SEEDBED

Practitioners in Conversation

Fall 2023, Vol XXXIV, No. 2

Identity & Access of Workers: Discovering Viable, Sustainable Roles in Least-Reached Communities

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Seedbed is a digital journal by and for thinking practitioners who plant churches and make disciples among the least reached. It is a forum for the exchange of ideas. Opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the editors or of Pioneers.

Letters to the Editor are warmly welcomed and some may be published. Please send all correspondence to editor@seedbedjournal.com.

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Editorial

Editorial: Remembering a Friend, Following the Master

By S.T. Antonio

S.T. Antonio (pseudonym), editor-in-chief of Seedbed, serves as a church planter and a theological catalyst with Pioneers for the Middle East alongside his wife. He is a graduate of Biola University and a perpetual member of its Torrey Honors College, and he holds MDiv and ThM degrees from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Antonio is author of Insider Church: Ekklesia and the Insider Paradigm (2020, William Carey Publishers). He is an American with a Hispanic mother and an Asian wife.

"Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey." – Zechariah 9:9

Frontier church planters live at the crux of contradicting forces. A creative—and at times heart-wrenching—tension exists between the "pull" of Christ's love and calling on our lives, and the "push" of resistance we encounter in least-reached communities. While many of us get our foot "in the door," it is often challenging to earn a seat "at the table" where long-term presence, relational trust, and lasting kingdom impact can flower and flourish.

Our Savior is no stranger to the challenge of navigating the call of his Father amidst hostile barriers. As the embodiment of Truth (John 14:6), Jesus boldly confessed his identity and calling when his hour came (Luke 22:67-70; John 10:17-18). Throughout his ministry, however, he was intentional and circumspect about how, when, and to whom he disclosed himself (Matt 11:4-6; Mark 8:30; John 2:24-25). In his final "triumphal

entry," Jesus opted not for an unambiguous, transparent declaration of his Messiahship and mission, a statement ripe for misunderstanding which could have fast-tracked the passion week. He instead embodied a carefully-chosen prophetic sign (Zech 9:9; Matt 21:1-11), one which obliquely but authentically conveyed his person and mission for those with eyes to see.

Following a Creative-Access Messiah

In this issue of *Seedbed*, several frontier church planters from various contexts offer the various ways they have sought to follow the Master amidst the tensions and pressures of identity and access in least-reached communities. As someone who has lived in this tension myself, I learned a great deal from these contributors and am grateful for the opportunity to share their rich insight with our readers.

- A veteran scholar-practitioner shares a key paradigm shift regarding his social identity that emerged from his pilgrimage of serving for several years in—and being expelled from—Central Asia.
- A female worker in East Asia who relocated from a creative-access country to a more "open" country engages a variety of perspectives in the literature and among peers related to truthful communication, fruitful witness, and the "m" word.
- A scholar-practitioner presents two case studies of leaders who responded to severe disruption in their ministry fields by flexibly adapting their roles and identities resulting in fruitful kingdom advance.
- An engineer with decades of service in the Arabian Peninsula shares stories of ways he sought to naturally integrate his work and his witness into his missional call.
- An experienced leader working in community development shares challenges, benefits, and practical tips for those seeking to integrate community development and church planting.

- An educational administrator and missional mentor gives practical tips to leaders on how to coach and support Global Professionals (GPs) through unnecessary guilt and potential burnout from their multiple vocations.

Supplementing these articles, four practitioners offer incisive reflections on an array of books, including Timothy Keller's *Every Good Endeavor* and Craig Ott's *Teaching and Learning Cross-Culturally*. We also include reviews of two non-ministry-related books with surprising relevance for identity and access of frontier workers.

Learning in Diversity, Navigating Global Turmoil

Frontier disciple makers continue to approach identity and access from various perspectives, and this *Seedbed* issue is no exception. Different contexts, callings, and personalities yield different approaches, and rightly so. *Seedbed* is never intended to represent the views of the editors nor of any organization (editors and authors hail from multiple organizations). Our goal is to stimulate fresh thinking and fruitful practice by engaging with new ideas and case studies from diverse corners of the harvest. We firmly believe we learn more and innovate better when we transcend our bubbles and interact honestly and charitably with those different from us, especially on critical issues such as identity and access of frontier workers.

This issue comes at a time of global turmoil and grief amidst wars and rumors of wars with enormous implications for identity and access of workers in the near and distant future. Our hearts and prayers are especially with our colaborers—and the unreached peoples they serve—in communities traumatized by dehumanizing hatred and violence, such as Israel-Palestine, Manipur, Sudan, and Burkina Faso—to name just a few. Disruptive, soul-rending conflicts represent just one manifestation of the urgent challenge of discerning together the Lord's wisdom for how to be his ambassadors in a volatile, complex, and dangerous world.

As we discern the Spirit's leading together, we do so as those whose ultimate identity—whatever other identities and roles we adopt—is wrapped up in our humble King. The Lord of Hosts could have acquired access and entry to his rightful throne through the military supremacy of heaven, but he instead adopted the form of a servant (Phil 2:7), making his final descent to Jerusalem atop a lowly farm animal (Matt 21:5). As we engage the remaining frontiers of the gospel in these evil days—as teachers, professionals, development workers, and clergy—we will be "little Christs" to the extent that we take our cues from the one who claimed his crown through the cross.

In Memoriam: Honoring a Colaborer and Friend of *Seedbed*

Our cruciform faith means that suffering is an unavoidable part of the package of seeking access to least-reached communities (Phil 3:10; 2 Tim 1:8), and a fortunate few will pay the ultimate price (Rev. 6:11). One example is a beloved friend, co-worker, and former *Seedbed* graphic designer, whom I'll call "Brother Bold."

I first met Brother Bold several years ago while his family was preparing to relocate to an underserved, high-risk area. Well aware of potential danger, he and his family were consumed with an urgent passion and unwavering determination to gain access and serve the community and bear witness to the love and truth of the Savior. They labored tirelessly to serve with integrity and excellence, while also giving their hearts to share Christ's love and mentor local disciples. Along the way, Brother Bold also found time to lend his graphic design skills to enhance our March and October 2022 issues of *Seedbed*.

Last year, to our loss and his gain, Brother Bold entered the joy of his master and the company of the martyrs. In paying the ultimate price, Brother Bold points us to more than just an example of dedication and integrity in creative-access presence among least-reached people. He

points us to the costly love required to search out the Father's lost sheep, as well as to the inestimable worth of the Lamb who deserves the offering of our lives. We honor Brother Bold—along with other unnamed martyrs—whose sacrificial service directs our eyes back to our humble, suffering King.

The editorial team dedicates this issue of *Seedbed* to the loving memory of our friend and colaborer who finished his race having lived and loved boldly for the glory of Christ.

May the Lord lead us all to bold, wise, and humble ways to honorably steward the tension at the heart of being a "sent-one" in resistant environments, that we might discover healthy, viable, and Christ-formed identity and access in the most challenging, broken communities in our Father's world.

Serving with you,

S.T. Antonio, with the *Seedbed* editorial team

Articles

Field Identity in the Rearview Mirror

By Gene Daniels

Gene Daniels (pseudonym) and his family served as church planters in Central Asia for twelve years. He is now involved in research, writing, and training focused on frontier missions. He has a M.A. in International Development and a doctorate in Religious Studies (dhca@securenym.net).

Moving from one side of the world to the other is a disorienting experience on several levels. Much of the cultural haze lifts within a year or so as the missionary learns their way around a new environment, language, and culture. However, there is one aspect of this disorientation faced by workers in restricted-access countries that can linger for years, potentially for one's whole career. Many missionaries are long haunted by the specter of how to live out their ministry-personal identity.

I speak from the personal experience of having been a church planter in two closed Muslim countries over the course of 12 years. That part of my life ended more than ten years ago when a friend turned my family and me into the state police. Since then, I have had lots of time and opportunity to reflect on the issue of field identity in high-security environments.

Trying to Stay Hidden

We began our sojourn with an excitement that is typical for missionary families moving to what we call restricted-access countries. Our home church was excited because they were sending out their first missionaries, which was ironic since I had to construct an identity to fit

a place where precisely such people were not welcome. If I had to distill our focus at that time into one thought, I would say we wanted to live "under the radar" of the host government as much as possible.

Like many others, we sought out a visa that was as innocuous as possible. In our case, an NGO visa in a poor country usually raises no questions. Of course, visa status as a worker at an NGO is not only a legal identity, but also a social identity—something we did not really understand at the time. Since the NGO was started and run by "like-minded" people (those on our team), the fit was seamless for our purposes. However, as I grew in knowledge and experience, my perspective of what a good "fit" changed significantly.

My focus at the beginning was my identity in the eyes of the government, but I eventually realized that my identity in the eyes of local people is as important, if not moreso, than the perspective of the government.

Social Identity

For the first two or three years that I was in country, I did not actually do a meaningful amount of work for that NGO—certainly not enough to be considered their employee. It would have been more accurate to say that I volunteered with them, as that would have described the financial and personnel arrangements between us. Even being called a volunteer for the NGO might be a stretch, since the majority of time I gave to that organization was in the form of attending meetings—which often had little to do with the community work being done by the NGO.

After those first few years, my interactions and tasks began to complement my stated social and professional identity. I had enough language skills and local contacts that I started doing more actual work. I began collaborating with them to do things that accomplished the goals of our NGO charter. And because I was working with locals, I started having natural opportunities to talk about my faith with them. Thus, my

visa-status identity slowly came to be in sync with my internal missionary identity.

It was also about the same time that I started to realize how important integration of social identity and my actual daily tasks actually was. As said previously, my main concern upon arrival was not being seen—especially by the government. But my focus slowly changed. I realized that no matter how hard I might try, I would be seen, just not as much by the people I had worried about before. Sure, the government still had to approve my visa renewals every six or 12 months. But other than those brief, stressful weeks while our passports were in a police office, the government paid very little attention to us.

On the other hand, every day the society around me was seeing my family. Every day our neighbors, landlord, and local friends were all seeing us in a much more exposed fashion than the government ever saw us. Once that dawned on us, integrating my personal identity in a way that made sense to our local community became my main concern.

Did local people look at my family and think of us as slightly irregular members of their community? Or did they wonder "what are they really doing here?" That became much more important than my official standing with the government. Looking back at my sense of identity at the beginning of our time in country, there were questions I should have considered that have a way of leaking to the surface at the most uncomfortable of times:

- Do I actually work for this NGO since they do not pay my salary?
- Am I doing the work of this NGO anything close to most of my time?

Expatriate workers often focus on the question of their identity as it concerns suspicious government authorities. Eventually, I found that the host government often knows, or can guess, more about us than we realize. Most governments have the capacity to bore straight through our identity smokescreens if they really want to. I think most of the time

our efforts at concealment do more to calm our own nerves than to hide anything from the authorities. Therefore, I have slowly become convinced that the number one question concerning our identity is what do the neighbors, taxi drivers, and shopkeepers think about us? Do they have a reasonable understanding of what we do? And perhaps more importantly, does that identity make sense to them?

One day I was sitting in a taxi chatting with a driver with whom I often rode. As we turned a corner, he pointed out an obviously American expat who was trying to flag a taxi himself. The driver asked if I knew him, but I did not. He then said something to the effect of, "There is something unusual about that guy. He says he is here as a student, but he is a grown man and has a bunch of kids. No one like that is a student. I wonder what he really does?"

From personal experience, and considering this occurred in the former Soviet Union, I knew good and well what the driver was thinking – CIA. That may sound comical to those of us raised on Hollywood spy movies, but the logic is sound from their point of view. In most societies, grown men do not move their families to a foreign country to start their university studies. It simply does not make sense. And even those who do move somewhere far away for a year or three, do not take wife and children along.

Of course, there might be a way one could explain this in a lengthy conversation between friends. But in the chit chat that goes on in a taxi, a middle-aged family man as a university student is quickly dismantled as a preposterous identity. Unfortunately, it is this same chit chat from the taxi that will become gospel truth around the neighborhood, bazaar, and tea houses. So, we should ask ourselves, do we really want all these people thinking "there is something off about them" when they look at us? Do we want to appear to be dishonest?

I realize that making any judgments on such deeply personal matters could ruffle some feathers, but I am willing to take that risk because

there is so much at stake. If our very presence is suspicious to locals, what will they think about our words? As ambassadors for Christ, our identity is our primary credibility, and without that we really have nothing important to say.

Trouble at the Extremes

From my observations, there are two extremes that we would be wise to avoid. On the one hand, I have seen many workers who view their visa identity as an elaborate façade. It is for appearances only, and they do as little with it as possible. I distinctly remember one evening when another missionary family dropped off one of my daughters after a school event. It was the first time we had met so we chatted for a little while. They asked me what I did, and I explained a research project on Muslim marriage that I was conducting. The husband replied with frank surprise, "Wow, you actually do what your visa says!" He went on to express that he avoided doing his visa-platform work in favor of getting as much ministry time in as possible. They seemed like a very nice family who were highly committed to their mission, but I seriously doubt they made sense to their Muslim neighbors. And this points toward a harsh reality.

On this end of the continuum, workers may feel they are "fully engaged" with their missionary calling, but that is only from their perspective. From the perspective of the local community, they are likely to be an unsettling question mark at best. At worst, they are seen as people with a hidden agenda, and few unbelievers are drawn to people like that as sources of eternal truth. Although such workers feel that their identity choices give them greater focus on their witness, in practice it probably does more to obscure their witness.

At the other end of the spectrum is the worker who is highly focused on "doing their job" and doing so with excellence. If they are an NGO worker, they passionately pursue the organization's goals and aims. If they are a businessman, they not only want to run their business well, but they

want to make a substantial profit in order to prove they are legitimate. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with either of those things, but there is a danger that such a focus will leave little time or energy for the exhausting work of cross-cultural ministry. The human psyche is a funny thing; what starts with the best of intentions can take subtle turns that, in the end, supplant the very holy thing that motivated us in the first place.

One example is a fellow worker in Central Asia who was there about the same time as we were. He and his family had the same people group focus as we did, just in a neighboring country. His strategy was to focus on the upper echelons of their society such as business and political leaders. Nothing wrong with that. But the longer he pursued this identity, the more he became known as a political mover and shaker. This was "evidence" that his social "entrance strategy" was working. Unfortunately, it carried unexpected baggage. This class of Muslims in post-Soviet society fell loosely into two categories: either Soviet-era indifference to all things religious, or one of the newly devout who would not suffer any whiff of Christianity. The result was that my friend's diligence to pursue this identity pushed his public persona farther and farther from vibrant gospel witness.

Do not let the specifics of these stories give the false impression they are isolated incidents. The deeper issues are widespread because they are rooted in human nature. Most missionaries, Western males in particular, seem drawn to find meaning and satisfaction from our work. But this presents a special problem when that "work" is some sort of bi-vocational blend of ministry and secular employment. When this is the case, our tendency is to spend our time and efforts on the side of the equation where we feel most successful rather than attempting to balance the equation. If we are working in a place of hard spiritual ground, it is seductively easy to become more satisfied with being a successful NGO agricultural specialist than a gospel witness still long waiting for a harvest. And even a small amount of imbalance can corrupt the ministry of the best of us. Therefore, the more authentically integrated our identity is, the less likely we are to be derailed from ministry.

Practically Speaking

Should we only send missionaries where that identity is openly welcomed? This does not seem to be the answer since Scripture calls us take the gospel to *panta ta ethne*,[1] many of whom live under repressive governments. In fact, if only those living under open governments should hear the gospel, then the early church would have never existed! Therefore, we must keep trying to find an answer.

Since field identity is usually formed during a missionary's first term, the time to begin addressing this issue would be in pre-field training and early-field orientation. Churches, mentors, sending organizations, and field leadership can orient the worker to think towards social identity rather than legal identity. New missionaries should learn to understand communication from the perspective of the listener rather than from the perspective of the speaker. This is what communication theory calls "receptor-oriented communication." With some self-awareness and a little practice, all missionaries can learn to consider their words in the social context before speaking. It also means we start measuring the effectiveness of our communication by what is understood, rather than our command of that language.

Finding the Sweet Spot

It seems to me an authentic field identity is both discovered and constructed. Let me explain. When we arrived on the field, my team leader gave me some advice that proved critical for finding my own identity sweet spot. He said, "You are like 'fresh meat' right now. Everyone here needs another person for their project. But you cannot take on any ministry projects during the first full year, so you have time to find out where you fit." Although I am not sure I was conscious of

1 The Greek phrase translated as "all nations" in Matthew 28:19-20.

learning anything about my identity, this did create the space I needed to discover how deeply curious I am about new cultures.

New workers need protected time to learn how their personality, gifts, and skills fit their new ministry context. This probably means they accomplish less at first but can potentially lay the groundwork for both a better field identity and a longer tenure on that field.

As the contours of the new worker's place become clear, the hard work of construction starts. The missionary must take what they are learning about themselves and forge an identity that makes sense with what they have learned about their context. For me that meant doing a master's degree in Community Development. This not only gave me new skills as an NGO worker, but it also helped me grow my budding interest in cultures into the full fruit of missionary ethnography.

Theologically Speaking

Moving from the practical to the theological, I see two ways that perspective can be gained in a way that would strengthen us as missionaries and sojourners. First, we should focus on our primary identity. Do we draw our distinctiveness as a person from what we accomplish, or from our relationship with Christ? I know this is much easier said than done, but it does need to be openly addressed.

When we were forced to leave our country of service, we returned home and frantically tried to find a new location to serve. After several months and thousands of dollars wasted, I became resigned to staying in the United States. At the same time, I struggled with the question, "Who was I, if I was no longer a foreign missionary?" This sudden loss of identity produced much soul searching, even some dark places of despair, before finding hope in simply being part of God's kingdom. Only after that was settled did the doors open for me to step into mission research and full-time teaching. In retrospect, I see that God was ordering my steps to

bring me to see my identity in Christ as not just a foundation, but as my day-to-day living reality.

Secondly, workers in restricted environments need to have a strong conviction about what it means for God to be sovereign. The story of Joseph is instructive here. He learned the practical meaning of this through harsh trials, so that in the end he could say to his brothers: "And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life... So it was not you who sent me here, but God" (Gen. 45: 5 & 8, NIV).

If we face arrest and interrogation, do we really believe God controls how long we live in our new country, not the secret police? Can we accept his hand over our lives if it includes deportation? When a worker has a robust theology of sovereignty, they can rest in this assurance because they know "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

Conclusion

As the geopolitical situation moves further and further away from a western-controlled, post-colonialist model, access to the least-reached peoples of the world will become increasingly difficult. Even for missionaries from the Global South, questions about who they are and why they have come will haunt their steps in many places. Therefore, it is important for field workers to think carefully about how they identify themselves in their new land. Of course, they need to have an identity that allows for a residency permit, but more importantly workers must consider what the society will think. And the choices made should be rooted in deeply-held theological positions about identity in Christ and God's sovereignty.

There are no easy answers, but we serve a God who delights in helping us face difficult issues. So, as we wrestle with questions about field

identity, we should take the words of James to heart: "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you" (James 1:7).

Questions for Conversation

1. What is the relative importance of our social, legal, and missional identities? How ought these identities relate to and impact one another?

2. How do people who observe you interpret your presence in their community? How satisfied are you with your current social identity?

3. What might the "sweet spot" of a more ideal social identity look like for you in your context? Are there any obstacles keeping you from reaching this sweet spot? What might you do to begin positioning yourself closer to a more viable identity?

Breaking the Mold: Recalibrating Identity in the Midst of Field Disruption

By Brian Lima

Brian Lima is the Research Coordinator for Pioneers. He started his cross-cultural missions career in Osaka, Japan in 1997, and he currently resides in Bangkok, Thailand. He graduated with both MDiv and MABL (Biblical Languages) degrees from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and earned a PhD in Christian Theology from McMaster Divinity College in Canada.

According to a recent article in the Harvard Business Review, the lack of "fit" is the most common reason employees give for leaving their job (Wittman 2022). Their role does not match how they see themselves. In other words, it does not align with their identity. Sarah Wittman (2002), assistant professor at George Mason's School of Management, defines "fit" as "the alignment of an employee's core values and capabilities with those of their job." If an employee feels that their current role does not align with their values and capabilities, they will either leave the organization or may remain in a disengaged way. What Wittman has discovered is that this perception of fit in a role is predominantly a psychological one. That is, people have difficulty and leave their role because they fail to realize how their identity has become too enmeshed with an idealized role.

Wittman (2002) argues that our identity is made up of three basic components: values, meanings, and enactments. Value refers to how much self-esteem we derive from our identity. If, for example, a field worker who has a graduate degree in theology is asked to teach English, the worker may receive this request as a slight on their ability and

usefulness. The worker believes that any work they do should align with their perception of themselves as a theological teacher or mentor.

"Meaning" is the associated connotation of a particular identity someone has of themselves. A field worker may associate the meaning of a "radical change agent" with their role as a field worker based on a common cultural understanding of their role. Using the same example from above, being asked to teach English may not connote the meaning of "radical change agent."

Lastly, "enactment" refers to how identity is lived out. Wittman (2022) states, "It's about the *what*, *hows*, and *with whoms* of work" (emphasis original). A field worker asked to teach English may resist the change because they imagine they should be working with local church-planting pastors rather than locals who wish to prepare for better employment opportunities. Each of these aspects of our identity can prevent us from making the adjustments necessary to ensure resilience in the field and eventual flourishing in ministry. "Fit" on the field in these cases has less to do with opportunities that arise and more to do with our perception of those opportunities based on the identities we create for ourselves. An example from my own experience of struggling with identity follows.

When my wife and I moved to Southeast Asia, I had just completed a PhD in Theology and was anxious about how I would be partnering with the local church. Fortunately, I was able to find work training future pastors and local church leadership in a local Bible college. I was the college's research lecturer for theological courses they provided in English. My goal was to study the local language part-time with the hope of teaching in both languages in the future and allowing me to instruct a greater variety of courses. After long hours of language and cultural learning to have an expanding ministry, I was shocked when several years later, the college decided to discontinue their courses in English and offered only courses in the local language.

Since I did not have an adequate knowledge of the local language to teach graduate level courses, the college temporarily offered ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes for me to teach. At the time, I did not think the offer was generous because I saw myself as a theology lecturer. I had taken out significant loans and spent years in training to be a graduate school lecturer. Trying to make the necessary adjustments to this major career disruption, I scrambled to get a certification to teach ESOL, but internally I struggled to make the adjustment to a position that a high-school graduate could fill.

Fortunately, I learned that the offer to teach English was in fact a very gracious offer, but it took some time to make the psychological adjustment. Below, I have provided two case studies from the field that provide better examples of change in identity through disruption. You will read about two field workers, one in the context of Asia and one in the Middle East. Both went through disruptive experiences that made them question their "fit" on the field. Both made the psychological adjustments around identity, and both were able to create ministries that flourished in very difficult and even dangerous contexts. Three areas are described: (1) the disruption that caused them to rethink their identity; (2) the shifts they made around identity to take on new roles; and (3) how their ministries flourished as a result.

Case Study #1: Asia

Disruption

Several years ago, many field workers were forcibly removed from the country where they had been living and working for many years. Many were arrested and interrogated for hours or days by government officials. All their possessions were confiscated, and many had to abandon their belongings, even houses that they had purchased. Rather than returning to their passport countries, many of the workers relocated in areas

spread out around the globe waiting to see what leadership in their organization would recommend as next steps.

This is a bit of the context of one field leader, Colin (pseudonym), who had been overseeing many of these displaced field workers, and who had been expelled from the country as well. Colin now had no collocated teams, no personal ministry to serve in, and no organizational procedure to help guide them. Their organization quickly developed a crisis management team, but this support could do little to help field workers who were struggling with the gravity of what had happened and what this meant for their work.

Colin quickly created an online platform for those team members who were now spread out over the globe. This online gathering was meant to serve as a support network and communications hub. This functioned as a "stop-gap" measure, but what was needed was psychological adjustments to their new context.

Psychological Adjustment

In Asia, Colin quickly realized that their previous identity had made them too dependent on other leadership roles within the organization. He felt that his role was structured in a way that required them to patiently wait for more senior leaders to derive new pathways forward for the team members anxiously waiting for direction. Senior leadership was extremely busy and could not offer immediate and ongoing assistance to teams that were already displaced from their areas of service and unsure what their next steps should be.

Fortunately, providing pastoral care was part of the field leader's lingering identity, which led to creating a virtual networking and member-care resource for teams. Teams could regularly connect with Colin and each other to share their experiences as well as developments in the news related to their previous area of ministry. Colin could also

give ongoing updates from senior leaders and working groups that were scrambling to provide direction and resources to the displaced teams.

While providing pastoral care was important at first, eventually the teams displayed a need for greater direction for further ministry. Displaced families felt the pressure to meet the needs of their children. They also were putting pressure on themselves to fulfill what they thought was their duty to field ministry. Some were even feeling pressured by supporters from their passport countries. Amid this ongoing pressure to serve the teams, Colin began reassessing his identity as a field leader.

Colin started by redefining his perception of the mission goals and values of their teams. No longer were they going to be members who merely followed the organization's goals and values. They were now going to re-evaluate themselves as shapers of organizational identity and not primarily followers. They did not change the organization's mission goals or values, but they adjusted how they would approach them. For example, their organization has a list of core values that shape their mission goals. Colin brought these values to the team and asked what three values best described them as a team. They appreciated all the values of the organization, but by personalizing how they would engage with those values, Colin created alignment and a new sense of "buy-in" from the team. They would create a new team, a new mission within the broader mission. The field leader saw their emerging team less as a follower of the organization and more as a leader in advocating specific organizational values and distinctives.

Within a relatively short time, this virtual and displaced community of field workers created their own distinct understanding of their contribution to the organization. Colin and the field workers no longer functioned in the same ways they did before the disruption. No longer were they displaced workers spread out over the globe. Through a renewed engagement in organizational distinctives, they had become a new team with a new identity and a new missional goal. Team members saw themselves more as shapers for mission goal and value alignment.

This led to more disagreement during virtual team meetings, but it also led to greater "buy-in" and commitment. Opinions, even if they led to conflict, were openly shared, and everyone was expected to lead the group discussions in areas of their expertise and training.

Colin's identity as a field leader changed when he adjusted his role. He aligned it with a new identity which took on new complexity based on the disruption and changes in his context. In this new disruptive context, the team leader's identity and role became much more complex, but this new identity enabled him to lead his team forward. He was able to provide security, focus, and eventually momentum among those he leads.

Growth

Ultimately, thriving in ministry is a shared goal for many field workers, and the example given above reveals that reassessing identity by transitioning to a viable role can lead to development and even increased fruitfulness in ministry.

Colin began noticing a synergy in the teams. Once team members began redefining their identity, members began to see each other not according to their organizational roles, but more according to the value that each member brought to the work. Members prioritized skill set over role, which created broad, interdependent working relationships. No one functioned as a leader in the sense of being in authority above others. The team leader had created a sort of new organization within an organization which everyone helped to build. Their reassessment of their roles, goals, and values were linked to their sending organization, but they had collaboratively reassessed how they engaged with the organizational structures in their own context.

Their collaborative approach led them to reassess what work they could do while not being collocated in the areas they served. It also led them to generate a new process from which to mobilize new members to their work. Organizational leadership had been meeting since their

teams had been removed from their area of ministry and had not yet produced processes to help displaced members reengage in their work. They were even further from producing a plan for sending more workers into this disrupted area.

By making the necessary, though difficult, shifts in identity, the team leader and the newly founded virtual team—spread out over a wide section of the globe—accomplished three things: (1) they rebuilt team cohesion; (2) they reengaged in fulfilling mission goals through local networks; and (3) they created an agreed-upon process for potential new members to join their team. This newly formed team with a new identity moved much more quickly and effectively than the organization. By making the necessary shifts in identity, this team became resilient and resourceful, which eventually led to growth in their ministries. Not only had they provided organizational leaders with a new pathway to mobilize new workers to the once closed field, but they also were functioning in a new capacity: as mobilizers of local church leaders. This shift to mobilization developed a new ministry "tool" to get the work done.

Case Study #2: Middle East

Disruption

Several years prior to the disruption that happened in Asia, a new field worker was arriving at their first field assignment in the Middle East. Stephen (pseudonym) had completed university and had anticipated building a career in his passport country but had instead received a call from God to overseas mission. He then enrolled in a biblical studies program after which he and his family moved to serve as new team members in a sending organization with opportunities in the Middle East.

Stephen had anticipated years of language and culture learning in their new "home" country as well as learning how to align with their new team. Shortly after the family arrived, unforeseen circumstances led to the relocation of the team leader. This new field worker who

had just relocated his family was subsequently asked to lead the team. Adding more disruption, several months after becoming the team leader, Stephen was then asked to lead a business that was created in their locale. This business provided visas for field workers from several organizations while also providing valuable resources for the local population.

But the disruption did not end here. Not long after these events transpired, political unrest upset the entire country they were serving and eventually led Stephen and his family to relocate. Stephen now found himself running another affiliated business in a new area while also networking with field workers from other organizations who remained engaged in the area of political unrest. Because political unrest had led to widespread oppression and need among the locals they were serving, field workers from several different organizations asked the now relocated field worker to help co-lead a massive initiative to meet the needs of locals in the area they were serving.

Psychological Adjustment

The rapid and continuous disruption Stephen faced in the Middle East also led to a change in perspective on identity. Stephen did not realize how deeply he identified with being a team member until the team leader and his family left shortly after his arrival. Further confusion was caused when Stephen was asked to become the manager of a local business that provided visas for workers in their area. Then, when political upheaval led to workers' "waves of exodus" to neighboring countries, Stephen's identity required further shifts. He was no longer working in the area he had planned to work in nor with the local population he had felt called to work with.

Stephen was now a field leader with a team consisting of various field workers from other organizations and local church leaders. His ministry had also expanded from church planting through his organization to partnering broadly with anyone who shared the same values and mission

goals that they had. Stephen's identity had primarily been identified with his role in his organization, but now it had become more defined by his desire to have impact for the gospel with anyone, anywhere.

What is compelling about this example is how little value this field worker eventually found in his identity as a member of his sending organization. Usually, organizations desire to build in their members a strong sense of belonging, both to their distinctive mission goals and values. The belief is that by building a stronger alignment to the organization in this way, field workers will become more resilient and effective in the field. But this case, along with the previous one, highlights the need to reassess established identities. Workers must find ways to fit into new roles and more developed identities so that they might not only remain resilient, but that they might thrive in new ministries as well.

Growth

Stephen's ministry in the Middle East flourished after he adjusted his own identity. During the years of ongoing disruption in his area, Stephen had to be flexible in his role and in selecting with whom he partnered for ministry. Although starting in a team that consisted of only members from his sending organization, Stephen eventually partnered with members of other organizations and with local believers.

It was through these partnerships that ministry began to really flourish. Stephen eventually became a team leader of his sending organization, but this did not mean that he primarily worked with members of that organization. Partnerships had become a necessity to remain working in the field.

Partnerships and Stephen's ability to reshape his identity led to the flourishing of the ministry. When he left his specific area of ministry because of political upheaval, he continued contact with partners who had decided to stay. Stephen began a new ministry in his new local context, but his team continued to build their relationship with the area they had left through visits and online communications.

During the political strife in his previous area, many of the local believers and their communities suffered. A colleague who had remained in the area asked Stephen if he could help organize a plan to meet their needs. Stephen had never previously considered participating in a community development ministry, but through an ongoing reassessment of his identity, he was now ready to shift into this space and respond.

Still residing in a neighboring area, Stephen became a part of a multi-organizational network with local believers. Through this coalition they produced a two-pronged approach to the humanitarian crisis: (1) they created an NGO with a network to any humanitarian development resource. Anyone from the area could volunteer to distribute resources they could collect from international organizations; and (2) they created a coalition of local believers and house churches to strategically meet the physical and emotional needs of locals, but to also call those they serve to follow Christ.

Stephen was now discipling local believers, networking with media ministries on potential contacts, and organizing and leading a growing, coordinated effort to care for the local community who were desperate for care. Stephen's identity had become very different than it was when he first arrived in the field. Because of this willingness to adapt through disruption, Stephen has seen the ministry grow to where his group now is able to raise significant financial resources to serve the area he first arrived at. His ministry provides all levels of care, from essentials to leading others to become faithful followers of Jesus, as well as a platform for local believers who want to partner in the work.

Conclusion

It would be good to reflect again on Wittman's article. Her point was that many fail to adjust their identity which causes them to fail in new roles. This failure to adjust has two negative consequences: (1) workers may repeat the mistake of leaving good working opportunities because

they have not learned how to adjust to new circumstances; and (2) they may never flourish in their work by learning the importance of holding a flexible identity, one that is open to change according to contexts.

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned my own experiences with shifting identity. I saw myself as a graduate-level teacher of the Bible, bringing value to the community I served in a very specific way. If I could not serve in the capacity that I had envisioned for myself, I found it difficult to find "fit." What I learned from my Southeast Asian brothers and sisters in Christ was to find value more in belonging to the community and doing whatever they were doing. If they thought I added value to the community by merely attending socials and shared events, then my path to flourishing in that community was to shift my identity accordingly. This does not mean I no longer function as a teacher, but that my identity broadens as it assimilates to the context in which I find myself. The shifts in identity have led to my own flourishing in ministry.

Both field leaders in Asia and the Middle East illustrate not only examples of shifts in identity but, more importantly, they also provide clear examples of the benefits. Both are examples of vibrant ministries that exceeded the expectations of the organization and even of themselves. These examples will hopefully provide encouragement for those struggling to make the necessary shifts in identity to flourish right where they are, even through disruption.

Questions for Conversation

1. How do we discern the specific role(s) that we should play in the mission of God at any given time and place? What is the place of organizational and team roles, and how clear or flexible should they be?

2. What level of disruption are you facing regarding your role? In what area are you feeling the most stress in your current role, if any (e.g.,

finances, job description), and how might that be related to your perceived identity?

3. What do you think would be your "worst case scenario" related to changes in your work? Would modifying your perceived identity address this potential disruption, and if so, how?

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Am I a "Missionary" Now? Reflections on Identity Outside Creative-Access Nations

By Julie B. Ma

Julie B. Ma (pseudonym) left Australia for China in 2012 and has been in cross-cultural ministry to unreached peoples ever since. She is a member of an international mission organization and has written articles for Evangelical Missions Quarterly*,* When Women Speak*, and* ChinaSource.

What are the ethics of concealing missionary identities to access least-reached peoples? Some argue for full disclosure despite risks, while others see concealment as necessary in restricted "Creative-Access Nations" (CANs). This latter view prevails among missionaries serving in CANs if only because the former are refused entry or, if they manage to slip in, are shortly asked to leave.

This article addresses the issue from another angle. Instead of asking whether government restrictions can make it ethically permissible to hide my missionary identity, I explore whether the *absence* of restrictions obligates me to embrace that identity. In other words, now that I am outside a CAN, I can freely use the "M-word" – but must I?

I begin by describing the status quo in China, and how I came to believe our careful wording showed love, not deception, in that context. Next, I share my shock after transitioning out of a CAN. Who was I in this free and open society where the culture, and in particular the church culture, differed starkly from what I had become accustomed to?

Initially attributing my discomfort to habit, I later found deeper reasons for avoiding the "M-word." These include association with colonialism, the temptation of pride, the security of vulnerable others, and ministry reproducibility.

Since the question is not unique to me, I share the stories of two other missionaries who are struggling in my current context. Then I turn to published literature, finding a mixture of argument, empathy, and unanswered questions. As I reflect on my reading, my context, and how God is growing me through this process, I conclude that there is no compulsion in how we describe or label ourselves as we go about Christ's work. The only imperative is that we honor our coworkers in Christ, trusting him to guide their consciences, and leave the judgment to him.

There Are No Missionaries in China

The few expatriate Christians still in China after the mass exodus of 2018 are not missionaries. That was the year President Xi Jinping proclaimed as his deadline for ridding China of us, and he largely succeeded.

The People's Republic of China has been a Creative-Access Nation since its inception in 1949. Expatriates need reasons to be in China that are legal, legitimate, and amenable to the presiding authorities. Rule enforcement has ebbed and flowed over the years, with a distinct tightening since President Xi's rise. If we are members of a foreign mission organization, or if we associate with people who are, the authorities must not find out. We might have sending churches but, if word gets out, it will not be long before they receive us back home.

When I was in China, there was an unwritten standard of conduct for foreign and local Christian workers. We knew we were "Ms" but did not admit it openly. We all had "short legitimate statements" (SLSs) ready to answer everyone from government officials to curious strangers on the street. When we, or our Chinese coworkers, met a new foreigner,

we would soon figure out whether they were "like-minded." We would observe each other's lifestyle, find out if we had mutual friends, and notice travel plans; it did not take long to decide whether they were one of us.

Once we had trust, we could speak freely in private. Yet we still generally avoided using the language of "mission." It was partly caution in case someone was listening in, but it was also just a habit. We got used to not using those words and we did not feel the need for them.

The gospel work we did was making friends, discussing our interests, mentoring people through life struggles, and hosting guests. Naturally, this included sharing our favorite books, music, and movies, which may or may not be about Jesus.

We did not even really need to work hard to avoid the word "church." The Chinese language has separate words for a church building and a church gathering. The word for gathering is not uniquely Christian. The same word is used for extended families coming together for a meal. If I went to a legally-recognized church building, everyone knew and there was no sense trying to hide it. If I met with members of a house (or "underground") church, then not even they used the distinctly religious word since they did not have a church building. When we planted a house church, the members decided what to call it. They did not want to attract the wrong kind of attention any more than we did.

Explaining why we were in China was easy. We all had jobs or university studies to work on and were often viewed through convenient stereotypes. Whenever I met someone new, they did not ask, "Where do you work?" but "Where do you teach English?" My short legitimate statements were exactly what people expected me to say.

Justifying our relationships with other teammates, missionaries, and local partners was not too difficult either. Referring to someone as a "friend" was usually sufficient in that culture, and it was generally assumed that these connections originated from studying Chinese,

teaching English, or simply being a foreigner—and foreigners love making friends. On the rare occasion I was pressed for details, I used vague answers I had picked up from my Chinese friends such as, "We've known each other for years," or, "Who introduced us again? Can you remember?"

Of course, it was not always that easy. Some of our foreign friends had no reason to be in China that made sense to locals. Others felt inauthentic emphasizing their secular jobs more than God's calling. For most of us, there were also those awkward times when a local would directly ask, "Are you a missionary?" Not everyone agreed on how God wanted them to answer.

Truth in Communication

If you believe you must always tell "the whole truth and nothing but the truth," then China is not a place you can serve in mission – at least not for long. People with such a conviction can serve God's mission mightily elsewhere, but in China, they will either bring trouble upon themselves (and probably others), or they will suffer under the constant pressure of feeling they are not following their own moral code.

To live long term in a CAN, some people might say they have to lie, which is sinful, though it is a "lesser sin" than not joining the Great Commission. Others sidestep the charge of lying by merely bending the truth, omitting certain details, and overemphasizing others. Another strategy is to prioritize practicality over absolute truthfulness. (I suppose most of us do this to some small extent: have you ever clicked on "I have read and agree to the terms and conditions" without actually reading them?) Any of these strategies might be described as stretching our view of honesty (Hale 2016, Introduction, "Defining the Problem").

I have started seeing it differently. Instead of redefining honesty, I think a lot of us need to broaden our view of the purposes of communication. When I first took a class in cross-cultural

communication, I was uncomfortable with the stereotype that Asians tell white lies to give or save "face." Asians are indeed more likely than Westerners to say words that mean "yes" when "no" would be more accurate, but in those contexts, everyone is supposed to know what is meant. They read the context, the body language, the situation. They know the relative status of the person speaking, and what the likely outcome is. It is usually only the cultural outsider who is deceived because they cannot "read the air."

Scott Moreau distinguishes low-context and high-context communication based on how much of the message's information is transmitted verbally versus how much is stored in the context (2014, 217). Westerners tend to be lower context than Asians, meaning they use truthful and accurate words to convey a large proportion of what they want to communicate, and they expect others to do the same. Yet Western culture also contains stored information and situations when words, although used, are essentially devoid of truth or falsehood.

For example, when an acquaintance says, "We should get together for a coffee sometime," they might mean exactly that – or exactly the opposite! The context tells you whether they genuinely plan to get in touch or are merely being polite. If it is the latter, they did not lie; they communicated contextually. Their purpose was a respectful, pleasant, and brief interaction, and they achieved it.

When in doubt, examining our purpose can help us discern whether we are acting as contextual communicators or liars. The former's purpose may be to communicate respect or acceptance rather than specific information, but the purpose is still to communicate. The latter's purpose is to obstruct communication of truth. The former honors their hearer by sharing messages in ways they can accept. The latter dishonors their hearer by disregarding how their message might affect them. To assess our motivations, we can ask ourselves a few questions.

First, will this knowledge, if shared, be a burden on the hearer? If I tell you about my illness or financial needs, you might feel obliged to help. If

I tell you about my illegal evangelistic activities, you might feel obliged to report me to the authorities. Protecting people from information they do not need to know can be an act of kindness.

Secondly, will this knowledge cause unnecessary division? If I know the salary of every employee in our workplace, I am aware that publishing those numbers could spark jealousy. If my political views differ from yours, I do not have to bring them up in conversation. Likewise, if I know your people have suffered at the hands of so-called missionaries, I do not have to align myself with your oppressors.

Thirdly, is this your information and do you have the authority to share it? Another way of looking at this question is to ask whether this is the kind of information that in some jurisdictions might be protected by confidentiality laws. A common rule of thumb is that missionaries can make their own decision about how they identify themselves but should not comment on the identity of others.

This is by no means an all-inclusive list. We can, and should, ask more questions of ourselves about how the things we say and the ways we say them affect our hearers.

Outside the Creative-Access Nation

This broader purpose of communication was the status quo in China, and it continues to be my natural way of talking, thinking, and being now that I live in a so-called open country. The country is "open" because Christians are not systematically persecuted and missionary visas are available. Here, Christians openly broadcast their activities, with churches streaming on YouTube, events plastered on Facebook, and "Missionary" used as an honorary title akin to "Doctor" or "Pastor."

For me, this openness came as a shock. I have reservations about being featured on YouTube or given the seat of honor at Christian parties. However, out of respect for fellow Christians, I sometimes accept their efforts to honor me, despite my discomfort.

Still, the openness of this place has limits. Not everyone sent here as a missionary is eligible for a missionary visa, so some of us are on work or student visas. Christians are free to practice and share our faith, but not every non-Christian in this place wants missionaries around. How should we introduce ourselves here? Are we "missionaries" or not?

Whenever someone addresses me as "Missionary Ma," I say that I prefer "Sister Julie." (Sometimes we settle on "Teacher Julie" as a compromise.) Why this preference? After so many years avoiding and even denying my missionary status, why can't I "relax" and enjoy being open about my calling?

Colonial Hangover

I now serve people from a variety of cultures and faiths. Some of these peoples have suffered under colonial rule by so-called Christian nations. To them, the "M-word" reminds them of past hurts and puts the person who identifies as a missionary in a category they cannot think of as a friend. A growing number of Westerners are now expressing remorse over the mistakes of their colonizing forebears and searching for new ways to show Christ's love as equals. Other Christians in my midst, including many Koreans and Taiwanese, have no such baggage associated with the "M-word" and wear it with pride.

Temptations of Pride

Although I am less prone than some to enjoy being put on a pedestal, I see the harm it does to the church and the missionaries themselves when they are given excessively high status. For example, a local church we walk alongside agreed to receive a burned-out Chinese missionary couple during a sabbatical year of rest and healing. They gave the missionaries no formal responsibilities, nor did they brief the congregation on their mission achievements. Before long, the missionaries became angry that they were not asked to preach, honored as church leaders, or given special seats.

Other times, it is the church pastor who becomes angry when a missionary will not give him or her enough face. This happened when my family and I sought to settle in a local church in our new open country. The pastor was excited to have us on his ministry team, so I joined the children's program and my husband began coaching some young men. This was not enough. The pastor wanted public speeches on stage, broadcast on the internet, including our full testimonies as missionaries. When we declined, he realized having us on his team was not going to give him the face he wanted and asked us to leave his church.

Security of Others

I am not physically in China and have no plans to return anytime soon, so why will I not broadcast who I am on the internet? It is because I need to consider others more than myself. Researching, mobilizing, writing articles like this one, and a host of other things God has called me to do would be so much easier if I did not need to hide my face and name online. But I still have friends in China, as well as students and coworkers trying to return. What would happen if the Chinese authorities found our names on documents or photos of us together? Assuming China disapproves of my missionary activities, then all these people would be guilty by association. To protect their identities, I need to protect them from public association with mine.

Creative-Access Communities in Open Countries

Even if China was not a consideration, a lot of my work is in Creative-Access Communities within this so-called open country. When I meet with my Muslim neighbors or strike up a conversation in a halal restaurant, how should I answer the question, "You are not a local. What brings you here?" I suppose I could say, "I have come to tell you about Jesus," but is that the best opener? If someone said that to me, I would feel dehumanized, like my only value to them was to fulfill their agenda. I would rather say something like, "I've finished my work for today. I have a little free time before my children come home from school, and you

seem like you have free time too." At restaurants, I like to say, "I heard your cooking was delicious."

I am always on the lookout for new ways to meet people. My coworkers in China gave me a host of ideas, but when I ask missionaries in my new open location, the most common response I get is, "It's hard." There seems to be a pattern that the longer someone has been in formal or public Christian ministry here, the fewer non-Christian friends they have. I have even heard missionaries who teach mission training courses say they no longer have any non-Christian friends. If anyone needs to stop using the "M-word" on themselves, I think it is they.

Reproducibility

I want to model a lifestyle where others can "imitate me as I imitate Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). Long ago, a seasoned evangelist hosted me and a group of others on a short-term mission trip. We were all overawed at how this man seemed able to turn any chance encounter into a gospel presentation within 60 seconds. Catch a bus, buy a drink, cross a road, open a door for a stranger, and he had clocked up four conversations about Jesus. We all agreed this man had "the gift" and we did not.

Even if I could do what he did, I would be careful not to overwhelm the people watching me. I want to model to my Christian friends, be they casual churchgoers, the young women I mentor, other missionaries, or kids from my Sunday School class, that sharing the gospel can be a natural part of everyday relationships. It is not a race or a task to be checked off a list. It is not so hard that only the "professionals" can do it. It is okay to take it slow, sharing a little bit each time you meet someone. It is even okay if sometimes you just catch a bus or buy a drink without saying the name of Jesus. We do not have a boss looking over our shoulder waiting to pounce when we slacken off. We have a Father who loves us.

For these reasons, I like to get a feel for a Christian friend's maturity before I tell them I am a missionary. Usually, I wait for them to guess. I want those who are new to the faith to see me as an older sister they can

imitate, not as a professional who is paid to make converts. When they hear me talking about Jesus to unbelievers, I want my Christian friends to feel like they can do likewise.

Diversity among My Coworkers

To supplement my reflection on my own experiences and struggles, I offer two additional case studies to illustrate the diverse ways people grapple with their missionary identity in my current context. The first case involves a pastor with prior experience in a CAN, and the second features a new missionary preparing to enter a CAN, grappling with self-identity during this waiting period. These stories highlight some of the unique challenges individuals face when it comes to embracing or refraining from the missionary label, emphasizing the importance of respecting personal choices and allowing room for growth and change over time.

Pastor Peter

After many years of fruitful campus evangelism in a CAN, "Peter" moved to an open country and accepted a role pastoring a church. Once he settled in, he started making visits to a nearby university campus. He tried to befriend students in much the same way he had done in the CAN. Although he was now free to call himself a missionary or pastor, he kept his identity vague out of habit. After several weeks visiting the campus, he told me about a new kind of awkwardness he was experiencing. Several times, he had had conversations like this:

"What subject do you teach here?"

"I'm not a teacher."

"Are you a student?"

"No."

"Oh, so why are you here?"

Peter was used to high-context communication and, in the CAN where he had served before, the context apparently allowed him to be on a university campus without having to explain why. But Peter failed to "read the air" when entering his new context. Peter needed a new short legitimate statement (SLS). He tried, "I'm waiting for a friend," but after an hour this "friend" was still nowhere in sight. Then he tried calling himself a member of the nearby church, but he soon realized that if the students he invited to church turned up, they would be taken aback to see him preaching from the pulpit. Peter realized his new context required a whole new approach which was far more open from the start. His SLS became: "I work at the church across the road. I'm here to look for ways our church can be a blessing to the students around us. What are your thoughts?"

Student Sam

"Sam" started his missionary career as a full-time language student. There is nothing unusual about that, until you find out Sam is married with children, has no obvious source of income, and does not identify himself as a missionary.

Sam and his family had hoped to serve in a CAN, but COVID-19 and other factors led them to seek an alternative. They landed in the same open country as I but retained the hope of moving into a CAN later. To increase his chances of being granted a visa in a country where Christians are persecuted, Sam needs a low profile and a clean record. He skirts questions about why he is here or where his paycheck comes from, and that makes it hard to form friendships. He keeps mission-related content off his social media and does not serve up-front in a church. He struggles daily with his identity and sense of purpose. Back home, he was a youth pastor. Here, he sees needs all around him that he is sure he could fill, but he is committed to his calling to the unreached in a far-off land, and he believes that means staying committed to secrecy.

Sam thinks his inner turmoil would be easier to deal with if he was not living in this open society. "In a CAN," says Sam, "everyone is in the same

boat. Everyone knows the rules. Everyone 'gets' people like me. But here, they don't 'get' me. They think I'm a fake, and I tend to agree with them."

Is Sam right? Would his struggle to live out an authentic identity evaporate if all the other missionaries around him were just as secretive as he? If it would not, what are his options?

Answers in the Literature?

Missionary No More

After 40 years as a missionary, Larry Sharp (2012) wrote the article, "Why I am Not a Missionary."[1] He shared the concerns of many of his fellow Americans about the ethics of hiding our missionary identity, as well as some of my concerns about using the "M-word." These included the matter of credibility, especially when relating sensitively to Muslims, and the false divide it can create between the sacred and the secular. Sharp articulates the problem well, but we must look elsewhere for a solution.

Alternate Identity Labels

Craig Greenfield (2022a) agrees the "M-word" must go. He confirms that in his current context of Canada, the word is "now more of a liability than an asset." Instead of honor, it is associated with colonialism, and its users are viewed unsympathetically. He suspects this is because "we've created too narrow a concept of what a missionary does." His book, *Subversive Mission* (2022b), proposes a range of alternate identity labels we might adopt based on the ministry of Jesus and his early followers, such as Catalyst, Ally, Seeker, Midwife, and Guide. No one of his suggestions can serve as a direct substitute, which is part of his point. There is more than one way to live out the Great Commission, and likewise, no single word needs to fit every cross-cultural servant of Jesus.

1 Updated and republished in 2021 as, "3 Reasons I Don't Want to be a Missionary."

Modifying Our Mission

Another solution, apart from tweaking our terminology, is to modify our mission so drastically that the terminology becomes defunct.[2] Denouncing deceit, Thomas Hale III argues that Bible passages used to justify hidden identities record specific times when godly people had hidden agendas (which he prefers to call "private purposes") but not hidden identities (2016, Introduction, "Defining the Problem," and chap. 2, "Attempts at Justifying Hidden Identity and the Withholding of Information").[3] Hale thinks the cognitive and emotional pressure tearing "Student Sam" apart is a natural consequence of his deceitfulness and will be resolved only by "modifying his mission" so that he can live authentically according to his core identity.

Hale's book is decidedly aimed at a North American audience. He makes only brief mention that "there is a definite cultural variation," saying, "I have never met an Asian who was troubled by a dual or hidden identity— they see the formal identity as just that: a formality." He finds another outlier in postmodernity, where it is "quite normal for one's `revealed' identity to vary from context to context" (chap. 2, "The Problem of Clashing Identities"). Is it possible that Pastor Peter and Student Sam are just not Asian enough, or not postmodern enough?

Hale's biggest challenge to people like me pertains to funding. He asks us to consider foregoing support raising through membership in a traditional sending organization because "our funding sources should also match what we say about ourselves" (chap. 2, "Honesty and Integrity," and chap. 4, "The Traditional Sending Organization"). This does not necessarily mean we should never accept money from Christians back home. He advocates procuring investors if we are doing business, or charitable donations if we have a cause our host country would find

2 Such a modified mission is illustrated with respect to China in a blog by an anonymous Christian teacher (Restore Hope, 2007).

3 Passages he discusses include Exodus 1:15--21 (the Hebrew midwives in Egypt), Joshua 2 (Rahab), 1 Samuel 16:2--3 (David's anointing), and John 7 (Jesus' secret journey to Jerusalem).

agreeable (chap. 4, "General Comments"). He concedes this can make it difficult to fund anything beyond what the locals we serve among have, such as regular trips back home, expatriate medical insurance, and the lengthy language study needed to engage with locals in their native language (chap. 4, "The Traditional Sending Organization," and "Paying for the Extras of Expatriate Life"). Herein lies the challenge: how many of us would be willing and able to serve—or even survive—overseas without these expensive props?

Openly Embracing Missionary Identity

Whereas Hale calls us to change ourselves so we can honestly say we are not missionaries, some research implies the opposite, that those openly identifying as missionaries are more effective than those who do not. Research conducted by "Patrick" on 450 tentmakers in Asian CANs revealed that those who openly identified themselves as missionaries were actually "slightly more effective" than those who did not (Patrick 2007). It could be argued that such an approach reduces deception along with associated mental, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion (cf. Lai 2005, 348).

However, Patrick Lai calls us to "Realize different cultures will view lying, deception, and shrewdness differently. We need training to learn our culture's perspective on these issues and then evaluate what is acceptable in light of Scripture" (Lai 2005, 353). This fosters acceptance of differing consciences and highlights godly motivations underlying some of the actions we might feel are deceptive (Lai 2005, 351). Such highly-nuanced views on deception raise the question on how we ought to make sense of the varied proposals of abandoning vs. embracing "missionary" identity.

Reflections on the Literature

Modifying My Language?

After reading "Patrick's" conclusions about the effectiveness of openly-identifying missionaries, I was surprised to learn that the

missionaries he surveyed were working among Muslims, the very faith community supposed to be most averse to associating with Christian missionaries. How is this possible?

There are at least three reasons that come to mind for why calling ourselves missionaries might be associated with greater effectiveness in mission among Muslims. First, locals might expect us to be too busy or uninterested in them if we appear to be solely focused on our tentmaking jobs or studies. On the other hand, if locals know we are missionaries, they might be more forthcoming. Those with needs are more likely to ask us for help with whatever they assume missionaries are there for. Anecdotally, Christians serving among Muslims in the context of an overtly religious identity (which due to visa regulations is more likely as pastor or professor of theology than missionary) report that spiritual seekers are drawn to them as authorities on the Christian faith.

Second, having already taken a risk by revealing our missionary purpose, we are emboldened to take further risks to make it count.

Third, we do not want to lose face. By calling ourselves missionaries in front of local Christians, we are positioning ourselves as model missionaries, even if unconsciously. I have felt a desire to "perform" when accompanied by local Christians, and I say I do not struggle much with pride. How strong must the pull be to save face for my colleagues who crave the honor and praise of their followers?

Of these three reasons, I concur that the first two make a reasonable case that I should start calling myself a missionary. Yet I remain unconvinced that they outweigh my reasons not to. I am more inclined to use another overtly religious title such as theology student or Bible teacher, both of which are also true of me.

As for Greenfield, I am drawn to his variety of role identifiers, but his vocabulary feels foreign, and I struggle to fit myself into any of his categories.

Like Greenfield, Hale wisely advocates moving away from "metaphors of conquest, colonialism, and commerce" as we seek authentic ways to explain our purpose for living cross-culturally (chap. 2, "Pros and Cons of a New Metaphor"). He also suggests a variety of identities and roles that might fit some Christians in some cross-cultural contexts. But after searching for a replacement for the general concept word "missionary," he settles disappointingly on "sent ones." This is merely a synonym, not as veiled in every language as it is in English. Swapping it for the "M-word" adds little and changes little if anything at all.

If we allow ourselves to stay hung up on finding the perfect vocabulary, we end up back at the original dilemma posed by Larry Sharp: wanting to abandon the "M-word" without having anything better to use instead.

Modifying Myself?

Although I do not hold such a rigidly low-context definition of truth-telling as Hale, and feel comfortable having a somewhat hidden identity, I have indeed implemented some of his suggestions. I never ask my children to keep secrets (chap. 2, "The Problem of Clashing Identities), but discuss my work, roles, titles, and relationships with them in ways appropriate for their ages. My core identity has never been as an evangelist, preacher, or "sent one" from any church or organization; it is as a child of God, citizen of his kingdom, wife, mother, elder sister, and friend. But government officials rarely ask about any of those. They ask what I do, so I tell them. I study, I write, I teach, I take care of my family, and I meet my friends.

Although I maintain that Hale's "modified mission" approach is no one-size-fits-all solution, I find myself on a trajectory toward living it out, not least because my sources of funding are changing. Being a student, a writer, and a teacher are all gradually becoming more central to who I am. They may even be edging closer to my core than being a missionary ever was. In this sense, it is not only my mission that is being modified, but myself.

Yet there remains a problem. The people we are keeping secrets from do not always ask how we identify or what we usually do. They ask about specific things we have done. Hale's solution was no help to my colleagues in China when officials asked, "Did you write this document?" or "Did you attend that meeting?" or "Did you give this Bible to that woman?"

Conclusion

Creative Access Everywhere

Hale believes that if I listen attentively to those who struggle with hidden identity, I will realize how problematic the approach is—especially for Westerners—and be convinced to change (Introduction, "The Tension of Hidden Identity"). I concur that some missionaries would do better if they followed Hale's advice and modified their mission so their core identity was one they could openly discuss in any context. Others would be more effective if they listened to others who suggest embracing the missionary identity openly. There are also many of us who are culturally Asian, or from other high-context cultures, or who have otherwise broadened attitudes to communicating truth. For us, a hidden identity is much less troubling.

There can be good reasons to use the "M-word" on ourselves, but there are also good reasons not to. If you are sent to pastor a registered church, teach in a Christian school or seminary, or serve in an openly Christian organization, it makes sense to use it, provided the word is not associated with too negative a connotation in your context. If you are a culturally low-context communicator or have a strong need to be your authentic self, you may need to either openly identify with the "M-word" or modify your mission so that it does not apply. You will also need to carefully consider how to authentically speak about your colleagues if you choose to serve in a Creative-Access Nation or community.

But if this is you, may I ask you not to push the rest of us to follow your lead? As Lai says, "We need not judge our brothers and sisters but

accept them, allowing God to deal with the motives of their hearts" (1 Cor. 4:4–5) (2005, 351). Even Hale, in his reflection on Rahab's deception (Josh. 2:5; Heb. 11:31) and Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors (Matt. 5:44), finds that these passages "illustrate the complexity of conflicting ethical demands—such as a sense that the importance of one's mission outweighs the importance of openness. In other words, they help us understand the impetus behind the hidden-identity approach and help us not to condemn those who follow it" (chap. 2, "Attempts at Justifying Hidden Identity and the Withholding of Information").

We do not need to use the "M-word" just because we can. It can stoke pride, compromise the security of persecuted Christians, hinder reproducibility, arouse memories of historic pain, and alienate us from non-Christians in any community.

No matter where we find ourselves in the world, we will find people who love the idea of missions and people who despise it, people drawn to us and people turned off. The gospel is for all of them. Our task is to help them get access to it, wherever they are, and that can require creativity. We need "Creative Access Everywhere."

Questions for Conversation

1. What do you think of the author's reasons for not calling herself a "missionary" in her new context?

2. What could be the benefits and liabilities of openly identifying as a "missionary" in your context? What about for a non-missionary identity? How might your answer change if you changed contexts from a "closed" to an "open" country (or vice-versa)?

3. How do you understand the ethics of truth telling regarding our identity and missional calling?

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Counting the Cost and Reward of Community Development

By Adam L. Smith

Adam L. Smith (pseudonym) is from the United States. Since completing his master's degree in intercultural studies, he has served for 25 years in church planting activities in Asia and the Middle East among least-engaged Muslim peoples. Throughout this time, he has worked in humanitarian and development initiatives serving the poor.

Those serving on the field for any length of time have seen many roles and models which workers take on as their means for remaining long term in a country. After the Lord called me to the least engaged for the spread of the gospel, he led me to teammates who were doing community-development initiatives. While I was soon convinced of the effectiveness of development work for access and engagement, the Lord taught me to respect and appreciate the varied ways He leads each of us into His work among the nations.

Community development opens significant doors for gospel ministry, but not without time, effort, and wise management of staff, team responsibilities, and projects. This article unpacks some of the central principles I have learned from two decades of experience of integrating community development and church planting (CP) in three very different Muslim countries.

A Powerful Door of Access and the Proper Motivation

Doing community development enables incredible access to a community and its families. While entry to a country may be easy, it can

be much more difficult to access a particular population or region within that country. Registering a non-governmental organization (NGO) usually results in obtaining the formal and legal permission from the government to operate in the country among the people you are called, which carries potential for long-term access. While each situation has its own history of NGOs, both good and bad, NGOs are generally acceptable entities in society for helping the poor, providing medical care, and offering other social development activities. In addition to access, doing development work enables workers to deeply engage with people and the community over time, which opens doors for ministry.

For example, think of the significant amount of time and involvement with people, in their community context, required to address the following issues:

- poverty through business development
- children with disabilities through rehabilitation and social inclusion
- sickness through community health
- child mortality through midwifery and life-saving skill training
- desalination and drought through agriculture development

Community development touches on some of the most heart-wrenching issues families and communities face. In those contexts, our efforts and presence open opportunities to advance the gospel that workers may never have had if not for the project.

Development work should not be a purely pragmatic means of gaining access to people's lives. We must believe that it is part of fulfilling our calling. When we look at all the work and challenges involved, a person must be convinced that the Lord wants them to do this development work. Also, we must be motivated by the love of Christ. When dealing with the many challenges and experiencing people's pain and suffering, it is the love of Christ that maintains our hope and keeps us from becoming cynical. The love of Christ is the foundation that compels us to work for healing, wholeness, and transformed lives.

The Cost of NGO Access

Many workers need to undergo several mindset shifts to prepare them for development work. First, it is important to recognize that obtaining access and engagement via an NGO comes at a cost (literally and figuratively). In most situations, there are several government requirements to maintain the NGO's registration:

- rent an office
- use a proper accounting system
- be financially audited every year
- submit government reports for both the previous and coming year
- renew the NGO's registration paperwork
- obtain approvals for vehicle purchases and annual registrations

The list goes on. Every country is unique, but all have administrative requirements that must be fulfilled.

In my experience, there is a sizable amount of project work (beyond administration) that is required to reach the tipping point of project effectiveness and impact. Before that point, the project just putters along and the opportunities for relationship-impact are few. When a sufficient (usually significant) amount of man hours and money are put into the project, there is a point at which the opportunities for ministry to people become exponential, and often more than the team can pursue. The worker's dilemma of "I'm trying to find a way to build relationships with people" becomes a thing of the past. Now they are praying for which ones they can actually follow up with and invest in. For many, this is hard to believe on the front end before they experience it for themselves.

Is it Worth the Time? A Story

In my personal experience, one of the top—and very legitimate—concerns of people interested in joining our team is how much time

they are required to spend working each week. However, this is driven by incorrect framing of the matter. Our development projects are not a "platform" to be exploited in order to otherwise do "real" ministry; they are an absolutely integral part of the ministry. For our team, development is the framework in which ministry takes place. Those who have stuck with it long enough can testify to the significant open doors into lives and communities which it produces, often beyond what we could have imagined beforehand.

This can be illustrated by a story. I was focused on serving a minority people group in a country in a remote area in which that group was almost 100% of the population. The only reason we could remain there was because, in the years prior, my team leader completed the lengthy registration process and established a project. To continue that legacy, we worked 35 hours a week in the project. A number of times, workers came from the capital, where the minority people group was a very small percentage of the population, and thus challenging for workers in that city to connect with and learn their language. They heard about us and would come to see if they could join our team.

The visitors were always amazed at the amount of access and engagement opportunities. However, they also saw the amount of work required to maintain our projects in order to live there. Almost all returned to the capital, because the time and effort needed to stay in the region was much more than they were willing to entertain. I don't criticize their decisions, but offer it as an example of how challenging it can be for some to believe that the trade-off of time investment pays off in richness of gospel opportunities.

There were a couple of positive outcomes from our time-intensive development efforts which are worth noting. The highlight was the establishment of a church after seven years —before all the expats were forced to leave. This occurred in an area where no church had existed for more than a thousand years.

Another positive outcome was from a local brother, who was employed by us. After he believed, he didn't agree with our philosophy of work. Because we were fellow Christians, he wanted us to be lenient with time, use work hours for ministry, and to give away supplies or equipment. However, that would have been contrary to our legal registration. After some time, he was detained and interrogated for over a month. After being released, he was immensely thankful, because he could always answer that the organization only did the project work for which it was licensed and not religious work. The project focused on its legally defined objectives, while the gospel spread informally through work relationships.

Furthermore, since he was a leader in the new church, his experience shaped how the local leaders understood ministry. The leaders promoted bivocational ministry for their context, even though there were other foreign Christian groups offering full-time ministry models with foreign support. Subsequently, those church leaders sent people into other cities in the area as bivocational church planters.

Local Staff, Vehicles, and Money

In addition to accepting the reality and value of the work required, workers need to adopt a second mindset shift: embracing the necessity and benefit of hiring local staff. Most of the time, a team thinks there's no need to hire people because the team members can speak the language and do everything themselves. While that may be technically true, it doesn't take into account the amount of time and struggle needed to do things which locals could do with much less time and effort.

Over the years, many frustrated individuals and teams have sought my help with government-process-related issues. The first thing I tell them is to spend money to hire a local employee. Sometimes it takes a bit of convincing, because we don't go to the field expecting to hire employees as part of our calling. Inevitably, after hiring someone, they thank me,

wishing they had done it sooner. The employee is able to get things done so much faster and cheaper, and the expatriate is then freed up to do other things. This advantage can apply to any role in the NGO.

Strategic thinking is crucial regarding the person you hire. First and foremost, the person must be qualified for the job, regardless of their beliefs. You may want a Christian because of ministry activities, but that is subsequent to them being qualified to do the job. Ideally, you find qualified people who are also favorable towards your CP vision. Then, the extension of the gospel has the immediate potential to extend through them as well. Of course, finding such people is difficult. Our employees are a mix of believers and not-yet believers. When you have not-yet believers, you have a unique opportunity for them to see something not easily ignored: the gospel worked out in your life and work.

When people want to run a new project with us, I tell them that, in order for the project to have impact, you need three things: local staff, vehicles, and money. That may not sound very spiritual, but I've been doing this long enough to see that without those three things, the opportunities for engagement and impact in a community are minimal, and they move at a snail's pace. Having the resources of full-time people and the means to travel to the community means more time in the context with the people you are wanting to serve and more time working towards your goals.

Strategically Designing Projects

While we are a Christian NGO, we don't do religious activities as part of our project work because of our context. There are contexts in the Middle East where this can be done, but it's not available in ours. This doesn't mean that we are secular in our work; we are seen as Christians who practice our faith. However, project participants don't come away from our activities thinking, "They are trying to spread Christianity." Following up on spiritually-interested individuals/families, facilitating

discovery Bible study (DBS) groups, establishing discipleship groups, etc., are all done outside of the project. We spend a lot of time and resources to do quality, positive development work. As such, it can be easy to perceive us as running an NGO simply for visas and legitimacy in the country while seeking ministry opportunities elsewhere.

That, however, is not the route we have taken. Instead, we've designed our projects to accomplish quality development work that also lends itself to informal opportunities to minister to the very people that we meet through our NGO work. One way to accomplish both is to identify in the culture where it is easier and acceptable to have spiritual conversations, and then to make logical project activities to be in that location. In our context, the optimal place for spiritual conversations is generally with the family in the home. One example is that we require our local project staff to visit participants to survey how the project is affecting their lives. We use a questionnaire for gathering, monitoring, and evaluating data on the project's outcomes, which is necessary for project improvement and reporting back to donors. When the staff person is not a believer, they simply visit the home and do the questionnaire. When the person is a believer, they do the survey and also see how the Lord may lead them to minister to the family's needs during the visit.

Don't Exploit!

It's important to address the fact that people in vulnerable life circumstances can be exploited. We have all heard of horrible situations where NGO staff have taken advantage of such people for personal benefit. We have child and adult protection policies, regular training, and accountability for our staff to counter exploitation. We are also careful that any time we offer to pray for someone, share from the Scriptures, or invite to a DBS, we are very clear there are zero strings attached. People must understand that their response has no effect on their benefit from the project activities.

Realistic Expectations

With all the work involved, teams will inevitably realize that no one team member is able to do everything. The amount of administrative and project work to maintain the NGO demands that some teammates spend more (or even all) of their time doing those responsibilities. This can sometimes be accomplished by recruiting members who are willing to leave the business world and understand that administration is their service to the success of the team. At other times, administrative responsibilities can be rotated every year so that all team members have both an understanding of that part of the work, as well as empathy for those carrying that load. Every team and context are different, but one thing that is constant is that there is an amount of routine administrative work that must be done to facilitate everyone's role, engagement with the community, and ministry follow-up opportunities.

Conclusion

Doing the field work of community development in a pioneer mission situation can certainly be difficult and time-consuming. Many workers shy away from the task of setting up and running an NGO required to support such an endeavor, because they see it as a distraction from their gospel calling. However, there are great benefits when workers adjust their mentality and see community development as the framework in which ministry can take place. Rather than a negative that simply "takes up their time," properly-structured NGO activities, along with wise choices of local staff and distribution of team responsibilities, provides an environment of rich and abundant ministry opportunities in underserved, untouched communities.

Questions for Conversation

1. What length of time is reasonable to invest to gain high-quality access to a community? Six months? One to two years? More?

2. How does the author advise integrating community development and church-planting goals? Is it possible to do both well, and if so, what could that look like in your context?

3. What are advantages and disadvantages of having unbelievers as staff in a field organization?

Guilt and the Global Professional: How Good Habits and Thoughtful Leadership Help GPs Thrive in the Workplace

By Alex Peterson

Alex Peterson (pseudonym) has a master's in Christian-Muslim Relations from Columbia International University. He has led cross-culturally for over a decade in the Middle East in both nonprofit and church contexts. The organization he led had people from 20 different nationalities, many of those global professionals. He is currently the director of an equipping program designed for global professionals.

I was having dinner with some long-time friends in our country of service. The husband was an employee at an international school, the wife a stay-at-home mom. Our families had co-labored together for many years in evangelism, discipleship, and mutual encouragement. As we sat and talked, it was clear that they were tired. Not the way you are exhausted after a long hike or after chasing your three-year-old all day. They were worn out, weary, and heavy laden. They were burdened with guilt due to the amount of ministry they were involved in and how successful it was. They felt guilty about their language ability and were stressed about their family's financial needs.

My friend is what some call a "global professional" (GP)—someone whose profession is both their visa access and social identity in a closed country. His story is, unfortunately, quite common. Exhaustion and guilt are common feelings among GPs, and anecdotal evidence suggests that GPs often do not last very long. After around eight years, my wife and I found that we were some of the longer serving GPs in our city. This experience is not unique to GPs. It is common for those involved in

ministry, whether pastors or other full time ministry roles, to also feel exhausted and even guilty. What causes this exhaustion and guilt? And what can GPs and their leaders do about it?

In this article, I outline the competing responsibilities GPs have on the field and how those responsibilities can contribute to guilt and burnout. I offer some ways to guide GPs and help mitigate the likelihood of these negative outcomes. Last, I suggest ways that team leaders and organization leaders can resource their GPs to help them thrive in their calling. To understand what causes feelings of unnecessary guilt and how we can help GPs thrive[1], we must first have a clear picture of the responsibilities that compete for the GP's time and energy.

Stress from Competing Responsibilities

The GP has a myriad of responsibilities: family, work, team, church, and ministry. They have responsibilities to their spouse and children, whether relational or just dropping kids off at basketball practice. Likewise, singles face their own unique challenges. They do not have the benefit of splitting responsibilities with a spouse, and they might feel a lack of companionship of a family to "come home to."

The workplace can be a source of challenge for a GP as well. If the GP does not see the workplace itself as the primary focal point for ministry activity, they may suffer from internal conflict or stress that work takes valuable time away from ministry. Moreover, workplaces can sometimes be places of significant interpersonal conflict, whether due to normal conflict or a result of cross-cultural misunderstandings.

After family and work responsibilities, GPs may face challenges related to the ministry team in which they participate. Teams in our region are usually a combination of three functions: team as church (we

1 It should be noted that there are times in ministry where we should feel guilty for not following through on what the Lord has assigned us to do. That topic is outside the scope of this article.

worship together), team as family (we care for one another and have fun together), and team as work (we do ministry activities together)[2]. These three can be combined in different ways, but they can also be a source of stress if the team does not meet the needs or expectations of the GP.

A fourth area of responsibility which could add stress relates to church. Some might attend an international or near-culture church, while others might attend a house church with teammates. While attending an international church provides a wider base of relationships, it also requires more time. Attending a house church with teammates can reduce commitments, but it also has potential to amplify team conflicts.

Fifth, GPs often have conflicted feelings about language learning. If they can get a job in their desired country, they probably don't need to learn the language to function. People might be concerned about a gap in their CV if they take multiple months or years off from work to learn language. Others are nervous about fundraising for those two years. Many default to what seems to be the easiest solution: part-time language learning. However, since language isn't needed in order to function at work or in society, it often becomes the lowest priority. Learning a new language is already a slow and arduous process. If the GP is trying to balance family, work, church, team, and ministry, and if there isn't apparent progress, the GP may cut down language learning time, or cut it out altogether.

Last but not least, stress can come from ministry relationships. These take copious amounts of time (and tea), but they are the core reason that the GP left their home and moved across the world. So, they likely sacrifice in other areas – typically language, rest, and family, to make time for their local friends.

2 This is similar to the vision outlined by Peter Lee (2022) in a recent Seedbed article on thriving multicultural teams.

If a GP is to navigate well these six elements of life rhythms, they must make critical decisions about how much time they give to each area. Something will inevitably get cut. What often gets cut out is time for rest and sabbath, which leads to burnout. Are GPs doomed to live a life of frazzled, perpetual guilt?

Wise, Careful Pruning

Some might approach this issue with a machete, chopping left and right until only the "essentials" remain. A better and more careful approach opts for more of a pruning knife, lest we damage the garden irreparably. Team leaders can help GPs do this by doing three things: (1) setting realistic expectations, (2) identifying clear ministry objectives, and (3) coaching GPs in co-leveraging similar responsibilities.

First, organizational and team leaders can help by setting realistic expectations from day one. I once sat with a couple that was preparing to come to our city. They laid out their goals for me regarding language learning, homeschooling their kids, helping their kids get into local relationships, and engaging in local ministry. We started adding up the amount of time they would need during the week to accomplish the tasks. The schedule was tight. So, I asked, "What happens when things go wrong? Where's your flex time?" They hadn't considered that. Nor had they considered time they needed for household chores, for having elementary and middle-school children who need to be driven to places, or for planning homeschool lessons. A second draft of their schedule accounted for these new factors and tapered their expectations for what they could reasonably expect to accomplish weekly.

A schedule to help set expectations prior to arrival is not set in stone. Once they arrive on the field, they can readjust as they settle in. By carefully and prayerfully considering their rhythms and what the Lord has called them to, GPs can gently and precisely prune away things in their schedule that keep them from doing what the Lord had called them to do.

Part of setting realistic expectations is thinking through seasons of life – seasons for language learning and for getting established (i.e., cars, housing, etc.), different family seasons depending on children's ages, and different seasons for ministry. In these various seasons, a person's capacity for team, ministry, and language learning will fluctuate. If a new family is spending time doing language learning, it may mean that they spend less time in evangelistic and discipleship relationships with locals – and maybe that's OK.

Setting realistic expectations also helps keep people from comparing themselves to other members of their team or the broader worker community. I sometimes look at my colleagues who are empty nesters and wish I had the time they have. But I also look at my life – with middle schoolers – as a blessing as I disciple my own kids. We can learn to take joy in the season we are in and not compare ourselves to others around us.

The second way organizational and team leaders can help the GP is by having clear ministry goals and an aligned strategy. This makes it easier to evaluate competing priorities regarding work, ministry, team, and church and then make informed, confident decisions about what activities in which to participate. When goals and strategies are not clear, the GP might not feel confident in the way they are spending their time. Uncertainty can lead to stress or result in packing in more than they can reasonably do.

For example, team leaders help to set priorities at the team level. Our team's goal right now is to sow seed widely, looking for locals who are open to reading Scripture. By having this goal, my team can prioritize what they do. One family I spoke with recently was involved in a few different ministry activities with the international church we attended, but some of the activities were not related directly with locals. When they started to show signs of burnout as they homeschooled, cared for small kids, and did language study, it was clear they needed to decrease their involvement in some areas. Having a clear goal helped them

evaluate their commitments and make a confident decision about how they spent their time.

Organizational leaders should consider how their messaging and requirements impact how much time GPs spend in various activities. When I was a principal of a school, I could come up with all sorts of impressive organizational goals, but if I wasn't careful, I would set expectations for teachers that were unrealistic. I could mitigate this by engaging in continuous dialogue with teachers, administrators, and families to hear how the school's organizational goals and priorities were working out practically. (One thing that students and GPs have in common is that they're not shy about sharing their opinions when given the opportunity!) I learned that I need to have humility to actively listen and be willing to adjust expectations and goals that were unrealistic to accomplish.[3]

Last, team leaders can coach GPs in ways to take seemingly competing responsibilities and graft them together. While it is not likely that you can make your whole job your ministry work or make all your family time your church time, the GP can look for ways to co-leverage multiple spheres of responsibility. I have two sons, who like to do very different things. One son loves sports, so I've organized a father-son baseball and kickball day (a nice "in-between" baseball and soccer) in which we invited our local friends to come with their kids and play. My other son loves hiking and camping, so when we've gone out into the mountains to hike, we've invited other dads and sons to come with us. I have a friend who loves playing chess – so he's looked for ways to play chess with locals. These are ways to co-leverage family and ministry responsibilities.

3 At the same time, leaders must also have the wisdom to know when pressing into objections is wise, or when people do have capacity that they don't realize they have. Followers (whether GPs or teachers) must be willing to submit even when they disagree with a reasonable leadership decision. In all of it, leaders and followers must approach conversations with copious amounts of humility and grace and love, forgiving seventy times seven.

Co-leveraging can also happen in the workplace. One reason the workplace is a wonderful place for ministry is because there are so many problems. When a GP reacts with love and grace to interpersonal conflict, this makes an impression on non-believing co-workers. When a business is not doing well and co-workers get stressed out, a GP's calm trust in the Lord can be a light in the darkness. This is even more true when a GP is treated unfairly and unjustly by an employer, and the GP responds with soft words and a compassionate heart. People know the message of the cross by our words, but people see the power of the cross as we engage in Christ-honoring, sacrificial love. Time in the proverbial trenches builds trust, and when co-workers share about their personal problems and concerns, sharing Jesus' words carries even more authority.

Co-leveraging does not solve the problem of competing priorities, but it can help a GP see how certain responsibilities are not simply necessary tasks for a visa, but integral parts of their ministry.

How Leaders Can Support Their GPs

GPs often need mentoring and coaching as they attempt to find the right balance between all their competing responsibilities. Leaders can set the stage to help GPs make strategic, healthy decisions in a few different ways.

First, team and organizational leaders need *themselves* to develop the skills of pruning their schedules and co-leveraging their commitments based on clear goals and identity. If I ask my team members to act in a certain way, and then I do the opposite, they may feel confused at best and resentful at worst. Moreover, if I cannot practice these skills myself, I will not be able to coach my team members into healthy ministry patterns. This is not to say that every person schedules their lives the same way – we must account for differences in personality, family, and ministry calling. But I must be willing to prune if I want my teammate to prune.

Second, team and organizational leaders can help by developing a clear vision with defined organizational goals for what they are seeking to accomplish. This gives team leaders the direction to set clear ministry goals for the team. By having a clear vision, the GPs who follow you can prioritize their lives. This can be challenging because of the abundance of good ministry ideas and objectives that could be pursued. If we try to do everything that seems good, we may not accomplish much, but if we strategically align ourselves with a clear vision, our team can be more effective. When you have a clear vision, you will find some people who look elsewhere, which is OK and might be good for everyone involved. But more often, having a clear vision serves the people you lead by giving them something to rally behind.

In our own context, we clarify our vision through a team covenant that outlines our specific team goals and how to interact together as a team. Our four defined tasks are sharing the gospel widely to find people interested in Jesus, developing seeker studies, discipling local believers, and developing leaders. In our city, we are primarily in the stage of casting wide nets, with a handful of seeker studies. Second, we have a regular time in our team meetings that we call "CP review" where we celebrate what the Lord has done recently and discern what task the Lord is assigning to us (individually or corporately) related to our specific goals. While this is not much different than any other ministry context, what is different is the number of tasks that need to be accomplished. The GP needs to be coached as they cull their commitments and not allow feelings of guilt or shame to settle in.

Third, leaders can cast a clear vision for obedience to the tasks the Lord has given to individuals and teams, and not to a responsibility for convincing people to follow Jesus or for "planting a church." I am an American, and I have heard a few non-Americans say (with affection): "You Americans think you can accomplish anything with enough hard work." I appreciated the comment and have found it to be true. In some scenarios, it's a helpful characteristic. But it's also dangerous.

It is important to distinguish between the Lord's goals ("results") and the tasks he has given to us (obedience). We cannot accomplish the Lord's goals, which he will accomplish in his time. We are called to do the specific task that he is calling us to. When we orient ourselves to results rather than to obedience, we can feel guilty or ashamed that we are not achieving the desired results. But when we are oriented towards obedience, our joy is set in the Lord, and there is no reason for feeling guilty, because we have accomplished the task we were assigned.

For several years, I discipled a man. We read Scripture together, and he was baptized. But he never regularly met with other believers. We eventually moved to a new city, and now he is not meeting with anyone, despite multiple opportunities for him to develop relationships with other believers. I wrestle deeply with the outcome of this relationship. Was it a waste of time? Or worse, did I do something wrong? Could I have changed the outcome if I had discipled him differently? Should I have introduced him to different people, or spent more time trying to press in? I have spent hours wondering about these questions.

While there is a place for self-reflection that the Holy Spirit uses to mold us, I must be careful not to lay responsibility for someone's salvation or maturation at my feet. I would argue the responsibility lies squarely and solely with the Holy Spirit. My response, with whatever sadness and longing I have for my friend, should be to reflect on whether I was obedient to the task set before me. If I was obedient to the task, then I can rest knowing that shaping their choices and the outcome of the situation was not my role. What I've written above is true not just for the GP, but for anyone working in ministry. What is unique about the GP in this scenario is the stress and feeling guilty from wondering if enough time was spent in ministry.

Fourth, leaders can spend time coaching (or provide opportunities for coaching) GPs so that they develop skills for ministry and healthy life rhythms. I run a training program for GPs which includes a semester-long module about such rhythms. I have found that teaching people

information in a workshop isn't enough. I need to spend time with my team members and help them to develop schedules, wrestle through competing priorities, and pray through any guilt they have felt about not accomplishing goals that are not possible for them to accomplish in the first place. But we can love people and walk with them as the Lord helps them to understand and believe that his highest calling for them is love, faith, and obedience, not results.

A Final Word

One might wonder whether GPs can thrive in UPG ministry with all of its challenges and responsibilities. I can confidently say that yes, one can thrive and be an effective disciple maker. The effective disciple makers are those who are disciplined with their time and careful to use it towards the goals of evangelism and discipleship. By creating space in their lives for specific relationships, they have the time to give towards discipleship and reading Scripture with those who are interested. They also have the mental and emotional space to walk with their disciples through difficult seasons.

Regardless, the effective GP is not able to disciple on their own. Rather, effective discipling is often a group effort. In my experience, there are almost always multiple GPs involved in the lives of local believers. I might not have the capacity to spend 10 hours a week with a local believer, but in community, we can all work together to mutually support and encourage one another. This approach can be a good thing for the indigenous church in the long run.

The number of GPs will continue to grow as we blur the line, rightly, between the sacred and secular vocations. Global professionals provide unique opportunities for ministry, and face unique challenges of balancing identity and time. But by helping them to develop a strong identity and use their time wisely, workplaces can be filled with people who can be long lasting lights in dark places.

Questions for Conversation

1. From your experience, what are the sources of guilt that global professionals face amidst competing responsibilities? What role does a healthy sense of responsibility and freedom play for long-term thriving in ministry?

2. What expectations do you have of those you lead, and what expectations do they have of themselves? Which of those expectations are good and which of those should they not have? How might you help them have healthier expectations of themselves?

3. Which of the author's tips for global professionals are the most relevant to your context? What additional ideas would you suggest about how GPs can faithfully fulfill their multiple vocations?

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A Holistic Identity for a Holistic Culture: My Pilgrimage as a Global Professional

By M.James

M. James (pseudonym) and his family served more than 25 years in the Arabian Peninsula, where he was employed. Together with a team, they co-labored, following up on media inquiries, ministering to seekers, discipling believers, and training workers.

A respected reputation in the community is essential for establishing trust, which enhances discipleship. Before leaving the US to serve overseas, I learned skills for not offending colleagues in the secular workplace, then later inviting them to church activities in the evenings and on the weekends. After accepting a position in the Middle East, I began to comprehend the possibility of a more holistic lifestyle that better integrated my profession and my faith. As my language and cultural fluency increased, I learned new workplace boundaries. I also learned the importance of having an identity that was reasonable to my neighbors, professional colleagues, and anyone else among whom I ministered. In this article I share a bit of my pilgrimage as a global professional over two decades in the Arabian Peninsula, and what my pilgrimage taught me about identity and witness.

Western Dualistic Identity

The question of identity is daunting and bewildering for any young adult. Although I discovered skills in mathematics when in high school, a life dominated by numbers sounded boring. A friend signed up for

engineering, and in a moment, I chose my life profession without knowing anything about it. At university, I discovered the source of lasting joy, God's promises and a redeeming relationship with Jesus. I also began my indoctrination into maintaining a secular persona in the laboratory by day while serving as an Intervarsity Bible study leader by night.

If I remained an engineer in the US, I felt I would be burying a talent, per the parable of Jesus. My extended family included pastors, missionaries, and overseas workers, so I naturally considered this calling. The prospect of being used by God overseas sounded more exciting to me, and my wife joyfully confirmed this path for our lives. At the Urbana student missions conference, I was assured that engineering and cross-cultural service coalesced in tentmaking, which was an important strategic development for ministry among unreached peoples.[1] Specifically, my employment provided the expatriate residency in countries that restricted Christian ministry. This meant my engineer identity now also included a missionary identity. We were sent out to study language and culture before accepting an engineering position in an unreached country.

Being a tentmaker, sometimes termed "global professional" (GP), was a strategic step, but the strategic thinking seemed to end at placement on the field. We were in the country and on a ministry team but were unsure of what exactly to do beyond visiting neighbors in the evening. In the greater region, some were working within the expatriate church and others were identifying as Christ-following Muslims. However, my national colleagues were suspicious of a Western stranger handing out Bibles or one claiming to be a Muslim who followed Christ. In fact, both of these extremes resulted in prison sentences and expulsion from the country.

1 Weerstra, H.M. and K. Smith. July 1997. Editorial: Tentmaking on the Frontiers, International Journal of Frontier Missions, V14, no.3. Clark, C. July 1997. Tentmaking State of the Art, International Journal of Frontier Missions, V14, no 3.

Unifying My Identity

Thankfully, our language and cultural training helped us navigate these boundaries and point us forward. Many of my GP colleagues in the region remained completely secular at work, as they did in their home countries. They assumed they could not mention religion at work. I had done the same in the US, living a segregated life with a secular focus of meeting deadlines during the day and ministry activities in the evenings and on weekends. However, we were no longer in the US, and I soon discovered the nationals in my Middle Eastern context had a "zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness" (Rom. 10:2). Paul was writing about his fellow countrymen, and I felt it applied to my adopted people group. Even a national who was an atheist would say "the praise is for God" many times a day and pray with his colleagues at the mosque. In other words, irrespective of internal disbelief, religious duty pervaded the society, and discussions of religion were appreciated and considered a form of entertainment, no matter the social context—whether the workplace, coffeeshop, or home.

A Western Christian lawyer once shared with me that his national supervisor was asking questions about Jesus. The lawyer's employment contract was ending, so I encouraged him to gift the supervisor an ornate New Testament as a departing remembrance. The lawyer was unsure of my advice, so he gifted his supervisor with the comment, "Here is a gift Bible from Mr. James." The supervisor had never met me and responded, "I don't know Mr. James, but please thank him for this precious gift." I surmise the national supervisor thought it was peculiar to receive a Bible from a friend of a friend. Even so, he communicated his appreciation to his Western colleague who feared presenting the gift directly. Unfortunately, many of my GP colleagues who were unfamiliar with the national culture felt it was safer for their continued employment to present themselves more as secular professionals than followers of Christ.

Western professionals in the Arabian Peninsula (AP) had a reputation for a strong work ethic with an ability to complete projects and meet deadlines. A national friend once shared a local proverb, "Nothing is too difficult for a Christian." When I inquired about the meaning of this proverb, he explained that his people were happily living in the desert when the Christians came and built a city. Another proverb that he shared states, "Sleep at the home of a Christian, but eat with the Jews." It implied that Westerners will honor their word in keeping you safe, but don't trust their food as they will eat anything. In both proverbs the term "Christian" had little to do with being a follower of Jesus. In fact, most of my national colleagues assumed all Westerners were Christians and often asked why Christians drank alcohol, didn't pray, didn't fast, and were promiscuous, as they saw in movies.

Therefore, I endeavored to be a Christian engineer who was unlike other Westerners. I greeted in Arabic, used local proverbs, freely discussed religion, told illustrative stories, and built relational trust. I made it clear that I wanted the best for my colleagues, friends, and family. I explored the cultural boundaries of acceptable workplace practice in my context and discovered that verses on my office wall were not acceptable, but an open Bible on my desk was fine. Giving out chocolates at Easter to signify I was celebrating was fine, but distributing Christmas cards with Bible verses was not. Discussing God's redemptive work through Jesus on the cross was always appreciated! Often this initiated further discussions on the nature of God, the Trinity, angels, demons, prophets, prayer, and mankind's relationship with God.

One day a national colleague unexpectedly declared, "You are a Calvinist!" I was taken aback and inquired about the reason for this strange declaration. He laughed and said he enjoyed YouTube clips on religious discussions and had learned about the sovereignty of God, depravity of man, irresistible grace, and other tenets that seemed to align with our previous discussions. He still didn't believe in salvation by way of the cross, but he enjoyed our conversations and was comfortable to listen and learn.

My professional life was marked by sharing what I knew to be true and striving to make my life choices and actions give credence to my words. When I returned to work after the funeral of my father, I shared my mixed feelings of loss, remembrance, and joy for my father who trusted in God's promises. My national Muslim colleague asked me to stop sharing until he left the room, not because he disagreed with me talking about the eternal life for those who trust in the cross, but because he had no hope. "We only know loss and passage of time to ease the pain," he shared. "When you share about the joy of your father's life, I feel the pain of my father's loss. We have no hope in death."

Another time, this same national colleague entered my office with a concern that our Hindu colleague, Raj, had died at his desk! We knew Raj had heart issues, but I could see he was still breathing. Immediately, I asked one colleague to call the ambulance, another to make a path for the stretcher, and a believing colleague to begin praying for Raj. After the ambulance left, my national friend inquired of the believer, "Were you actually praying for Raj the entire time?" After an affirmative answer, he vocalized his thoughts, "Why didn't I pray? I should have been praying too." After Raj's recovery and return to work, my Muslim colleague encouraged Raj to attend church and follow Jesus because, "It was the Christian God who saved your life!" Also, when I was faced with a difficult situation at the workplace, my Muslim colleague reminded me of God's promises! "You are a follower of God and he cares for you! I know that he will bring a solution for you."

Biblical and Historical Examples

This more natural approach to God-centered identity is not new. There are many biblical examples of professionals serving cross-culturally and sharing the truths of God. These include Joseph in Pharaoh's government, Daniel as an administrator in Babylon, Nehemiah as a governor of Persia, and Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila as itinerant tentmakers in various areas of the Roman empire. In each case, God used their professional skills, second-language abilities, and cross-cultural insights

to serve his greater purposes. In fact, the first four chapters of the book of Daniel could perhaps be renamed "Nebuchadnezzar one, two, three, and four" as the narrative focus is more about God's reaching out to the king through Daniel.

Beyond the biblical era, examples include men like John of Damascus (675 – 749). His family served the Umayyad caliphate through management of taxes and the sovereign wealth, in addition to John holding public debates seeking to refute Islam.[2] William Carey (1761 – 1834), the father of modern missions, managed an indigo factory for many years and later established the first degree-awarding national university while translating the Bible into various Indian languages. Other examples could be named of professionals, including missionary physicians, midwives, and many others.

A Trustworthy Identity

From my experience, understanding the national culture and language was essential to building trust. In 2020, the Fruitful Practice Research team surveyed various missionaries in the Arabian Peninsula about their experience with the Arabic language and ministry. As one would expect, those with a stronger Arabic proficiency tended to have deeper local friendships, more frequent spiritual conversations, and more experience in discipling national believers. One survey participant shared how a national seeker expressed joy in finally meeting someone who spoke Arabic as he was frustrated with spiritual conversations via Google Translate.[3]

Along with my engineering profession, my language and cultural skills enhanced the opportunities to connect and build trust with national colleagues, neighbors, and friends. This often led to the seemingly logical

2 Butler's Lives of the Saints. edited by Michael Walsh. July 1991. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers.

3 Daniel, G. et al. Fruitful Practices for Language Learning: A Quantitative Study of Language Learning and Effective Ministry in the Arabian Peninsula. October 2021 Seedbed, V32, no.2.

progression in one friend's mind, "If you understand our culture and you can read the Quran, then why don't you become a Muslim like us?" This gave me the opportunity to explain my relationship with God, my trust in God's promises, and my place among the community of believers, which goes beyond national borders. When requested to give an opinion about the prophet of Islam, I would respond that it is better to ask an imam at the mosque that type of question. I would say something like, "I know Jesus and God's work through him; would you like to know more about the joy of redemption, grace, and God's promises for us?" Once, in front of a group of colleagues, a national boldly stated that the Bible was corrupted and couldn't be trusted. In response, I raised my voice for all to hear and angrily requested him to leave my office because it was dishonoring to God to imply weakness in preserving his Word. After the confrontation, other Muslim colleagues privately assured me that my response was justified and this particular distraction was no longer included in our discussions.

As a Christian engineer, I never felt I was hiding my true identity or putting forward a false front. I had the same identity as an expatriate professional who truly followed the Messiah, whether I was among my work colleagues, neighbors, family, or home supporters. In *Authentic Lives*[4], Thomas Hale notes that a hidden identity may make a Christian professional feel more like a secret agent than a sent-one of Jesus. Though I didn't feel this, our children often struggled in explaining to their national friends why we, unlike most expatriates, knew the language and cultural customs. As a result, their friends assumed we were associated with the CIA. I can relate to a fellow GP who felt that if he did not share every aspect of his life, his colleagues would embellish his identity with the worse possible conclusions. For example, if I shared that I was planning a trip to Dubai, my national colleagues assumed I was arranging to visit a prostitute. As such, I quickly learned that I needed to share the details that I was planning a trip to Dubai with my family to shop at the

4 Hale, Thomas, Authentic Lives: Overcoming the Problem of Hidden Identity in Outreach to Restrictive Nations. 2016. William Carey Library.

mall! When I was asked why I knew Arabic and local customs, I answered directly that I loved the language and people and that it would be a shame to live among a people and not learn from them! Then I quoted a local proverb such as, "Learning the language of the people protects you from their evil," or "Forty days among a tribe and you become one of them." I would add that I don't believe either of these proverbs, which usually resulted in laughter.

A trustworthy identity in the community supported our ministry. We hosted Bible studies, discipled national believers, and coordinated media follow-up of seekers. Though we were sent out through a sending organization and maintained a ministry fund, my expatriate Christian engineer identity greatly reduced questions about external finances. Instead, it exemplified a fact that it is normative for believers in the Lord Jesus to work, provide for their family, and support the ministry of the church. It was common knowledge in our country that converts to Islam receive a financial gift and most nationals thought the same was true for those who converted to Christianity. That is, there seemed to be no need to work since the church would provide an income to new believers!

With employment and a modest home, our neighbors and colleagues didn't have to wonder how we fit into their society. Obviously, we were expatriate Christians who supported their nation's development, cared about their families, prayed for their health concerns, talked a lot about Jesus, and gifted people with an ornate Bible on the first visit. For media follow-up, the story was the same. The initial meeting of a new contact always involved excessive adrenaline for both of us. I didn't know him, and he didn't know me beyond the message that there was a Christian living in his city who would contact him. At a coffee shop, fears were soon calmed through introductions, discussions of family, and honest sharing of my place in his society. Building trust is essential in sharing truth and deepening the discipleship relationship.

An Identity in Christ Foremost

As a Westerner, I always strove to order my life with God being first, family second, and my profession third. However, national friends were more holistic regarding faith and profession. For them, prominence was in their tribe and family name. I studied Arabic and was comfortable with the language, but I know I will never be as fluent as a national speaker. I studied the national culture and have over 25 years of experience among the people, but I know I will never be a citizen or a member of their national tribe. I am a global professional who strives to magnify the work of God, effectively communicate the promises of God, show forth the life of a Christian, and disciple new believers through group study, reliance on the Bible, and guidance by the Holy Spirit. We have the promise that God will build his church (Matt 16:18), sometimes through—and often in spite of—his people.

My pilgrimage as a global professional has taught me that lifelong learning of language, study of local culture, discipleship, and church growth better equip us to be used by God. An authentic, holistic, consistent identity can help us establish ourselves cross-culturally, demonstrate the life of a Christian, and work towards the establishment of the local church within whatever country in which we serve.

Questions for Conversation

1. What misunderstandings and suspicions in your context do outside workers need to overcome? What would a "trustworthy" identity look like in your context?

2. Does your current role in society give you natural opportunities to share your faith, or do you have to force those to happen?

3. Is your current field ministry profile similar to any biblical examples? What changes might you make to better align yourself with what you see in Scripture?

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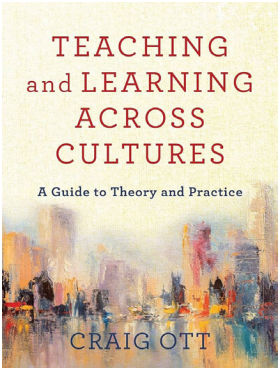
Book Reviews

Teaching and Learning Across Cultures: A Guide to Theory and Practice



By Craig Ott. Baker Academics, 2021. 336 pages.

Reviewed by V. Phillips

V. Phillips is an American who has served long term with AWM/Pioneers in North Africa for over 25 years in health education and development work. She finished her doctoral studies at Biola University in Intercultural Education. She continues to serve in ministries to Muslim women in mentoring and a variety of resource roles, as well as teaching as an adjunct professor with the Lilias Trotter Center.

How Learners Learn

Teaching, whether professionally or in ministry, plays an important role in many of our lives. That role may be in a formal classroom teaching English for a language school or teaching in an educational institution. Perhaps our teaching role is in the informal context of a development project or vocational training. Many of us, if not all, are involved in teaching spiritual truth to our disciples individually or in a group Bible study. Moving outside of our passport country to teach may seem intimidating because of the need to function in a different language, but that is only the beginning of our cultural challenges!

Craig Ott, in his valuable text, *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures*, reminds us that while our knowledge of the content may be excellent

and our ability to adopt new methods may be helpful, the challenge of cross-cultural teaching is a more complex process.

Understanding this additional level of complexity was significant for me in my own experience with teaching professionally in East and North Africa for different development projects as well as teaching from God's word in my ministry relationships. I gave information that was comprehensive and accurate while using teaching methods that were varied and engaging (I thought), but I often struggled with feeling ineffective and seeing little change in attitudes and behaviors in those I taught.

Later, with exposure to some practical field models grounded in basic adult education principles, I discovered the added level of complexity of needing to understand my learners and how they learn. This discovery eventually led to graduate studies in the field of intercultural education and getting a better grasp on the value of matching my teaching process with the learning process of my "learners." If I want to be an effective teacher and see lives transformed, I need to know how my learners are understanding and processing information—whether that is a topic on health or a lesson presenting biblical truth. Even a well-presented gospel message holds little meaning if the information is not communicated in a way that makes sense to my listener. "Jesus lived and taught in ways that served his objective: to not only impart knowledge but also to transform lives. Teachers today will do well to follow his example" (64).

Over the years, I have discovered and read a variety of literature on adult and cross-cultural theory that has helped me understand my learners. Ott's "guide" is a welcome resource that puts so much of that theoretical and practical insight into teaching across cultures in one book. I wish I had had this book years ago!

Ott, a long-term professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School who also has extensive overseas experience, offers a "modest, but comprehensive, survey of the challenges and approaches to teaching

across cultures" (23). Ott calls his book a "dip of the toe" into the essentials gleaned from the vast amounts of resources and literature on teaching cross-culturally (23). I found Ott's scholarly background in intercultural studies and practical understanding of his students in a range of educational fieldwork an important value of his book. *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures* is an excellent introduction to relevant and insightful principles that can help all of us feel more effective and less frustrated in our teaching roles. Applying these principles can help us see changes in the behaviors, values, and beliefs of our students/disciples.

Learning Styles and the Five Dimensions of Culture's Influence

As a scholar writing a textbook on teaching cross-culturally, Ott defines and explains his terms as he introduces them. Probably the most interesting definition is that of *learning style*—a term that "generally refers to natural or preferred conditions under which an individual best learns" (47). He acknowledges that learning style is not "fixed or innate" but better seen as a preference or expectation (54). As individuals, we can certainly appreciate that we have our preferred learning styles. However, it is important to see that the discussion is one of cultural preferences more so than specific styles, and this makes our role as cross-cultural teachers more complex as we work to bridge the cultural gap between our teaching and their learning. The task is not only to "expand" our teaching styles but also to help our students "expand" their learning style in order to see transformation happen (53).

Ott identifies five "dimensions" of cultural influence on teaching and learning. He divides and organizes his chapters according to these dimensions, providing theoretical foundations and practical suggestions for each relevant issue. In true textbook fashion, there are sidebars throughout the book to provide examples from different cultures or to add resources for more information. Themes, such as orality, have recurring value in relation to the different dimension topics. The five

dimensions (illustrated by an overlapping flower-like diagram) that Ott identifies are: cognitive, worldview, social relations, media, and environment.

The cognitive dimension receives the most attention, addressed in three chapters covering a range of theory and practice related to how people think and how they process information. Culture affects **what** as well as **how** people think (65). Ott looks at the differences between abstract and concrete thinking and the ways these affect reasoning and critical analysis. The author also recognizes learners with a "holistic orientation" versus those who are oriented toward a more analytic and linear way of perceiving and organizing information (112).

Personally, I found the chapters on the cognition dimension to be particularly helpful in my role of teaching abstract ideas of health (such as germs or immunity) as well as spiritual truths (such as redemption). These abstract concepts were challenging for my concrete thinkers. In my attempts to be creative, I would develop impressive charts and diagrams to represent a topic. However, my scientific orientation hindered my health messages and my Western logical reasoning interfered with my finding good ways to share spiritual truths. African oral learners could not grasp my linear cause-effect presentation of information, leading to frustration for all of us. Even an inductive style Bible study could become a chaotic lesson that was too analytical and confusing for my listeners. My observations align with Ott's on concrete thinking, and I eventually did learn how to adapt oral methods of teaching for my learners (which I will address below).

In contrast to the cognitive and thinking dimension, the worldview dimension focuses more on how the learner views reality and how things work (137). Ott explains the "how we know what we know" that is significant in understanding a learner's response to a new source of knowledge. What holds more value—tradition or science, for example? Why do things happen, and will simple cause-effect answers explain everything for a holistic thinker? More importantly, can true change

happen if an individual's worldview is not changed? As Ott says, "Most Christian cross-cultural teachers do not want to just see learners accomplish tasks, develop skills, or master content; they also want to help them see the world more biblically and lead lives more consistent with those teachings" (160).

The third dimension of Ott's teaching and learning paradigm is social relations. There is the significance of the relationship between the teacher and student with the complexity of power distance, different authority structures, and patron-client arrangements. The author also considers how social realities, such as honor-shame and direct-indirect communication values, can impact a learner's motivation to interact and succeed. Ott speaks of the positive results seen with problem-based learning (197). This resonated with me as I thought about teaching settings where I watched a group of illiterate women sit and discuss a problem among themselves. Reflecting and thinking critically together, as a group, helped them to come to a solution for that problem – and that process was more effective in motivating change.

"Media" and "environment" are the last two dimensions. The two chapters on media describe the range of instructional methods learners respond to and why. Ott discourages lecturing in favor of more participatory and creative means of teaching, offering an impressive description of different pedagogical tools. He also includes a chapter about online and technological possibilities of learning for those teaching in this growing field. A final chapter looks at the environmental factors that affect learners. Thinking about practical, but important, realities such as the physical arrangements of a room or scheduling considerations around seasonal time constraints are among the examples of environmental barriers to learning.

The Value of Orality

The number of principles and examples related to orality that Ott scatters throughout his text really stood out to me. The fact that I work with illiterate women makes the draw to oral methods of teaching

a natural assumption, but Ott describes most concrete learners as oral learners whether they are readers or not (90). Stories, parables, metaphors, case studies, songs, drama, puppet shows, and any representation of narrative expression can organize information into meaningful content. These methods "embody and illustrate truth" that can persuade change to happen (93). Oral methods also enhance understanding (99), facilitate critical thinking skills and problem solving (99), and give a sense of meaning and hope (165). Narrative has cultural appeal but can also challenge traditional ways of thinking (91) as Jesus did with his parables. Stories and songs can touch the emotions and create memorable means of passing on or reproducing information (249).

Ott discusses other forms of teaching and learning, but his five dimensions brought out the importance of why a method such as narrative is valuable for teaching cross-culturally. This value applies to theology as well: "Understandings of orality are not important only for evangelism and discipleship; they also hold potential for deeper theological reflection" (132).

Ott introduces us to the new terms (at least to me) of "oral hermeneutics" (90) and "narrative theology" (131). With the increasing availability of how-to trainings in developing and using chronological Bible storying, it is helpful to have a discussion on why and how orality is helpful in so many cultural contexts.

Can I Recommend a Textbook?

Ott's book is a well-written and well-organized resource. *Teaching and Learning Across Cultures* is the type of textbook I would have loved to own years ago when I was desperately trying to be a better teacher. I would have learned the value of spending time watching what helps an illiterate woman to learn, observing how she processes new information presented to her, and considering what helps her in that process. From this, I would learn about her learning process and reorient my thinking

about my teaching process. Wanting her to understand and change her behaviors, such as practicing good nutrition or preventing disease, I would then need to teach in a way that helps her to find meaning in these ideas and not just throw information at her. Wanting her to understand the transforming truth of the good news of Jesus Christ, I would need to share that message in a way that reaches her heart. The content of that message is important—but the way it is presented may make all the difference in her embracing the truth about Him.

I imagine that there are few who will sit and read such a book cover to cover as I did. Ott's book is comprehensive and detailed, but it is also easy to read and accessible. It is not so theory-laden to make it a heavy text. The examples and references are practical and helpful. Perhaps it is not a book to recommend for every team member to buy. On the other hand, I can see the benefit of having access to it; the content it provides would be invaluable as a team resource. I appreciate Ott's stated goal in his preface: "May these pages kindle an appreciation for human diversity, a curiosity to understand learners, and most importantly, the ability to see others not primarily as students, or as citizens of a nation, or as members of an ethnic group. But rather, may we see them first and foremost as persons created in the image of God with amazing potential" (xiv).

Ott's hope is to encourage you as teachers to reach your potential, as much as to help you know how to help your students reach theirs.

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Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work

By Timothy Keller with Katherine Leary Alsdorf. Penguin Books, 2012. 300 pages.

Reviewed by Susan Payne

Susan Payne, PhD, is an associate professor in the Christian Ministries Department at the University of Northwestern-St. Paul, St. Paul, MN. Before teaching at Northwestern, she served in church ministry, primarily in Minnesota, for 25 years. Dr. Payne teaches courses for undergraduate and graduate students called to serve in local churches, non-profit organizations, and intercultural careers. She has also been involved in two church plants in diverse neighborhoods of Minneapolis.

Church planters working in creative-access contexts are often required to spend a significant portion of their time engaging in "secular" work to gain access to the communities they are called to serve. This raises questions and practical challenges for how their "day job" relates to their calling as church planters. While not directly addressing the context of frontier church planters, *Every Good Endeavor* explores the integration of faith and work, providing a rich theology of work and the challenges that arise in working as a Christian.

Every Good Endeavor combines the wisdom of a pastor-theologian with the practical insights of a business leader who started Redeemer's Center for Faith and Work at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York

City. The late Timothy Keller founded the church and a group committed to outreach in the urban, multicultural, unchurched setting of Manhattan. The church was established in 1989, and by 1993, the founders saw a revival start as they reached out to an unchurched, urban population.

The authors focus on how a Christian can see their vocation as a work of the gospel. The book "captures some foundational ways of thinking about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit; who we are in relation to that Trinity; and how all this affects the work we were created to do" (xi). It is a compelling and engaging mix of theology accessible to all readers and practical theology for those who are looking for the meaning of their work in this world. In the introduction, the authors state, "Our goal is to feed your imagination and stir your action with the richness of what the Christian faith says (directly and indirectly) about this inexhaustible subject" (8). They achieve that goal in this practical book, directed toward any Christian, but deeply grounded in theology.

Summary

The book is organized in three parts, seeking to answer three questions that Christians should ask about their work to ground them in the realization that "all human work is not merely a job, but a *calling*" (2). The three questions are:

1. Why do you want to work? (Why do you want to work in order to have a fulfilling life?)
2. Why is work so hard? (Why is it so often fruitless, pointless, and difficult?)
3. How can we overcome the difficulties and find satisfaction in our work through the gospel?

Each question is addressed in one of the three parts of the book. Part one, "God's Plan for Work," is making the case that people are created by God to work. Starting with Genesis, the authors explain God's creative work and that God included work for his creation to do in the

garden paradise (chap. 1). Work is a mark of human dignity (chap. 2), and humankind was "built for work and the dignity it gives us as human beings, regardless of its status or pay" (41). The third chapter is particularly interesting to those who minister in multiple cultures as it discusses work as cultivation or culture making (often associated with theological discussions of the Cultural Mandate). The first three chapters lead to the fourth where the authors argue that the purpose of work is therefore service. Work is a calling to serve, not for the person, but for the gospel.

The second part of the book, "Our Problems with Work," addresses the question, "Why is it so hard to work?" Chapter 5 points out that we all encounter thorns in our work life, but we can be assured that ultimately we can see how our aspirations to do fruitful work will be fulfilled in eternity. The feeling of work being pointless is addressed in chapter 6. It looks at how the author of Ecclesiastes has the same feelings and reminds the reader, "Nothing within this world is sufficient basis for a meaningful life here" (93). The authors discuss the common Western cultural issues of work becoming selfish (chap. 7) and idolatrous (chap. 8) as people may search for their identity in and through the work they do.

Part three is the solution that the authors have been moving toward in the first two parts. It is the Christian gospel that "decidedly furnishes us with the resources for more inspired, realistic, satisfying, and faithful work today" (147). Chapter 9 describes how the gospel is the "New Story" for our work. The new story provides an alternate narrative based on the worldview of a follower of Christ. The gospel speaks to what human life is all about and what can help people thrive in their work and world. The gospel also gives us a different conception of work (chap. 10). When our work is understood as partnering with God in the stewardship of this world, it can change how we view our daily work. The authors directly address the need for a moral compass in chapter 11. Clear ethical guidelines for work are crucial, and the gospel is wise counsel for our ethical practices. Finally, chapter 12 states that a focus on the gospel radically changes our view of our vocation. Gospel motives give us the new power that grounds our work in the gospel.

This book includes an epilogue telling more of the story of the development of Redeemer's Center for Faith and Work. This practical chapter discusses how a gospel approach to work can be taught and discussed. It includes what the authors learned about how to help people change their mindset, ethics, and practices in the workplace. The story of the founding and development of the center could be valuable for developing a similar model or adapting their model to different cultural settings.

Evaluation

This collaboration between a prominent pastor-theologian (Keller) and the executive director of the Center for Faith and Work (Alsdorf) provides an insightful and powerful combination of theology and practice in a very readable book. The structure of the book around three questions that Christians may have about their work makes the argument easy to grasp. Those who have studied the theology of work previously will find the content of the first part familiar, as the discussion of the Creation Mandate, the intrinsic goodness of work, vocation, and calling are common topics. However, Keller's writing shows the heart of a pastor who is deeply perceptive but is able to make theology accessible to everyone.

The reader knows the authors are speaking from experience, having worked with many (notably younger adults) at their center. The illustrations not only have credibility but also may ring true to our own experiences if we have been a part of a similar American church.

The third chapter is a profound theological discussion on the command of God to be fruitful and multiply (often called the Cultural Mandate) and the building of cultures and civilization. The discussion is helpful for those who have not studied this before, though it may also be familiar to the reader from other sources. The theology of work lays solid groundwork for the application to any situation. A strength of the book

is that it is written from each author's experiences in business and in a church in New York City. The descriptions and illustrations about kinds of work, beliefs about work, and ethics in the workplace are rich because they are steeped in working with their multicultural, urban population.

The multicultural practitioner will need to evaluate the practical topics from the perspective of their specific community, allowing for application of the principles to their situation. I have been part of two church plants in the diverse neighborhoods of Minneapolis, and we repeatedly found that we had to work intentionally not to simply copy a success from one situation and expect the same results in another. This is a strength of the book as well, because it challenges those in other contexts to consider their own applications instead of simply adopting the solutions that were fruitful in Keller's situation. Questions provided for the individual to evaluate how they are viewing their work from a Christian worldview, on pages 182–183, could be adapted for discussion on work beliefs in one's own cultural situation.

Every Good Endeavor is also a helpful book for those who preach, and it is written from a pastor's point of view. At the same time, Keller has a way of making deep biblical and theological points accessible to all. I highly recommend this book for those who are starting to consider the integration of faith and work from a Christian worldview. It grounds the reader in a rich practical theology of how Christians view the work God has given them to do and then helps the readers unpack how to do that work in their community. The book would be a great resource to study in a group. Although the first three chapters may be the most useful "as is" for groups in cultures other than Western/American, the second and third parts would need to be discussed with the intention of adaptation to one's own culture or the target culture.

This book will also be valuable in the changing landscape of missions today. Those called to serve are more often finding themselves in positions where they are bivocational in order to support their ministry or for entry into countries where a job is necessary to receive a visa.

Cross-cultural church planters among the unreached are increasingly facing crucial questions like:

- How much time should I devote to my work versus other more direct ministry?
- How do I run a legitimate business in a closed country which also has some kind of natural spiritual connection?
- Am I doing a job that local people could do and therefore taking away opportunities from them?
- How can I work or run a successful business in an economic environment that is impoverished and not business-friendly?
- What is the relationship between meeting practical needs through my business and preaching the gospel?

While not directly addressing these questions, *Every Good Endeavor* lays a theological foundation which can resource and inform these questions and others like them. As cross-cultural church planters employ various avenues of work to gain access to unreached communities, this theological vision for the goodness of work—God's design and call in our lives to work for his glory—can infuse practitioners' everyday "secular" work with a deeper sense of meaning.

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Forward by Katherine Leary Alsdorf

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Adorning the Dark: Thoughts on Community, Calling, and the Mystery of Making

By Andrew Peterson. B&H Publishing Group, 2019. 113 pages.

Reviewed by David M.

David M. lives in Southeast Asia along with his wife and three children. He works with a team that builds mobile applications to distribute Scripture Engagement content. He holds an MDiv from Reformed Theological Seminary.

The Wingfeather Saga. Over a dozen albums. Twenty years of *Behold the Lamb of God*. Founder of The Rabbit Room and contributor to *Every Moment Holy*. As outsiders looking in, we are tempted to think that if a secret sauce for a successful and productive life exists, Andrew Peterson has found it. Yet, Peterson sets out to show readers that there is nothing particularly special about him or anyone else who "adorns the dark." *Adorning the Dark* is an insider's view into the inner world of a Christian singer, songwriter, and novelist. Peterson generously provides readers with the opportunity to understand his joys and challenges as he both looks back to where he came from and looks forward to the coming kingdom.

"Why is Andrew Peterson's book relevant for cross-cultural church planting?" we might ask. Although the author does not have expertise in missions to unreached peoples, he has a wealth of experience using

his gifts to build God's kingdom on earth. It is precisely this point—being faithful to our calling in the context of community—where cross-cultural workers relate to Peterson. Each of us on the field are massively interested in faithful kingdom building.

Adorning the Dark, as Peterson explains in the early chapters, is not intended to be an academic work. The book is written in short chapters like lengthy journal entries. It is a fun and easy read with plenty of illustrations and examples from Andrew's own life. The book is helpful for readers of all ages, but it could be especially helpful for a teenager or young adult. Many of the experiences that he shares are from his teenage years, making the book easy for that specific age group to relate to.

As we might expect from an experienced novelist, Andrew weaves in multiple themes and subthemes throughout. Two strands get more time on stage than the rest: Andrew's journey as a musician, and his house, called The Warren. We can think of *Adorning the Dark* as a storyteller teaching us what he has learned through his experiences. I understand the book's overarching thesis to be that the dark is adorned when we take creative projects to completion because we have brought a piece of the coming kingdom to earth.

Peterson emphasizes multiple times that "creatives" are not a special class of people (89). At one point he pauses, questioningly, at the idea of using the word "creative" as a noun. My own mission organization has a network for "creatives." Peterson is saying that there is both a broad and narrow lens when we speak of creatives. In the narrow sense, we can speak of those who make their living from jobs such as singing, writing, or painting. But in the broad sense, the art of *creating* is a common task for all of God's people. Whatever we do, we are bringing God's kingdom to earth as we use our gifts and follow his will. Peterson's primary audience is anyone who seeks to begin and complete a creative project that reflects God's glory. In the missions world, our projects might be producing scriptural content, finishing a translation, recording indigenous worship music, or any number of other endeavors.

Rather than give a chapter-by-chapter flyby, here is my attempt at distilling the book down into two parts: the dark and the adorning. What does Peterson mean by "the dark," and what does he mean by "adorning" it? And what does community, calling, and the mystery of making have to do with it all?

The Dark: Resistance and the Room

The first term that Peterson uses to describe the dark is "the Resistance" (yes, with a capital R). Peterson is referring to the Resistance made up of rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers over this present darkness, the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12) (28). There is an active spiritual force that works against God's people as we labor as Christ's ambassadors. This part of the dark is not adorned. Instead, this aspect of the dark hits us with doubt, despair, and lies, often at the level of our identity in Christ.

Whether we are creating businesses, Bible story sets, pottery, or churches, the Enemy wants our creation to "draw some measure of attention" to ourselves (29). The Resistance wants the things that we create to be an end in themselves instead of pointing outward to the "Ultimate Self, the Word that made the world" (29). For a missions context, how might the subtle drive to be seen as a real, hardcore missionary come up in our creations? In whatever we are creating, how are we tempted to shine the spotlight on ourselves?

The dark is not only the Resistance, but also a room. For Peterson, a dark room represents the space in which the creative process happens. In the midst of building, writing, or recording, we cannot see the completion of our work. Like professional artists or authors, some missionaries may have a lower degree of structure in life compared to a traditional nine-to-five office job. Peterson argues that this means we must generate forward momentum without the help of external structures to move us along. In this dark, God's people can become

consumed by their deeper fears and doubts. These seem to be especially present for those who embark on a creative project, and Andrew's own self-doubts and fears are peppered throughout the book as he shares his story.

A larger project our team is working on is building a technology network within our organization. The purpose is to create a central site for teams to receive help distributing scriptural content among their target people. After the initial wave of momentum upon launching the network, we found ourselves in a dark room where fears and doubts abound. Peterson's book is an encouragement to keep going.

The dark is the Resistance and a room. It connotes both the spiritual powers that work against God's people and the metaphorical space in which we do our creating. But what does it mean to "adorn" the dark?

Adorning: The Room and the Earth

As the dark room is adorned with completed creations, the earth is adorned with the coming kingdom. Peterson speaks at length about his marvelous garden (in the British sense) at The Warren. A friend drew up a thirty-year plan for the garden which he framed and placed on the wall by the front door. When he looks outside, he can compare what he sees with the drawing. His point is that he can understand what he needs to chop or plant *today* because the end goal is clear. From this example and others in the book, I surmise that it is important to Andrew that we live in light of what we know to be true about the end, namely, that earth will both be made new and restored in full. The BAM entrepreneur and artist must look at this "long-term plan" as they work *today* to bring heaven to earth. What we believe about the end frames our present reality and how we create within our own "gardens."

If the creative process is also like fumbling around in a dark room due to insecurities, fears, and doubts (50), adorning involves working through the creative process in community with a clear calling (hence

the subtitle). Andrew has clearly known from a young age that his calling is making music. And even apart from the cleverly titled chapters "Art Nourishes Community" and "Community Nourishes Art," readers find Andrew constantly referring to friends, family, and mentors who brought him through difficult times. His point is that creative projects best come to completion when we are serious about involving others in the process. When we allow others to sit with us in the dark room, they can lift us up and help us keep going.

The dark room is adorned when we bring creative endeavors to completion because we have brought a piece of the coming kingdom to earth. In this sense, the darkness of the world is adorned when we take the gifts that God has given us and make new businesses, ministries, and music. We accomplish part of our calling as humans when we make beautiful things. For Andrew Peterson, this is what it means to adorn the dark.

Reflections for Cross-Cultural Workers

Belonging and TCKs

One of the more emotional sections of the book for me was Andrew describing the rootedness that his children have at their home. Our family has moved four times in the last six years. If you are a cross-cultural worker and reading this, you can likely relate. In Wendell Berry-like fashion, Peterson believes that attending to specific soil in a given place is one example of adorning the dark. And yet, he acknowledges that there will always be something missing because our true home is in a better country called Heaven. The deep longing that Andrew feels, and that I feel, is to belong. As we know, belonging is an especially difficult thing not only for us as cross-culture workers, but also for our children. Peterson's book was a helpful reminder that although we should do our best to provide a sense of belonging for our kids, there is still a more ultimate sense of belonging that only God can provide.

Community and Resiliency

What is the adversity that you face as you build scriptural content, relationships with locals, and businesses in the country in which you serve? What is the shape of the dark room that you are stumbling around in (79)? Peterson believes that bringing others into our dark rooms is the way to move creative projects to completion. This allows people to understand our fears and walk with us through them. Whatever situation you are in, *Adorning the Dark* is a call to lean into your calling in the context of community. And as we press forward, God's world is made beautiful.

I recommend this book for cross-cultural church planters who are either seeking to begin a creative project or stuck in the middle (in the dark) of one. If a person is looking for a practical "how-to" book, I do not recommend this work. However, if a person is looking for an encouraging mentor to walk with them through their creative calling, I recommend this book as a helpful resource.

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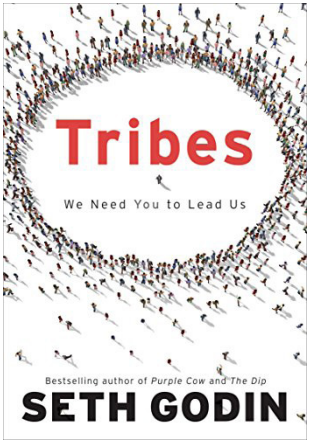
Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us



By Seth Godin. Penguin Publishing Group, 2008. 152 pages.

Reviewed by William Connor

William Connor, along with his wife Breanna and the accompaniment of five children, have engaged in various forms of disciple-making ministry in Northwest India for the past eleven years, including frontier evangelism, church planting, equipping the church for outreach, multiplication, and maturity, as well as team and area leadership with Pioneers. William earned his Doctor of Intercultural Studies from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2022 focusing on contextual issues for Sikh-focused ministry.

A graduate of Tufts University and Stanford Graduate School of Business, Seth Godin is an entrepreneur, leadership and marketing guru, and author known for his blogs and various published titles.[1] Godin defines a tribe as "a group of people connected to one another, connected to a leader, and connected to an idea," such that "a shared interest and a way to communicate" qualifies a group for tribal identity (1). He highlights the idea of relational reciprocity as tribes and leaders need one another, while leadership fulfills a tribe's desire for connection, growth, and change (ibid). Godin writes for those "who choose to lead a tribe," as modern leadership is easier than ever with

1 Some of Godin's published titles include *Purple Cow* (2005), *The Dip* (2007), *Linchpin* (2011), *The Practice* (2020), and *The Song of Significance* (2023). More can be learned at his personal website (sethgodin.com) and The Famous People site (thefamouspeople.com/profiles/seth-godin-2833.php).

venues for broad, immediate communication and influence—leadership is now a choice (5, 8).

While not from a Christian perspective, *Tribes* informs disciple making and cross-cultural leadership. It gives perspective to why workers might establish a business as mission (BAM) presence in our respective host countries or audaciously live as "extreme users" of our visas.[2] It lends credibility to "filtering for the faithful" in church-planting movements, and informs our need to communicate the gospel with cultural relevance.

This short, quick read resembles a chapter-less string of interwoven blog posts that engage themes familiar to missional leadership such as identity and belonging, faith and innovation, the status quo and leading change, communication and influencing people, passion and vision, movements and motivation, and resistance and perseverance.[3] While I found these topics informative, nothing piqued my interest more than "the heretic."

"Heretic" is a striking term. It generates strong emotion and triggers post-traumatic stress. As a natural reflex, folks in ecclesial and missional circles balk at the word, and for good reason. It invokes thoughts of false teachings in faith circles, unorthodoxy in religious traditions, boat rockers, red-flag raisers, and recipients of justified Old Testament stoning. Yet Jesus was a kind of heretic in his time and context, and they killed him for it!

Godin uses some form of "heretic" or "heretical" fifty-nine times in *Tribes*. "Heretics are the new leaders," he says,

> The ones who challenge the status quo, who get out in front of their tribes, who create movements. The marketplace now rewards (and embraces) the heretics. It's clearly more fun to make the rules than to follow

2 I speak here in design-thinking terms.

3 The book has no formal chapters, but rather a long list of subheadings, which are listed in the Table of Contents.

> them, and for the first time, it's also profitable, powerful, and productive to do just that (11).

What is "Heresy"?

Merrium-Webster defines heresy as, "Dissent or deviation from a dominant theory, opinion, or practice" (2023). The *Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible* defines it as, "false doctrine, or teaching which denies one of the foundational beliefs of the church, such as the Lordship or deity of Jesus" (Lockyer 1986, 475). In the New Testament, heretics deceived the church with false claims (2 Cor. 11:13) and included Gnostics who denied the deity of Christ (1 John 2:22; Lockyer 1986, 475). Godin also notes the Council of Trent in 1515 which prohibited the consumption or possession of heretical books, the penalty being excommunication (84).

It is important to recognize the difference between heretics in Scripture and the secular business heretics Godin discusses. In faith circles, religious heresy is a serious charge that called for death in Old Testament times and in some cross-cultural contexts today. There is a difference between pushing to change fundamental tenets of a sacred faith and challenging the status quo of outdated systems and traditions with innovation and justice.

"Heretics" in *Tribes*: A Synthesis

The "heretic" in *Tribes* inspires further discussion. Throughout his book, Godin considers the heretic related to various terms: status quo, leverage, fear, contemporary heretics, risk, and the need for leadership.

Heretics Challenge the Status Quo

Martin Luther challenged the status quo (49). Such leaders take risks when others want to see them fail (42), know on what they can't compromise (79-80), make strong commitments (10-11, 49), and cause a

shift in mindset (10-11). They may experience satisfaction and happiness in their work (10-11, 49, 69), but may experience isolation and fear (69).

Heretics Leverage Change

Nowadays, heretics who form tribal connections can lead groups to reach their goals with ease (11-12). In 1967, Jim Delligatti leveraged his role as a McDonald's franchisee by inventing the Big Mac, which went global within twelve months and benefitted the entire company (75). However, modern times do not require a well-positioned franchise owner or corporate executive, but empower grassroots leaders who lead change (75).

Heretics Must Be Fearless

Fearlessness captures the quality of a successful heretic (42). When challenging the status quo, such fearlessness mitigates the potential of sacrifice, and loss of reputation and creature comforts (42). Drive and purpose override fear (42-43).

Heresy Requires Faith

Without faith, heretical leadership is suicidal (79-80). Godin says, "Heretics must believe" (49, emphasis original). Steve Jobs believed. He didn't live for the paycheck but challenged the status quo, dared to be great, and was "truly present" (49). In rock-climbing terms, kids who learn the "dyno" technique jump from one hold to the next. They learn that the technique is more about cultivating faith and less about strength and skill (79-80).

Persevering for Culture Change

It takes faith and perseverance to lead change, and such change relies on the emergence of a new culture to sustain and define it. It's breaking free from old religious systems and forming new ones (82-84, 130). Outside-the-box thinking creates new boxes (82-83). Heretical leaders

need a tribe of like-minded people and resources to sustain their faith toward change (82-83). Change agents must persevere amidst the doubt of competent, successful people who are skeptical about the viability of new ideas, such as Microsoft's early opinion of Google and Facebook (92). Godin writes,

> What's hard now is breaking the rules. What's hard is finding the faith to become a heretic; to seek out an innovation and then, in the face of huge amounts of resistance, to lead a team and to push the innovation out the door into the world. (130)

The Time is Now!

Heretics are today's leaders (72). According to Godin, the cost of being a heretic today is minimal compared to the days of old. He says they are no longer martyred but elected to office, take their companies public, find fortune, and are celebrated (69-70, 108).

Heretics Take Risks

Back to rock climbing, Godin refers to Chris Sharma who didn't invent the dyno jump but has pushed it forward. It was "risky" and "controversial" at first; now others have adopted the technique (76-77). Chris fits the stereotype of a typical heretic—a risk-taking loner who does absurd things, risks his life, and fails often (77-78). Obe Carrion is another risk-taking rock climber who decided to just run up the wall during a competition. By doing this, he bypassed early challenges of the climb that befuddled other climbers—he "leaned into" the problem and it went away (78). The risk of challenging the status quo these days is minimal—have faith, cast your vision, and go for it—and "people will follow" (108).

Contemporary Examples about Heretical Leadership

Godin describes several examples of contemporary heretics. In one example from the music business, Godin notes that competent music

industry leaders lacked the initiative to hire change agents with the vision in hand to lead the transition from CDs into the future—the ideas were there but nobody pulled the trigger (92-93, 95-96). A second example involves Jerry Sternin who went to Vietnam to solve a hunger problem. He found women whose babies were thriving and gave them a venue to share their wisdom with others. Instead of solving an inside problem with an outside solution, Jerry leveraged the thriving heretics of the bunch who already had the answers and gave them a voice. The problem was alleviated internally (133-34). Other examples highlight empowerment, trying new things for wider influence, and risking honesty.

Interaction and Response

I wrestle with the term "heretic" because it invokes historical punishment for those who deviated from orthodox Christian thinking. I disagree with Godin who says those days are gone. While it is true that through today's business culture and modern technology, heretics can amass a following, fellow Christians are facing deadly persecution in isolated pockets around the world because of their deviant religious views. I do not want to make light of this reality.

In my thematic synthesis of *Tribes*, I have focused more on the heretical leader than on the important theme of tribes, due to its critical relevance to our work. Godin's heretical leader informs how cross-cultural workers lead on the field and engage unreached people toward following Christ. As "missional heretics" in our contexts, God has called us to challenge the status quo, live in faith and fearlessness, persevere, seize the day, take initiative, and empower others as we collect and connect with tribes of people who share our interests in advancing God's kingdom.

Jesus was a missional heretic who fearlessly challenged the status quo (John 10:22-42), took the initiative to gather a group of followers (Matt. 4:18-22), invested in his followers (Luke 22:7-38) and empowered them to carry on a shared vision (Matt. 28:18-20; John 21:15-25). Before Jesus

gave his life as a missional heretic (John 18-19), John the Baptist gave his life for the same shared vision (Mark 6:14-29). After Jesus' ascension, Stephen bore the ultimate temporal reward (Acts 7) as did James the brother of John (Acts 12:1-3). Modern-day examples include Graham Staines and his sons in the late 1990's along with others around the world throughout history who have similarly shared in this fellowship of Christ's sufferings (Phil. 3:10).

Other biblical heretics who may not have experienced death for their heresy, but met successful outcomes, include Abraham who by faith followed the Lord's instruction even though he did not know where he was going (Heb. 11:8-10), Jacob who seized the day and snatched Esau's birthright (Gen. 25:29-34; 27:1-46), Joseph who persevered (Gen. 37-50), Rahab's risk (Heb. 11:31), Elijah's fearlessness with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18), Daniel and his friends who remained obedient despite the threat of death (Dan. 3, 6), and Solomon's innovative request for wisdom (1 Kings 3:1-15). Coupled with Godin's reflections, these biblical examples give us a foundation for leading change in our tribes and for recruiting harassed and helpless people looking for a shepherd (Matt. 9:35-38).

Cross-cultural workers are not unlike Godin's heretic. We assume roles and identities in our missional contexts according to our calling, training, and skill sets. BAM heretics take intentional, persevering steps to establish and sustain a legitimate presence in a country of service. They seek to maintain visa integrity while blessing a community with jobs and services while also being kingdom salt and light. True BAM is that slow burn, the little bit of yeast that can significantly influence a local culture for Jesus but requires hard work and patience.[4]

4 Other workers acquire business visas without the skills or drive to run a business, which makes them "extreme users" of business visas in a way not intended by the issuing authorities. Yet they take that risk and may face tensions of identity and scrutiny. Other gospel-minded workers are "extreme users" of tourist visas, pushing the limits of visa terms to make permanent residence.

One church planting concept that feels heretical to me is sometimes called "filtering for the faithful." The idea is to sift through groups of Christian leaders and invest only in those who consistently practice activities learned in CPM trainings. I have wrestled with the practice as it elevates the evangelist and apostle, ignores the giftings and callings of other faithful leaders, and minimizes the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher. Yet, a missional heretic might make such stone-hearted decisions in the same spirit that Jesus said to wipe the dust from your feet of those who do not welcome you (Luke 10:10-12).

Gone are the days of transmitting the gospel through colonial structures and superior postures. Now are the days of humble incarnations, learning postures, and relational engagement. Missional heretics who learn about their receiving culture before imposing our theological worldviews may meet resistance. Uninformed skeptics may naturally assume we are engaging in extreme forms of contextualization and are compromising the integrity of the gospel. Therefore, it is imperative that our methodologies employ a robust hermeneutic and critical contextualization that avoids erecting conduits for syncretism and false teaching (Hendricks 2007; Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou 1999).

Conclusion

Tribes informs disciple making and cross-cultural leadership in various ways. Godin's "heretic" resonates with Jesus' life and ministry and other biblical examples. It also gives perspective and credibility to practices such as BAM, "filtering for the faithful," and the need for humble, culturally-relevant communication.

Several questions remain. What about our brothers and sisters from Global South cultures, where standing out as a heretic will get a person hammered down quickly? How does shame, honor, and patronage play into this conversation? How do heretics leverage missional change and kingdom advancement in communal cultures? How do we motivate those stuck in the status quo to join our tribes or lead tribes themselves?

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