

Building Thriving Multiethnic Ministries in Global Missions: Three Critical, Overlooked Issues

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Introduction: Globalization of Missionary Personnel¹

It is no secret that Christians in the Global South outnumber Christians in the Global North, and they do so by more than two-fold in 2021. In fact, by the year 2050, the number of believers in the Global South is projected to be more than three times the number of “Western” Christians (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2021, 23). That’s not all. Already, Global South missionaries are reported to make up nearly half (47%) of

1 I would like to thank David Greenlee, Esther Theonugraha, Juan Carlos Téllez, James Park, and Elizabeth Rauchholz for providing helpful feedback on an early draft of this article. Their insights sharpened and refined the thoughts presented in this article. If there are any shortcomings in this article, I am solely responsible for them.

all missionaries in the fields (ibid, 16–17). The growth and emergence of the younger churches in the Global South have been so phenomenal that the global missionary movement is yet to catch up to these enormous changes. These shifts in the global church are also increasing mission complexity. In the 21st century, Christian mission is not simply “from everywhere to everywhere” but perhaps more accurately, “from everywhere to everywhere *through* everywhere” (Lee 2020, 218). The “through” part here signifies the complexity of missions under the triple phenomena of accelerated globalization, urbanization, and migration.

In light of all these rapid changes, the needs of the global missions movement of the 2020s and beyond are challenging us to rethink and reshape some of our dearly held assumptions. One such area has to do with increasing cultural diversity in global mission organizations and teams. The world has always been gifted with cultural diversity, and today, people of different races, ethnicities, cultures, and languages are increasingly living and working in proximity to one another, even as nationalist and xenophobic sentiments are growing worldwide. At the same time, aided by new technologies, people are seeing new kinds of instant connections across the globe through various apps and virtual spaces. Despite the global COVID-19 pandemic, the hyper-globalizing world is not slowing down but teeming with movements and flows of various individuals and groups, goods and capital, ideas and ideologies, media and aesthetics, data streams and technological advances. While we are far from being borderless, these forces both blur and redefine various boundaries in our world in new ways.

Amid all these, people are receiving and mixing various elements from various cultural sources. The rate of blending of these elements seems to be increasing as well. Globalization scholar Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2015, 67) sees “globalization as a process of hybridization” that heightens cultural mixtures. All these processes have an enormous impact on Christianity as a global faith, and specifically on Christian mission as a global movement. In an era of globalizing, hybridizing realities everywhere, we can hardly overstate the significance of cultural diversity

for Christian mission in today's extremely connected and yet highly fragmented and polarized world.

At this juncture, it is a welcome sight to see more mission organizations founded in the West attempting to internationalize and recruit missionary personnel from diverse cultures. Several large mission organizations had a head start in globalizing their missionary personnel. I have been privileged to work with one of them since 1997. Operation Mobilization (OM), with which I work, is a global missions movement that had international personnel from the very beginning. When I attended an OM regional meeting a few years ago, I counted at least 20 birth countries, 19 current countries of service (mostly different from the birth countries), and 16 native languages represented by the 40 participants in the room. Such diversity in a single meeting is not that unusual for OM.

While cultural diversity in global missions is a huge blessing and perhaps needs to become an important consideration in intercultural discipleship going forward, it also involves complicated challenges. Even those organizations that have had multiethnic, international teams for decades struggle with developing adequate means and strategies for establishing strong ministries with integrated cultural diversity among all members. There is also more work to be done in developing a solid biblical theology of multiethnic ministries and getting a good grasp of the realities involving cultural diversity. These global mission organizations have looked for that holy grail of effective multiethnic leadership and teamwork for decades and tried various means and methods, such as appointing leaders from the Global South in significant international leadership positions and adopting intercultural communications theories in mission practices, with limited success.

So, how can we build thriving mission teams that are culturally diverse? How can we develop teams for church planting in frontier mission contexts in the 2020s and beyond that honor and reflect the global diversity of the Church? What should we do to see more thriving multiethnic global mission movements? For sure, there is no magic bullet. But are there principles or insights that may help us go

further than where we are today? Over the past two decades, I have spent much time and effort learning, thinking about, and researching multiethnic missionary teams and organizations. Through many hours of conversations with missionaries, leaders, and missiologists, I identified three critical issues related to cultural diversity in global missions that are often overlooked or inadequately dealt with. I suggest mission leaders, teams, and organizations consider the following three issues as they embark on multiethnic ministries.

Unity through Diversity: Developing a Biblical Theology of Cultural Diversity

First and foremost, we need to think biblically and theologically about cultural diversity. We must not only think about how to operate multiethnic missionary teams but also consider what the Bible teaches about cultural diversity. This is obviously a big topic that needs serious biblical and theological work. In this space, I want to highlight the fact that diversity weaves throughout the biblical narratives from the beginning to the end.

Seeing Unity in Diversity in the Bible

The Bible emphasizes unity in diversity from its opening pages. Let's take creation as an example. Theologian Tite Tiénou once explained how the beginning of Genesis illustrated God's intent for human unity in diversity.² God said, "... *they may rule...*" (1:26). God did not intend he or she but they to rule. Genesis also says, "*male and female he created them.*" Being united and diverse is fundamentally a divine design; unity and diversity are essences of humankind. Adam reacts to the creation of his helper by saying, "*This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*" (2:23). According to Tiénou, Adam is essentially saying, "She is me!" It shows the profound unity God intends for us through diversity. If we can

2 This content by Tiénou comes from one of the lectures given in his Ethnicity course at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School on January 14, 2015.

live out Christian unity in diversity by faith, we may be able to say to one another within the body of Christ, "You are me! I am you! We are one!"

Mission with All Our Diversities, to All Nations

The theme of unity in diversity among the people of God continues to run deeply through biblical narratives. We see God's work of transforming and healing the nations as they gather and come toward the light of God's people in Isaiah 60. We see God's holy intent for unity in diversity when the Holy Spirit is poured out upon Jesus' disciples at Pentecost and they speak in other tongues in Acts 2. We also read about this biblical truth being lived out in tension by the early church in Jerusalem in Acts 6 and in surprising dynamism in the church in Antioch in Acts 11 and 13. There is Paul's strong declaration, "*There is neither Jew nor Gentile... for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal. 3:28). And of course, the bible ends with a powerful imagery of unity in diversity in Revelation 7:9 where a great multitude of people from every "*nation, tribe, people and language*" gather together and stand before God's throne and the Lamb in marvelous worship.

These biblical accounts and others speak powerful truth about God's desire for human diversities in culture, language, and ethnicity. In today's increasingly polarizing world, nationalism and racism seem to be on the rise everywhere. Exclusion and discrimination are more visible in many places. Even in Christian settings where cultural diversity is affirmed, people often treat cultural differences as something to be merely tolerated and managed. Instead, as followers of Jesus, we are reminded to live out both unity and diversity. Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to say that we attain unity through and via diversity, not over and against it. When we participate in the mission of God in the world, there is no other way around it; theologically speaking, it is difficult to fathom that true unity in a biblical sense can exist without diversity since this is by God's original intent and design as Scripture beautifully illustrates for us.

We understand that Jesus' Great Commission to make disciples of all nations in Matthew 28 is a call for all peoples, all nations, and all everyone and anyone to be included in God's Kingdom. As we strive to make disciples of panta ta ethne, calling all peoples and nations to follow Jesus, we bring honor to Christ's name by living out in faith God's desire for us to be one with Him and with one another. We do this, not *despite* cultural diversity and cultural differences, but perhaps precisely because of them. As all of God's people from all the nations, the whole body of Christ, embrace one another in all the diversity that exists among us, we are fulfilling God's command.

Diversity is not an obstacle to be overcome in missions, which is how it is often seen, but a blessing to be received with gratitude. For global missions, this way of thinking about our diversity helps us envision a more well-integrated cultural diversity that is only possible through Christ. It stands in contrast to the uninspiring multiculturalism that is unfortunately too widespread in the world today.

Cultural Hybridity: Updating Our "Culture" Model

Secondly, if we want to see more well-integrated, cultural diversity reflected in global missions, we need to revisit how we understand and use the concept of culture in missions.

Culture, a Concept Borrowed from Anthropology

The notion of culture has long formed the fore- and background of missionary training. Many missiologists who made significant contributions to mission studies for the past half a century have been anthropologists by training who studied other cultural groups around the world.³

3 This list of anthropologists who contributed to a North American missiology between the 1970s and the present may include Alan Tippett, Charles Kraft, Paul Hiebert, Louis Luzbetak, Daniel Shaw, Sherwood Lingenfelter, Robert Priest, Darrell Whiteman, Michael Rynkiewicz, Enoch Wan, and Stephen Ybarrola (Priest 2008, 27–28).

However, as an academic discipline with its own intellectual history and theoretical development, cultural anthropology seems to have its strengths and flaws. Mistakes of the past, colonial influences, and changing perspectives are all part of any academic discipline's past and present, and certainly anthropology is not an exception. Not only were its bright points carried over into missiology, but its past shortcomings as well. Sometimes missiologists hold onto some of the older anthropological ideas too long, even the ones abandoned by anthropologists long ago. A prime example may be how the concept of culture is used.

"Culture" is a term often used by social science disciplines to provide a generalized, concise version of traits and commonalities found among certain groups of people. For example, some people may think that Koreans would behave in certain concrete ways because of the Korean culture, Germans would behave in different ways because of the German culture, and so on. This culture model assumes that culture is a stable, coherent, and bounded whole used by insiders of that culture to navigate life and social relations. It tends to assume that cultures are isolated systems that do not change much over time. Let's call this way of understanding a "bounded culture model." It assumes that one could learn and become an expert on a certain culture by diving deep beyond the surface level to its core values and worldview. Many people involved in intercultural life and ministry may be fascinated and convinced by this bounded model. However, it may be surprising to hear that anthropologists no longer subscribe to this way of describing culture. This model is based on a structural-functionalist view popular in the social sciences until the 1950s; in the ensuing decades, social sciences moved away from this model (Rynkiewicz 2002).

However, 70 years later, this bounded culture model is still widely used in missions today. There certainly are benefits of using this model. It can help make the world appear more understandable and fit into neat, manageable categories. However, it is far from the reality of the dynamic social world that we inhabit. It does not do justice to any of the actual cultural contexts. There is a reason that anthropologists departed from this way of thinking about cultures. Simply put, it did not help

them understand people. Instead, it perpetuated cultural and ethnic stereotypes, obscured their view of the world, and imprisoned them in a rigid understanding of societies and people, none of which is helpful for missionaries working in multinational, multiethnic organizations.

Not Keeping Up with Changes in Anthropological Perspectives

It should be noted that cultural anthropology, along with other social sciences, went through a major paradigm shift, sometimes called “a reflexive turn” during the 1980s and 1990s (O’Reilly 2012, 212–13). Some anthropologists began to look critically at how they were studying cultures and became aware of their own biases ingrained in the works they produced. They recognized that their view of different people and societies was historically positioned and socially constructed, influenced by their own history, past and current biases, where and what they studied, and who they mostly hung out with. During the past 40 to 50 years, anthropologists left this old model of culture that used to define and provide an explanation for people’s behaviors.

Anthropologist Michael Agar (2019, 2) helpfully summarizes the dilemma with the bounded culture model when he writes, “‘Culture’ is a frequently used mess of a concept with more meanings than there are cars on the LA freeways. It usually travels in partnership with a ‘problem’ in today’s discourse, unless you’re an anthropologist, in which case it’s a word you try to avoid because it’s not clear what it means anymore.” Agar (2019, 87) argues that a description of another “culture” is inevitably “my mental model of your perspective” or “our model of *them*, not *their* model.” So, if you are not a French and you are describing “the French culture,” according to Agar, what you are doing is presenting your mental model of some French people, not necessarily the actual perspectives of all French. Unfortunately, many mission leaders and workers still use this old bounded culture model in mission training and give the impression that it was sound and true.

Updating Our Culture Model—Culture as a River

Today, cultural anthropologists do not talk about any specific culture as if it exists as a monolithic entity. Indeed, there is no such thing as a single American, Korean, or German culture. There are certainly some broad values and tendencies shared among a large group of people that may differ from other groups, but these broad trends are not fixed in time. They continually shift and change, and the imagined boundaries between these groups are socially imagined, usually blurry, and always on the move. This way of seeing “culture” is called a constructivist model of culture. Because it grew out of a postmodern turn in scholarship that attacked and attempted to relativize Christian convictions and faith claims, it seems many evangelicals chose not to engage with this kind of postmodern, postcolonial thinking. Perhaps they did not want to incorporate such a view in their teaching about cultures. However, staying many decades behind in a discipline from which we heavily borrowed might not be a good option either.

Instead, we should pay attention to what anthropologists have been saying for the last few decades and learn from them once again, just as we did half a century ago. Missiological anthropologist Michael Rynkiewicz (2002; 2011a; 2011b; 2016) summarizes recent anthropological discussions and states that *culture is contingent, constructed, and contested*. Swiss anthropologist Hans-Rudolph Wicker (1997, 39) gives an excellent metaphor for culture—“the river, forever changing within given perimeters of space and time, and eluding the grasp of science because of its liquid nature as a process.” As these and other scholars point out, people are not machines that constantly run on some pre-determined cultural program. While they might follow established cultural and social norms, they also constantly accept, reject, and blend various cultural elements at their hands in the context of their human interactions. They build new hybrid cultural and social forms and apply them to their lives.

Therefore, the idea that cultural elements mix over time to produce new things, or the concept of “cultural hybridity,” is needed to better understand various cultural contexts as well as the people from all over

the world who may join and mingle within our missionary teams and organizations. The widely used concept of “national” cultures does not necessarily help us understand the diverse people whom God calls into fellowship with us. It tends to create stereotypes and prejudice about people who come from other countries. It makes more sense to base our understanding of people on our teams as continually changing their habits and social life to meet their needs and aspirations, than to base it on an unchanging, timeless thing that defines its members. It is even more important in culturally complex settings such as international mission organizations and their multiethnic ministry teams where people from all over the world form a new community and work together toward evangelization and church planting. Are these teams culturally Western, Asian, Latin American, or African? Or are they to be a mixture of various things and form something new? I believe the latter would be a better way to look at cultural complexity present in global missions today.

Authentic Community: Going beyond Pragmatism of Business Models

A few years ago, I had a chance to survey some of the missionary training materials used in three well-known international mission organizations. These materials were imported and adapted from the business world. Among them was the “forming, storming, norming, and performing teams” model.⁴ They also included Belbin Team Roles, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Culture Map, the Cultural Intelligence (CQ), and Geert Hofstede’s dimensions of national culture.⁵ For sure, these tools can be useful to an extent for certain purposes, but they cannot be the only source for learning different cultural values in intercultural mission teams. While these may give some helpful ideas about how to operate a project team in a corporation, they are far

4 This is a model first proposed by an American psychologist Bruce Tuckman (1965).

5 These are popular tools used by business consultants and human resources departments to improve organizational effectiveness, teamwork, and working relationships among a diverse workforce.

from adequate for building thriving multiethnic ministries in intercultural contexts. An obvious gap exists between these management materials and the actual experiences of our mission teams. This became clear when I went to a country in North Africa in 2018 to conduct research for my doctoral dissertation.

I was trying to learn how workers on multiethnic mission teams in a country in North Africa were experiencing cultural change. I didn't set out to learn about their teams *per se*. I interviewed 47 workers who were members of seven different international mission agencies. I also met with dozens of other mission workers. When I asked them to share challenges in their multiethnic teams, many participants opened up about their disappointments and frustrations with their teams. I noticed that most of these frustrations were caused by differences between what they expected and what they actually experienced in their teams. After reviewing all the materials I collected in North Africa, I saw a pattern of what these workers desired from their teams and organizations.

My interviewees helped me identify the gap that existed. The aforementioned business and management materials are limited to one aspect or function of mission teams—the workplace, but there are other aspects of teams that these mission workers desired. Eventually I came to see four aspects that these workers wanted their teams to fulfill. So, what are the four functions of a multicultural team most desired by our mission workers?

Mission Team like a Family and a School

One, mission workers on multiethnic teams wanted their team to function *like a family*. We all need intimate, close relationships. When we join a mission organization and go overseas, we leave everything and everyone behind. We are uprooted from our ongoing social connections with our families, friends, church members, neighbors, etc. We are replanted in new soil. When we first arrive, we are like little children who need emotional and relational support from parents and siblings. But lo

and behold, when we arrive on the field, the people on our multiethnic teams appear strange to us. They are from different countries. They speak different languages. They don't behave or talk like we do. They don't laugh at our jokes and even worse, laugh when it's not funny! The team is all we have when we first arrive. Naturally, it needs to become like a family that meets our relational needs. Eventually, as we grow in the local knowledge and learn to do ministry in the new context, we too become like parent figures to other new workers.

Two, the team needs to function *like a school*. Initially, we have a lot to learn. We must learn and develop basic survival and ministry skills in the new country. The team functions like a school where we learn and grow in different cultural skills and knowledge. We learn the local customs and social norms. We receive training on simple things like going grocery shopping to ministry skills like how to share our faith with a local person. In a school, we don't just receive content or materials. We are put in a learning structure. The team gives us the structure that supports our development as skilled missionaries. Apart from any formal training program, the team needs to provide mentoring, modeling, and coaching. Just as schools have teachers and classmates, mission team members serve as teachers, mentors, and classmates for new team members.

Mission Team like a Church and a Workplace

Three, the team needs to be *like a church*. The team provides spiritual input and nourishment for its members. Some teams I visited in North Africa were very intentional about worshipping, doing Bible study, and praying together. Discipleship was happening in those teams as they met regularly. In a sense, the team is like a church fellowship. Different gifts of members are used to build up the team as a spiritual community. It's not just the leader's job to serve in a pastoral role. Everyone contributes. Especially in a frontier mission context where spiritual fellowship is limited, this church function is vital for the health of the team members.

Four, the team needs to be *like a workplace*. As mission workers, we need *work*! Most of us need an organized work, project, or ministry

platform that gives us an authentic identity, credibility in the local society, and a sense of fulfillment. The need for a well-functioning workplace seems stronger for those with a professional or corporate career background. This is a tricky part for many teams in ministry contexts where there is strong religious opposition and persecution. In these settings, mission workers often need to maintain a low profile and cannot engage in ministry in public. In these settings, mission workers must find other avenues to maintain residency in the country.

However, building a well-functioning business, non-profit organization, educational institution, or healthcare establishment is very difficult and time-consuming work. This is the reason that many workers in these settings tend to work separately, apart from their mission teams. Many teams in frontier mission contexts simply cannot provide a meaningful, organized workplace. If the team can provide such a workplace, it would be a tremendous blessing to its members. In my observation, many missionaries who come to a place like North Africa for the long term but end up leaving after only a few years almost always have difficulties with getting involved in a viable workplace.

Mission Team as an Authentic Community

In a perfect world, we would have teams that provided everything our missionaries needed in each of these four areas. The reality is that no mission team can completely meet all four areas of needs for every team member. This is especially true for multiethnic, multicultural teams which have a wide variety of needs that are not easily filled by their culturally diverse teams. In a sense, it takes far more energy and effort for multicultural team members to reach out to their teammates, build relationships with them, get to know and trust them, communicate with them, and enjoy each other's company. When they seemingly have so little in common with their teammates, it is very taxing to invest in working and relating with them.

We need to remember that everyone on our teams, especially multicultural teams, may have a different level and shape of need in each

of the four areas at any given time. The type of need in each area for each person also changes over time. When I set up a business in a North African country some years ago, my need for “school” changed. I more urgently needed knowledge in marketing and sales, which my team could not really provide. However, in my first few years in the country, I had a bigger need for “school” in language and cultural learning, with which the team had resources to help me.

We need to recognize that no workers need their team to fulfill all four functions all the time. It’s not one person’s responsibility. The team leader or field director cannot simultaneously serve as everyone’s parent, teacher, pastor, and manager. The teams and their members should seek to provide in these four areas of need, not any single person. Every team member needs to become aware of their own current need level in these four areas and communicate their needs with the team. It is also important for mission organizations and their teams to identify the current level of support they can provide for each need area and communicate it clearly to team members. If some needs cannot be met within the team or the organization, we need to find help from outside to meet our workers’ needs. Mission organizations should strive to build an ecosystem, a network that supports their workers in these four aspects.

In summary, our multiethnic teams must be multi-dimensional, multi-layered, and multi-functional. We cannot do teamwork and training sessions for our mission workers as if they are business project teams. These needs become especially acute for missionaries in pioneering, frontier mission settings even as the team’s ability to meet these demands decrease as its internal diversity increases. This is the reason that we must strive to build teams that support its members like a family, equip them like a school, spiritually nourish them like a church, and provide meaningful roles like a workplace. Our workers long for and need a holistic, authentic community of missionaries who together make disciples of one another and the unreached. Thriving multicultural mission teams would provide their members with these four functions at various levels as it becomes a symbol and metaphor for unity *in and through* diversity.

Conclusion

Some years ago, I was part of a multiethnic mission team with a dozen members in a city in North Africa. With many countries and denominations represented by seemingly incompatible personalities on the team, I was afraid that our diversity and differences might undo us. We had difficult incidents between team members resulting from miscommunication and misunderstanding. Team meetings were at times contentious. The “baggage” each of us brought would lead to uncomfortable interpersonal dynamics.

Nevertheless, we were committed to sharing life in Christ and doing ministry together. We continued to worship, pray, and read Scripture together. We not only shared tea, coffee, and meals but also our concerns and struggles with one another. Weeks, months, and years went by. Some members left the team and others from different countries joined. As time went by, we began to see changes in our team. We felt a little more comfortable with one another. We still had our differences and felt tensions among us, but each of us felt better known and understood by the others. We began to talk less about our “German-ness” or “Korean-ness” and more about our shared experiences over the years, both struggles and triumphs. As flawed and frail as we were individually and corporately, we were becoming a community in a biblical sense. I would not have seen our team this way had we all come from the same country or had similar backgrounds. Diversity among us was hard, but it taught us the spiritual reality of being one, *not despite* our diversity but *precisely because* of it.

I presented three critical issues that mission organizations often overlook but should seriously consider as they try to build thriving multiethnic ministries. There are surely many other pitfalls and challenges involved, and it is no secret that building strong multiethnic ministries is difficult and tiring. Sometimes, it may seem easier to just give up. However, in the current reality of a globalizing missionary movement, doing ministries together with and among a culturally diverse body of

Christ is no longer an option but a necessity. The tensions and challenges involved in multiethnic ministries may never go away. Nonetheless, by committing to building healthy communities of diverse mission workers, reflecting critically and constructively on our past and present practices, and seeking to bridge any existing gaps with persistence and resolve, I am confident that we will bring honor to Christ and get to experience the fullness of the *global* body of Christ.

Questions for Conversation

- How does Dr. Lee's vision for multicultural teams relate to your own experience relating to diverse co-laborers?
- Is cultural diversity an obstacle to biblical unity? Or do "we attain unity *through* and *via* diversity"?
- What do you think of Dr. Lee's proposal that we should view culture as a "river"? How would his model change the way we think about and relate to people of other cultures?

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