

Why Missions Have to Change

by Brent Mitchell

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Engaging the Changes in Missions

At a recent gathering of mission leaders I made the statement, "Missions, as we know it, needs to change in order to meet present reality." That comment is the basis for this article. At the outset I should state that I am assuming that the reader recognizes in one way or another the cultural, social and worldview shifts occurring in Canada and around the world. There is little question that change will and is taking place. The critical question then is, what are mission agencies doing to embrace the change and to facilitate the Good News going out into all the world? A great deal is being said and written about the major shifts going on in the western world. However, many mission agencies and leaders sense these changes as a threat rather than an opportunity. This I believe is due to an underlying feeling that the structures we have created do not integrate well with the expectations of new recruits and an increasingly skeptical and jaded donor base. The answer does not lie in continuing to dissect

the negative perceptions regarding change but to create an awareness, and where possible, a plan to engage these changes.

Which Model to Use?

The pattern presently used by many mission organizations originated in the post-World-War-II era. It grew from a great influx of missionaries available for world outreach because of the increased world awareness acquired by many while on overseas military duty. Naturally, this model used a lot of military structure and language. And, it proved to be a relevant and resilient format for mobilizing large numbers of missionaries into areas where communication and supply lines were long—as they were in most parts of the world at that time. Over the last 50 years this model has been refined and modified somewhat to give consideration to people's increasing discomfort with the assumptions of hierarchy intrinsic in a military model.

The rise of technology aided the accomplishment of mission goals and structure. Small planes, personal computers, bank wires, medical laboratory equipment all have proven useful in making the missionary's task achievable in a shorter time. But, these same tools have created a visible chasm of wealth disparity between the missionary, his organization and much of the world they serve.

In today's world, the postmodern viewpoint has all but annihilated any

acceptance of the individual working under a top-down leadership structure. If a mission agency has a centralized leadership (at country or world level) with a high degree of authority on the placement of the mission worker, his or her associations (religious or otherwise), and a rigidly defined ministry role, the agency's days are numbered because the recruit base will very soon be drying up.

Which World Are We Serving?

The Third World, the Developing World, the Two-Thirds World—the title continues to change as does the reality. Most mission endeavor occurs in non-Western countries, meaning that these countries have a large percentage of poor among their populations. While the percentage of those living in absolute poverty has diminished over the last twenty years, those living in poverty has increased. The gap between the wealthy and the poor continues to widen. Most importantly, the poor's awareness of the disparity between themselves and the wealthy has become exponentially greater through the media, creating serious tensions in this area. The reality is that missionaries are coming increasingly into contact with violent crime around the world because they are perceived to be part of the wealthy elite upon which the desperate poor prey.

Shifting demographics has created a burgeoning urban poor in all of the world's cities. This occurs as rural people migrate to urban centers because of war, lack of opportunity, drought and so on. Missiological stud-

ies show that these are some of the most receptive people in the world to accepting a new worldview. This is especially important in areas of the world where world religions are synonymous with the people's perception of who they are as a member of their culture. Yet, an incarnational outreach to them means that most of our present models, where we minister from a secure and wealthy neighborhood into their poverty, will be ineffective. They know who we are and what we have. The unavoidable issues of dependence and attempted manipulation of missionaries by the group that they seek to reach have created immense obstacles and difficulties. This has caused many missionaries to focus increasingly on more manageable population groups.

Globalization continues to impact all aspects of large parts of the world's populations experience. Alliances change, markets dissolve, many immigrate to the West; all of which have an impact on the awareness and perceptions of population groups. Paul Borthwick states in a PULSE interview, "Globalization is a force over which we have no control, and which benefits or hurts different sectors of the global population disproportionately. Christian Westerners who serve in contexts of relative poverty must grapple with the issues in one way or another, since the Bible's teaching must always be applied to specific situations within particular contexts. Reading the Bible in a setting where one is regarded as spectacularly wealthy is pretty uncomfortable..." (*World Pulse*, Oct. 18, 2002; "Missions and Money Revisited").

The point of discussing the shifting world stage is that present mission structures, administration and strategy are, in many cases, not in sync with what the world is today. Effectiveness of missionary effort will continue to decline until the issues of perceived wealth, disparate opportunity and structure that divides wealthy, elite mission personnel from those they are to serve are addressed.

Who's Paying for All of This?

Increasingly, those who would go out as new missionaries are struggling to raise enough support to cover all of the expenses for overseas mission service. There are a number of reasons for this, one of which is the unfortunate way in which public speaking ability is tied to willingness to support an individual. However, the purpose of this paper is to discuss potential change which can overcome some of the hurdles. I am basing my following comments on discussions that I have had with close friends, mission boards and pastors.

Many churches and individuals raise difficult questions when they discover the global income needed to keep a missionary family in a ministry context. Many feel manipulated by the fact that the costs continue to rise and it seems that there is little affirmation for the costs they are bearing. In addition, many have visited missionary compounds and private homes in overseas contexts and find themselves raising their eyebrows at the level of comfort that missionaries live in.

Others have mentioned to me that they question the fact that there must be

so many expatriate office or support staff when qualified national people can be hired for a fraction of the cost of a missionary sent by Canadian churches.

In saying these statements, it is not my purpose to paint all individuals or organizations with one brush. In the experience of my family, the bedroom that we slept in for fifteen years had grass and bamboo roofs. But there is no question that the Canadian donor base is rather jaded about the cost of overseas missions.

Who's Leading Anyway?

The face of those available for mission service is changing rapidly. Increasingly, western and local highly trained national lay and clergy are emerging. The original paradigm of the western agency being the one who determines strategy and operational programs is coming under criticism.

While serving in Senegal, five out of thirty families in our mission were from Brazil. They had a much easier time envisioning Senegalese leadership on our Field Council and in helping us develop effective programs and strategies for outreach. The predominately American leadership had a very hard time envisioning people who did not share their crisis and task orientation as having a credible and viable voice in directing Western personnel and resource in their native country. The reality, however, is that many of these individuals had more education and relevant experience than the western missionaries did.

A good friend of mine from a Central African country recently

returned extremely "burned out" from his last term. This emerged from a conflict with national church leaders who did not agree with the western mission's priorities and strategy in their outreach program. Increasingly, national churches and leaders want to have a say in how the development of the church occurs in their home country.

Moving Forward

Often, times of change represent opportunity for the people of God to look outside of their own experience and viewpoints to new vistas of expression of Christian outreach and commitment. I believe that the opportunity is now upon us to do this very thing. However, to engage on the basis of today's realities, the issues mentioned in this article must be addressed. While by no means being comprehensive, I would suggest consideration of the following ideas:

1. Mission agencies must accept the different expectations and assumptions of today's young adults. Often called "post-moderns," the recruits of today and tomorrow are usually very aware of the global village and have a sense of responsibility regarding how their actions impact people in other places. This can be maximized when integrated with a theology of mission that is described in terms that resonate with their heart. Most of these people will be very concerned that their involvement is holistic and does not have an exclusive focus on worldview transformation without community transformation as a part of its ethos.

But, as mentioned above, the kind of structure that missionary agencies usually have about determining where and how an individual will minister will not be accepted unless it comes about through dialogue. This dialogue must clarify the rationale of the placement and how this best expresses incarnational witness to the community.

New recruits will not necessarily commit to a long assignment. Therefore a mission posting is better filled through assuming that there will be a number of people rotating through to accomplish what was formerly done by one individual staying for an extended period. While this has important implications, demanding that people who do not work under the same framework of assumptions submit to mission leadership will mean that new, young recruits will not be accessed. The mission structure must be seen as facilitating the vision of the recruit rather than determining the parameters and policies of his/her ministry.

2. The cost of running a western mission agency, and more specifically, accessing funding for a missionary has no easy solution. However, I would recommend that a variety of models be considered. Some of these may conflict with the ethos of a "faith mission," but I believe that some of the theological underpinnings for such an idea need to be revisited.

It may be that in many contexts, one of the team members or spouses should work in an available position in an embassy, an NGO office or an international school. The benefit of this is two-fold. First, costs of keeping

a missionary in the field are greatly reduced and secondly, the missionary is seen as belonging to a broader reality in the host country's landscape.

I feel that missions must address head on the reality of donor-base fatigue that they have caused by filling posts with supported missionaries that could much more economically be filled with hired nationals. A parallel reality is that many mission agencies need to address their entrenched paternalism, which operates on broad assumptions of the character and capabilities of the national people in their host country.

3. I strongly believe that the day has passed when mission organizations can operate independently of the national church and para-church in their host country. The credible and qualified leadership that exists in practically every country should be integrated into planning and leadership of the mission agency's operations.

Secondly, missionary postings should be very strategic in their intent and goals. This means that individuals should be carefully selected and placed in a way which will cause the greatest sustainable impact. This will cause some tension regarding the viewpoint of post-modern recruits but ways must be discovered for crossing the bridge.

I have spoken frankly and as an insider into the debate relating to changes in missions. It is my great desire that the issues discussed are taken seriously. Many agencies are living on borrowed time as their ranks thin through attrition and their donor base evaporates as the donors who accepted the earlier model of mission, age. I believe that God still wants his people to engage the world, laying down their lives for the Gospel's sake. But this can only take place as we abandon much of what we have created in the past and move forward, boldly engaging the change that is upon us.