes bring great opportunities for partnership and collaboration. They also encourage honoring different cultural perspectives. This is imperative if we are to serve together as a diverse team, united by a common vision.

### MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

As we reflect upon the rich conversations that we have had with fellow trainers around the world, we find ourselves with more questions than answers about what polycentric mission training can and will look like in the coming days.



Asia: A3 Leaders from 5 countries across Asia meet together as a cohort to grow and learn from one another.

PHOTO BY JEFF JOHNSTON, COURTESY OF A3

# In our polycentric world, however, mission training needs to be flexible about place, time, and process.

What are the distinct characteristics of sending culture 1, 2, etc.? What about the host culture? What are their cultural patterns? What is God doing in their midst? In this polycentric mixture, how do they each see one another?

As new sending nations “go to the nations” what will polycentric mission training look like for expats returning home, or children of expats returning to their parents’ homeland? After being out of their *home* culture, possibly for years, what training will serve them well? How do we equip the TCK’s to adapt to a culture that is called *home* but is not their own? What assumptions might they have about their own cultural *fit*?

How will we engage with the needs of those engaged in diaspora mission? How do we train a university student or a construction worker who returns home as a new Christian with a heart to bring the gospel into their community? How can we help churches disciple these new Christians and support them? How do we train these and other returning diaspora to take their place in the *polycentric* mission world?

How do we train those called to bring the gospel to their families, friends, and neighbors? When the call is not to go but to stay, how do we equip them for intercultural ministry at home?

We do not have answers to these questions, *but we know* that God has a heart for the nations that is driving this new era of polycentric mission training. We can be guided by his Word and the Holy Spirit as we move further into a world in which diversity and unity are both central to the building of the kingdom.

## TRAINING MISSIONARIES FOR A POLYCENTRIC WORLD

Given the diversity of this glorious polycentric world of mission, what are the values and principles that we as trainers need to hold onto and instill in others? How should we prepare those who will make disciples in, from and among all nations? Here are a few suggestions.

### 1. Love Above All

Jesus told us that our love for one another would be a vital part of our mission outreach. John 17 relates Jesus’ prayer for us, his church. In verse 21, he prays, “that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you did send me.”

The importance of John 17 cannot be overstated particularly given the opportunities for conflict and misunderstanding that arise in polycentric mission. How will we bring new people

into a church if it is divided? As we look at the great potentials for polycentric mission training, one key competency is having the biblical attitude of finding peace with other Christians. Jesus told us that our love for one another is a testimony that we are his.

### 2. Prioritize Relationships Over Techniques

The Bible speaks little of techniques, but it speaks with clarity about the importance of relationships. The call of mission is to disciple people into loving the Lord God with all their heart, soul and mind *and* their neighbor as themselves (Matthew 22:34–40). Enoch Wan describes these relational directions as the *vertical relationship* between Creator and created beings (in this case, people), and *horizontal relationships* among created beings.<sup>3</sup>

The Western world has, over time, developed a love for techniques and methods. The rest of the world often focuses more on building relationships. Learning how to develop appropriate relationships is as essential to reaching a host culture as it is when interacting with mission colleagues.

Relationships are not simply a matter of “we like each other” or “we work together.” A maturing relationship will take account of cultural expectations, personality traits, appropriate behaviors in relation to gender, age, level of professional involvement etc. Relational interactions are shaped by cultural attributes such as power distance and individualism vs. collectivism. By looking through the lens of relationship we can engage with people in ways that honor and respect their cultural norms.

### 3. Become Flexible

Many of our mission training approaches, particularly those that grew out of the West, are based on *either/or* thinking processes. We work either with collective cultures or with individualist. We work either in *your* language, or *mine*. We work with children or adults. We work with believers or non-believers.

In a polycentric world, however, it is far more fruitful to look at training in terms of *both/and*. For example, we work with people who both have strong communities and are still individuals. We help people grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ – both those who have a firm testimony of faith and those who have not yet trusted Christ. We work with families, including adults and children.

Taking a flexible, *both/and* view of life and ministry helps build bridges, break down barriers and create relationship with those around us.

### 4. Learn to Learn

Today’s mission teams are likely to interact with multiple nationalities, languages, and cultural expressions of Christianity. Theoretically, culture specific training could be an answer to how to equip workers for polycentric mission. However, cultures contain so many variations that it is not possible to *teach* enough culture-specific content and expect that memorizing those facts will lead to healthy relationships. More often, it leads to stereotypes that might not be true at all.



Philippines: As part of an intensive training in the Nehemiah Teams program, students participate in a Bible study, preparing them to take the gospel first to the Philippines and then to the nations.

A better approach is to guide people into the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to be self-directed learners. This develops curiosity and creativity enabling them to engage with unexpected patterns. Teaching people how to observe, ask questions, adjust, reserve judgements, and appreciate is far more effective. The focus is learning how to learn the patterns of others and adjust to them in order to build effective relationships to spread the gospel.

### 5. Participate with Jesus

Jesus is building his church. We are called to participate by making disciples and training and equipping faithful people who can also train and equip others (2 Timothy 2:2). But as we consider our part, we must not forget that God leads.

Ephesians 4 calls on the church to guard the unity that is inherent in the body of Christ. That means we develop the humility and the patience to see him at work in directing both workers from *my country* and workers who are arriving from *your country*. He is directing the building of his church, and we can take comfort in trusting that those who arrive in any given nation (whether it is to share the gospel or receive it and take it home with them) – along with those who welcome them – were all sent by that same God.

### CONCLUSION

Polycentric mission is our reality. The gospel was meant to be spread and shared by all who received it. So, too, was this day meant to come when mission would be from everywhere to everywhere and everyone to everyone. This is the work of God in our day.

As stewards of the multiform grace of God, we come together from many nations to serve God and equip others to do the same. To be faithful to our calling, our training must recognize the reality of this beautifully complex polycentric Church that Jesus is building. Training that focuses on love, relationships, flexibility, learning to learn, and growing trust in God will equip us for this season.

As we embrace this exciting world of polycentric mission training, we have something to offer – the Scriptural lessons of a saving relationship with triune God. If we go into that world in his strength, as learners who are willing to lay aside our preconceptions and what is no longer needed from the past, we have a great adventure ahead of us. Trainers need to point toward that great adventure. ■

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# A Framework for a New Era of Missions

When every geopolitical nation has a gospel presence, what is the role of an outsider in helping the global church to continue to grow? How do outsiders, especially from the West, remain faithful to God's call to love their global neighbors and use wisdom to know how best to serve?

For many, missions is the story of heroes, martyrs, and gospel advance. For others, it's the story of colonialism and missionary disasters. At the same time, the context of global mission has changed drastically. The church has spread to every geopolitical nation, and more people from more nations are participating than ever before. The era of the West to the rest is over.

Is there still a place for outsiders, particularly Westerners, to serve in cross-cultural mission? Does this cause more harm than good? How do outsiders now remain faithful to God's call to love our neighbors – both across the street and across the oceans?

I've lived in slums and inner cities as an outsider among the poor for twenty years. I've led humanitarian organizations, a global missions agency,<sup>1</sup> and now a grassroots youth movement (called *Alongsiders*)<sup>2</sup> that is truly making the world a more beautiful place.

So, I am passionate about finding ways to frame and communicate God's call to engage in ways that fit today's realities. Perhaps the framework I have developed to understand the role of *outsiders*, including Westerners like myself, will be helpful for you, and your context, as it has been for many others. But first, let me give you a glimpse of my story...

## AN INVITATION TO PREACH

My phone lights up and pings with a message. I flick my thumb across the screen and an invitation appears. The backlighting on my phone illuminates my face as I read the invitation of a lifetime.

"Brother Craig," it begins, as so many messages from my friends in India do. Relationships are everything in this part of the world. "Would you come and speak at our upcoming Christian event in Delhi? You would be our keynote speaker. There will be 20,000 young leaders in attendance. We want you to challenge them to reach out and walk alongside children

in their communities. You can really get your *Alongsiders* message out, Brother!"

Twenty thousand young leaders! My eyebrows lift, and a whistle of amazement escapes my lips. For some, public speaking is their worst nightmare. Speaking to twenty thousand young leaders would be daunting for most people – and frankly, it's daunting for me, too. But I have been sharing about God's heart for the poor at conferences, festivals, and churches for years. An opportunity to spread the vision like this is an amazing dream for me, a chance to use my God-given talents to grow the *Alongsiders* ministry and reach thousands of children.

I start thinking through logistics and imagining the potential impact. And if I'm honest, I begin to imagine myself on that stage, the audience in rapt attention. Some good photos of the crowds for my social media feed wouldn't hurt at all. I'm only human.

I press my forefinger on the message until it turns a darker shade, then hit the forward button. Before responding, I know that I need to submit the invitation to my mentor and South Indian friend, Paulus.

My connection with India goes back to my paternal grandparents, who were missionaries in South India for 25 years. My father spent his early years in Bangalore. My parents were also missionaries so I guess you might say that being an outsider working for change in the world runs in my blood.

Paulus has been helping me navigate these types of situations in India for years, and as an outsider, I'm careful to listen to his insider advice. But as I wait for Paulus's response, my heart begins to sink a little as I anticipate what he will say. I know Paulus well.

His message eventually pops up on my phone. "Brother! Call me when you can." Relationships are everything in India.

I press video dial with trepidation, and within seconds, I am greeted by Paulus's smiling face and rich, baritone voice. A Tamil



Kompong Chnang, Cambodia: Craig Greenfield speaks with several children.

by ethnicity, he has a very dark complexion, and he is wearing his thick, trademark black glasses. They frame the kindest eyes, which shine with spiritual wisdom and friendship.

I want to make sure he understands what this invitation means to me, so I almost start to say, “This is the invitation of a lifetime, Paulus!” But I hold my tongue and wait for my mentor to speak.

“Ah yes,” he smiles. “I don’t think this is a good opportunity for us, ahha? This will put a big spotlight on you as a foreigner. If we want this discipleship movement to take off here as a local Indian movement, it would be better for it not to be presented by you. That will send the wrong impression, Craig.”

His words are understated but crystal clear. They immediately remind me of the ancient Khmer proverb, “It takes a spider to repair its own web.” My chest sinks, and I feel my lips curve into a slight frown. I know Paulus is right, but, frankly, I’m gutted. After I hang up, I sit for a while, letting the disappointment sink in.

### USING MORE WISDOM

Now, at this point in the story you may be thinking, “Needs are needs. Who cares who meets them? Get out there and make a difference! Seize every opportunity to use your God-given gifts to preach the gospel!”

But what if the greater invitation for many of us in this new era – particularly those of us who have power and privilege – is to use more wisdom in the ways we seek to serve others? I’ve had to learn this lesson the hard way as I have served in slums and inner cities and made a lot of mistakes along the way. Though I’ve started ministries around the world, I am still learning.

As a white Westerner, I have always been taught to consider the words I speak on stage as if they stand alone – disembodied – as if I am a neutral messenger bringing the Word of God. After all, it’s not like I would be up there on stage waving a Union Jack – the flag of India’s former colonial power (and the birthplace of my ancestors). And it’s not like I would be flashing wads of cash, implying that by joining this discipleship movement these poor youth could get connected to overseas money.

But I don’t need those props to send the youth a message about power and outside money. My very presence sends that message all by itself. Though 20,000 young leaders would hear my words of love and goodwill, those words would be reinterpreted and misunderstood if I were the person delivering them. I knew in my gut that Paulus was right. The leaders would perceive my words as a foreign message, wrapped in a cloak of colonialism and cash.

The next day, I shoot Paulus a message. “You’re absolutely right, Bro. Who else could we get on that stage to communicate

the message? Someone local, of course!”

Paulus replies immediately, “I know just the person.”

### THE TEMPTATION TO PURSUE GOOD IN THE WRONG WAY

Have you ever noticed how the things that Satan tempted Jesus with during his 40 days in the desert were not *inherently* evil (Luke 4:1–15)? Satan tried to goad Jesus into making bread from stones, but there’s nothing particularly bad about bread, is there? Starving people need food, and the world is full of pressing needs. Only a heartless jerk would deny a starving beggar a yummy bread roll.

What about the promise of safety in the hands of angels? That’s not evil either! Endangered people need protection. Vulnerable children need people to stand on their side when life is tough. They need someone to get up on a stage somewhere and advocate for their well-being.

And what about the opportunity to have the whole world bow before Jesus? That’s not evil either. Imagine if people all over the world knew the love of God. Surely anyone pursuing that end, in any manner, is simply doing the work of God?

And yet, we know from this story that it was the bad guy – Satan himself – dangling all these good things, these valid and pressing needs, in front of Jesus. Still, Jesus resisted. He resisted the shortcuts because he knew there was a better way: God’s way, God’s timing. He resisted the shortcuts because the *ends never ever justify the means*.

Jesus could have overwhelmed Israel with his power and wonders – a one-man miracle machine. Instead, he chose the slow, difficult route of raising a community of believers and empowering them to take his message to the world. He sparked a grassroots movement that has stood the test of time.

What if the temptation we face as people with power and privilege in a world of need is not so much the temptation to pursue evil – rape, murder, or pillaging? Instead, what if our temptation is to pursue good in the wrong way?

This is a temptation I face every day because, as a Western missionary for more than 20 years, I walk the streets with forms of power that many of my Cambodian neighbors don’t have. I receive invitations and open doors that others don’t receive. With that access comes the temptation to be their *savior*, to use my power to create *miracles*, when I’m really called to be something else – something more humble, vulnerable, and much, much better.

This challenge is for anyone who goes into the world seeking to change it while carrying more power than those whom you are trying to reach – whether through a passport or privilege, money, or mastery. The simple fact that you have the ability to buy and read a magazine written in English means you have forms of privilege and power that most people in the world don’t have.

I’ve lived among the poor and marginalized for a long time. I’ve held the dying and walked alongside the desperate. My whole life is geared toward seeking change that will make the world a better place for everyone. And, frankly, I’m impatient!

... what if the greater invitation for many of us in this new era – particularly those of us who have power and privilege – is to use more wisdom in the ways we seek to serve others?

I want a better world for my poor neighbors – and I want it sooner rather than later. I want to see more vulnerable children being reached and uplifted. I want bread for the hungry, I want safety for the endangered, and I long for people to know the boundless love of Jesus.

Yet, I’ve come to understand that there are lots of ways to seek what is good for the world. Over time, I’ve learned that many of the short-term ways I’ve tried to pursue change – such as handing out money or food – have actually resulted in more deeply entrenched systems and structures, which continue to perpetuate poverty and injustice. At times, some of my great ideas have made things much, much worse because I’ve been trying to play god in the lives of the poor.

### HOW IS GOD CALLING US TO SERVE?

So, if we’re no longer standing center stage as outsiders, giving keynotes to 20,000 young leaders, how is God calling us outsiders to serve in this new era? Didn’t Jesus call us to go out into all the world to make disciples and build his upside-down kingdom? Didn’t God call us to bring good news to the poor, freedom for those in captivity, and comfort to those who mourn?

In Ephesians 4:11–13, Paul describes five different types of giftedness for serving God in the world and the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds (pastors), and teachers. I believe that these five types continue to provide a promising framework for how we can serve the world even in our post-colonial era, but we need to examine them through different eyes. We can’t simply transplant them into cross-cultural situations that have deeply embedded power dynamics, or we run the risk of disempowering local people.

For example, perhaps you are a gifted pastor or church planter in Portland. Does this mean you should be a pastor or church planter in Bangalore, India? After all, you will eventually return home, and your foreign ways will be hard to replicate by local people with fewer resources. Perhaps a more effective role would be to come alongside local Indian Christians as a *midwife*, supporting them as they lead and give birth to what God has already planted in their hearts. During the journey to India, the gifted pastor needs to become a *midwife*.

Or you may be an apostolically gifted entrepreneur in San Francisco. Does this mean you should initiate new projects among African Americans in inner-city Detroit? Perhaps a wiser approach would be to serve as a *catalyst*, helping local leaders create new initiatives that reflect their own understanding of their local needs so they will have ownership of them going forward. Sometime during the journey to Detroit, the gifted apostle needs to become a *catalyst*.

Or perhaps you are a prophetic social justice activist in Toronto. Does this qualify you to lead justice work in Nairobi, Kenya? Perhaps a more helpful role would be to come alongside local activists as an *ally*, amplifying the voices of those who will continue to live in the local context after the struggle. After all, you can leave at any time, escaping the consequences that local people face after a confrontation. Sometime during the journey to Kenya, the gifted prophet needs to be transformed into an *ally*.

Each of the five ministry gifts outlined in Ephesians 4 – apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher – needs to be reframed for cross-cultural contexts, especially in places of poverty, or where there is a significant power

differential. The *fivefold* ministry types become *missional* types. Otherwise, we run the risk of playing benevolent gods – taking power away from those who need to be inspired to look to Jesus, the one true savior. In every context, we need to ask ourselves whether we are ministering as an insider or an outsider.

In the urban hubs of Asia, the slums of Haiti, the inner cities of North America, and the rural villages of Mexico, those of us who come as outsiders with access to resources tend to hold dramatically more power and money. We sometimes wield that power in heavy-handed ways, knocking over the carefully arranged banquet set before us by our local friends. This lack of self-awareness leads to the sins of colonialism and the *white savior* label, no matter what color you are.

#### RETHINKING THE FIVE ROLES

By rethinking these five roles from Ephesians with a cross-cultural perspective, we retain the original meanings, which were meant for insiders, but in ways that don't leave us, as outsiders, hogging the limelight. In place of the traditional translation for Paul's ministry roles in Ephesians, I propose the following five missional types for outsiders in a cross-cultural context:

*catalyst* (for apostle), *ally* (for prophet), *seeker* (for evangelist), *midwife* (for pastor), and *guide* (for teacher).

#### Catalyst (Outsider) / Apostle (Insider)

Catalysts are wired as pioneers for the kingdom, not just the church. In their commitment to God's people around the

In every context,  
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an outsider.

world, they are self-disciplined and mature enough to say, not “my kingdom” but “your kingdom come, Lord.” Catalysts refuse to build their own empires but seek to help spark something new in partnership with those insider apostles



Phnom Penh, Cambodia: A medical volunteer prays with a patient and his family at a clinic.

PHOTO COURTESY OF IMB

who will lead the movement going forward. By nature, they are future-oriented and want to work with local people in new and uncharted contexts.

### Ally (Outsider) / Prophet (Insider)

Allies know God's heart for the marginalized, so they seek to come alongside and use their privilege to amplify voices that are struggling to be heard. They care deeply about justice and mercy and are bold enough to speak truth to power in situations of injustice. As outsiders, they are uniquely positioned to question the status quo and call the global community toward God's kingdom on earth, using their privilege (access, training, and resources) to support the causes championed by local prophets.

### Seeker (Outsider) / Evangelist (Insider)

Seekers search for cultural touchpoints as a way of bridging the universal truth of the gospel with local understanding. They seek to discover what conversation God is *already* having with the people in this place. They are enthusiasts for contextualization, storytelling, and creativity. As outsiders, they arrive as students of language and culture and are more likely to ask questions than to offer answers. They work with insider evangelists to understand and communicate what the kingdom of God looks like in each new context.

### Midwife (Outsider) / Pastor (Insider)

Midwives are pastorally gifted leaders who nurture and protect the people of God, helping insider pastors birth, shepherd, and care for communities of faith. As outsiders, they are passionate about cultivating the local church and developing disciples without needing to be in the limelight. They are careful to use church-planting approaches that can be replicated without outside resources.

### Guide (Outsider) / Teacher (Insider)

Guides are gifted teachers who can not only understand and

explain truth but can guide local people to discover the truth *for themselves*. Guides communicate God's wisdom in all kinds of ways as they help local people discern God's will. Rather than offering prepackaged answers, guides creatively help people work together to discover solutions for themselves.

## THE CHALLENGE TO SERVE AS AN OUTSIDER

I wrote *Subversive Mission*, to describe this *Fivefold Missional Type* framework in depth, along with the five most common blind spots that Westerners bring into cross-cultural service. The book tells the story of my own experiments – and many failures – as I have tried to find my place in the world as an outsider.

As followers of Jesus, we are all called to be ready to follow Jesus in loving our neighbors, not only across the street, but also across the oceans – from Vancouver to Nairobi, from inner-city Chicago to Phnom Penh. We can't afford to isolate ourselves in paralysis any longer. I hope you will join me in seeking a better way, a more beautiful vision for how we can all bear the light we have been given into the world. ■

1. I was the International Coordinator at Servants to Asia's Urban Poor from 2005–2012, <https://servantsasia.org/>.
2. I founded Alongsiders International in 2013, <https://www.alongsiders.org/>.



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**Craig Greenfield** is the author of *Subversive Jesus*, and his latest book, *Subversive Mission*, published by IVP. He is the founder of Alongsiders International, a grassroots youth discipleship movement that has now spread to 30 countries. You can read more at [alongsiders.org](https://alongsiders.org) or take the free Missional Types test on Craig's blog at [craiggreenfield.com](https://craiggreenfield.com)



Chiang Mai, Thailand: Missionary colleagues from the US and East Timor talk together.

# Building Bridges Between Local Churches and New Neighbors

Church leaders and organizations are grappling with the changing dynamics of the American church. However, the fields remain – calling for tilling, sowing, and harvesting. And the nations are here at our doorstep. Global workers who have already lived and served cross-culturally are uniquely equipped to help churches engage these nations and serve cross-culturally here in the US.

I prepared many years to serve overseas, expecting to serve for decades if not for life. Instead, I served for two years in Asia working with a refugee population and learning language and culture. There is a bigger story there, but the short version is one that is remarkably common – the Lord’s plan for my life looked different than my plan for my life.

The journey that the Lord brought me on continued when I returned to the US and moved into an immigrant neighborhood outside of Washington, DC. I met with families who had not been allowed to ask questions about Jesus or to access Scripture in their homelands.

They had significant practical and relational needs. Almost invariably I heard that they had not met any American friends, wanted to learn English, and had never been in an American home. The spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of these neighbors are great.

Church leaders and organizations are grappling with the changing dynamics of the American church including *leaner* times and smaller churches post-COVID. However, the fields remain – calling for tilling, sowing, and harvesting. And the nations are not only across oceans. They are literally at our doorstep.

Many people think our newly-arrived neighbors have access to the gospel because they now live in the US. But major barriers exist mainly due to lack of relationships and language skills. A tremendous opportunity exists, but those who want to see their churches engage cross-culturally with these communities are often not sure how to begin.

Global workers who have already lived and served cross-culturally are uniquely equipped to help churches engage these nations and serve cross-culturally here in the US. They have skills that can help effectively bridge the tangible needs of immigrant communities with the resources of local churches.

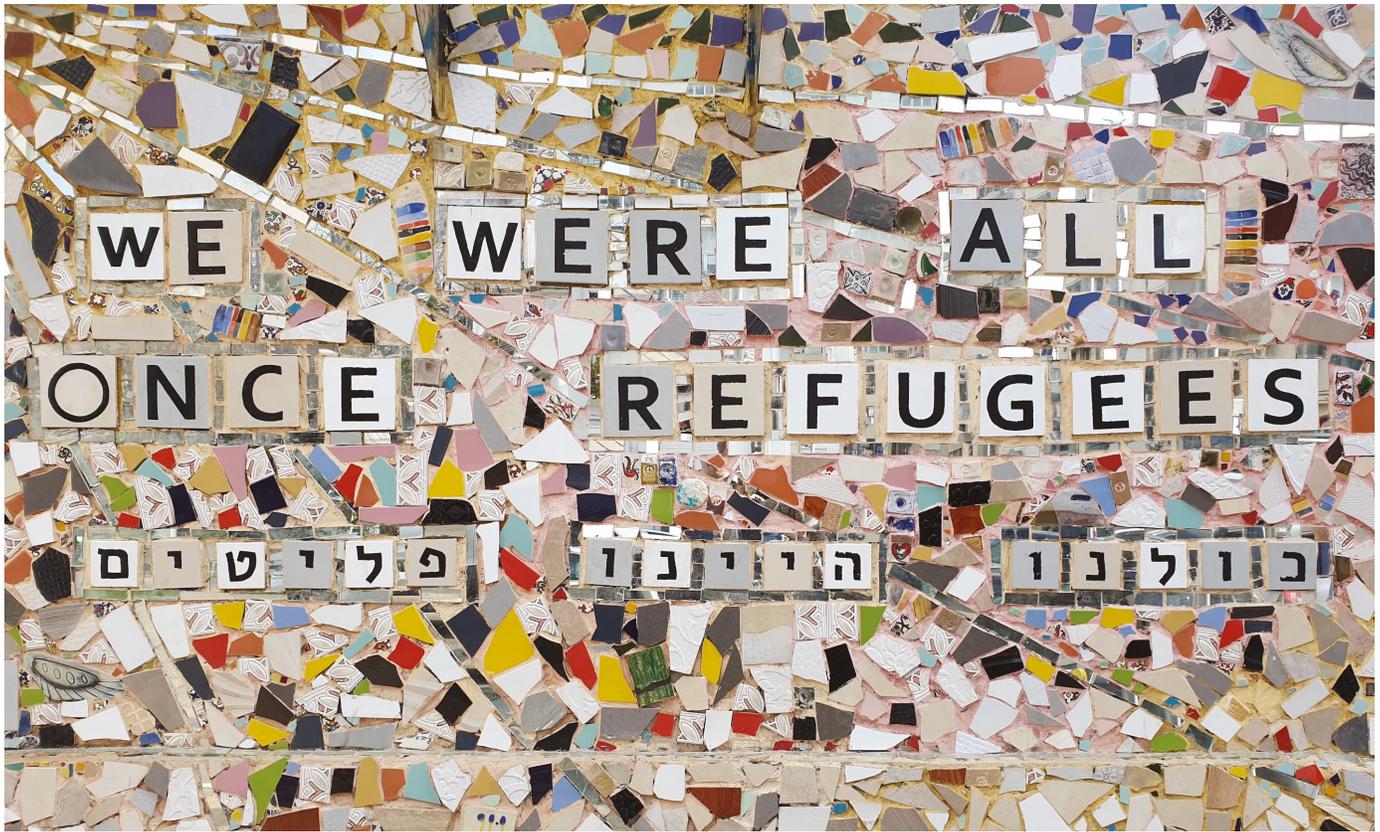
## **PRAY: PERSISTENTLY, CONSISTENTLY, AND WITH ANTICIPATION**

A few months after moving into an apartment complex with immigrant families, I realized something important. For my ministry engagement to be fruitful, I understood that I needed the Spirit to pave the way and open doors ahead of me. I had dreams, but I could not make them happen. I had one-time interactions but not ongoing relationships.

Six months in, a woman I had seen and been praying for as she quickly dropped off her kids to a babysitter sat outside my apartment to nurse her baby. I spoke her language and was able to begin a conversation that turned into friendship. Gradually I developed new relationships within the neighborhood and through this initial friend.

I met one-on-one with women, drove them to appointments and to get groceries, went to school events, and hosted events in my apartment. I taught a health class with a resettlement agency and helped with English.

A few years into cross-cultural ministry in the US, I was feeling alone. So I reached out to two older women living in New England to ask them to pray with me twice a month by phone.



They prayed as I met with individual women. They celebrated the joys and grieved disappointments with me. I saw the Lord answering prayer, often in exciting ways, and was tremendously strengthened and encouraged. I have been praying with each of these women by phone for about four years!

The Lord knows what he wants to do in your neighborhood and in your church. Prayer is an important means to walking in step with the Spirit and serving not in your own strength but in his.

Pray for your neighbors and those you serve, and then invite your church to pray specifically with you for individuals and circumstances. The work of intercession is crucial, but it is often overlooked and undervalued. That may be because we do not realize how dependent we are on the Lord. We are called to faithfulness and obedience, but we are not competent in ourselves to accomplish the great things we desire.

### OFFER A WARM WELCOME

Many refugees moving to the US are coming from cultures with a high value on hospitality. For example, if you have ever been served a meal by a Middle Eastern family, you have experienced the sense of deep care that goes with the meal. The US can be bewildering for these immigrant families. Genuine friendship (despite language and cultural barriers) goes a long way.

In my apartment complex, kids and teens would knock and ask to come in and play, bake, do crafts, or play games. We planned and threw birthday parties and invited other neighbors. Holidays are a great opportunity to invite neighbors over and introduce them to American holidays.

### SERVE PRACTICAL NEEDS

For families who are newly arrived in the US, the needs are numerous. You will not be able to meet all those needs, but you can walk alongside as they navigate their new environment. Training or demonstrating how to navigate the system will go much further (and take more time!) than simply providing or doing it yourself.

Of all the practical needs, learning English is one of the most life-changing skills. It helps with medical visits, conversations with school administrators, ability to work, and helps immigrant families become independent. You can help as a patient, consistent language partner or volunteer with an ESL program.

For the Nations (DC: [ftndc.org](http://ftndc.org); Dallas: [ftnro.org](http://ftnro.org)) is an excellent example of a Christian organization that provides good quality English teaching but also comes alongside students in meaningful non-academic ways. ESL programs are one of the most effective bridges for churches. The commitment is more defined than other types of neighborhood ministry, the program can adjust depending on resources and volunteers, and it meets an ongoing significant need by offering life-changing language help.

If a full ESL program requires more time and energy investment than is possible, a conversational English class is a good starting point and still offers a huge help to students. And having that clear bridge means that relationships can develop and deepen naturally for those who are interested.

Other practical ways to help could be any of the following:

- Medical appointments and rides
- Applications, resumes, and phone calls
- School registration
- Accessing public resources – food assistance, health insurance, learning to ride the bus.
- Driving practice (I nervously took one woman out for driving practice in our crowded neighborhoods. A few months later when her husband died suddenly, she began to support her family by driving for Amazon and Uber-eats!)
- Friendships and mentoring

### INVITE AND EQUIP YOUR CHURCH

When I served cross-culturally overseas, there was a couple who mentored me, prayed with me, and helped me process what I was experiencing and learning. They equipped me so that when I returned to the US and served cross-culturally, I could do this for others. Crossing culture is not comfortable or easy for many Americans, despite what many expect! People are caught off guard when they encounter different values and cultural expectations.

I remember inviting my small group from church to help a family move. My American friends showed up ready to knock it out in 2 hours. My refugee friends had no boxes, had not begun organizing, and were expecting a full day together.

American visits are often 1–2 hours. Many of my immigrant

friends expect a 4–5 hour visit. Americans tend to think “to each their own” when it comes to clothing, food choices, etc. Meanwhile, many of my immigrant friends would be shocked or offended by what we call *choice*. Americans prize efficiency and skill while many other cultures prioritize relationship and honor.

### Mentor Others

Take friends from church along with you on visits, ask them to pray with you, invite them to cross-cultural gatherings, and ask them to help with English conversation. By inviting others into the cross-cultural ministry you are doing, you help them learn to make adjustments, process surprises and differences, gain flexibility, prioritize people over efficiency, and serve generously.

### Demonstrate Giving Up Preferences and Freedoms

Engage in discussing significant cultural and religious differences with your American friends, showing them how to love new neighbors by setting aside personal preferences and freedoms. An example would be serving halal meat or not offering alcohol at a gathering. Or consider dressing modestly for the comfort of your guests. This will go a long way in removing unnecessary barriers to the gospel.

If you have called yourself a *missionary* at any point, recognize that this term may not work with certain immigrant populations in the US and explain this to your American friends. Those who serve cross-culturally with these groups may want to describe *what* they do and *why* as they love God and love others, without using a word with unintended nuances. This will go a long way in removing unnecessary barriers to the gospel.

### Prioritize Relationships

Introduce your American friends to the joy of face-to-face, cross-cultural, relational serving (which can be rich, complicated, and surprising). Raising money or donating items are valuable and necessary ways to serve; however, cross-cultural relationships present exceptional potential for spiritual impact and mutual transformation. Relationships engage the heart in ways that some projects may not. Christlike care for others leads to a desire to meet practical needs as well.

### CONSIDER FURTHER TRAINING

Options abound for additional training, but one area stands out. Many immigrants and refugees live with a history of trauma and emotional pain with few opportunities to process or understand what has happened. In the context of a friendship, you may be able to come alongside your neighbors with underlying trauma.

The Christian Counseling and Education Foundation ([cef.org/school](http://cef.org/school)) offers biblical counseling certificates and equips lay persons and those in ministry to come alongside friends in need. American Bible Society ([ministry.americanbible.org/trauma-healing](http://ministry.americanbible.org/trauma-healing)) offers training for establishing trauma healing groups. If you speak a second language, you may be able to bridge the gap for immigrants who need space and someone to process with. These do not take the place



USA: Hosting fun birthday parties with the children of immigrant neighbors goes a long way to building lasting relationships.

PHOTO BY SARA MILLER

of trained counselors and medical professionals, but it may help you care better.

### PARTNER WITH LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

I taught a women's health class for a resettlement agency for a few years. Resettlement organizations can be leery of Christians evangelizing or inviting their clients to church. However, the benefit of working with an organization is a clear structure (a bridge) for you to connect and serve. I often ran into students in the grocery store or in my neighborhood, and they recognized me as a teacher with a familiar organization who also spoke their language.

### ENTER INTO SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS

Many cultures assume that God is central, and religion impacts everything. These new neighbors may be curious to know what you believe and are often open to deeper discussion. This stands in contrast to what many of us experience in the US cultural context. We can share our hearts and our experience with gentleness, humility, and love.

Occasionally, a friend may be interested in reading Scripture with you. Often, even if they are strongly opposed to the gospel, they will appreciate prayer in hard times. We do not serve needs just to get to the gospel, and we do not gain credit for ourselves in getting someone to pray a prayer. We serve to love as Christ loves and out of the overflow of his lavish love towards us.

And we share the gospel because it is the one thing that offers our friends hope in their deepest need and the only thing that offers them eternity. Years of serving and loving others may be a quiet tilling of the soil. Meanwhile we pray for opportunities to plant spiritual seeds and to invite our friends to a deeper exploration of who Christ is.

### USE WISDOM AND LOOK FOR OPEN DOORS

We need wisdom in how best to serve and reach out. We need open doors and the Spirit to move in hearts and lives. The Lord is at work, and he will accomplish what he desires as we build bridges between the Church and the nations represented in our neighborhood.

For me, bridging the gap between my church's resources and the needs of the refugee and immigrant population in my city happened in small events and with small needs. A few women from church joined me for some neighborhood gatherings, such as the year I hosted an Easter meal for 10 women and 15 kids in my 750 square foot apartment!

My small group prayed with me through various needs and helped with a few small one-time events and needs. A friend from church helped me start an ESL class in my home for a few women that ended soon after when the pandemic hit.

Then a chance to meet an almost overwhelming need happened during the Afghan crisis of August 2021. Our church of about 100 adults walked alongside four newly arrived Afghan families (and the three babies born within a few months of arrival). We delivered furniture, laptops, and emergency food/clothing. We provided transportation to appointments,

“The Lord is at work, and he will accomplish what he desires as we build bridges between the Church and the nations represented in our neighborhood.”

assisted with paperwork, helped with school enrollment, health insurance, and food assistance.

We installed water filters that did not work and drove to job interviews that did not pan out. We visited. We taught them how to ride the bus and helped with English lessons. A few men from church played soccer with some of the teen boys and the women threw a beautiful, warm baby shower. One friend from church donated and taught a new mom the use of a breast pump.

Everything did not go as we expected! But our church grew in understanding and maturity, and I believe that individuals were changed to respond more quickly, confidently, and compassionately to enormous needs and to navigate cross-cultural situations with less discomfort.

The gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16) and the success of the gospel depends on the power inherent in the message of the cross, not on its messengers or their strategies. Christ loves his bride, and he continues to lead us as we joyfully and imperfectly hold out the treasure we have found in him to a world that is searching.

His work is gloriously redemptive and good. It will culminate in a day when we join “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God whose sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Revelation 7:9–10, ESV).

We pray for that day and eagerly await it. ■



SARA MILLER\*

**Sara Miller** is a medical professional living near D.C. After a number of years serving cross-culturally in Asia and then back in the US, she is now primarily serving her local church, working in a hospital part-time, and enrolled in seminary.

\*Pseudonym, portrait is representative.

# The Nigerian Church and Global Missions

The Nigerian church has been engaged in cross-border and cross-cultural missions for more than 150 years. Since then, it has played an important and growing part of the global missions movement. And Nigerians are eager to play a bigger role in collaboration with global partners.

Nigeria's first contact with the gospel happened around the fourteenth to fifteenth century through Portuguese merchants in the present-day South-south region of the country. At that time, African Traditional Religion was prevalent, as was Islam, which arrived as far back as the eleventh and twelfth centuries. But it wasn't until later that real gospel seeds would be planted and watered, and Africans played a major role.

As Rueben Ezemadu asserts, "Right from the cradle of Christianity in Nigeria, an indigene had played a pioneering role in the spread of the gospel."<sup>1</sup> Almost every mission pioneering effort in Nigeria and within Africa had significant involvement from Nigerians or people of African descent.

## THE BEGINNING

The first was Thomas Birch Freeman, a missionary with the Methodist Missionary Society. He arrived in Badagry, South-west Nigeria on September 24, 1842. While Freeman grew up in England, his father was an African freedman from the West Indies, and his mother was English.

As an adult, Freeman was compelled to answer God's call to go to West Africa. After a first and then a second wife died, Freeman married Rebecca Morgan, an early Fante convert from Ghana. She became a "true helpmate ... a woman of education and intelligence, a deeply committed Christian and a loyal church worker."<sup>2</sup> William de Graft followed Freeman



Abuja, Nigeria: National Christian Centre.

PHOTO BY TERVER, ADOBE STOCK

continuing mission work in Badagry. De Graft trained John Martin, a Fante man from Ghana, who traveled east to pioneer mission work in Lagos, Nigeria.

Another early Nigerian pioneer was Samuel Ajayi Crowther. When he was around 12 years old, he was captured by slave raiders, but the British Royal Navy intercepted the ship where he had been taken. He was resettled in Sierra Leon. It was there he became a Christian and then later a missionary with the Church Missionary Society (CMS).

In 1841, he started his participation in the CMS Niger Expedition, exploring possibilities to use agriculture as an access ministry for mission in West Africa. It resulted in mission work beginning in both Niger and Nigeria. After settling in Nigeria, he translated the Bible into Yoruba and became the first African bishop of the Anglican church.

Another notable Nigerian is John C. Taylor. He began his ministry in Onitsha, (in present day Anambra State, Southeast Nigeria) in 1857 and eventually took the gospel to Bathurst (which is now Banjul, the capital of The Gambia in West Africa). At Taylor's farewell service in Bathurst, an elder said, "Thank God! Is this word true, that our children, too, can go out like white men and preach the gospel? Lord send plenty of our children more."<sup>3</sup>

Pastors and clergy in Nigeria were not the only ones engaged in missions. For example, ordinary men and women led the Baptist Mission to the northern part of Nigeria. While exploring trade and commerce opportunities in the Muslim north, they spread the gospel and established churches.

## The whole Nigerian missions movement remains convinced that God is raising up missionaries from different places, including Nigeria, who should go everywhere.

Nigerians have also collaborated in mission with people from other places. In the Northern part of Nigeria, western mission organisation, like the Soudan Interior Mission (now Serving in Mission – SIM) and Sudan United Mission (SUM), depended on local Nigerian people to reach the Muslim north. This partnership was so effective that when certain Western missionaries left during the First World War, it had little or no impact on SUM's mission in the northern Nigeria.

Lowry Maxwell comments that the SUM believed that "a consecrated African can reach his own people as no European can."<sup>4</sup> Additionally, he mentions "special efforts were made to encourage the native Christians to give their testimony and to conduct meetings ... to make them less dependent on the foreign missionary."<sup>5</sup>

### THE 1970S REVIVAL

In the 1970s, God brought revival to Nigeria, especially among young men and women on university campuses. This gave birth to student fellowships such as the Christian Union, the Scripture Union, and the formation of the Christian Youth Corpers in 1973 (which later became Nigeria Christian Corpers' Fellowship).

They focused on Bible study, prayer, and hospital ministry, and were involved in various evangelistic outreaches. Their activities brought more people to Christ. The National Youth Service Corps opened the channel for these vibrant and young graduates to spread the Christian faith in their various locations. They formed charismatic groups and those who traveled abroad took along their newfound faith.<sup>6</sup>

This movement gave birth to indigenous missions organisations. Founded in 1975, Calvary Ministries (CAPRO) became the first indigenous non-denominational mission agency in Nigeria. Then the Christian Missionary Foundation (CMF) formed in 1982.

Both organizations trace their beginnings to the campus revival connected to the Christian Youth Corps. Over the last forty years, most mission organisations have drawn the bulk of their missionary recruits from students, graduates, and youth corps members.

Isaac Oyebamiji explains, "... Christian Youth Corps members to Kaduna State (Northwest Nigeria) conducted the Zaria City crusade of 25th December 1974. Bayo Famonure, then a Youth Corps member himself, was the unappointed leader of the team. CAPRO was to start a few months later."<sup>7</sup>



Samuel Ajayi Crowther

# Old notions of Western church superiority and majority world church inferiority must be cast aside, so that we can learn from one another as peers.

Many more nondenominational missions organisations that were established were significantly influenced by CAPRO and CMF especially in their commitment to *faith missions*. Nigerians were ready to both *give* and *go* for the gospel to reach everywhere.

It must also be noted that before nondenominational missions organizations existed, indigenous denominational missionary structures had already been founded, such as the Evangelical Missionary Society (EMS) of ECWA<sup>8</sup> which began in 1948 and the Home and Foreign Missions Board (now Global Mission Board) of the Nigerian Baptist Convention established in 1953.

## THE BIRTH OF A NATIONAL MISSIONS NETWORK

As indigenous mission efforts progressed, the need to build synergy increased. This led to the formation of Africa's first and largest national missions network in 1982: the Nigeria Evangelical Missions Association (NEMA). The idea of Africans in missions was not popular at that time, so the aim was to collaborate to mobilize the church in Nigeria to promote missionary efforts.<sup>9</sup> This brought together indigenous denominational and non-denominational mission structures to maximize the advance of the church and emergence of indigenous missionary efforts towards finishing the task.

Responding to the rapid growth of the majority world church, the founders of NEMA wanted to see Nigerians to play an even

more active role in global mission. In 1985, NEMA hosted the first World Evangelical Fellowship Missions Commission Consultation tagged in Jos, Nigeria (ICOM '85).<sup>10</sup> Around 80 people attended representing countries including Ghana, Cameroon, Uganda, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, India, and a few countries in Latin America. The theme of the consultation was "Mobilising Indigenous Missions for the Final Harvest."

At the event, Panya Baba, the founding chairman of NEMA, shared, "An era of new dimension in missions is evident in the 1980s. Never before has such a consultation been held in Africa. There is no doubt that ICOM has become a new chapter in African history of missions. It is a milestone towards what we expect to accomplish through missions in Africa in the future."<sup>11</sup> Baba continued, "If the whole world would be evangelised, then missionaries must be sent from every country to every corner of the world. The idea of sending countries and receiving countries is long over-due for a change."<sup>12</sup>

The whole Nigerian missions movement remains convinced that God is raising up missionaries from different places, including Nigeria, who should go everywhere. And while need remains in Nigeria, we understand and embrace the commitment to God's global purpose.

At the same time, progress in sharing the gospel continues at home in tandem with increased global engagement. During ICOM '85, there were 74 known unreached and unengaged peoples in Nigeria identified. Mission leaders responded to the challenge. In 2017, NEMA reviewed the 1985 list and found that 65% of the then identified unreached peoples not only exited the list, many of the converts from these groups are now a part of the Nigerian missions force. At the same time, our updated research revealed that 72 unreached peoples and 8 unengaged people groups still exist in Nigeria.

NEMA organized a national consultation and these groups were allotted to different denominations and mission agencies. The 8 unengaged groups were re-engaged within a year. Moreover, the confirmed list of unreached and least evangelized peoples in Nigeria is now down to 43.<sup>13</sup>

Several initiatives have also been taking in mobilizing the Nigerian church for the remaining harvest. For instance, Mis-

## THE NIGERIAN CHURCH TIMELINE

First contact with the gospel occurs through Portuguese merchants in the South-south region of Nigeria.

15TH CENTURY

Thomas Birch Freeman, a missionary with the Methodist Missionary Society, arrives in Badagry, Southwest Nigeria.

1842

John C. Taylor begins his ministry in Onitsha, Southeast Nigeria.

1857

Home and Foreign Missions Board of the Nigerian Baptist Convention is established (now Global Mission Board).

1953

Samuel Ajayi Crowther joins the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and participates in the CMS Niger Expedition.

1841

Rev. Thomas Jefferson Bowen initiates his ministry in Abeokuta, marking the beginnings of Baptist missions.

1850

Evangelical Missionary Society (EMS) of ECWA is founded.

1948

sion Awareness Conferences (MAC) were held in some strategic cities with hundreds and thousands of people in attendance. GOFEST is another of such initiatives targeted at mobilizing students and campus. The 1998 edition had a record of 10,300 students in attendance. Many of the fruits of these meetings are now serving on the frontiers or in mission support roles.

### VISION 50:15

Realizing the huge Evangelical strength and advantage of Nigeria amongst countries in the 10/40 window, the leadership of NEMA launched the Vision 50:15 initiative in 2005. The vision was to mobilize 50,000 great commission workers. 15,000 of them would be trained, sent and supported go to 34 mostly Islamic countries beginning in the North of Nigeria to the Sahel region of Africa, the Horn of Africa, North Africa, Arabian Peninsula, and finally to the region around Jerusalem.

By 2020, 4,000 Nigerian missionaries were placed in 31 countries of the 34 targeted countries. Since the target has not yet been met, the initiative continues in what is now called Vision 50:15 Plus. This has taken place in the midst of sacrifices, persecution, martyrdom, all forms of hardships, obstacles, and oppositions. Nevertheless, we do not believe the Nigerian missions movement has yet fully expressed its mission potential.

Nigeria has around 105 million Christians. About half are Evangelicals. In relation to this, the 15,600 missionaries from NEMA's 159 registered member agencies less than 0.03% percentage of evangelicals. We want to see 10% of Nigeria's Evangelical population sent as missionaries. And as we see the continued rapid growth of the Nigerian church, we feel a burden to take more active leadership in the forefront of global mission.

Yet we also see that Nigerians can be found literally everywhere. This voluntary and involuntary going is another way God's way of scattering his people for his global purpose. The Nigerian diaspora can also be mobilized for missions. As NEMA has considered strategies for the Vision 50:15 Plus initiative, we've determined that our goals can be better met by mobilizing Nigerian Christians in the diaspora who are already resident in the target countries.

### NIGERIAN MISSIONARY ADVANTAGES

Philip Jenkins rightly predicted that "The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes, and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning."<sup>14</sup> Global South peoples in countries like Nigeria are sincerely seeking God, and not just religiosity.

It is quite ungracious and very insensitive to describe Nigerian, nay, African spirituality as a mile wide and an inch deep. That may be true of some individuals as it is on every continent. Yet Africa also has a significant movement of people who are committed to biblical discipleship with strong devotion to the study of the Word, prayer, fasting as well as engaging in spiritual warfare. Africa's Christian population includes a vast number of Evangelicals. The Nigerian church, alone, has the largest number of Christians and Evangelicals in Africa and in the larger 10/40 window. This is already being leveraged for strategic missions mobilization and deployment.

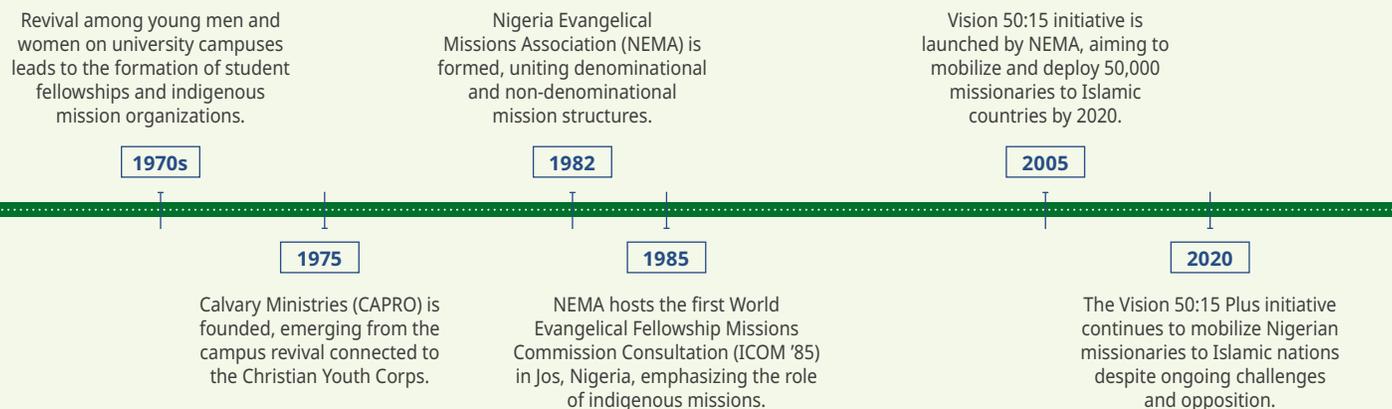
People across Africa, including in Nigeria, also have advantages in culture and language acquisition. For instance, Nigerian missionaries can easily adapt in the Vision 50:15 Plus countries (10/40 window) because they often do not need to cross too many cultural barriers. The collectivist nature of Nigerian society also helps as many unreached and unengaged people groups have similar cultural contexts.

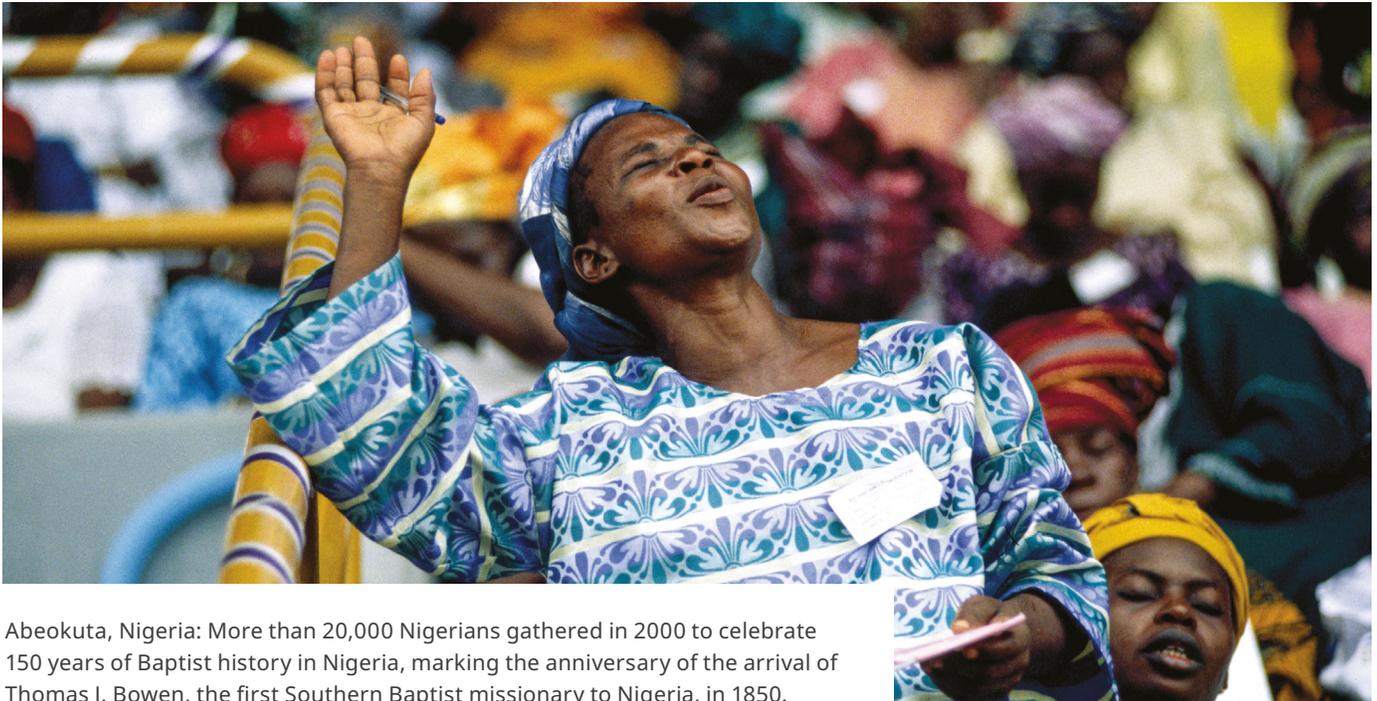
Because Nigerians live in a country with an even distribution of adherents to Christianity and Islam, and a number of followers of traditional religion, it is easier for them to build bridges with people of other faiths. Being multilingual also helps Nigerians to learn new languages.

Finally, Nigerian culture fosters a *can do* spirit that unleashes amazing creativity and flexibility to overcome challenges. When faced with a difficulty, a typical Nigerian response is "No problem." In missions, this helps Nigerian missionaries adapt quickly, cope with uncertainties, access difficult terrain, and survive with minimal support.

### COLLABORATION IS THE FUTURE

Already, the Nigerian commitment to mission is influencing missional praxis, inspiring mission engagement, and significantly contributing to the growth of global Christianity. The Nigeria





Abeokuta, Nigeria: More than 20,000 Nigerians gathered in 2000 to celebrate 150 years of Baptist history in Nigeria, marking the anniversary of the arrival of Thomas J. Bowen, the first Southern Baptist missionary to Nigeria, in 1850.

Evangelical Missions Association wants to maximize the potential within the Nigerian church as well as working alongside African (and global) national networks. For this to be effective, healthy partnerships need to be prioritized and honored.

Dean Carlson says, “healthy partnering requires a humility of heart that is more concerned with kingdom advance than organizational accolades.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, doing missions *polycentrically* requires effective collaboration. The world can be transformed in Christ’s power when we unreservedly commit to working together in the spirit of mutual respect and unified purpose.

Old notions of Western church superiority and majority world church inferiority must be cast aside, so that we can learn from one another as peers. As commendable as the intercultural intelligence of Nigerian missionaries might be, we still need to be progressively incarnational both in cross-culture engagement as well as in relating with other mission networks.

The Nigerian church and missions movement has much to learn from other global mission participants. At the same time, it has much to share. When global mission partners respectfully ask for our help, this increases our commitment to participate. While the partnership of resources from the Western church is appreciated, this is a secondary need. What is most desired is a sincere invitation and welcome to participate as an equal collaborative partner.

As Nigerian missions takes the gospel to the priority unreached and unengaged and to the West, it needs the support of the existing church in mutual learning. We need to create a collaborative environment that is not subservient. Moreover, doing missions in a polycentric context means paths would frequently cross between the church of the global north and the global south. Therefore, taking positions of preferring one

another as we collaborate will bring more sheaves and honor to the Lord of the harvest. ■

1. Rueben Ezemadu, “Missionary Efforts in Africa: The Nigeria Case Study,” in *Contemporary Issues in African Missions: Papers in Honour of Rev Dr Reuben E. Ezemadu*, ed. Kayode Owojori (Ibadan: ACCLAIM, 2020), 60.
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# Polycentric Missions Should Include the Church

Immense global changes are affecting every aspect of missions. Missions models are getting flatter. And local churches are increasingly engaging in aspects of missions previously reserved only for mission agencies or large NGOs. Polycentric alliances offer a way for a wide range of mission participants, including churches, to work together to address missional challenges.

As change reshapes many aspects of missions today, a growing number of churches are hungering to engage in shared missional endeavors with others from literally all over the globe. Local churches are stepping up and into spaces that in the past were generally reserved for mission agencies and larger NGOs. Missions models are getting flatter and more complex as churches lean into more proximate engagement and discover opportunities to walk alongside others in global missions.

We believe that truly polycentric alliances offer a better way to engage the full range of resources God has invested in the variety of mission participants (including local churches), to better address today's complex missional challenges. There are opportunities for polycentric missions and collaborative leaders to form more synergistic, multi-polar partnerships for greater kingdom impact.

We describe healthy polycentric missions as the engagement of multiple entities to become a *relational community* working together to achieve a *shared, missional outcome*. Further, polycentric missions recognizes the essential of *reciprocity* as each participating entity becomes a partner. As partners they not only contribute to the common purpose(s) that birthed the shared mission but also commit to helping each other flourish as they journey together.

Fulfilling these varied purposes requires a commitment to community, flexibility, and sacrificial generosity. The following examples illustrate the varying degrees of complexity and different organizational approaches polycentric missions can take.

## GYERGYO, BUDAPEST, AND LANSING

In 2015, a small evangelical church in Gyergyó, located in predominantly Catholic northeastern Romania, approached

a church in Lansing, Michigan with a request. The Gyergyó church had heard about the partnership between the young adults of a congregation in Budapest, Hungary with a church in Lansing. They wanted to know if a partnership like this could be replicated with them.

As the leadership at the Lansing church considered this invitation, they wondered if a modified missions model centered around the Budapest church and its young adults might be the better approach. Over the next few months, they shared ideas, constructed scenarios, and evaluated options of what a three-way partnership could look like. Their shared values of power-balancing and launching emerging leaders, as well as a willingness to fail and learn as they experimented on the way forward, were crucial. A web of friendships among the churches undergirded the whole initiative.

### Adapting the Multi-partner Collaborative Model

**The Gyergyó church owned the outcomes.** They agreed that the Lansing church would not execute a plug-and-play summer youth program with them as recipients. Instead, they changed their mindset to *own* the ministry and rely on their Budapest friends as their primary resource. The Gyergyó church leaders also began to reexamine and better define their desired outcomes for their young adults.

**The Lansing church downshifted its mindset to a third-chair position.** They released curriculum and program design to the Budapest church and cheered them on as Hungarian leaders reworked the curriculum adding their own unique elements. The Budapest and Gyergyó churches sometimes engaged directly without the Lansing church present. US



Romania: A man reads from his Bible at church.

dollars were matched by gifts in the local currencies in Hungary (forints) and Romania (leus) as shared leadership led to shared resourcing.

**The Budapest church stepped up to serve as the linchpin.** They coordinated leadership, prayer, logistics (shared with the Gyergyó church), and fundraising (a first-time activity for them!). More significantly, this 20-year-old church realized they were now the ones *on mission* across a national and ethnic boundary.

There were numerous Zoom calls to clarify roles and to provide assurances that all were committed to the desired outcome and the new journey to get there. Various types of coaching took place. Young leaders in each church prioritized working together over just hosting an American summer project.

### Results

This shoulder-to-shoulder missions engagement provided a platform for healthy interdependence across multiple centers of influence. As each partner was listened to and honored, polycentric efforts increased mutuality and nurtured a shared spirituality. Significant fruit de-

veloped far beyond the summer project that initially brought everyone together.

Today, the Gyergyó congregation has grown to be the most influential church in their region of Romania. They have a virtual presence on social media in the tens of thousands, a coffee shop, a renovated church in the central square of the town, a used clothing center, a school for the Roma (often known as *gypsies*), etc. Not a single foreign missionary is onsite. These results were all powered by young adults who, instead of having to host an American summer project, became strong leaders stepping up into local missions responsibilities undergirded by deep friendships with two foreign (Hungarian and American) churches who modeled shared leadership.

The Budapest and Lansing churches also experienced reciprocal benefits: One gifted young man emerged from the group of young Hungarian leaders to become the current senior pastor of the Budapest church, freeing the founding pastor to start a new ministry among the Roma. Members of the Lansing youth group were also influenced – one joined an international ministry at the local university, and others launched

a house church. Over the years, many of the leaders of all three churches have visited each other and attended conferences together. The relational community of friends has continued.

This foray into polycentric missions, led by leaders not only committed to kingdom values but also willing to take risks, has been a catalyst to reexamine and refresh many current partnership models.

The prefix poly carries an expectation of a co-generative posture. It challenges the clichéd wisdom that warns against too many cooks in the kitchen.

## CAMBODIA/US POLYCENTRIC MISSIONS

The prefix *poly* carries an expectation of a co-generative posture. It challenges the clichéd wisdom that warns against too many cooks in the kitchen. Believing in collaboration, Lake Avenue Church in Pasadena, California, helped to develop and implement a multi-church, multi-entity partnership in Cambodia that thrived precisely because it had multiple *cooks* bringing their unique contributions to our shared effort. Throughout the decade of partnership, roughly 2005–2016, our understanding of polycentric mission continued to be a work in progress as we learned together.

### A Central Hub and Partner Spokes

This polycentric missions effort was anchored by World Relief-Cambodia (WR-Cambodia) and its then country leader, Tim Amstutz, whose commitment to a polycentric approach arose from his experience as an MK in India and his father's model of mission ministry.

“My dad demonstrated that the power of the Gospel cannot be owned by any one person, church, denomination, or mission agency,” Tim says. “It belongs only to God. Therefore, I believe polycentricity in mission is about releasing power and control to others.”

The Western-world partners were US churches from a variety of denominations recruited by World Relief USA (WR-USA) based on their prior collaboration with World Relief in both the US and Cambodia. Each church already had extensive global experience and had demonstrated a posture of serving *alongside* WR-Cambodia which in turn was the local NGO walking alongside emerging cell churches. These new congregations were being birthed in multiple provinces. At that time, this country was less than 0.5% Christian, so most churches were led by first-generation Christians.

The final partnering entity was a YWAM ministry already working locally with WR-Cambodia to develop leaders from the Khmer people for the emerging cell churches. This leadership development piece was their singular though essential contribution to our col-

laborative effort. As an exception to our overall polycentric process, the YWAM program minimally and only indirectly interacted with the US church partners.

On the part of the US churches, there was a complex and challenging web of relationships. Each church committed individually to the core mission but also embraced mutually beneficial relationships with one another and sought to expand their existing partnerships with WR-USA and WR-Cambodia.

### Foundational Clarity and an MOU

The partnership began with shared values of *intentionality* and *commitment*. They *intentionally* wanted to test a new model of mission and were *committed* to working through the issues that were certain to arise.

“Where it succeeded, the mission did so by creating and living out a deeper understanding of reciprocity,” Tim explains. “Each partner – US churches, World Relief, the Cambodian staff, and communities of believers and non-believers in the villages of Cambodia – acknowledged that none of us had all the answers, but we each had something important to offer and to learn from one another.”

The initial, iterative polycentric model of collaboration was created by a group comprised of WR-Cambodia senior staff who were a mix of Cambodians and Westerners, a representative of WR-US, and the outreach pastors representing the various US churches. WR-Cambodia's existing ministries and developmental activities, rooted in preexisting strategies, provided the foundation.

Working together in this *multi-cook kitchen*, they developed a framework that eventually resulted in an MOU. This MOU defined shared expectations, communication requirements, and prioritized means by which the church partners might contribute their unique skills and resources. The methodologies adopted were built on, but not limited to, the strategies employed by WR-Cambodia.

“I am grateful for the intentional way our US church partners entered into partnership through a covenant (MOU) that was discussed among all partners in

advance,” Tim observes while reflecting on this cornerstone piece of the polycentric model.

“Over the years, we often referred back to the core principles of that covenant whenever we debriefed with the *home team* in Cambodia. Those core principles were reciprocity, a learning posture, a commitment to listen – especially to the culturally quieter voices – and an expectation that God and other partners would do the unexpected.”

### Developing the Leadership Model

From the conceptual document, the group moved on to defining polycentric operational activity that flowed in many directions (see figure 10.1). Churches connected with one another, WR-Cambodia, and, to varying degrees, WR-USA. A partnership lead team met annually in Cambodia or in the US to coordinate partner church activity, pray together, and share relational, strategic, and operational updates. In addition, we held quarterly virtual meetings. Task forces and working groups were also formed as needed, sometimes led by WR-Cambodia and sometimes by one of the church partners.

This polycentric model brought its own challenges, partially because it was hard to shed prior models and realities they created. “Each party struggled,” Tim explains. “For those used to being in charge and having all the answers, it was hard to listen. For those who historically had been ignored or minimized, it was a struggle to muster the confidence to speak up.”

### The Essential Role of Communication

Multi-level and multi-factor communication proved to be the greatest hurdle. Romroth Chuon, WR-Cambodia's CFO and program operations manager, took this a step further. “Sometimes, early on, I felt it was hard to know whether they are pretending respect or really valuing our input,” shares Romroth. “We had to discuss until we were on the same page. It took a lot of effort to get each side's buy-in, and then we had to work to contextualize it.”

An indication of this buy-in was the decision to recruit a partnership coordinator from one of the US church partners who would move to Cambodia and function as a connector and communications hub for all entities. This was achieved in the second year.

### Results

Ultimately this polycentric model saw growth in all entities that were generated and/or facilitated by the partnership. Measurable progress included the following:

- Additional village cell churches were planted and existing ones expanded in size with better-developed leaders
- WR-Cambodia’s launch of an anti-trafficking program
- The installation of a network serving provincial IT office systems in Cambodia
- US church partners deepened practices of intercession, service, economic development as ministry and mutual submission developed.

Together and separately, through mutuality and shared commitment, God used this polycentric missions model to effectively advance his kingdom mission.

### ADDITIONAL POLYCENTRIC MODEL ESSENTIALS

Because the success of polycentric missions relies on the cooperation of highly diverse partners rather than on organizational control, they face multiple hurdles. Two additional

elements are worth noting for their role in successfully engaging local churches. These can be illustrated by the polycentric partnerships developed by two of the Christian Reformed Church’s relief and development entities, World Renew-Uganda (WR-Uganda) and World Renew-Canada (WR-Canada), in collaboration with other strategic partners.

### Facilitators with Skills and Time to be Effective Bridgers

This polycentric missions partnership, now over 15 years old, has flourished due to the essential role played by their skilled facilitators. These key players build vision and ownership among all partners, especially local churches embarking on their first such relationship. Each facilitator provides training in cultural intelligence and builds partnering skills. Perhaps most importantly, the facilitator continues throughout the partnership to be a problem solver and guide through the adjustments almost all such efforts require over time. In short, the facilitator is an essential *bridger* (as the role is designated in Uganda) or *coach* (the parallel role in Canada).

Dr. Richard Mutava, director of World Renew-Uganda emphasizes, “[Our polycentric partnership] structure is deliberately designed to include tools, persons, and defined processes that help partner churches understand the dynamics involved. *Coaches and bridgers* act as facilitators and partnership development managers. They are *go-betweens* to ensure that communication and decision making are not lopsided and ensure that predetermined processes are followed, expectations are clarified, and the *savior syndrome* is contained.”

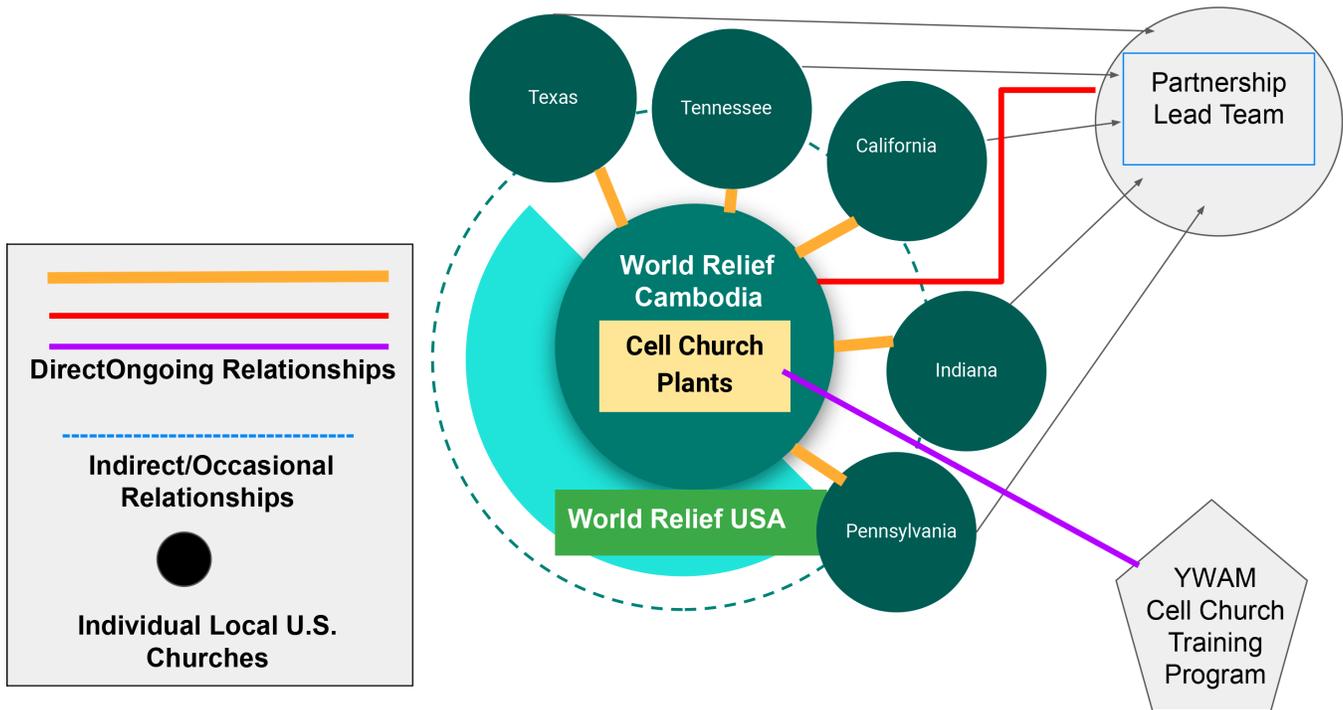


Figure 10.1: Cambodia polycentric partnership model.

In short, highly qualified facilitators have proved themselves essential to World Renew's church-to-church partnership model and to the success of other examples we do not have space to include here.

### Humility in Passing the Baton

As all of these models illustrate, the heart of polycentric mission is mutual commitment to shared goals achieved under local leadership. This requires Western partners to take the backseat and to serve when/as requested, resisting even the most subtle means of using influence or funding to promote their own agenda.

"It is not easy for Western churches to surrender the leadership, and occasionally there is a desire to take control and make things move faster, especially when it comes to making decisions," Dr. Mutava summarizes, "Stories of success and best practices from other churches that have walked a similar journey can help new churches see the advantages."

### A PATH FORWARD

Polycentric missions is not easier, but our experience confirms to us that it is better. Our world with its multicultural dynamics and vastly diverse contexts seems an ideal setting to experiment with fresh models such as these that we believe offer promise of more authentic kingdom impact. We would encourage churches and organizations that have begun walking a polycentric journey to use their experience to encourage others to take a similar road of collaborative missions. ■



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Lagarto, Ecuador: An African American pastor prays with two men. The pastor was part of a group meeting with local communities to build relationships and explore partnership opportunities.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WGA

# Loren Cunningham's Legacy: Transforming Missions

To say Loren Cunningham reshaped missions is not an overstatement. It's a fact. From the vision of waves turning into young people on every shore, to the last catalytic call to see every native tongue have an oral translation of the Bible, Loren was a man who loved the Lord and inspired peoples from every nation to join in on the adventure of God.

In the wake of Loren Cunningham's death, it's hard not to reflect on the life of a man who reshaped the way we do missions. That's not some grandiose posthumous comment, it's a fact. Countless upon countless lives have been impacted and changed because of this one man's "yes" to God's giant dreams.

Looking at my (Charis) own life, there isn't one aspect that hasn't been formed or affected by "Uncle" Loren's, global movement, Youth With A Mission (YWAM). As a third-generation YWAMer,<sup>1</sup> it's in my DNA. Because of him, I've experienced a vibrant community of believers from all walks of life and cultures going anywhere and everywhere, and not a mission environment of strict rules, where only specific people had the opportunity to go.

But what exactly did Loren do that was so transformative to how we do missions today?

## HOW IT BEGAN

In 1948, 13-year-old Loren knelt at an altar during a brush arbor revival meeting. God gave this boy a verse that would alter his life. "Jesus said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation'" (Mark 16:15).

Just under a decade later, in June 1956, days before his 21st birthday, Loren knelt again, this time by the guest bed he'd been given where he was staying in the Bahamas. He asked God what he was supposed to preach on that night. It was the continuation of that call from Mark.

God gave Loren a vision.

The white wall of his room transformed into a living map of the world, complete with waves crashing on every shore. It wasn't just an image, it was moving, he could see the waves spreading onto each continent, taking over the

land. As the waves reached the shore they transformed, turning into young people.

In his own words, Loren described what those young people were doing, "They were talking to people on street corners and outside bars. They were going from house to house and preaching the gospel. They came from everywhere and went everywhere, caring for people."

The vision ended as quickly as it came but the impact of it is still making waves today.<sup>2</sup>

Four years after experiencing this incredible vision, Loren founded Youth With A Mission, often known today simply as, YWAM. Within two years he married co-founder, Darlene Scratch. By 1969, the two would expand the movement by running the first School of Evangelism in Lausanne, Switzerland. I wonder if at that point they had any idea of the global impact their "yes" would have?

What started there, with roughly 30 participants soon became a polycentric movement. YWAM locations sprang up in Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK, to name a few. But this was just the beginning.

In 1972, with the Munich Olympics fast approaching, two castles outside of Munich were found to house the expected 1,000 young people from all over the world who were to come and evangelize during the games.

One of these, Schloss Hurlach, had only recently been refurbished and modernized from its sixteenth century style. YWAM miraculously purchased it in faith. Trusting that God would provide, the contract was signed, and within days the down payment appeared. What made this even more remarkable was the fact that only a handful of people were even aware and praying for the provision.

It was here Loren Cunningham, and other speakers like

Brother Andrew, Joy Dawson, and Corrie ten Boom, shared and inspired young people to go into the city, and all over the world, to evangelise and proclaim, “Jesus is Lord.”

In the documentary film titled, *Revolution of Love*, a YWAM production, Loren addressed hundreds of young people, “There were 50,000 young people that were marching through the streets of Moscow, Russia, and they were chanting this slogan, ‘We’re ragged and we’re poor, but we’re changing the world.’ I would to God that would’ve been 50,000 Christian young people that might say, ‘We’re ragged and poor, that part doesn’t matter, but we’re changing the world for the cause of Christ.’”<sup>3</sup>

A moment later, as the documentary shows clip after clip of young people sitting there listening, Loren added, “But now we are seeing young people as they’re marching now, on every continent of the world that are truly changing the world for the cause of Christ.”

I don’t think they knew it yet, but they were on the front lines of a global revival known today as the Jesus Revolution or the Jesus People.

### WELCOMING GLOBAL CHRISTIANS

One beautiful aspect of this growing global movement was how it welcomed Christian’s from every denomination and every nation. Today, this idea has been imbedded within YWAM’s core beliefs and foundational values. Stated within the core beliefs is the importance of fellowship, recalling the commitment a YWAMer has to the church, locally and “its mobile multiplying expression.”

Within the foundational values, a list of 18 values to help foster kingdom culture across YWAM’s decentralized centers worldwide, is value eight: Be international and interdenominational. Several others, also highlight the importance of keeping nations and denominations in mind.



Loren and Darlene Cunningham attend an event. Loren was often called the “de-regulator of missions.” YWAM’s unique model enabled young people from everywhere to serve everywhere.

By the mid ’70s, it became clear that young people coming to take part in the Schools of Evangelism and other short-term missions events were in need of more training focused on Biblical foundations and character development before they were sent out to share the gospel.

One beautiful aspect of this growing global movement was how it welcomed Christian’s from every denomination and every nation.

This came about when one YWAM leader, Leland Paris, was chatting with a student. Leland asked the young man about his religious background, and when the young man replied with one word, “Drugs.” Leland consulted with Loren and other YWAM leaders to form the Discipleship Training School (DTS). This has become the foundational course in YWAM training.

Just three years later, in 1977, Loren, along with Dr. Howard Malmstadt, would expand the movement again, establishing the Pacific and Asia Christian University (PACU). Leasing out, what was then called the Pacific Empress Hotel, in Kona, Hawaii, they began renovations to turn the property into the University.

In one recounting, Loren recalled how he was sitting on a metal chair in his empty flat, with Howard sitting on the only other piece of furniture in the room – another metal chair. He shared with Howard that God wanted YWAM to have a university. Howard’s response was, “Yes, I know that.” This surprised Loren, as only a select few were aware of this new polycentric vision. When Loren expressed his shock, Howard said, “Yes, God told me that last spring.”<sup>4</sup>

Within a short time, many training schools were developed in six of the seven continents. The aim was to make disciples of all nations and in all spheres of society. In 1989, the PACU’s Board of Regents recognised the various schools around the world linked to PACU no longer reflected the impact the university was having on higher education world-wide. At their meeting, it was a unanimous vote to change the name to the University of the Nations (UoFN).

Today there are 12 colleges within the university. People of every nation and denomination can earn degrees in several spheres of influence, from master’s degrees in science and technology to associates or bachelor degrees in health care, linguistics, sports or communication, etc. The impact is staggering.

Over the course of the next few decades, more new initiatives and ministries would develop throughout the world. These included impactful ministries like King’s Kids, Mercy Ships, 30 Days of Prayer for the Muslim World, Impact World Tours, Reconciliation Walk, and many more.

By 2010, during YWAM's 50th celebration, it was determined over five million people had taken part in this movement as either staff, student, or short-term volunteer. At that point there were tens of thousands of people from more than 200 nations serving in 191 countries at over 2,000 YWAM locations. It was the last time YWAM would take a census, today only God knows the number of YWAMers and YWAM locations world-wide.

### MULTIGENERATIONAL MISSIONS

Countless men and women in YWAM have met and married, raised families, and watched as their children entered a life of missions too. My (Charis) mom was there during those early years, smuggling Bibles into closed countries, and praying for people at the Munich Olympics.

I was raised on the YWAM Kona campus, running around after our community meetings, hugging all the grown-ups I liked, people like Darlene Cunningham and others, who I'd come to understand later were academic deans of different colleges within the UofN.

Several of the men and women I interact with on a daily basis, were also raised on the mission field with YWAM. Their families, and mine, walking out the vision of waves turning into people going anywhere and everywhere.

There are graduates working on blockbuster film sets and building wells in remote countries and nations. There are YWAMers who became leading voices for things only dreamt of in science fiction, creating one of the first operational flying cars – the intention behind this innovation coming out of a need to find a better way of reaching isolated parts of the world with medical supplies.<sup>5</sup>

The movement has become so vast, it's near impossible to recount every endeavor, event, ministry, or project. It's difficult to know how to define the details of the different works being done. And that's just what's happening in YWAM. There are YWAM alumni working in every sphere of society, using what the Lord taught them during their time of short-term missions, to continue to make an impact in their work today.

### ENDING BIBLE POVERTY

I (Lynn) count Loren and Darlene Cunningham to be trusted friends and inspirational leaders to both myself and my wife, Marti. Along with a few others, we pioneered YWAM in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s. In my tribute to Loren, I shared, "[We] met at one of the earliest courses and Loren asked us to pray about going to England to plant another School of Evangelism. Now there are nearly a thousand locations world-wide where YWAM courses are available."

In 2003, I was with Loren in Singapore for a leadership meeting. Loren was due to speak to a large group of Christian leaders at a dinner one evening. I asked him what subject he'd be speaking on, and Loren's response was, "I plan to convey vision to get a Bible into every home in China." At the time, I discouraged Loren from sharing on the subject. I told him that as one of the leaders of YWAM, I felt an obligation to have a plan to accomplish anything they talked about. Praise God, Loren spoke on the subject anyway.

It would be a few years before I understood the spiritual, visionary dynamic of what happened that night. Did Loren have a plan? No, but he had a prophetic word. It was as if God wanted to change the world again and he was looking for someone to have the faith to speak out, in faith, what he wanted. And it wouldn't happen unless someone spoke it out as God directed. Once again, Loren obeyed.

That dinner was the beginning of Loren Cunningham's primary message for the last 20 years of his life. His research confirmed that there were no sustained revivals without the Bible being available first. With more than 8,000 languages on earth and many without their own Scriptures, much work remained. So, wherever he went, his message from that time on was, "end Bible poverty now!"

In the last few years, he focused on oral Bible translation and then the essential importance of every person having access to the Scriptures in their mother tongue.

When asked shortly before his passing if he'd seen the fulfillment of the vision of waves turning into young people, Loren shook his head and stated, "Not even remotely close."



2010: Staff and students from the YWAM Harpenden base in Harpenden, UK gather together with Loren and Darlene Cunningham for a group photo in celebration of YWAM's 50th anniversary.

PHOTO COURTESY OF YWAM HARPENDEN

Could his last message to end Bible poverty be the fulfillment of that vision from 1956? Could the work that's being done, even today as you read this, be part of the answer? Only God knows. Whatever the outcome, it's a beautiful continuation of being polycentric missionally – finding and translating the Word of God into the heart language of every tribe and nation.

Being a missions movement that values prayer (this is another of YWAM's foundational values), one of the first things established to see this giant answer met was a website. On

## Whatever the outcome, it's a beautiful continuation of being polycentric missionally...

this site every praying Christian can adopt a mother tongue to pray for and watch the progress of it becoming an oral Bible translation. There are also other ways to help, either financially or inviting people to be a part of the answer.

It's important to note, this is not just a YWAM initiative. Knowing that countless other global leaders shared the same burden, Loren invited and met with hundreds of Christian leaders across denominational divides to partner with this cause.

Loren's desire was to fulfill Jesus' prayer in Matthew 6:10 to see God's will be done "on earth as it is in heaven." And when we think about what is being done in heaven, Revelations reveals a stunning picture, perhaps similar to that original vision of waves. "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelations 7:9).

When Loren received a diagnosis of small-cell lung cancer in January 2023, it didn't deter him from his mission and the Lord gave him many months more than the medical professionals expected. During this extended time, he was largely pain-free. He also had miraculous mental and spiritual capacity to focus on oral mother tongue Bible translation. On that subject, he could pray, think, and talk to others by the hour. So, he constantly refined the vision and his ability to explain it.

### A MULTIPLYING MOVEMENT

Many people have wondered, what will happen to YWAM now that Loren is gone? Will it continue to grow and be innovative, and transform missions?

There is no doubt that no one can replace him. However, from the very beginning he focused YWAM's heart and soul, encouraging every person from young or old, towards the biblical paradigm of the body of Christ, as it applies to YWAM. He spoke a vital message on that subject in 2002 and it became known as the "Tripod Message." A glimpse of that message is this: If we continue to practise the knowledge of the priesthood of all believers; if we

strengthen and guard our relationships; and if we recognise the wisdom and spiritual gifts of elders among us, we will multiply more and more and be a blessing to the whole body of Christ.

Loren was never a CEO in YWAM. He always worked with teams of leaders and leaned into the different spiritual gifts and strength of others. There are teams of elders and leaders all over the world and the vision God has given YWAM is broad and clear. If each person that makes up YWAM carefully nurtures the health of their relationships, remaining rooted in biblical beliefs, and pursues the vision of taking the good news to everyone in every mother tongue, YWAM, but more importantly, the vision of God will thrive.

Reflecting on the moments I (Charis) had the opportunity to be in Uncle Loren's presence, I believe this movement was able to have such a huge and global impact because of his servant-hearted leadership. Here was a man who graced millions of stages and spoke to crowds in the thousands who patiently sat laughing and praying with individual after individual, even though I'm sure many of those times he was jet-lagged and tired after giving a message.

He was The 6 Million Mile Man, having traveled over 6 million miles, always sitting in an economy seat. He was all this and more, yet one of my fondest memories will always be of a man in his late 70s dressed in dusty clothes, in a room by himself, quietly scrapping stucco off the floor of a new building that would house thousands and thousands over the years.

If we want to see our different missions grow, this is where it starts.

Learn more about Loren and YWAM at [ywam.org/about-us/history](http://ywam.org/about-us/history). ■

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**Charis Joy Jackson** works as a full-time missionary with Youth With A Mission (YWAM). For 14 years she served in a leadership capacity for the UofN's film and acting courses. Currently located north of London, she is working on establishing a narrative writing seminar to encourage and train aspiring authors. In her spare time, she weaves stories of speculative fiction.



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**Lynn Green** and his wife, Marti, established the work of Youth With A Mission in England in 1971. He's served as director of YWAM in the UK, chairman of the board of directors, YWAM's international chairman, and founder of "March For Jesus." Lynn now devotes much of his energy and time to international leadership development. As a result, he has ministered in more than 100 nations, encouraging and training younger mission leaders.

# Leading with Beauty

Do we know the story of what God is doing today? Often, we know how God has worked in the past and we have hope for what God will do in the future. But do we really know what God is doing here and now in the present? Across America, giving to missions is declining. And across the West, missionary attrition is rising. I believe one reason for this is that we have not done well telling stories of what God is doing around the world today.

Did you know that across Europe, thousands of churches are sitting empty? Buildings once home to vibrant Christian communities are left vacant and decaying. I've stood in monumental churches that birthed radical revivals. But now, many require a fee to enter or charge you to take photos as they struggle to make ends meet and simply stay open.

I came across an article a couple years ago showing the stark reality of Europe in its headline: "Europe's Churches Go on Sale."<sup>1</sup> Under the headline was a picture of a church converted into a skate park and a teenage boy performing a kickflip off a ramp.

Did you know that many church buildings in the UK are being turned into mosques? I've heard this from Muslim friends and seen it with my own eyes. Often, as I drive through our neighborhood, we will see Muslim men filing out of an old church building after Salat.

Did you know, just one century ago, Europe had the highest percentage of Christians of any continent, but now is considered by many to be the most unreached continent in the world?

"What does this have to do with storytelling?" you might ask. I'd respond, "Everything."

## THE FORGOTTEN VIRTUE

In the past century, Europe has gone from being the epicenter of Christianity to now being a secular society marked by post-Christianity. But this move away from Christianity is not just happening in Europe, it's happening in North America, too.

A new study released last year shows that for the first time *ever*, church attendees are now in the minority.<sup>2</sup> More people in the US have no religious affiliation than all people who regularly go to a church, synagogue, or mosque. In the West, we are increasingly living in a post-modern, post-Christian, post-truth world.

But what does this have to do with storytelling?

If you've taken introduction to philosophy in college, you may remember learning about a concept called "transcendentals." Transcendentals are the virtues all humans recognize – across cultures, time, ethnicities, and religions. The three transcendentals are goodness, beauty, and truth.

Christians love talking about transcendentals because we believe goodness, beauty, and truth all find their fullest revelation in the person and work of Christ. Jesus is the perfection of all goodness, the reality of all truth, and the wonder of all beauty. This is the mystery of God. Or, as the apostle Paul puts it, the mystery of Christ is that "All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in him" (Colossians 2:3).

All humans know realities that are good, true, and beautiful. Whether it is the goodness of helping the poor; the truth that humans must find purpose to make sense of life; or the beauty of a child running into his mother's arms.

Historically, Christians have used each of these virtues to speak about, write, and depict God. But when it comes to Western traditions of Christianity, Protestants have relied heavily on two of these three virtues to speak about Christ.

We have held high the truth of God's word and the goodness of God in our proclamation of the gospel. And for a long time, it worked! If you just got people into the stadium to hear Billy Graham proclaim the truth of the Bible, *then* people would respond. If you just remind people of the goodness of God, *then* they will be moved to give their life to Jesus.

But the world is changing. In a world where truth is seen as one's own opinion, and morality has been thrown out the window, how do we connect people to Christ?

Enter beauty.

## WHISPERS OF GOD'S PRESENCE

Sadly, Christians in the West have all too often forsaken beauty. In our quest to hold high the goodness and truth of God, we have done so at the expense of minimizing Christ's beauty. Increasingly, people don't care what you think is good; they don't want to hear what you believe is true. But every one of us knows beauty when we see it.

Author and pastor Brian Zahnd, in his book *Beauty Will Save the World*, puts it like this: "To a generation suspicious of truth claims and unconvinced by moral assertions, beauty has a surprising allure."<sup>3</sup> It may be the wonder you feel gazing at Van Gogh's *A Starry Night*, the transcendence of a sunrise over the peaks of the French alps, or the stab of joy in reading

*Les Misérables* for the first time. These aches in our soul are whispers of God's presence in all that is beautiful.

When our apologetic defenses for Jesus end at the goodness of God and the truth of Scripture, we will fail to capture and challenge a dying world still moved by beauty. I firmly believe we have overlooked the beauty of God for the goodness and truth of God. Of course, we need the goodness and truth, but if we divorce the two from the beauty of God, we will fail to enrapture those on the fringe of faith in Christ.

We must display the beauty of Christ again. And this is where storytelling comes in.

### HERALDERS OF BEAUTY

There is a lot we can critique about the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. But if there is one thing they understood that we have often forgotten, it's beauty. From ornately stained-glass windows to meticulously constructed cathedrals, they believed the visible display of Christ's church ought to mirror the beauty of Christ himself.

We may scoff at the decades these would take to build and the sheer amount of money put into constructing these edifices, but we cannot critique them for their desire to showcase the beauty of Christ to the world.

Look at our churches today. The cookie-cutter layout, warehouse-turned-sanctuaries with gray walls contain no wonder. They may look flashy, even *cool*, but they lack any sense of reverential awe. When did you last walk into a church and say, "Wow, I'm just enchanted by that welcome sign?" It's silly to even say! We've forgotten to keep beauty at the heart of the gospel.

I don't think the answer is to go back to the Middle Ages and build million-dollar churches or try to re-capture what the church did in the past. But I do think we have missed the mark for highlighting the beauty of the gospel to the world today.

In Psalms, David reminds us that "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth" (Psalm 50:2). God's sanctuary, God's very presence, is the perfection of beauty. And from the beauty within God, it shines forth to all the world.

Similarly, Solomon tells us, "God has made everything beautiful in its time." He goes on to say that God "has also

## In our quest to hold high the goodness and truth of God, we have done so at the expense of minimizing Christ's beauty.

set eternity in the human heart" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). There is a beauty beckoning to all of us, and God put it there for us to seek and find Christ.

In the book of Titus, the Apostle Paul tells us to "Adorn the gospel" of Jesus (Titus 2:10). What does this mean to adorn or beautify the gospel?

I believe capturing stories of God's work in the world is a way to beautify the gospel. This is our role as Christians, as ambassadors, as storytellers. To say, as the Psalmist, "Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me" (Psalm 66:16). Or, as another psalm puts it, "Publish his glorious deeds among the nations. Tell everyone about the amazing things he does" (Psalm 96:3).

We are called to be heralders of beauty.

Stories can be beautiful. Of course, not all stories are. It's easy to find a story lacking beauty—whether it's a cheaply made movie, music that profanes God, or art that objectifies people.

But stories can be beautiful. Have you ever finished a well-cast movie, seen a perfectly captured image, or read a beautifully written novel and wanted to give a standing ovation to the screen or a bearhug to the creator?

This is the power of story. Story has the power to do something a guidebook never could. As British children's book writer Sally Lloyd-Jones rightly notes, "Rules don't change you. But a story—God's Story—can."<sup>24</sup>

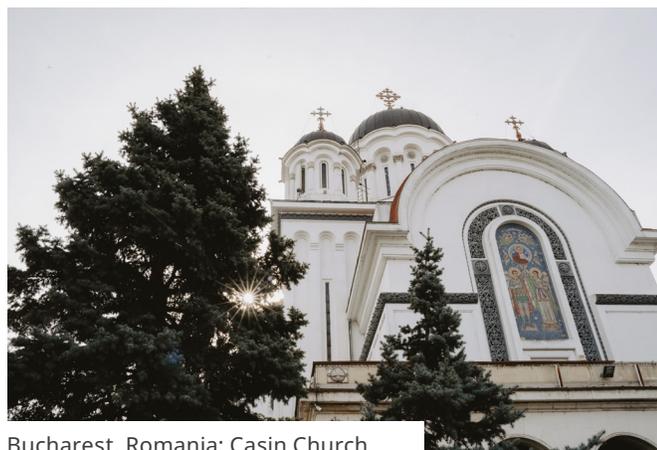
### THEOLOGY FOR THE MIDDLE

Stories are powerful. This is why so much of Scripture is narrative.

Jesus knew this. He knew the power of a well-told story. Did you know roughly one-third of Jesus' teachings were stories? I love how Mark captures Jesus' words as he looked out at a large crowd gathered to hear him. "Jesus said, 'How can I describe the Kingdom of God? What story should I use to illustrate it?'" (Mark 4:30).

Jesus was the greatest storyteller to ever live. He weaved stories—grand and small—into the fabric of his teaching to connect with all kinds of people. He told stories of winemaking, sewing, farming, and baking, stories of grand feasts and stories of small seeds.

And if this isn't incredible enough, Jesus didn't just leave his story to be read about in a book. No, the book wasn't fully formed for many years after Jesus, and the common person



Bucharest, Romania: Cașin Church

didn't have access to a written copy of Scripture for 1,500 years. Instead, he told his disciples, "You will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). They were the ones entrusted to carry on the beautiful story of love, sacrifice, forgiveness, and redemption that Jesus lived and taught.

And while today we have the book, the call is still the same – to be his witnesses.

To be a witness, a messenger, an ambassador implies a story we must know and tell. Do we know the story of what God is

## Do we know the story of what God is doing today?

doing today? Many times, we know how God has worked in the past, and we have hope for what God will do in the future. But do we really know what God is doing here and now in the present?

Writer Lauren Winner calls this gap our "theology for the middle."<sup>5</sup> Storytelling is a way we fill in the theology of the middle of what God is doing here and now.

Mission agencies that write stories, capture photos, and make videos of God's work in today's world to share with their constituencies participate being "theologians of the middle" – publishing stories of God's presence in the world. In fact, when any missionary shares their stories, they play the part of a theologian!

### PRIORITIZING BEAUTIFUL STORYTELLING IN MISSIONS

From the pandemic to the plethora of political unrest in various countries our world has seen in recent years, people are passionately making their voice heard. Often, it's hard to hear God's still small voice through the mayhem of noise. And sadly, the Church hasn't always done well to rise above the rabble of polarization and tribalism to focus on the mind-bending story of a God who stooped down into the dregs of human despair to make a united family out of all the warring peoples in the world.

Isn't this an amazing story? It is the most beautiful tale ever told – and it is true! So true, in fact, that across the world, there are groups – small and big – living out this story of God's redemption. Yet many organizations do not prioritize gathering and telling these stories. People who feel called to help capture and share these missional stories have few options of places to serve.

The world is full of noise, but as Donald Miller notes, "Story can make music out of noise."<sup>6</sup> We need stories to help make beautiful music out of the clashing noise the world is making. What would happen if gifted storytellers pooled their efforts to powerfully tell beautiful stories of what God is doing in the world?



South Africa: A missionary communicator takes a photo of a field team.

Across America, giving to missions is declining. And across the West, missionary attrition is rising. I believe a reason for this is because we have not done well at telling stories of how God is using kingdom resources to change lives and reporting stories that inspire people to say, "How can I get involved?"

I believe beautiful storytelling in missions could be the catalyst for a revival in world missions.

And even more than just inspiring those inside the Church, how can we use storytelling to reach lost people outside the Church? As Lincoln Brunner and Jim Killam say, when we do storytelling poorly and "people inside the church are uninspired by all this, how will it ever connect with anyone outside?"<sup>7</sup>

### UNLEASHING KINGDOM STORYTELLERS

It's time for a revolution. The beauty of the gospel must become central again to the global mission of God's people. Great storytellers help us remember what God has done in the past, equip us to be alive to what Jesus is doing in the present, and prepare us for what the Spirit wants to do in the future.

We live in the most technologically advanced age in the history of the world. The nations are literally at our fingertips. The massive gaps of information of how God is moving around the world have no excuse.

Missionaries who are writers, photographers, and filmmakers have an important place in God's mission. As kingdom storytellers, they can capture the beauty of God to share with a world in need of hope. And mission agencies need these storytellers. People passionate about Jesus, passionate about people, and passionate about stories can beautifully share God's amazing work with the world through words, pictures, and videos.

Missionaries who are writers, photographers, and filmmakers have an important place in God's mission.



Chad: Missionary communicators conduct a video interview of a colleague in his region of service.

The gospel of Jesus is good. It is true. And it is beautiful. In a truth-diluted and goodness-neglected world, beauty truly has a way to sway hearts and bring people into the kingdom of God like nothing else. May this vision for beauty infuse our strategies and guide our future. ■

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# Missionaries as Needy Patrons

Patronage relationships are common in many cultures. Western missionaries in these environments are often viewed as patrons by default. This can be an uncomfortable role. However, when we understand how reciprocity works in these contexts, we can participate in ways that strengthen local relationships.

In 2013, six months into my (Tamie's) decade in Tanzania, I was asked to be the patroness of a village. I was only passing through and was taken aback by this request. My first instinct was to read this request as a postcolonial power imbalance in which missionaries are wealthy and local people dependent on them.

I wondered how I might avoid such an interaction in the future or transform it to be more equitable. However, both avoidance and transformation approaches assume patronage to be a vulnerability rather than an asset for witness to Jesus Christ.

What if there is another way to resolve this tension? Understanding reciprocity in patronage cultures, is the key. This can help us become what Anne Dyer calls a "positively helpful patron."<sup>1</sup> In a healthy patronage model, a patron is not exempt from need.

## UNDERSTANDING PATRONAGE

"Our fingers are not all the same," says an Egyptian proverb, recognizing that people occupy different and uneven positions. In Swahili we say, "*Akili ni mali*," that is, "knowledge is wealth," because there are different things that we can offer to each other, not only money. Patronage relationships reflect these two dynamics.

Patronage relationships take place between two people of unequal status: a patron and a client. They both bring something to the relationship, enabling an exchange. The patron offers access to resources such as material goods, protection, influence, or employment that provide economic, political or spiritual benefit. The client responds with public gratitude, loyalty (even when it is costly, if the patron is out of favor), and sometimes service, gifts, and visits. Thus, patronage is mutually beneficial but not symmetrical: patron and client have different roles that they are expected to fulfil.

A patron who does not provide, who places unrealistic demands on the client or who uses their position to control the client has not fulfilled his or her obligations. A client who takes from the patron without returning a kindness or repaying the favor has likewise failed in his or her obligations.

A healthy model does not disempower the recipient but enables both giver and recipient to make significant contributions to the relationship. This is all held in check by social sanctions of honor and shame which are collectively ascribed on the basis of whether the patron or client lives up to their role. Thus, neither patron nor client is unaccountable.

There is flexibility in patronage roles. Brokers are intermediaries between patron and client. If there is great social distance, a client may be unable to approach a patron. They require someone closer to the patron to bridge that gap and open the pathway to the patron.

In this middle position, a broker's role is flexible: he or she appears as patron to those lower in status but approaches the one higher in status as a client. A broker will therefore typically deal in both kinds of resources, granting access to money or provisions for their client, and offering loyalty or honor to their patron. They are brokers not only of resources but of trust.

## PATRONAGE AND MISSIONARIES

Often missionaries do not get a choice about whether or not they are viewed as patrons. It is simply assumed that they will be.<sup>2</sup> Missionary attitudes to patronage differ. Some see patronage as an asset to their ministry. Others view it as a liability.

Jim Harries of the Alliance for Vulnerable Mission argues that missionaries "should not relate to local people as patrons using foreign money," because the associated gift-giving "requires deep cultural knowledge and an identity that a foreigner from a different worldview typically does not have."<sup>3</sup> While

the missionary may be thinking of themselves as generous, Harries identifies that engaging in patronage has a number of negative results.

First, Western missionaries acting as patrons but unaware of local dynamics can be unknowingly co-opted into local disputes without their knowledge or consent.<sup>4</sup> Second, because clients are required to give patrons honor and loyalty, they may outwardly agree with a Western missionary even when they privately disagree. The Western missionary may have no way of being able to ascertain otherwise. Harries points out that this can even occur at the level of theologizing, with local theologizing being circumvented by the need for local people to agree with Western theology.<sup>5</sup>

Third, this can lead to setting up of ministries that are a poor fit for the local context but which seem appropriate to the Western missionary. This can result in a waste of resources and ineffective discipleship.<sup>6</sup> With these very great obstacles and vulnerabilities, patronage is viewed as a liability to mission, one which needs countering by models such as vulnerable mission.

Vulnerable mission is “mission carried about by the Westerner in reaching the non-West using the language(s) and resources of the people being reached”<sup>7</sup> It arose out of a recognition that, “the idea that one could bring positive change

**Patronage is a means of investing in a person; a patron’s refusal to participate in it implies investment elsewhere. Such a refusal can be seen as a form of relational withholding.**

to a community using outside money” needed to be challenged because it has entrenched dependency.<sup>8</sup>

A vulnerable mission model seeks to resolve the complications missionaries encounter in patronage contexts by sidestepping patronage altogether. In a vulnerable mission model, a Western missionary uses only local resources and lives at a local level. To make this sustainable, Harries advocates missionaries keeping two separate *worlds*: “In one place a VM can be imitating the behavior of the poor... and in another the behavior of westerners.”<sup>9</sup>



PHOTO COURTESY OF IMB

Zambia: A missionary greets a friend. In highly relational cultures, participating in giving and receiving help is an essential part of building relationships.

... it is not the case that whenever we are needy we are in the position of a client, because patrons can be needy as well.

These should not be secret from one another but provide a way for Western missionaries to communicate Christ in their local contexts without the complication of dealing with patronage, and still blow off steam or keep a family in a Western context.<sup>10</sup> The vulnerable missionary's acceptance or welcome by local people is not based on financial incentives, so that their offering of the gospel is untainted. Anne Dyer points out that this model has a strong Scriptural foundation, such as in Matthew 10, Mark 6:8–9 and in Luke 10, where the disciples take nothing with them in their missionary work.<sup>11</sup>

However, James Tino and Derek Chinchen both found that not including patronage in their ministry model diminished rather than increased their effectiveness. In 1995, Chinchen argued that patronage is an “indigenous style of discipling” which is “practiced naturally by many national Christian leaders” and which foreign missionaries can also practice “if they understand the patron-client system found in most non-Western societies.”<sup>12</sup>

James Tino built on this paradigm in 2008, offering the story of José. Tino saw his relationship with his protégé José wither when Tino refused to be the patron for José's ongoing farming activities. Tino reflects that he did not realize the implications of José's requests, lending credence to Harries' concerns about missionaries needing deep cultural knowledge to navigate patronage relationships.

However, rather than sidestepping patronage as Harries advocates, Tino envisions a different solution, where, in exchange for assistance with his crops, José would certainly have applied himself diligently to his studies and preparation as a church leader ... improved his station in life, [and] eventually, he could have become a patron himself, mentoring other young men in the community as Christian disciples.<sup>13</sup>

For Chinchen and Tino, patronage can be the means by which longer-term and deeper relationship is secured as the client becomes the patron's spiritual child, much as the apostle Paul became the spiritual father of Timothy.<sup>14</sup> Patronage is a means of investing in a person; a patron's refusal to participate in it implies investment elsewhere. Such a refusal can be seen as *a form of relational withholding*.

This raises questions about Harries' model of having a known double life where the missionary operates “in their local contexts without the complication of dealing with patronage” while keeping separate (withholding) his wealth and even his family.<sup>15</sup> We suggest that here sidestepping patronage is just

as much a liability to mission as patronage itself. Indeed, Tino says, being “unwilling to work within a patron/client system benefits neither the missionary nor the persons to whom they are ministering.”<sup>16</sup>

With missionaries viewing both participation in patronage and sidestepping patronage as unsatisfactory for kingdom purposes, Rennae de Freitas suggests instead that a better way may be “embracing and redeeming patronage to better navigate the power imbalance in relationships.”<sup>17</sup>

While we applaud the notion of using patronage to navigate relationships, we are hesitant about concluding, as Freitas does, that this is necessary because, “the corrupt patronage systems in the Majority World fall short of offering flourishing, abundant life for the powerless.”<sup>18</sup> We suggest that there are elements of patronage itself which can be deployed in the missionary's life.

Here we follow Tino who argues, “the missiological task is not to attempt to “change the system”; rather it is to identify and understand patron/client relationships and utilize them for the good of the kingdom.”<sup>19</sup> We suggest that a fuller understanding of the dynamics of reciprocity is one way of utilizing patronage for the good of the kingdom.

## RECIPROCITY

Patronage is an asymmetrical, reciprocal relationship. Both client and patron contribute and receive, albeit different things. In patronage cultures, as in many societies around the world, reciprocity is the fundamental principle that undergirds the movement of material and social resources within societies. In patronage societies, these relationship-exchanges are marked by unequal reciprocity, but the inequality does not cancel out the reciprocity.

Reciprocity is a system of gift exchange that is never completely balanced. If both want the relationship to continue, then someone owes and someone is owed. Exchanging gifts does not constitute a ‘paying off’ of indebtedness. Rather, accepting a gift implies the commitment to return a gift, in what is a further ‘investing into’ the relationship. The aim of the exchange is not independence, but rather interdependence, a mutuality in which gifts do not have to be equal, either in substance or in amount.

This is where patronage differs from charity. Unlike in charity where the recipient's only role is to receive, in patronage, a client has an obligation to reciprocate in some way.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, clients who do not reciprocate are transgressing. Chinchen describes the “Big Man Mountain” where clients fulfil various obligations in order to access the patron's resources.<sup>21</sup>

These steps ensure that adequate time is given for patron and client to assess each other's character, for relationship to be built, and to protect the patron from a constant stream of requests divorced from relationality.<sup>22</sup> In the example of when I (Tamie) was asked to be the patroness of the village, my instinct to view it as engendering dependence was correct. The request came with no prior relationship, and since I was only passing through, it had little capacity for reciprocity to

be expressed. Reciprocity is a useful paradigm for assessing the genuineness of a relationship.

Reciprocity also implies that it is not only the client who is needy or who gains. The patron is in need of the client's loyalty, knowledge, or honor. Providing for the client engenders an obligation for the client to reciprocate in some way to meet a need that the patron has. Thus, the patron can be thought of as needy, perhaps not in material security but in relational terms.

A model of patronage where the patron is strong and dominates the client is highly flawed because it puts relationships at risk. A patron who is not vulnerable in some way cannot enter into a reciprocal relationship, the fundamental principle of patronage. Understanding reciprocity highlights the vulnerable aspects of the patron. This is where a vulnerable missionary can exercise patronage, in understanding their own vulnerability even as a patron.

The problem is, as Chinchén says, "American missionaries tend to be self-sufficient. It's hard for them to be needy. But not to receive from others makes them look superior."<sup>23</sup> The problematic dynamics of patronage which vulnerable mission has highlighted come from being an *inviolable* patron instead of a *needy* patron.

### NEEDY PATRONS

Key to harmonizing patronage and vulnerable mission is the recognition that patrons are needy. Western missionaries have many needs when they come to communities. We can often feel like clients in this sense. We need local people to be our patrons: to give assurance of protection to us, open the door

into networks of local relationship, perhaps help us to obtain lodging or a visa.

However, it is not the case that whenever we are needy we are in the position of a client, because patrons can be needy as well. As we become more established in a community or if our lifestyle marks us out as those who could be potential patrons, it is essential to maintain that sense of neediness. Chinchén advises, "if you have no needs, invent them. Ask clients to give valuable information in the community, to help with language study and to advise on cultural issues."<sup>24</sup>

This does two things. First, it indicates to people that you are seeking an ongoing relationship. If you do not have needs, how can they reciprocate to your patronage? The relationship is too one-sided for it to have longevity.

Second, being able to reciprocate preserves the honor of your client; without an opportunity to reciprocate, the client is shamed and the relationship will wither. Reciprocity therefore enables the relationship can continue. Furthermore, as a missionary has needs that are able to be met by clients, relationships are able to deepen and the missionary is able to be further integrated into the community.

I (Tamie) experienced these principles firsthand while my family and I lived in Tanzania. In 2021, Dar Es Salaam experienced an acute water shortage. The street where I lived with my family had no running water for two months. Our only option for water collection was to find a working line somewhere else in the city to re-fill and then transport some 20L water containers.

The problem was that the working line changed every day without public notification or advertisement. Without



PHOTO COURTESY OF IMB

Rogbane, Guinea: A missionary chats with a Susu farmer. Missionaries are often seen as patrons in the places where they serve. When they express needs that can be met by clients, it deepens relationships.

local networks, it was impossible to obtain water. My family and I had a clear need. A client of our – our *bajaji* (tuktuk) driver – stepped in to meet this need and offered to get the water for us. He also refused to take any money from us, either reimbursement for the water or payment for his transportation services.

When we asked him about why, he explained that we have a relationship, ‘we help each other out’ (*tunasaidiana*). By refusing payment, he indebted us to him, thus putting him in a position of giving to us. The amount was negligible compared to our patronage of the driver and thus the exchange was unequal, but the act was significant because it allowed him to reciprocate by giving, thus preserving his honor.

I also found that our neediness led to greater integration in the community. When our home was broken into, our neighbor took it upon himself to investigate the situation. He was involved in local government, at a level which had been previously unknown to us as it is played out primarily

...as a missionary has needs that are able to be met by clients, relationships are able to deepen and the missionary is able to be further integrated into the community.

at a relational level. He organized the neighborhood watch (of which I was previously unaware) to keep a special eye on our family’s place. This opened up new relationships in our community.

To thank him for this favor, I made him some special baked goods at Christmas. Again, the comment came that ‘we help each other out’ (*tunasaidiana*). It resulted in him checking in on our family more often, and coming to me more often when he had financial hardship and was in need of funds. Because of our family’s need, our relationship with him was deepened. We were further integrated into our local community, and better able to navigate the relationships and requests for patronage within it.

### CONCLUSION: GENEROUS, WITHHOLDING OR NEEDY?

Some forms of patronage by missionaries may be terribly damaging, including when missionaries are naively generous, unaware of the power dynamic at play. However, assuming this means patronage cannot be utilized by missionaries is equally problematic. This can position the missionary as a withholder or divert them away from contextualized discipleship models.

Understanding reciprocity within patronage relationships and operating as a needy patron goes a long way to resolving these tensions. This enables a missionary to recognize that it is inevitable that they will be viewed as a patron. However, by positioning themselves as a needy patron, they can deepen relationships and learn to operate within patronage cultures in a way that deepens rather than endangers discipleship. ■

1. Anne Dyer, “A Discussion of Vulnerability in Mission for the Twenty-first Century from a Biblical Perspective,” *Transformation* 34, no. 1 (2017): 38–49.
2. James Tino, “A lesson from Jose: understanding the patron/client relationship,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 44 no. 3 (2008): 320–327; Robert Oh, “Patron-Client Dynamics Between Korean Missionaries and Cambodian Christians,” *Asian Missions Advance* 48 (2015): 12–19.
3. Jim Harries, *Theory to Practice in Vulnerable Mission: An Academic Appraisal* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 1; Jim Harries, “Sidestepping Patronage with Vulnerable Mission,” paper presented at the Patronage Symposium, Beirut (October 4, 2018), 2.
4. Harries, *Theory to Practice*, 98.
5. Jim Harries, “Enabling the Majority World to Benefit from ‘Superior’ Western Theology,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 44 no. 2 (2017) 16–19.
6. Harries, *Theory to Practice*, 97.
7. Harries, *Theory to Practice*, xix. David Williams suggested an alternative definition in 2019, building on Eleanor Hof’s critique that vulnerable mission does not seek the participation of “non-Westerners.” He suggests instead, “Vulnerable mission argues that mission should take place in the language of the hearers and should empower the local church to care for the poor within its community using its own gifts and resources,” in David Williams, “Toward a Worldwide Theology of Vulnerable Mission,” *Missio Dei* 10, no. 2 (2019), accessed 8 September 2023, <https://missioideijournal.com/issues/md-10-2/authors/md-10-2-williams>.
8. Harries, *Theory to Practice*, 41, 42.
9. Harries, *Theory to Practice*, 102.
10. Harries, *Theory to Practice*, 105.
11. Dyer, “A Discussion of Vulnerability,” 41.
12. Delbert Chinchen, “The Patron-Client System,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 41 no. 4 (1995): 446–451.
13. Tino, “A Lesson from Jose,” 324.
14. Chinchen, “The Patron-Client System,” 451.
15. Harries, *Theory to Practice*, 105. A weakness of this suggestion is also that it assumes a male missionary and places his wife and children in the non-vulnerable, non-mission world, excluding them from mission except as auxiliaries.
16. Tino, “A Lesson from Jose,” 323.
17. Rennae de Freitas, “Power and Partnership: Implications of Redeemed Patronage in Missional Context,” *Missiology* 51, no. 3 (2023): 258–67.
18. de Freitas, “Power and Partnership,” 265.
19. Tino, “A Lesson from Jose,” 323.
20. Jayson Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures: Biblical Models and Missional Implications* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 323.
21. Chinchen, “The Patron-Client System,” 448.
22. It is different to the dynamic Ethiopian Mekdes Haddis describes where the appreciativeness of recipients obscures rather than clarifies the relationship. Mekdes Haddis, *A Just Mission: Laying Down Power and Embracing Mutuality*, (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2022), 127.
23. Chinchen, “The Patron-Client System,” 450.
24. Chinchen, “The Patron-Client System,” 450.



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# God's Mission Story Centers on Fellowship

Does God's faithfulness end when our usefulness runs out? While most Christians would deny this, the way we tell the story of God's mission reveals otherwise. This places a significant question mark over God's faithfulness, and it threatens our spiritual formation and our evangelistic integrity.

Does God use us – and then cast us away?

Most Christians would answer a hearty and immediate, NO. It is spiritually and missiologically fundamental to affirm the exact opposite: the One who calls us is faithful (1 Thessalonians 5:24). God does not treat us as disposable. Scripture instead celebrates God's enduring faithfulness to those whom the world casts away: the old and gray-haired (Isaiah 46:4; cf. Psalm 71:12–16); the lowly (1 Corinthians 1:26–31); those who break faith with God (2 Timothy 2:13). “Though father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me” (Psalm 27:10, BSB).

The truth that God is faithful even when *usefulness* runs out is precious to Christian mission workers. Retired missionaries must lean on it when their lives of service conclude. Families and friends of people with disabilities cherish them quite apart from societal standards of productivity. Practitioners of creation care respect the inherent value of lands regardless of their profitability.<sup>1</sup> As Christians, we invite outsiders to experience the steadfast love of God in Christ because they can rely upon it for their whole lives, without fear of being cast out or discarded.

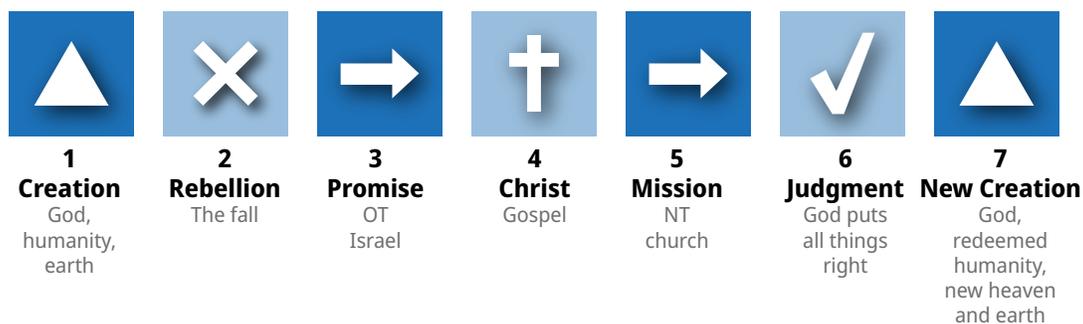
And yet for as fundamental as this truth is to our Christian faith and our mission practice, the way we commonly tell God's mission story is out of alignment. We have let a strong

element of *disposability* shape our understanding of the biblical narrative. Even unintentionally, we have placed a significant question mark over God's faithfulness, and this threatens our spiritual formation and our evangelistic integrity.

Two *moments* in our usual telling of the biblical mission story that put *usefulness* in bold theological relief. The “standard canonical narrative” *instrumentalizes* the election of Israel and the incarnation of the Son of God, and in closing it proposes a different, non-instrumental approach.<sup>2</sup> A better telling of God's mission story understands both these events not as *means to an end*, but rather as *God's goal(s) from eternity*. God's mission in Scripture is not mainly a salvage operation but an (interrupted) plan for fellowship to draw close to his creatures.

## THE STANDARD CANONICAL NARRATIVE

Old Testament scholar and missiologist, Christopher J. H. Wright's most recent book, *The Great Story and the Great Commission*, exemplifies the standard telling of God's mission story in Scripture. It presents the Bible as “one whole coherent narrative.”<sup>3</sup> As Wright admits, the biblical story twists and turns and contains many smaller subplots.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, Wright contends that the whole Bible can be concocted into a single drama in seven acts.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 14.1** – The Seven Acts of the Biblical Drama from Christopher J.H. Wright's, *The Great Story and the Great Commission* (Baker Academic, 2023). Used with permission.

According to Wright's explanation, act 1 at the left hand of the diagram represents *Creation*; it constitutes the "good beginning" to the biblical story in Genesis 1–2. The triangular symbol indicating this act visualizes a three-way relationship between God, the earth, and humanity. Wright emphasizes the controlling interpretive importance of act 1, writing: "It is important to take this first act of the Bible very seriously, as the foundation of all the rest."<sup>6</sup>

Notably, act 7 at the right hand of the diagram repeats the same image. Wright explains this visual reiteration: "If we don't have a strong grasp of the creational *beginning* of the story and all that it means for human life, societies, and cultures, we will not have a good understanding of the *goal* of the rest of the story or of its wonderful *ending* in the new creation."<sup>7</sup> Stated differently: act 1 is not just the starting condition or set-up of God's story. Its role is much more substantive: it provides the benchmark toward which God seeks to restore creation – to accomplish a "factory reset," so to speak.

The standard narrative thus resembles a U-shape; the end is a return to the beginning. The Dutch mission worker Edjan Westerman describes it this way: "Scripture, interpreted from this traditional canonical perspective, hinges on the first chapters of Genesis, and because of this on the restoration of God's original intentions."<sup>8</sup>

## The truth that God is faithful even when usefulness runs out is precious to Christian mission workers.

### THE DISPOSABILITY OF ISRAEL

The second act in the sevenfold drama of Scripture is, according to Wright's diagram, *Rebellion*, or the Fall. This event occurs in Genesis 3, though its effects spiral out in Genesis 4–11. Human disobedience disrupts each part in the original triangular relationship between God, creation, and humankind. Genesis 11 is the lowest point in the story, "what seems like a dead end."<sup>9</sup>

But then God reveals a counter-initiative. In Genesis 12, God promises descendants and a homeland to the man, Abraham. God also announces the divine purpose to bless all nations in (or through) him. This is act 3, which Wright captions *Promise*. Fittingly, he designates it with an arrow pointing rightward. Even though God's promise faces toward the future, act 1 (Creation) continues to guide and govern the plot, including this episode. As Wright writes: "what we need to see is how this Abrahamic promise that drives act 3, and indeed the rest

of the biblical drama, is connected to act 1."<sup>10</sup> God's promises to Abraham concerning his descendants and his homeland are only a miniature and microcosm of God's original creational intention for *all* humans and the *whole* earth.

Wright thereby *instrumentalizes* the election of Israel. The nation that descended from Abraham and the land that they inherited are turned into waypoints in God's larger purpose that reaches beyond them. Wright spells this out explicitly and repeatedly: "Out of all nations on earth, God created and called one, Israel, to be the means of bringing blessing to the rest."<sup>11</sup> Or again: "Israel is only there because God has plans for the whole earth and all nations."<sup>12</sup> If this *means-to-an-end* framing were not clear enough, Wright repurposes the famous verse from John's gospel: "God so loved the *world* that he chose Abraham and created *Israel*."<sup>13</sup>

Wright takes God's promise to bless all nations through Abraham as a basic charter for mission. The promise in Genesis 12:3 is "a fundamental declaration of God's intention, the agenda for the mission of God for the rest of human history."<sup>14</sup> Indeed: "the mission of God is ... simply God keeping his promise to Abraham."<sup>15</sup> God's mission is, on this standard telling, also therefore basically *instrumental* and *reparative*: God summons Abraham and summons all subsequent agents of blessing in order to return creation to its original good condition. That is the mission of God: repair ("to rid his whole creation of evil"<sup>16</sup>). Mission work, too, is a means to an end, accelerating the sliding motion on the U-shape of God's story.

But instrumentalizing Israel has the effect of making Israel *disposable*. This can be seen in several dimensions. First, it makes Israel hermeneutically "indecisive."<sup>17</sup> As the theologian Kendall Soulen observes, the standard canonical narrative places certain episodes of the Bible in the interpretive *foreground*. Specific chapters emerge as focal points: in the Old Testament, these are preeminently Genesis 1–2 and Genesis 12. The vast remainder of Old Testament material "recedes into the *background* of the standard canonical narrative."<sup>18</sup> The result is, as Soulen says, a commonplace "leap" in Christian rehearsals of God's story: from Genesis 1–3 with its arc of Creation and Fall straight to the New Testament "interpreted as God's deliverance of humankind from the fall through Jesus Christ."<sup>19</sup>

Christopher Wright notices this same leap. He identifies a "biblical deficiency of some evangelical traditions" such that they "'jump' ... from Genesis 3 (the fall, act 2) straight to Jesus and the cross (the climax of act 4), as if nothing in act 3 (the largest part of the Bible!) is of any relevance to understanding or explaining 'the gospel.'"<sup>20</sup> Yet Wright's own framework makes this jump inevitable. Wright may personally love and value the "narratives, laws, songs, and prophecies [of the Old Testament]," but the effect of loading all of them into act 3, the promise of God to bless all nations, makes it structurally impossible for them to contribute more robustly. The reader already knows the essential contours of God's identity and God's purpose; the exodus, the tabernacle, the monarchy, the exile, all these other Old Testament passages can only offer lessons auxiliary to Genesis 1–3 and Genesis 12.

The second implication of instrumentalizing Israel's election expands on the first: if most of the Old Testament is hermeneutically *indecisive*, even interpretively disposable, then Israel itself is also disposable. On Wright's telling, "the promise of the Old Testament comes to fulfillment when Jesus of Nazareth is born ... acts 1–3 point toward what God accomplished in act 4."<sup>21</sup>

But as Edwin van Driel notes, "if Israel were only elected for the sake of a larger goal, the grounds for this relationship disappear as soon as the goal is reached."<sup>22</sup> Once Israel's *job* is *done*, their standing before God becomes obsolete, even if Abraham's descendants persist

as the Jewish people down through history. This obsolescence of God's covenant relationship with Israel is exactly what Christian theology has historically taught. Called "supersessionism," this teaching has supported Christian persecution of Jews.<sup>23</sup>

Making Israel disposable in these ways has further, negative missiological consequences.<sup>24</sup> It undermines our Christian profession of God's faithfulness. How can we say to retired missionaries that God treasures them even when their health fails, their capacities diminish, and their usefulness recedes – given this way of telling Israel's election? How can we support

the disability community if our story of Israel is so conditioned by their *usefulness* to God's mission? How can we relate non-extractively to the earth if God relates in this way to Israel? More than that: how can we invite outsiders to trust this God – a God who calls Israel God's firstborn son (Exodus 4:22) but then treats that son as a means to an end?<sup>25</sup>

Thankfully such a God is not at all the one whom Scripture attests! God set divine love on Israel not "because they were more numerous than other peoples, for they were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved them and kept the oath he swore to their



Kenya: Two women walk together to gather water. At the heart of God's mission is relationship.

ancestors” (Deuteronomy 7:7–8, adapt.). This is a beautiful tautology – the Lord loved them because he loved them. The Old Testament also frequently depicts God’s relationship with Israel through other non-instrumental metaphors such as marriage, betrothal, and friendship.<sup>26</sup> Far from being disposable, the New Testament affirms that God’s covenant with Israel is “irrevocable” (Romans 11:29).

## THE DISPOSABILITY OF THE INCARNATION

The standard canonical narrative supposedly centers on Jesus Christ. This can be seen in Christopher Wright’s diagram, where *Christ*, act 4 of the biblical drama, sits visually in the middle. Despite this presentation, however, Christ’s incarnation, life and ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension all structurally answer to God’s prior goal of restoring creation to its original condition. As with the calling of Israel, the enfleshment of the eternal Son is, on the standard telling, *instrumental* and *reparative*. The Son comes to “to rid his whole creation of evil.”<sup>27</sup> Indeed one might go so far as to say that the incarnation is an “emergency measure”<sup>28</sup> occasioned by the human rebellion in act 3 and oriented toward act 7, the new creation. The biblical story retains its basic U-shape. Far from orbiting around Jesus Christ, the standard narrative places *him* in an ellipse around creation. Christ wins the decisive victory over sin and evil; he accomplishes, at least anticipatorily, the “factory reset” of creation back to its good, primordial state.

Just as in the case of Israel, so also with Jesus Christ: the effect of casting him as a contributor (even the pivotal contributor) to a story whose essential coordinates come from outside him is to render Christ hermeneutically “indecisive.”<sup>29</sup> Act 1, Creation, governs and norms Jesus’s ministry.

He may be the “Word of God,” as John’s gospel confesses (John 1), but in fact, his is a word in support of God’s *prior* word, expressed more fully in creation at the beginning. He may declare himself “Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and

the End” (Revelation 22:13), but actually, his career stands between a different beginning and end, namely creation and new creation. The evangelical theologian Oliver O’Donovan understands even the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as “the confirmation of the [old] world-order God has made.”<sup>30</sup> Christ corrects and confirms creation.

The standard narrative thus makes the incarnation interpretively secondary. One hesitates to say *disposable*, but the effect is similar to that of the Old Testament: the reader already knows the essential contours of God’s identity and God’s purpose on the basis of Genesis 1–2. The content of Christ’s incarnation is auxiliary.

Did Christ come only to save us, such that, once we are saved and restored, the basis of our relationship with him becomes obsolete?

As odd and perhaps impious as it sounds, this hermeneutical disposability opens the way for another and more radical disposability. Orthodox Christians by definition affirm the divinity of Christ. But if the incarnation of the Son is truly an “emergency measure” occasioned by human rebellion, then, having achieved its goal of restoring creation, it becomes unnecessary – even obsolete. The Dutch theologian Arnold A. van Ruler supplies a provocative example of this reasoning. According to one summary of van Ruler:

God did not create the world for the sake of the incarnation, but the other way round: Christ’s salvation has been accomplished in order that the creation may exist before God. Van Ruler considers the incarnation to be God’s temporary measure to rescue his creation from sin, evil and corruption. In his eschatological kingdom, *the incarnation will be abolished*.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, “the eternal Son of God took on human nature in the incarnation as a reaction to human sin [and] this human nature will be laid aside in the eschaton when sin, death and guilt have been destroyed.”<sup>32</sup> This is, as van Ruler admits, a “revolutionary innovation in Christian belief,”<sup>33</sup> and it certainly goes beyond what Wright or other biblical theologians of mission claim.<sup>34</sup> But it is consistent with their instrumentalizing of the incarnation within the story of God’s mission. The instrumental logic it follows is the same.

Such instrumentalizing bears immense missiological consequences. It curtails God’s faithfulness, making it retractable. If the Son of God drew near to us in his incarnation only to complete a certain term-limited *job*, and then once that task is complete, *he rescinds that nearness* – does this not undercut all our Christian conviction about God’s desire to establish fellowship with us – his creatures? Did Christ come only to save us, such that, once we are saved and restored, the basis of our relationship with him becomes *obsolete*?

## A BETTER TELLING OF GOD’S STORY

A better telling of the story of God’s mission renounces both these forms of disposability thinking. Instead of an instrumental view of Christ, it takes departure from exactly the possibility that van Ruler opposed: it asserts that God did create the world for the sake of the incarnation. As Colossians 1:16 says, “All things were created through him and *for him*” (emphasis mine; Greek: *eis auton*). Far from being an ad hoc emergency measure, God’s mission from eternity was to draw close to creatures in the person of the Son. Sin and evil

interrupted and complicated this venture! and the coming of the Son has the effect of “rid[ding] creation of evil.”<sup>35</sup> But the *raison d’être* of incarnation is not *repair* but *communion*.

If this be so, act 1, Creation, is not (in Wright’s words) “the foundation of all the rest.”<sup>36</sup> Creation is good – but it is not yet complete in Genesis 1–2. Rather, creation does not reach its fullness until later in the biblical story. It is, in Kendall Soulen’s phrase, a “creation-for-consummation”: God intended from eternity to grow and develop the world from its initial good condition, to prepare it to be a home for God’s own presence (i.e., its consummation).<sup>37</sup> Visually, we might reconfigure Wright’s diagram so that Christ is in the furthest left-hand corner, since *he* is the beginning, the *Archē* (Colossians 1:18). This results not in a U-shaped story but rather *a diagonal*: the end surpasses the beginning.

Instead of being an auxiliary word in service to a yet more original or primary word (namely, Creation), this better telling of God’s mission story can more fully confess that Christ is truly and fully the Word of God, the “exact representation of [God’s] being” (Hebrews 1:3). Christ is the benchmark: the measure of God’s will is not Genesis 1–2, but rather, the incarnate Son. Creation refracts and anticipates him, not the other way around. So, too, Christ is the definitive image of God, and humans are made after his likeness (Colossians 1:15). As such, he is unsurpassable within God’s economy. There can be no completion of a term-limited job. Abolition of his incarnation is impossible.

A better telling might also reconsider the election of Israel. Israel is not “there because God has plans for the whole earth and all nations.”<sup>38</sup> Rather, as the medieval Jewish commentator Rashi said it, “God created the heavens and the earth *for the sake of Israel*.”<sup>39</sup> Instead of being a means to an end beyond it, Israel embodies God’s plan from everlasting. God’s glory indwelt the Tabernacle at the center of the Pentateuch; Israel is thus embedded within God’s “creation-for-consummation,” integral to God’s mission of making creation a home for God’s own presence. On such a recalibrated telling, no danger of obsolescence hangs over Israel’s status.

Much remains to be said about this better telling of God’s mission story. Where Israel might fit on a revised version of Wright’s diagram is difficult to discern: some Christian theologians who are attentive to the irrevocability of God’s covenant would keep Israel in the third and promissory position after Christ, Creation, and Rebellion.<sup>40</sup> Others would place Israel in second place, following Christ but before the Fall.<sup>41</sup>

Regardless, a better telling means that mission, too, loses its *instrumental* and *reparative* profile. Mission is not time-limited, an endeavor that will end when God renews the earth. It is, rather, an ongoing invitation to draw near to God because God has already drawn decisively near to us in Christ. Finally, this better telling allows us to reclaim God’s faithfulness beyond instrumentality. We can say a hearty, “NO: God does NOT use us and cast us away.” God desires

fellowship with us whether we are old and gray-haired, faithless or faithful, productive or fallow. ■

1. See, for example, Norman Wirzba, *This Sacred Life: Humanity’s Place in a Wounded World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
2. The language of “standard canonical narrative” comes from R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996). Other biblical theologies of mission that follow the same plotline as Wright include Arthur Glasser (*Announcing the Kingdom*), Michael W. Goheen (*A Light to the Nations*), and Brad Kelle (*Telling the Old Testament Story*) – among many others.
3. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Great Story and the Great Commission*, *Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 13.
4. Wright, *Great Story*, 14. Wright also concedes that the Bible contains material that is not narrative at all, such as wisdom literature, psalms, or the New Testament letters.
5. Wright, *Great Story*, 15–16.
6. Wright, *Great Story*, 18.
7. Wright, *Great Story*, 18.
8. Edjan Westerman, *Learning Messiah, Israel and the Nations: Learning to Read God’s Way Anew* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2018), §13.7. Westerman was a Dutch pastor and former staff worker for the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students.
9. Wright, *Great Story*, 21.
10. Wright, *Great Story*, 23.
11. Wright, *Great Story*, 23.
12. Wright, *Great Story*, 24.
13. Wright, *Great Story*, 25.
14. Wright, *Great Story*, 22.
15. Wright, *Great Story*, 25.
16. Wright, *Great Story*, xiii.
17. Soulen, *God of Israel*, 31.
18. Soulen, *God of Israel*, 32.
19. Soulen, *God of Israel*, 32.
20. Wright, *Great Story*, 55–56n10.
21. Wright, *Great Story*, 27.
22. Edwin Chr. van Driel, “Incarnation and Israel: A Supralapsarian Account of Israel’s Chosenness,” *Modern Theology* 39 (2023): 7.
23. R. Kendall Soulen, “Supersessionism,” in *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 413–414.
24. A critique I owe to R. Kendall Soulen, “Why Did God Choose the Jews?” in *Irrevocable: The Name of God and the Unity of the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 82.
25. Wright brings up his own sons in a very confusing example on *Great Story*, 24.
26. See van Driel, “Incarnation and Israel,” 7.
27. Wright, *Great Story*, xiii.
28. Westerman, *Learning Messiah*, §13.7.
29. Soulen, *God of Israel*, 31.
30. Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1986), 14.
31. My italics. Quotation taken from Adriaan van der Dussen, “The Creator Blasphemed? A Critical Analysis of Van Ruler’s Rejection of Augustine’s Use of the Distinction *uti et frui*,” *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 73 (2019): 273. Edjan Westerman first alerted me to the significance of van Ruler (*Learning Messiah*, §13.7).
32. Garth Hodnett, “A.A. van Ruler’s idea of the ‘messianic intermezzo’ and its implications for understanding the Old Testament,” unpublished study, p. 1, [https://www.academia.edu/38227199/A\\_A\\_van\\_Rulers\\_idea\\_of\\_the\\_messianic\\_intermezzo\\_and\\_its\\_implications\\_for\\_understanding\\_the\\_Old\\_Testament](https://www.academia.edu/38227199/A_A_van_Rulers_idea_of_the_messianic_intermezzo_and_its_implications_for_understanding_the_Old_Testament).
33. Quoted in van der Dussen, “The Creator Blasphemed?” 273n43.
34. See note 2 above.
35. Wright, *Great Story*, xiii.
36. Wright, *Great Story*, 18.
37. On this theme, see now Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *The Home of God: A Brief Story of Everything, Theology for the Life of the World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2022).
38. Wright, *Great Story*, 24.
39. Quoted in Paul M. van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality, Part II: A Christian Theology of the People Israel* (San Francisco: Harper&Row, 1987), 54.
40. R. Kendall Soulen, “Israel and the Nations in the Time of Preparation,” in *Covenant and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Mark S. Kinzer*, ed. Jonathan Kaplan, Jennifer M. Rosner, David J. Rudolph (Eugene: Pickwick, 2023), forthcoming.
41. van Driel, “Incarnation and Israel”; Westerman, “Presence and Involvement: The Pre-incarnate Messiah in the History of Israel,” *Keshar* 41 (2022), <https://www.kesharjournal.com/article/presence-and-involvement-the-pre-incarnate-messiah-in-the-history-of-israel/>.

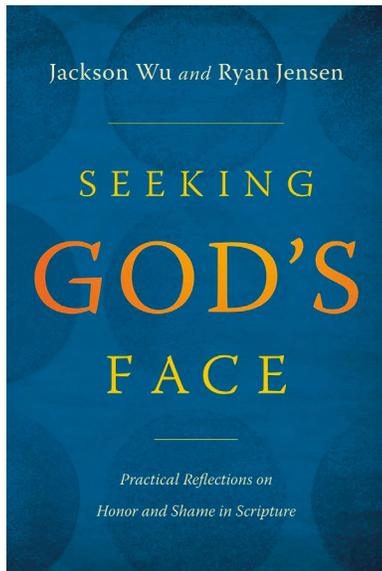


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# Seeking God's Face

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## Seeking God's Face: Practical Reflections on Honor and Shame in Scripture

JACKSON WU AND  
RYAN JENSEN  
Lucid Books, 2022  
305 pages  
US\$18.99

### For Further Reading

*Honor, Shame, and the Gospel: Reframing Our Message and Ministry* by Christopher Flanders and Werner Mischke (William Carey Publishing, 2020).

*Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Foundations and Practical Essentials* by Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker (IVP Academic, 2016).

*The Global Gospel: Achieving Missional Impact in our Multicultural World* by Werner Mischke (Mission ONE, 2015).

After writing the academic text *Saving God's Face*, Jackson Wu follows with this devotional work that seeks to touch not only the head but also the heart and hands (viii). Containing 101 Scripture passages highlighting honor/shame concepts, *Seeking God's Face* delves into the realm of spirituality and the soul, exploring ways of thinking and heart motives.

Covering concepts such as face, status reversal, filial piety, reciprocity, hospitality, and people-pleasing, the entries span the breadth of the complicated constructs of honor and shame. Students exploring honor and shame will also note mentions of glory, reputation, reproach, contempt, insult, indignity, and the like. Since we are created for God's glory (Isaiah 43:7), pondering these reflections nudge us toward that noble purpose.

Each uniquely titled selection contains a passage of Scripture, a commentary, a parting reflection, and a prayer. Written in the first person, the commentaries seem to originate with Wu and leave one to assume Ryan Jensen composed the parting reflections and prayers. The first reflection, "The Genesis of Glory," begins with Psalm 104:1–2 and addresses God's worth.

Subsequent explorations follow the order of the biblical canon without addressing every book. The final devotion entitled "Maligned for Following Christ" reflects on 1 Peter 4:3–4. After coming to the end, I longed to read an entry from each biblical book and a concluding reflection from Revelation (perhaps 21:23–27), tying the concepts together and giving final honor to God, just as the reflections began.

In each devotion, Wu tends to examine the text surrounding the chosen verses and occasionally interjects personal stories. The depth of the writing illustrates his years of intercultural experience: "Greatness itself entails giving honor to others" (125). "Can it be that showing honor to others equates to loving them?" (134). The reader will encounter similar refreshing insights with each reflection.

In exploring Job, for instance, the writers present an interesting thought regarding Job's friends: "It was *their* sin that caused him shame" (57). The friends' questioning, their dishonoring, and their lack of trust stabbed the heart of Job's character and may have wounded more than his physical discomfort. What a novel thought. Likewise in the New Testament, the authors again portray discerning and insightful writing – notably when discussing the plight of the Samaritan woman at the well and Jesus' interaction with her.

For whom is this book suited? The missionary ministering in honor/shame settings may identify and come to better understand his/her audience. Wu's years of working in collectivist China shine through so that one who so wishes might gain an insider perspective into this worldview. Filled with provocative quotes, this resource will both challenge the heart and inform the mind. *Seeking God's Face* contains enough academic information to press any reader toward further exploration of the critical concepts of honor and shame. ■

# Christ-Followers in Other Religions

Reviewed by **Alan Howell**, who served in Mozambique among the Makua-Metto people (2003-2018) and as visiting professor of missions at Harding University (2019-2023).

**H**ow can we thoughtfully consider the stories of followers of Jesus who instead of converting *out of* their religion, faith, or family, are convicted to *stay in* as agents of reconciliation? What would it look like to find ways to assist and honor these brave ones who are willing to be *strange Muslims* or *strange Hindus* while many of us may perceive them as *strange Christians*?

Since both the paths of *staying in* and *converting out* each have their own share of pitfalls and dangers, where can we find wise guides to help us navigate this terrain? Darren Duerksen steps into this complex space, sharing from his own experience in South Asia, and introducing readers to the testimonies of those who have been a part of insider movements. His book is a helpful orientation, highlighting the stories of those who are *staying in* their religious and relational communities for the sake of Christ.

Duerksen begins by framing his exploration in terms of practice and on-the-ground realities (4–5). This way of starting the conversation helps move us past some barriers created by colonialism and helpful but limiting missiological conceptualizations like people groups and contextualization (5–13). Duerksen argues that “insider movements are shaping alternative missiological imaginaries from which other Christ-followers can learn, or re-learn, insights about God

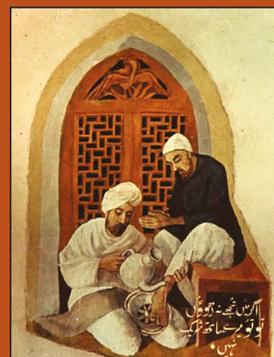
and his mission” (15). One of those insights is that hybridity is not something we necessarily need to be afraid of, because God has often been at work in hybrid religiosity.

The book’s middle section is made up of case studies of insider Christ followers. The stories of Black Elk (a Lakota Native-American Christ-follower) and O. Kandaswamy Chetti (a Christ-following Hindu reformer) are followed by contemporary examples from different parts of the world. Duerksen allows the reader to listen to the voice of the insiders whenever possible, while also bringing in reflections from *alongsiders* – those Western and non-Western companions and friends of insiders (65). These stories allow us to consider additional questions that are covered in the last section of the book: revelation and religious texts, salvation, conversion, and family relationships.

Duerksen is a helpful and thoughtful guide, introducing readers to a wider conversation about insider movements. Listening to their perspectives develops the imagination necessary for what it would take for someone to leave the ninety-nine of World Christianity to go after the one (or more) lost sheep in their own religious tradition. This would be a helpful resource for both undergraduate and seminary classes. ■

## Christ-Followers in Other Religions

The Global Witness of Insider Movements



Darren T. Duerksen

### Christ-Followers in Other Religions: The Global Witness of Insider Movements

DARREN TODD DUERKSEN  
Regnum Books  
International, 2022  
206 pages  
US\$21.00

### For Further Reading

*Better Religion: A Primer for Interreligious Peacebuilding* by John D. Barton (Baylor University Press, 2022).

*Toward Respectful Understanding and Witness among Muslims: Essays in Honor of J. Dudley Woodberry* edited by Evelyne A. Reisacher (William Carey Library, 2012).

# All That Jesus Commanded

Reviewed by **Randy L. Jackson**, PhD, who served 18 years with the International Mission Board. Currently, he is the associate pastor of discipleship and missions at First Baptist Church in Milton, Florida.

You Must Be Born Again • Repent • Come to Me • Believe in Me • Love Me • Listen to Me • Abide in Me • Take Up Your Cross and Follow Me • Love God with All Your Heart, Soul, Mind, and Strength • Rejoice and Leap for Joy • Fear Him Who Can Destroy Both Soul and Body in Hell • Worshipping God in Spirit and Truth • Always Pray and Do Not Lose Heart • Do Not Be Anxious about the Necessities of Daily Life • Do Not Be Anxious about the Threats of Man • Humble Yourself by Making War on Pride • Humble Yourself in Childlike, Servant-hood, and Broken-hearted Boldness • Do Not Be Angry—Trust God's Providence • Do Not Be Angry—Embrace Mercy and Forgiveness • Do the Will of My Father Who Is in Heaven—Be Justified by Trusting Jesus • Do the Will of My Father Who Is in Heaven—Be Transformed

## ALL THAT JESUS COMMANDED

*The Christian Life  
according to the Gospels*

JOHN PIPER

### All That Jesus Commanded: The Christian Life according to the Gospels

JOHN PIPER

Crossway, 2023

464 pages

US\$39.99

### For Further Reading

*God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself* by John Piper (Crossway, 2011).

*Church Multiplication Guide Revised: The Miracle of Church Reproduction* by George Peterson (William Carey Library, 2013).

Disciple-makers do not fulfill the Great Commission unless they teach others to obey all that Christ commanded. That truth should motivate missionaries and mission mobilizers to read *All That Jesus Commanded* by John Piper. Piper is the founder of Desiring God, chancellor of Bethlehem College and Seminary, and retired pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Missionaries and mission mobilizers know him for his book, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, and his influence in mobilizing people to the mission field through his sermons and other books.

The book is a revision and renaming of *What Jesus Demands from the World*, originally published in 2006. In this edition, Piper includes an appendix explaining his methodology in the updated volume. Another difference between volumes is that this one uses the word *command* for chapter headings instead of *demand*. It consists of 50 chapters, each addressing a command, but occasionally with sequences of chapters expanding on aspects of a single command. Therefore, the book does not actually address 50 different commands of Christ.

Missionaries and missions-mobilizers will find the chapters for commands 47–50, which deal with believers letting their lights shine and making disciples of all nations, most useful. Piper explains that the motivation for believers to shine their light is so that others will glorify God. He argues believers' light shines brightest when they endure suffering for Jesus' sake. In the final

two chapters regarding the various commissioning passages, Piper says that Jesus' authority is the basis for evangelism and missions. The last chapter offers assurance that the gospel will reach every tribe, people, and language.

Parts are controversial. For example, Piper takes a hard line against divorce. Still, other chapters are inspiring, particularly the chapter, "Command 13: Always Pray and Do Not Lose Heart." Potential readers who disagree with Piper regarding complementarianism and Calvinism should still find much of the book helpful.

The book is best read one chapter at a time, like one would read a daily devotional. Piper's writing is typical for him; engaging and easy to understand but occasionally focused on minute details. As in all his books, Piper encourages his readers to make Jesus their greatest joy. For Piper, living a life that delights in God is the key to living obediently to all his commands. This view keeps Christ's commands from being cold legalism and is one reason to read the book.

Those who own a copy of *What Jesus Demands* may wonder if they should buy this one. The changes are not significant enough to warrant buying this version, but for those who don't own the older version, the book is useful. For missionaries and disciple-makers, it provides a list of commands to teach disciples along with scriptural, theological, and contextual background for those commands. However, despite the title, it is not an exhaustive list of all Jesus' commands. ■

# Elisabeth Elliot

Reviewed by **Cameron D. Armstrong**, Asia Graduate School of Theology, Philippines.

Rarely does a biography make the book review list for *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. Lucy Austen's biography of Elisabeth Elliot, however, deserves its place as an exception. Readers both familiar and unfamiliar with Elliot's story will find great encouragement in its pages, especially mission-minded Christians.

Austen divides her biography into three parts: Elliot's life pre-Ecuador, in Ecuador, and post-Ecuador. In part 1, Austen describes Elliot's years growing up in an evangelical Christian culture that prized personal holiness and missionary zeal, culminating in her thriving among friends at Wheaton College, including Jim Elliot. Austen takes care to emphasize facets of Elliot that would play a major part in her later public persona, such as Elliot's introversion, love for journaling and letter writing, and a deep belief in the Lord's guidance.

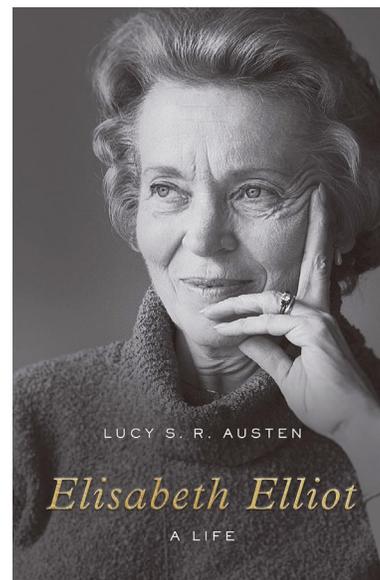
In part 2, Austen traces Elliot's missionary career in Ecuador before and after Jim Elliot's death by Waorani spears. Readers will be surprised to learn of the up-and-down courtship of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot and the difficulties Elliot faced in interacting with her missionary partner Rachel Saint. Part 3 tells the rest of the story of the next 50 years of Elisabeth Elliot as a public Christian, influencing generations through her books, public speaking, and radio ministry. Austen makes clear how Elliot helped shape American evangelicalism into its contemporary form, especially through her writings on biblical womanhood.

The book has many strengths, but I will mention two specifically. First, Austen portrays well how Elliot's context was essential in developing her worldview, noting how some of Elliot's behavior and ideas were indeed unbiblical. Austen looks critically at how Elliot grew as a Christian, a writer, and a person.

Second, the missiological community will find it fascinating how Elliot's understanding of the missionary task evolved as a result of her experience in the Ecuadorian jungle. Dealing with such common challenges as language learning, team conflict, contextualization, raising children on the mission field, and defining *success* after leaving the field, Elliot's story will resonate with anyone who has served overseas.

One weakness is that Austen gives surprisingly little detail concerning Elliot's initial call to missions. Instead, readers are only given a single sentence relaying that her call happened sometime between Elliot's sophomore and junior years at Wheaton (56). Such an absence appears imbalanced given the attention Austen gives to other details. The book could be strengthened if this important event were described, if such a description is available.

Austen's *Elisabeth Elliot* is an excellent biography that deserves a wide readership. As Austen notes, the story of Jim Elliot's death is "the best-known missionary story of the twentieth century" (524). Yet there is far more to Elisabeth Elliot's life than this single event. I for one am glad to have learned more from such a powerful life. ■



**Elisabeth Elliot: A Life**  
LUCY S. R. AUSTEN  
Crossway, 2023  
624 pages  
US\$39.99

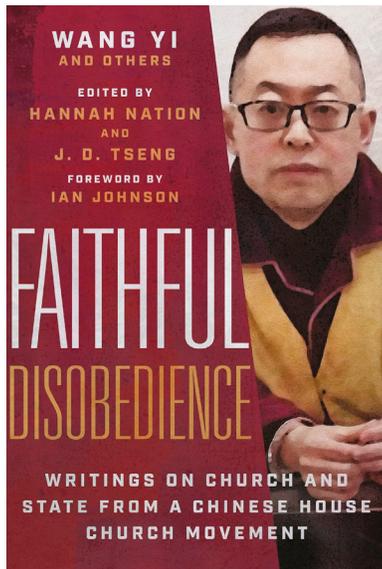
## For Further Reading

*Through Gates of Splendor* by Elisabeth Elliot (Tyndale, 1981).

*Becoming Elisabeth Elliot* by Ellen Vaughn (B & H Publishing, 2020).

# Faithful Disobedience

Reviewed by **Richard Cook**, professor of church history and missions at Logos Evangelical Seminary in El Monte, California, and a former missionary in Taiwan.



## Faithful Disobedience: Writings on Church and State from a Chinese House Church Movement

WANG YI AND OTHERS  
Edited by Hannah  
Nation and J. D. Tseng  
InterVarsity Press, 2022.  
288 pages  
US\$28.00

## For Further Reading

*Faith in the Wilderness: Words of Exhortation from the Chinese Church* edited by Hannah Nation and Simon Liu (Kirkdale, 2022).

*Darkest Before the Dawn: A Brief History of the Rise of Christianity in China* by Richard R. Cook (Pickwick, 2021).

Wang Yi is a colorful leader of the house church movement in China who is currently incarcerated for nine years by the Communist government. These articles, translated from Chinese to English, make his writing available to a broad audience. In this ambitious project, the editors, Hannah Nation and J. D. Tseng (a pseudonym) put forward the writings of Wang Yi as a vital contribution to the broader historic discourse on church and state. “These essays can be seen as specific to China but are also reflections of a remarkable explosion of faith that is taking place in many countries” (xvi).

Wang Yi is the primary contributor, but there are several articles by other Chinese pastors. The editors endeavored to locate bibliographic sources, but they ask for patience from their readers as Wang Yi customarily relied on a large “corpus of unpublished, uncatalogued, and sometimes apocryphal stories and documents of the early Chinese house church” (11). The lack of scholarly rigor, however, is made up for by the lucid and passionate ideas and writing of Wang Yi. The editors also provide abundant and helpful resources for readers unfamiliar with China, including a timeline of modern China, a glossary, an index, and informative footnotes.

Hannah Nation opens with a biography of Wang Yi. Born in 1973, he graduated Law School in 1996 and began teaching Law at Chengdu University. He quickly became a nationally recognized human rights advocate, regularly publishing articles online.

Along with his wife, he was baptized in 2005, and they began a Bible study in their home. Among other honors, Wang Yi met President George W. Bush at the White House in 2006. He resigned from Chengdu University in 2008 and founded his *Early Rain* church. Even as his theology matured, he continued to write on human rights. He became somewhat controversial as some Chinese church leaders preferred to distance themselves from him and his rhetoric.

The 22 articles are divided into three parts, “Our House Church Manifesto,” “The Eschatological Church and the City,” and “Arrest and the Way of the Cross.”

Hannah Nation notes that many have stated that Wang Yi’s most important work is Chapter 14, “History Is Christ Written Large.” He builds upon insights from the twentieth-century philosopher Eric Voegelin, that history is Christ written large.

He opens with a dramatic encounter when he was arrested. The officer inquired, “Have you ever engaged in activities that try to subvert state power?” Wang Yi asked if prayer counts as subversion of state power. Wang Yi admitted to prayer, but insisted, “prayer is the secret weapon of the church, the atomic bomb of the church” (180). He uses Colossians 1:15–20 to discuss that “God uses history to write about his saving grace” (180).

The editors succeed in bringing Wang Yi’s clarion voice to the global church. It is controversial, and readers will sometimes disagree. However, this book belongs on the bookshelf of students of church and state. ■

# New and Old Horizons in the Orality Movement

Reviewed by **Jerome S. Cepeda**, PhD student in orality studies, Asia Graduate School of Theology, Philippines

What will it take to bring about impactful evangelism and discipleship? Tom Steffen and Cameron Armstrong and company discuss how orality as a methodology provides a robust approach to engaging people from oral cultures in evangelism and discipleship. To fully appreciate orality, readers are presented with its definition as an expression of one's inner speech, describing orality as not just a preference for certain learning methods, but an identity.

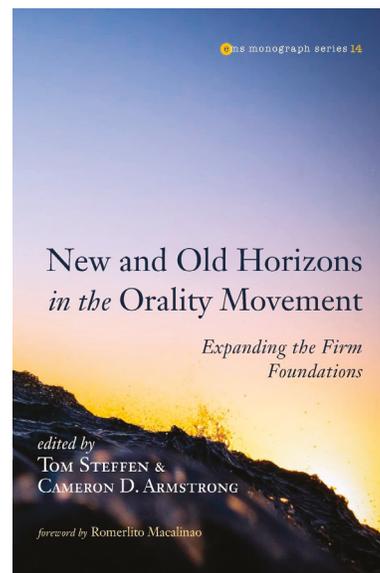
Steffen and Armstrong's *New and Old Horizons in the Orality Movement* is divided into three parts. Part 1 presents orality as a catalyst to re-evaluate the post-reformation model in advancing the gospel. As an example, orality-influenced models for evangelism such as Living Waters International illustrate the use of narratives in leadership development, network expansion, and community engagement.

Part 2 discusses how the power of narratives is universal and present in every place, society, and history. One example in this part of the discussion is Wiley Scot Keen's exposition of the importance of identifying the metanarrative and how it can shape one's worldview. The third major part of the book focuses on the role of oral hermeneutics in interpreting and communicating biblical meaning. To add perspective, Tricia and Stephen Stringer expand the use of orality by using it as a means to bring healing from brokenness or trauma. They shared that the use of biblical narratives, combined with personal narratives and healing activities, can bring spiritual and experiential wholeness.

One strength I found in the book is how comprehensively it defines terms. Collecting the lived experiences of the authors and how they articulate meaning adds a vivid description of what orality is all about. Another strength is the book's presentation of processes or methods. The book provides both the concept and its meaning and the process of how it can be applied.

On the other hand, one potential area for further improvement involves Steffen and Armstrong's discussion on the metrics used in identifying the effectiveness of orality as a method. Such a discussion could add greater comprehensiveness to the process. Second, the chapters do not elaborate on why it is helpful to consider transitioning low orality-reliant people to high orality reliance. Though *New Horizons* covers the importance of orality in reaching the highly oral people of the world, a discussion regarding how to transition less orality-reliant groups that are traditional and textual in their learning paradigm to a greater orality reliance might add a broader perspective.

Overall, *New and Old Horizons in the Orality Movement* provides a renewed perspective on how narratives are essential not just in communicating the gospel but also in sustaining its effect in areas such as personal transformation, leadership, and healing. I found the book engaging, especially the argument that orality helps move individuals from being informed to being transformed. ■



**New and Old Horizons in the Orality Movement: Expanding the Firm Foundations**  
TOM STEFFEN AND CAMERON D. ARMSTRONG  
Pickwick, 2022  
304 pages  
US\$38.93

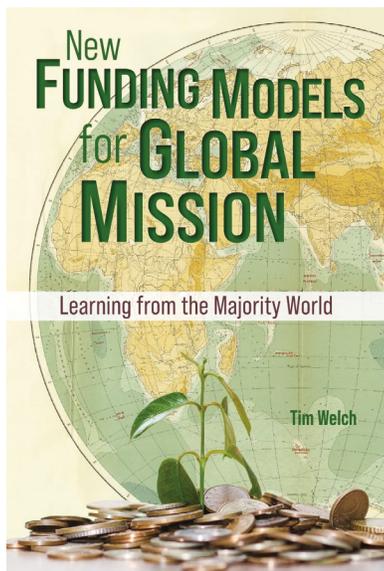
## For Further Reading

*Beyond Literate Western Models: Contextualizing Theological Education in Oral Contexts* by Samuel Chiang and Grant Lovejoy (International Orality Network, 2013).

*Worldview-Based Storying: The Integration of Symbol, Story, and Ritual in the Orality Movement* by Tom Steffen (Orality Resources International, 2018).

# New Funding Models for Global Mission

Reviewed by **Louisa Evans**, a Malaysian PhD student at Fuller Theological Seminary and former lecturer at All Nations Christian College, UK.



## New Funding Models for Global Mission: Learning from the Majority World

TIM WELCH

William Carey  
Publishing, 2023  
130 pages  
US\$10.99

### For Further Reading

*A Multitude of All Peoples: Engaging Ancient Christianity's Global Identity* by Vince L. Bantu (IVP Academic, 2020).

*The Realities of Money and Missions: Global Challenges and Case Studies* edited by Jonathan J. Bonk, Michel G. DiStefano, and J. Nelson Jennings. (William Carey Publishing, 2022).

*Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* by Jehu Hanciles (Orbis Books, 2008).

Today, Christians in the Majority World outnumber those in the West two to one. This is projected to be three to one by 2050. Thus, what Tim Welch calls the “traditional” model of funding missionaries employed by Western evangelicals, where missionaries are responsible for raising support, is increasingly criticized. Why? It inhibits the recruitment of Majority World missionaries because it requires knowing people who can give and what many cultures view as “begging.”

This is culturally unacceptable in many non-Western contexts, and even among the younger generations in the West (4). The stakes are high: Without an answer to the question of how to fund missions, the two-thirds of the world that still does not know Jesus may not hear the message of salvation (14). This is the problem the book seeks to address.

The book chronicles ways of missionary funding from the Book of Acts to show that other models were used throughout history. However, the “traditional model,” proposed by William Carey in 1793, dominates current mission funding practice. Despite its weaknesses, Welch asserts that this model can be tweaked to be more effective.

Nevertheless, other models must be considered by Majority World Christians – not only because they “cannot afford this model” (21) but because “what works for one culture cannot be exported to another” (23). Welch then presents 18 alternative models that provide less difficult ways to find financial resources, thus allowing more Majority World missionaries to be sent.

In the last four chapters, Welch lays out the biblical principles of mission funding,

challenges the church to invest in the Majority World like the business world is doing, argues that churches that are generous toward mission experience improved finances, and concludes with 15 recommendations for Majority World churches.

For evangelical missions and church leaders wrestling with the question of funding missions, this book offers ways to “break out” of the traditional model. It generates awareness of creative, alternative ways to finance missions, particularly those from “the margins” from which Welch hopes the West can learn. However, while promoting alternative funding models for the Majority World, Welch seems unwilling to abandon the traditional model despite its growing ineffectiveness, perhaps due to his focus on the “missionaries” as the primary agents of mission.

In contrast, for most of history, witnessing was part of Christian life not as *missionaries* but as ordinary believers, often scattered by persecution. This is not recognized despite his pointing out that Africans participated in cross-cultural missions in Acts 11. Today, there is a growing understanding that the whole church, rather than the missionary alone, is called to participate in God’s mission.

This shift in the understanding of mission requires a more radical rethinking of how global mission is funded than what Welch proposes. Nevertheless, the book contributes to a much-needed conversation on “money and missions” that Christians often shy away from and the urgent need to enable Majority World Christians like myself to participate in God’s mission. ■

# Supracultural Gospel

Reviewed by **Brent H. Burdick**, DMin, adjunct professor of missions, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina, and director of the Lausanne Movement's Global Classroom.

**B**ecause cross-cultural servants may be ethnocentric as they share the gospel, there is a need to be more supracultural as they evangelize and disciple. Mary Lou Codman-Wilson and Alex Zhou, in their book *Supracultural Gospel: Bridging East and West* define supracultural as “above all cultures.” They note that “the content of the supracultural gospel must be embraced if Christians are to live successfully as Christ’s disciples and be disciplers of all people groups throughout the world” (4). The author’s major concern is how Westerners disciple Eastern converts, but much of the book applies to any cultural context. All cross-cultural servants must be supracultural.

The desire that the gospel be supracultural stems from the observation that Westerners sharing the gospel with Eastern peoples has often resulted in Christianity being perceived as an outsider religion, in cultural resistance against the gospel, and in persecution. Westerners must therefore be aware of the Eastern cultural mindset boxes that often prohibit full acceptance and understanding of the gospel by Asians.

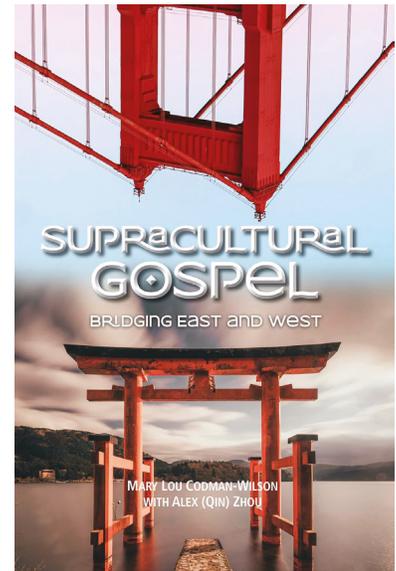
These boxes also can inhibit effective discipleship of Asian Christians. Eastern cultural values like *wa* or harmony, *jyoushiki* or common sense, *gimu* or obligation are Eastern mindsets that a Western discipler cannot ignore. If this happens, then Asians

discipled by Westerners may not be able to stand up to the many challenges to the Christian faith they will face when they return to their home country because of the prevalence of these values and the roadblocks they present.

The book is helpful for people who minister both in Asia and in the West, but it will probably be most helpful for people living in the West who work with Asian international students. Many of the illustrations point out the challenges Asian students face when they return home, but missionaries living in Asia will find the book helpful so that they do not *copy and paste* the Western gospel into Asian settings, leading to ineffective rooting of the gospel.

The book also suggests some Asian perspectives on theological and spiritual principles to guide new believers and their disciplers. These are very helpful and would be encouraging for Asian believers and disciplers alike. However, some of the illustrations and quotes in these sections come from Western contexts. Though the overall message comes across well, this helpful book would have been even more effective if more Asian quotes and explanations had been used.

*Supracultural Gospel* is a book to add to your library for more effective and contextually relevant communication of the gospel in Asian settings and to Asian people. ■



## Supracultural Gospel: Bridging East and West

MARY LOU CODMAN-WILSON WITH ALEX (QIN) ZHOU  
William Carey Publishing, 2022  
208 pages  
US\$15.99

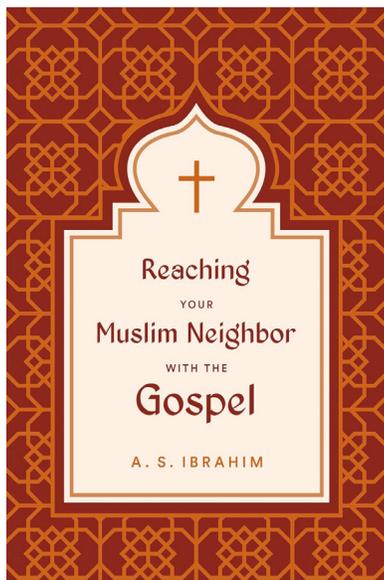
## For Further Reading

*Contextualization or Syncretism? The Use of Other-Faith Worship Forms in the Bible and in Insider Movements* by Derek Brotherson and A. Scott Moreau (Pickwick Publications, 2021).

*Contextualization and the Old Testament: Between Asian and Western Perspectives* by Jerry Hwang (Langham Global Library, 2022).

# Reaching Your Muslim Neighbor with the Gospel

Reviewed by **J. Rupert Morgan**, ABWE International Resident Missiologist.



## Reaching Your Muslim Neighbor with the Gospel

A. S. IBRAHIM  
Crossway, 2022  
176 pages  
US\$12.98

## For Further Reading

*Fruit to Harvest: Witness of God's Great Work among Muslims* edited by Gene Daniels, Pam Arlund, and Jim Haney (William Carey Publishing, 2019).

*Chrislam: How missionaries are promoting an Islamized gospel* edited by Joshua Lingel, Jeffery J. Morton, and Bill Nikides (12 Ministries, 2012)..

A .S. Ibrahim has two aims in this book. He seeks first to help his readers understand the Muslim mindset and second to challenge them to share the gospel with Muslims with confidence and boldness. The book is well organized. It is divided into two parts which address his two primary aims. He ends each chapter with a summary and introduction to the next topic. He accomplishes these two tasks admirably. His own passion to understand the worldview of Muslims and evangelize them is palpable throughout.

This work has an autobiographical flavor where the author describes experiences he has had with Muslims from childhood through his adult life. He demonstrates the principles he espouses in the narratives of his personal encounters with Muslims. One example is the interchanges he had with an imam he befriended (124–128). This helps the reader see the practical application of these principles.

Frequent use is made of enumeration which helps the reader to follow the logic of the argument. One example among many is his listing of seven elements of an Islamic worldview (62–72). Dr. Ibrahim does an excellent job of describing and addressing objections that Muslims have to Christianity. His comments on Muslim understandings and objections to the Bible and the Trinity are excellent.

He emphasizes using the Bible and not the Quran when engaging in conversation with Muslims. The only exception he makes is to use the Quran to demonstrate that the Quran supports the authority of the Bible and never states that it is corrupt. The author isn't promoting a method of Muslim evangelism but an attitude of understanding and compassion. Although he refers to the "Jesus Method" in the section *Raising Questions and Answering Them*, this is more a model than a method for sharing the gospel of Christ and demonstrating His compassion. He states, "Our goal is to reflect and proclaim Christ, not to defeat competitors" (143).

There are 167 pages in this text but no bibliography, only 14 footnotes, and perhaps one quotation from another source. It is a little surprising that a scholar who is so well-versed in Islamic history, life, and practice has very little to say about shame and honor. This book is rooted in the personal life of the author who grew up in a Christian home within a Muslim-majority country and his experience as a lifelong Muslim evangelist. *Reaching your Muslim Neighbor with the Gospel* serves as a primer for Muslim evangelism. It is full of valuable and insightful perspectives that will enrich both a debutant to Muslim ministries as well as a veteran. ■

# Movement Catalysts

Reviewed by **David Greenlee**, PhD, missiologist for Operation Mobilization based in Tyrone, Georgia.

Describing, understanding, and at times critiquing rapidly growing Christ-centered movements has become a significant theme in mission strategy and missiology. While various authors have described how God is at work, Emanuel Prinz together with his team centered at the Bethany Research Institute carries out the most extensive research effort into the competencies of movement catalysts.

Prinz's recent book *Movement Catalysts* is developed from his 2016 Columbia International University dissertation, an in-depth study of 31 apostolic leaders who have been effective in catalyzing a movement in a Muslim people group. These catalysts have contributed to the start of 35 movements among 28 people groups in 15 different countries.

Prinz's key finding is that "the person of the apostolic leader is the key element that determines whether or not a movement is launched, not the method he or she employs" (100). Prinz explores and commends many of the widely known movement methodologies and approaches. However, his findings demonstrate that although a worker may be handed a good strategy and methodology, without the traits and competencies identified (including those related to prayer and dependence on God) the worker will most likely be ineffective.

One strength of *Movement Catalysts* is its solid grounding both in missiological literature and studies related to leadership and trait theory, offering us a compact summary of the insights of important publications on these themes. Coupled with a good research

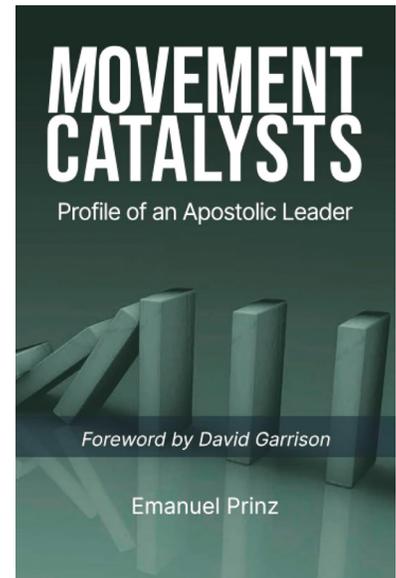
approach, the hard work Prinz went through in studying these sources is solid ground upon which he stands as he moves ahead with confidence and rigor in analyzing and presenting his findings.

A second strength I find is the detailed list of traits and competencies of movement catalysts, drawing attention to those typical of all the fruitful catalysts in his study as well as a further list of qualities ascribed to most of the sample. A chapter on best practices offers us illustrations of how each of these traits and competencies are lived and experienced by the study participants.

A further strength is in Prinz's thoughtful recommendations. For example, rooted in his findings on the combined role of internationals and near-culture workers in the formation of movements, he suggests a partnering role focused on pioneering efforts among unengaged and frontier groups.

Finally, Prinz offers us a helpful model of an apostolic leader. The model is not static but is the subject of ongoing research and writing by Prinz and his team, based on a much larger and wider, global pool of movement practitioners.

Whether field missionary or agency leader, professor, or missions student, I commend *Movement Catalysts* as a good start to understanding Emanuel Prinz's important research. Do not stop here, though; pursue his team's ongoing publications including their occasional reports and Prinz's frequent blog posts (see below), many of which are published as resources available to a global audience. ■



## Movement Catalysts: Profile of an Apostolic Leader

EMANUEL PRINZ  
Independently  
published, 2022.  
206 pages  
US\$12.99

## For Further Reading

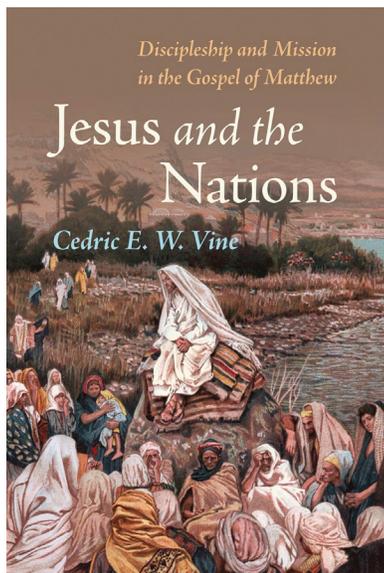
*Motus Dei: The Movement of God to Disciple the Nations* edited by Warrick Farah (William Carey Publishing, 2021).

*Acts and the Movement of God from Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth* by Steve Addison (100 Movements Publishing, 2023).

*Catalytic Leadership* blog by Emanuel Prinz (<https://www.catalyticleadership.info/blog>).

# Jesus and the Nations

Reviewed by **Ed Scheuerman**, professor of intercultural studies, Lancaster Bible College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, having previously served with Pioneers for 23 years in Southeast Asia.



**Jesus and the Nations:  
Discipleship and Mission  
in the Gospel of Matthew**  
CEDRIC E. W. VINE  
Pickwick Publications, 2022  
167 pages  
US\$26.00

## For Further Reading

*The Missionary-Theologian: Sent into the World, Sanctified* by the Word by E. D. Burns (Christian Focus, 2020).

*Theology of Mission: A Concise Biblical Theology* by J. D. Payne (Lexham Press, 2022).

What does it look like to be a disciple-maker of Jesus Christ? In *Jesus and the Nations: Discipleship and Mission in the Gospel of Matthew*, Cedric Vine develops five identities of Jesus in the book of Matthew. These five identities provide Christians with models to emulate.

Vine's scholarly work brings the reader deeply into Matthew, focusing on how Jesus was each of the following: prophet, righteous person, disciple, wise man, and scribe. Each of these is developed in a separate chapter, concluding with implications for how each can be lived out in one's discipling of others. "Imitation of Jesus is the key" (7).

Much appreciated is Vine's focus on how "Discipleship must be understood in the context of mission and mission in the context of political theology" (8). This helps to distinguish discipleship from simply helping others be better Christians. The missional emphasis must not be diminished.

The first role addressed, that of a prophet, emphasizes how "the prophet is the catalyst that starts the process of national transformation" (16). The prophet not only denounces but also casts a vision of renewal (25).

"Righteous persons are to strive to be righteous not for the purpose of achieving personal salvation but for the purpose of saving their communities from judgment" (67). For the disciple-maker, this role is a significant challenge. Those who claim that they cannot disciple others because they are not spiritually mature enough need to recognize that they, too, are seeking to become a righteous person even as they call others to walk this journey with them.

"If the role of the prophet is to call the community back to God and that of the righteous person is to nudge it toward righteous behavior, the role of the student-teacher ... is to preserve the teachings of the master teacher" (69). This is where the more traditional approach to discipleship is realized – that of imparting knowledge for learning and living.

But knowledge for its own sake is insufficient. Wisdom is needed to consider the best path forward for both the disciple-maker and those being disciplined. "The idealized wise man ... is also the object of revelation concerning God's plan for the future ... particularly during periods of great suffering" (108–109).

Finally, "the missional purpose of Matthew's idealized scribe is to promote the law of their king" (121). The scribe aspect of discipling echoes the call to obedience, knowing that it is our Lord Jesus that we follow.

The book is a solid academic study in the gospel of Matthew, looking at it through the lens of discipleship. At times, it gets a little bogged down with background. But this book would serve well as a textbook for a discipleship class as well as a personal reflection for those wanting to grow in their understanding of what discipleship entails. "The Evangelist has written the Gospel in such a way as to encourage his readers to participate in mission" (164). ■

# Centered-Set Church

Reviewed by **William R. Green**, an affiliate professor at Kairos University and the associate editor of the journal *Missiology: An International Review* with a decade of pastoral and church-planting experience in East Asia and the Northeastern United States.

In the complex milieu of contemporary Christian congregations, some churches have elected to draw clear rule-based boundary markers that delineate “proper Christian behavior,” known as “bounded set” churches. On the flip side are churches disillusioned with this rigid approach and forgo most such markers in favor of a more ambiguous conciliatory “fuzzy set” approach to faith and congregational life.

Mark D. Baker (PhD, Duke University), professor of Mission and Theology at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California, cautions against adopting either approach. Influenced by the work of missionary anthropologist Paul Hiebert, he champions an alternative “centered-set” church model, which he asserts not only fosters genuine freedom but also promotes robust spiritual growth and vibrant relationships.

The book unfolds through four logically structured parts. The first delves into the unique characteristics of bounded, fuzzy, and centered-set churches and concludes with Baker interfacing his articulation with frequent queries in the broader discussion. Underscoring the necessity of doctrine, ethics, freedom through Christ, and the fundamental necessity of love that permeates all aspects of centered-set churches, part two describes what it means to have God at the center of a church.

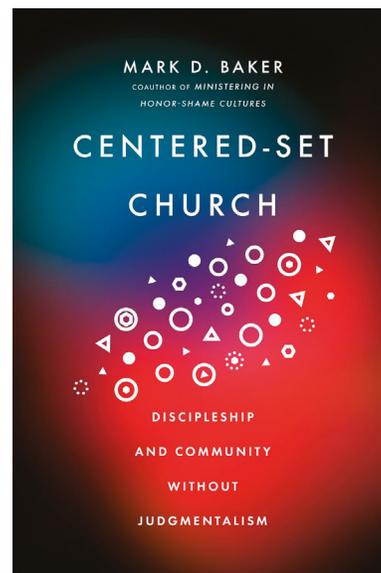
Building on this foundation, parts three and four turn to more practical and applied considerations. That is, part three focuses on discipleship in community, and explores themes related to centered approaches to exhortation, character development in light of the qualities of Jesus, methods and ideas

to contextually practice loving intervention, and the necessity of discipleship that leads to transformation. In a related vein, part four focuses on a centered approach to ministry and culminates in a vivid tableau of the richness of centered-set churches: individuals journeying together in authentic relationships, repentance, forgiveness, reorientation, and love.

Within the ongoing debate surrounding the centered-set model, Baker makes several novel contributions. In this text, we find a refreshingly accurate representation of Hiebert’s anthropological work, which distinguishes it from the vast majority of books that get it wrong (see Yoder et al. below). Moreover, Baker brings theological acumen that is not always observed in discussions on the topic. Finally, and despite the intricate anthropological and theological themes, his work remains remarkably accessible, enriched by his own missionary experiences and the shared testimonies of numerous practitioners and congregants.

In sum, Baker adeptly navigates dual pitfalls: the stringent confines of bounded religiosity and the hazards of boundless relativism. As such, it is an indispensable resource for pastors and church leaders. Moreover, the optional supplementary 5-part video course, referenced below, enhances its utility, making it a valuable tool for small groups as well as lay members on a journey of healing from past wounds acquired in the church.

As someone who has followed the discussion for many years, I offer a hearty bravo! ■



## Centered-Set Church: Discipleship and Community Without Judgmentalism

MARK D. BAKER  
IVP Academic, 2021  
247 pages  
US\$16.50

## For Further Reading

*Introducing Centered-Set Church* by Mark D. Baker (<https://jesuscollective.com/centered-set-church-series>).

“The Category Christian in the Mission Task” in *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* by Paul G. Hiebert (Baker Books, 1994), pp. 107–136.

“Understanding Christian Identity in Terms of Bounded and Centered Set Theory in the Writings of Paul G. Hiebert” in *Trinity Journal* 30, no. 2 by Michael L. Yoder, Michael G. Lee, Jonathan Ro, and Robert J. Priest (2009): 177–88.

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**Tonga:** Maxy Koloamatangi first experienced cross-cultural missions while attending a YWAM Discipleship Training School. YWAM ministry began in Tonga in the 1960s and continues training students for mission. Today, Maxy leads a Tongan mission agency.

PHOTO BY ELYSE PATTEN, COURTESY OF WGA.





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