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Because Context Matters

Musings from a Missions Conference *A Mission's Paradigm in Need of Changing?*

Visiting a New World Several weeks ago I attended the fourth annual International Wholistic Missions Conference (IWMC). Because of my contextual work on “*Making Disciples Jesus' Way*,” I was invited to facilitate two workshops on aspects of discipling. Had I not been invited, it never would have occurred to me to attend such an event. I strongly suspect I am not alone in that regard.

Heretofore, my notion of “missions,” sad to say, was something that a handful of people meeting in the church basement paid attention to. I never gave any thought to what happens in that Missions Committee fiefdom. My only real awareness of missions was the church’s annual “Missions Emphasis Week.” Thoughts of missional strategy and tactics, as well as metrics for measuring the impact of various “mission” projects and programs, was something that never crossed my radar screen. I was shortly to find out how utterly “yesterday” my notions and thinking (or lack thereof) were with regard to missions.

Challenges! Conference plenary speakers challenged a number of conventional/traditional paradigms:

- The use of the word *Wholistic* is intentional (as opposed to *holistic*). It is meant to convey that the whole church, each member, needs to be engaged in missional activity. It was never intended to be the domain of a few. While only a few may exercise their missional activity internationally, everyone can be involved in missions domestically – right in your own home town. To underscore that, the theme of this year’s conference was “*The Whole Church on Mission*.”
- *Wholistic* also implies scope – it addresses everything necessary for a community to be whole; e.g., education, nutrition, sanitation, recreation, socialization, spiritual condition. **Serving is how we love our neighbor; and to love them comprehensively includes serving them in the various aspects of their lives.** The biblical basis for this wholistic perspective is found in Luke 2:52 where we are told that Jesus grew in *wisdom* (how to live in biblical *Shalom*) and *stature* (physical) with *God* (spiritual) and *man* (social). Hence the call is to be missional with the whole person in view, not just his or her spiritual condition.
- Our missional priorities need to change. Focusing primarily on evangelism is not biblical because Jesus’ call is to “*make disciples*.” Evangelism-only is unintentional disobedience (Lev 4&5) that we need to be repenting of. That was an arresting thought to many in the audience.
- The importance of the local church was repeatedly emphasized. It is tempting to go it alone and do-it-yourself in missions work and bypass indigenous churches. The IWMC movement stresses the importance of mobilizing and working through the local church. They see the village church(s) as the Body of Christ that needs to be involved and nurtured to take ownership of the responsibility of bringing wholeness to their community. As one village sage whispered to a young, ambitious NGO worker, *If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.*

Discovering the World of CHE Since I was trained as a Chemical Engineer (ChE) - that didn’t last long, thank you Jesus! - I was intrigued to discover a different meaning to those three letters – Community

Health Evangelism (CHE). This is an approach to missions that takes a Wholistic approach to a village/town. The wholistic use of the word *health* involves everything needed for a community to be “healthy” physically, socially, spiritually, economically, educationally. As such it includes its need for nutrition, employment, sanitation, clean drinking water, schools and Jesus.

The CHE strategy is to enter a village and establish (trusted) relationships. While looking for a “person of peace,” CHE people start to envision projects the village can do to help itself toward wholeness. It might be digging a well, creating a community washing pad alongside the river, or collecting “cow paddies” and putting them in a tank to create “natural gas” for cooking. As these projects unfold, the CHE person starts to tell Bible stories to these (mostly) orality culture people.

Orality and the “Good News” At one of the workshops on “orality,” I heard the presenter explain that many of the world’s cultures are oral in nature. Because of illiteracy, these cultures have a strong oral tradition with young people memorizing the cultural stories of their ancestors word by word. As part of this orality dynamic, people not only love to tell (and retell) their stories, but relish new ones.

Fascinatingly, the Bible is 75% stories, 15% poetry and 10% teachings. While Western Evangelicalism focuses mostly on the 10% teachings, the rest of the world is wired to “hear” the Bible differently. So as the CHE people begin to mobilize the community (and the indigenous churches if they exist) on community “health” projects, they tell Bible stories. While the words *Christian* or *Christianity* are not initially used, the Bible’s stories of creation, Moses, David and Jesus are told. With an appetite for new stories, these people quickly pass along these stories verbatim to others in their villages and clans.

Some CHE organizations maintain a “library” of 80-100 Bible stories intended for orality cultures. As the stories are taught, the CHE people underscore the morality issues contained in them. Fascinatingly, these cultures begin to embrace and live out these morality lessons in their daily lives. **This leads to the profound observation (profound to me anyway!) that “discipling can precede conversion.”** After pondering the Gospels yet again, it occurred to me that was Jesus’ pedagogy with the Twelve. They were called to be disciples before they were “converted.” That may well explain why Jesus instructed His disciples to make disciples, not converts (Matthew 29:19). If you focus on converts, you may or may not make disciples. But if you focus on making disciples, you will create converts along the way as part of the process. After telling most of the library’s 80-100 Bible stories, the CHE people begin to bring God, Son of God, prayer, Christian worldview, et al into the discussions until that day when “conversion” occurs.

Orality and Hearality You can probably guess how I responded to orality. Since our focus at PBT is on “*the rest of the story*” so as to discern original meaning, my first reaction was, “It’s great to teach villagers to memorize Bible stories, but will they also get “*the rest of the story*” to “hear” the original meaning intended by the Holy Spirit?” The Bible writers always assumed their readers lived when, where and how they did. Thus, they had no reason to explain what everyone knew to be true. They just assumed you knew. Thus, the writers often wrote in “shorthand” knowing their readers understood the “longhand” meaning. In the West, we miss most of the Bible writer’s “shorthand” clues to their “longhand” story. Hence our need for “*the rest of the story.*”

Fortunately, many of these third-world villagers resonate more with the cultural dynamics of the Near East than of the West, e.g., honor and shame, mandatory hospitality, social reciprocity, community being more important than the individual, and thus are more able to understand what’s being said in the white spaces between the lines of the Bible’s stories than we in the West typically do. Ironically, third-world villagers often hear (understand) more of the richness of the Bible’s stories than our “sophisticated” Western congregations. **That evoked in me a new term for what we do at PBT – teach people hearality.** If illiterate cultures depend on orality, then literate cultures (those who can actually read the words of the Bible) need to depend more on “hearality” so as to “hear” the words of the Bible as they were intended to be understood. As part of that task, PBT brings contextual frameworks, tools and resources to churches, seminaries and pastor conferences to train pulpit and pew in “hearality” skills.

A New Conference This notion of improving our “hearing” has birthed a new, two-day Pastors and Christian Educators Conference on *“Reading Between the Lines: Discovering the Rest of the Story.”* It will be held October 14 & 15 at the First Christian Church in Phoenix (if you would like a brochure, let us know). This innovative multimedia conference will focus on Integrated Contextual Exegesis (ICE), an indispensable tool for (better) discerning the original meaning of Bible passages. That meaning is where the Holy Spirit’s always-intended transformational power is to be found, and that power remakes “believers” into disciples.

A Serendipity Lunch I had a delightful lunch at the Conference with two people from a SE Asian country (deliberately unnamed). Over a decade ago, they established the Truth Centered Transformation (tctprogram.org) program to see if people could really move out of poverty as they understood and applied a biblical worldview. The results were beyond anything they ever imagined. The “case histories” they shared with me over lunch stunned me with their impact. Let me do my best to recapture some of those dynamics.

The TCT program was instituted in over 100 villages, quickly growing to several hundred communities. It is built on the idea that beliefs have consequences – what we believe has significant impact on our behavior. For example, if we believe that women and children are possessions (as many in third-world countries do), then they are abused and mistreated. Men will receive the best food and live comfortable lives while the rest of the family live as servants. The TCT program begins by teaching biblical Truth about all areas of life – from how we work to how we are to treat our neighbor. The churches are then challenged to reach out to their communities through Acts of Love. They do a variety of projects from helping in the fields, to building homes for widows, to digging wells.

Amazingly enough, within three years of commencing the TCT program, the staff started to hear reports of many communities moving towards prosperity. Today hundreds of communities have been impacted with most having moved out of poverty. One of the key factors of this transition is the roads that are built by the churches. These roads typically take the 200-300 community members 30 days to build. Now these communities no longer have to carry their crops on their backs to market but can bring in small trucks. In many of the “case histories” shared, there are examples of God multiplying the efforts of these new-believer villages in spectacular ways, e.g. dramatic (and humanly unexplainable) increases in crop yield even in drought conditions. As far as these villagers (now followers of Jesus) were concerned, God was faithful and they gave Him all the glory.

The before-and-after stories of these villages were not lost on the country’s Central government. As you might expect, they were intrigued as to how dirt poor villages could become prosperous so quickly. To get answers, they sent a team of researchers to check out the reason this happened. The scientists visited the villages, talked to the people, listened to the explanation, and wrote their report. Their reason for this poverty-to-prosperity turnaround was straight forward – it was due “to the community understanding and obeying the Bible.”

For an atheistic government, this conclusion was received with ambivalence. While they were all for more productivity, they could not countenance God being the reason. So they commissioned a second team of researchers to travel to different villages around the country to find out the real reason for this transformation. This time the group came back to report that the people’s God moved them out of poverty when they obeyed Him. These TCT case histories were a striking example of how a small group of believers with a strategic vision can impact hundreds of villages and thousands of people for the Gospel.

Missional Leverage As you can tell, at the IWMC I discovered some mission organizations that really impressed me with their strategic vision, ability to mobilize the indigenous church and make a great impact for Christ in exchange for a modest mission/financial investment; the Truth Centered Transformation project being “Exhibit A.” It caused me to wonder if we need a whole new set of metrics (measurables) to help evaluate where and how best to invest our mission’s budgets.

Let me share another example as “Exhibit B.” I ended up partnering with Dr. Bob Moffitt of Harvest International in a discipling workshop. He invited me to a Harvest reception a few evenings later. Harvest is a CHE-type missional organization committed to working through indigenous churches to best impact

communities for Christ. It has 34 Associate staff people in the field serving in 24 countries. Here's what blew me away! Most of these nationals are tent makers generating their own incomes in their respective cultures. Harvest raises a little over \$100,000 a year for their combined (34 people) travel expenses and incidentals; e.g. cell phones and laptops, along with a very modest \$1500/year salary supplement. That equates to around \$3,000 per year per associate on the ground. There are also nine field staff that (mostly) raise their own support so they can focus on mentoring the 34 associates and train villagers.

Together these 43 (34 + 9) Harvest field people spend most of their time mobilizing, training, encouraging and supporting indigenous churches in third-world settings to address the needs of their villages/towns in the CHE model. That's a lot of transformational impact per dollar invested. All of that caused me to realize that when it comes to "sandals on the path," there is a big difference between (just) spending a lot of money on missions and wisely investing in missions that have a high leverage/multiplication impact like Harvest and the TCT Project.

I am aware of situations where missionaries in Europe need \$80,000+ of support a year to lead Bible studies for a couple of dozen college students, and that's after needing a few years to learn the language. And here is Harvest with 43 nationals working through hundreds of churches to transform communities for Christ for, comparatively speaking, cents on the dollar. I realize I am no doubt comparing apples and oranges with these observations having been exposed to just one piece of the Mission pie. As we all know, there are times when the strategic thing to do for advancing the Kingdom is counterintuitive to "worldly wisdom." But that doesn't mean than every Spirit-led decision regarding missions needs to be counterintuitive!

Thus the three days I spent at IWMC raised questions: How do we measure the effectiveness of a wide variety of missional organizations and methods? In a world of limited resources, where are we getting the most miles per gallon of transformation? What constitutes sober (and strategic) missional stewardship? As churches and individuals, do we evaluate, compare and contrast various missional options based on 1) their respective strategies and tactics, 2) the degree to which they leverage the local churches in a community, and 3) the average cost per "sandals on the path" or "shoes on the ground," 4) overall transformational impact?

"What a Difference a Day Makes" That was the title of an old Dinah Washington Grammy award winning song from 1959. I can only echo that refrain and observe "what a difference three days makes" in thinking new thoughts about missions. I realize I only got a snap shot view of a few missions, not an extensive view of many. Nevertheless, it did cause me to wonder: What are we doing with our missions programs, what metrics (measureables) are we using, and why are we doing it that way? Are we still propagating (or stuck in) "yesterday's" paradigms, or are we availing ourselves of the best practices in the missional world today?

Reflect Upon

- Prior to this Reflection, what was your notion of "missions?" What struck you in this Reflection?
- How would you evaluate where your church is in its understanding and practice of "missions."
- To those Missions Committees still embracing "yesterday," how would you respond to the members when they (defensively) reply, "*The Lord led us to do it that way.*" Or how about, *the only reason for missions is to preach the Gospel, not to build roads!*"
- How do you react to a missional strategy where the vision is for "*discipling preceding conversion*"?
- Are you more an "*orality*" person – listening to the words of the Bible being read through a Westernized grid – or a "*hearity*" person – hearing what's being said in the white spaces between the lines like the people who first heard and understood those words? Implications for the Western church?
- Do you subscribe to the thesis of every follower of Jesus being involved in missions in some way? If so, what adjustments might be needed in your life?
- Do you agree or disagree with the thesis that Jesus calls us to "*make disciples,*" not "believers" or "converts." What are some of the implications of whichever position you take?
- How do you react to the notion of metrics (measurement yardsticks) being used to measure, evaluate and rank missional priorities?

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