
MISSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY: MAKING WISE CHOICES

Over the last decade we have seen many positive changes in evangelical mission thought and practice. Mission, for example, is no longer understood by evangelical Christians as an activity going out from the West to the rest of the world. Mission in the 21st century is understood as a global endeavour from everywhere to everywhere. As a result of this paradigm shift many Western evangelical mission organisations seek to be more international and multi-cultural, partnering with missionaries from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Today we find African Christians being involved in a church plant in London and Chinese mission partners working in theological education in Kenya. However, there are also some problematic developments which have an impact on everyone involved in cross-cultural mission. In this paper I will look at these developments and the choices mission organisations, missionaries and local churches face.

A broad view of mission: what's in a word?

Firstly, a new understanding of mission is emerging among evangelicals which conceptualises mission rather broadly. Evangelism and verbal communication of the Gospel are considered at best as optional extras but no longer as the heartbeat of mission. Some understand mission first and foremost in terms of community development; their main focus is on the transformation of society and no longer on people's salvation from sin, death and the power of the devil. In other words, mission is no longer Great Commission mission; it has become 'kingdom mission'. Don Carson comments: 'I know numerous groups that claim to be engaging in "holistic" ministry because they are helping the poor in Chicago or because they are digging wells in the Sahel, even though few, if any, of the workers have taken the time to explain to anyone who Jesus is and what he has done to reconcile us to God. Their ministry isn't holistic; it's halfistic or quarteristic.'¹

For others Gospel proclamation is only one of many dimensions of mission which are equally important. Proclamation of the good news is no longer, what Timothy Keller describes as 'the most basic and radical ministry possible to a human being.'² Some argue, for example, that health ministry must be seen at the very heart of mission. Others urge the Church to get involved in ecological mission. To support their case, the Great Commission is sometimes re-interpreted and the traditional evangelical view of mission branded unbiblical or out of date. For many evangelical missiologists and mission practitioners the heartbeat of mission has clearly changed. There are different terms used to describe these new positions on mission. Some speak of the

¹ Carson, D 2011. How to do justice and not undermine evangelism. <http://www.sermoncentral.com/pastors-preaching-articles/don-carson-how-to-do-justice-and-not-undermine-evangelism-943.asp?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=BetterPreachingUpdate>

² Keller, T 2010. Generous justice: how God's grace makes us just. New York: Dutton, 139.

missional church approach, others speak of revisionist holism. What both positions have in common is the emphasis on the central role of the kingdom of God in mission. However, in their version of the kingdom Jesus and his Church are marginalized; mission is about the promotion of kingdom values, such as justice, peace and equality. The kingdom is first and foremost identified with social and political reforms but not so much with the king and his gospel. The Church whose head is Christ the king is regarded an incomplete expression of God's reign.

Others stress the importance of Jesus and his incarnation as the sole missionary model. Missionaries have to do what Jesus did and say what Jesus said. Since Jesus is seen either as God's agent of socio-political reformation, the transformer of individuals and whole societies or the saviour of the world, missionaries must become exactly that, i.e. liberators of society, transformers of culture, or saviours of needy people. The traditional evangelical view which argues that the apostle Paul and his fellow apostles are our models in mission is rejected. Postmodern evangelical missionaries no longer see themselves as witnesses (Acts 1:8; 22:15; 1 Pet. 5:1) and ambassadors of Christ and his gospel (2 Cor. 5:20; Eph. 6:20) whose core business is evangelism (Acts 6:4&7; 1 Cor. 9:16-23; Col. 1:28-29; 2 Tim. 4:1-2) and the establishment of churches (Acts 14:21-23; Acts 18:1-11). The result is missionaries who are involved in a kind of churchless mission. This, however, is a dangerous development, because missionaries with a churchless mission forget that the Church takes central place in God's salvation history.³

New theologies: Gospel ministry versus secular development work with a Christian touch

Secondly, there are certain postmodern theologies which are gaining influence in evangelical mission circles. Evangelical missionaries from North America and Europe have undoubtedly played an important part in the spread of the Gospel, the formation of African, Asian and Latin American churches, and the material and practical support of the poor and marginalised, and many of them still do so.

There are, however, also missionaries who bring with them some unhealthy theological baggage, such as Open Theism and certain Emerging Church philosophies. While the former with its denial of God's full foreknowledge is mercifully rare, the impact of the latter is more visible. Three of the main features of the Emerging Church are a deep distrust of the institutionalised church, a disregard of Christian tradition, and an emphasis on community. In some southern African countries, for example, these views manifest themselves in such a way that missionaries work independently of indigenous churches. While in the past missionaries were involved in the planting of churches, the training of church leaders and the education of children and young people in church schools, there are an increasing number of missionaries who serve in hospitals and schools, agricultural projects or projects for orphans and vulnerable children which have no or only little church connection. For these missionaries the main partners are not indigenous churches and para-church organisations, but government departments and national and international non-government organisations. Joachim Rieck, a Namibian Baptist pastor, writes: 'Many are called "missionary" today who are nothing but "development aid workers", and who no longer speak about the life giving gospel of God's grace to sinners. They do nothing to get a church of grace-filled people going and multiplying.'⁴

³ Cf. Schulz, KD 2009. Mission from the cross: the Lutheran theology of mission. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 205.

⁴ Rieck, J 2011. Grace: the means by which we do missions. Sola 5 Chronicles 12:4&6, 6.

Homemade problems

There is no doubt that postmodern theologies and a broad conceptualisation of mission are influencing an increasing number of evangelical mission organisations and their missionaries. Evangelism, church planting and leadership training are no longer their core business. However, there are also some homemade problems which foster this development.

Theological ignorance: it is not good to have zeal without knowledge (Prov 19:2)

It seems that in some mission organisations there is a degree of theological ignorance. It is alarming when an evangelical mission organisation, in an attempt to promote a holistic view of mission, teaches a model of the atonement which claims that Christ died so that people can be reconciled with their self. How do these mission leaders arrive at such a conclusion? The obvious answer is a lack of theological training and a limited understanding of biblical teaching.

Most evangelical mission organisations require some kind of formal Bible and cross-cultural training from their missionaries. In a number of mission agencies, however, the standards in this field have been lowered in recent years. Instead of one or two years full-time training at a Bible college it is sufficient for mission candidates to attend a six-week residential course or to complete an online course in cross-cultural mission. Of course, that does not mean that these courses have no value. On the contrary, they often help future missionaries to gain a deeper understanding of culture, the importance of team-work and the biblical basis for mission. However, it can be problematic when missionaries with a background in medicine, nursing, education, business or law who have undergone only very basic theological training are appointed as team or field leaders or given other leadership responsibilities within the mission organisation that require theological discernment.

But even missionaries with a good theological knowledge might not always feel able to respond to new theological trends. Day-to-day ministry can be so demanding and at times frustrating that all these missionaries feel they can do is to concentrate on their own ministries and to keep the work going.

False teaching: it can happen in the best families!

While lack of theological knowledge might explain some of the unbiblical positions held and promoted within mission organisations we must not forget that the Bible also warns us against false teachers who infiltrate the church and damage the believers (e.g. 2 Cor. 11:3-4, 2 Peter 2:1-3; Rev. 2:20). If things like this can happen to a local church, why should evangelical mission organisations be spared? When mission leaders argue that the cross of Christ might have been only 'God's plan B', because the Bible does not give us God's total perspective on his plan which would allow us to know what he was thinking at creation or when they argue that the Bible's teachings on the church and church leadership are not prescriptive for us today but only descriptive of the early church, it raises some serious questions about their view of Scripture and their agenda. The same is true for those who claim that evangelism does not work in certain countries, that all we need to do is to get alongside people and sort out their problems.

Pragmatism: how mission leaders are chosen

Sometimes theological ignorance goes hand-in-hand with a strong pragmatic approach to ministry. One example is the recruitment of mission leaders. There are various reasons why missionaries are promoted to leadership positions. In some mission organisations, the percentage of former missionary kids among both membership and leadership is noticeably high. One reason is that these adult missionary kids (AMKs) are considered to be better qualified than those without this background. In long-established mission organisations this tendency of appointing AMKs to leadership positions is sometimes supported by an organisational culture whose motto is 'We are family'. As a result the same family names appear again and again on the mission's membership list. 'Family bonds' can be so strong that it takes a long time before leaders are, if at all, disciplined for false teaching or other inappropriate conduct.

Being an AMK is, of course, not the only qualification for a leadership appointment. Other mission leaders may get appointed because they have been part of the organisation for a long time and it is felt that they cannot be overlooked. Others have had a successful career in their secular business before they joined the mission, suffer from ill-health and are no longer fit for front-line mission work, or are known to be people who will not oppose what their team members or superiors want to do. All these are, of course, the wrong reasons and the wrong criteria for appointing a mission leader. The right criteria can be found in Scripture. Passages such as Titus 1:5-9, 1 Timothy 3:1-13, 2 Timothy 2:1-13 and Acts 6:1-6 apply not only to church leaders who are involved in God's mission in London or Sydney but also to those who are involved in cross-cultural mission work in Tokyo or Johannesburg. However, as David Hesselgrave⁵ has pointed out, mission organisations tend to be rather selective when it comes to these leadership criteria: While they emphasise qualifications for leadership such as 'husband of one wife', 'blameless' or 'self-controlled' they tend to pay little attention to a qualification that was extremely important to the apostles, i.e. the ability to 'give instructions in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it' (Titus 5:9).

Finally, we must not forget that a pragmatic approach to mission work can also be financially motivated. In times of economic crises and tight finances, when raising money for their general fund is getting more and more difficult, there is a great temptation for mission organisations to ignore particular doctrinal issues or to compromise on them. And all of a sudden issues that were generally considered primary only a few years ago, such as the doctrine of penal substitution or the primacy of evangelism, become secondary or non-essential issues, i.e. issues that 'good' evangelicals can disagree over.

A low view of the local church: the tragedy of an unequal partnership

Sometimes it is a low view of the local church and its role in world mission that fosters unhelpful strategies and even heretical views in the mission field. For many years mission organisations have been reminding local churches in the West of their responsibility for world mission. Local churches, they rightly argue, must be mission-minded. However, there is also a need for mission organisations to be church-minded. Unfortunately, there is still an attitude among evangelical mission organisations that sees local churches first and foremost as a source of new missionaries and financial means. Local churches and their individual members are seen as supporters of mission agencies and their missionaries rather than as mission partners.

⁵ Hesselgrave, D 2007. Will we correct the Edinburgh error? Future mission in historical perspective. *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 49(2):121-149, 141.

One reason for this is obvious: a lack of understanding of the biblical view of mission. The biblical model of mission, as it can be found, for example, in Paul's letter to the Philippians, is not a support model but a partnership model. This model stresses a fourfold partnership between local churches and their mission workers: a partnership in praying (1:4; 1:19), in serving (1:27; 4:14), in giving (2:25; 4:15-18), and in sharing news (2:19; 2:25). The role of mission organisations must be to support these partnerships. Instead, many organisations tend to see themselves as mission specialists whose job it is to fulfil the Great Commission.

Lack of accountability: wearing blinders in the mission field

Such a low view of the local church and its role in mission often has implications for the accountability of mission organisations – not only in the mission field in Africa or Asia but also back home in Europe or North America. While most mission organisations have councils to which the senior leadership is accountable these councils do not necessarily consist of official representatives of local churches, church fellowships or denominations. Instead, they are often made up of former long-term or short-term missionaries, representatives of other mission organisations, Christians with a special interest in world mission and perhaps the occasional church minister. In some cases, the general mission council consists exclusively of serving missionaries which means that there is no external accountability at all. Because of this lack of external accountability there is little sense of ownership among local churches, but even more important, mission organisations receive only little or no advice and correction from churches when it comes to theological issues and mission strategies.

When faced with heresies or an unbiblical understanding of mission it does not help that many mission organisations have a rather complex organisational structure, which makes it difficult to hold missionaries and their leaders accountable. These structures can lead to bizarre situations where, for example, mission leaders are directly involved in appointing their own supervisors every year or where missionaries, mission leaders and their supervisors are all members of the highest decision-making body of the organisation. In both cases real internal accountability is hardly guaranteed. Also, it is not unusual that missionaries working together on the same team are affiliated to different national mobilising offices of the same organisation or have been seconded from different agencies. While working under the same umbrella these national branches and agencies might have very different approaches to mission or take very different views on some theological controversies. Put differently, what the UK branch may consider as heretical may be perfectly acceptable to their Canadian colleagues. A situation like this becomes problematic when, for the sake of unity and harmony, these theological issues are not addressed.

What shall our response be?

Let me give a number of recommendations which missionaries, mission organisations, sending churches and receiving churches may want to take to heart.

Missionaries: choose your mission organisation wisely!

How do future missionaries learn about mission organisations? Well, some are recommended to them by church leaders, Christian friends or missionaries sent out by their church. Others attend mission fairs organised by Bible colleges, visit the stalls of mission organisations at Christian events, or study helpful brochures and books on mission. Whatever organisation they finally decide to join, their decision needs to be

an informed one. The selection process of mission organisations can be quite rigorous. Enquirers and candidates have to fill in questionnaires, provide several references and undergo a number of interviews.

Such a thorough process is undoubtedly helpful and necessary, but it must not be understood as one-sided. While it is important for the mission organisation to find out if someone is right for them, the candidate must seize the opportunity to find out if this particular agency is also right for him or her. It is the time to find out more about the agency's character, beliefs, ministry philosophy, strategies, values and policies. It is the time to ask the agency some tough questions:

- What are your purposes, goals and objectives?
- What exactly is your view of mission?
- Is this view also shared by your leaders in the field?
- What do you mean when you speak of partnership?
- How closely do you work with local churches?
- What role does relief work play in relationship to evangelism, church planting and leadership training?
- What is your leadership style?
- What are your structures like?
- How would you describe your organisational culture?
- How do you deal with false teaching in your organisation?
- What does your pre-field orientation look like?
- What kind of care do you provide for missionaries?
- What unwritten rules do you have?
- What happens when things go wrong?

Not to ask such questions and to join a mission organisation just because it is well-known and long established can be dangerous. Let's not forget: what is true for individual Christians is also true for mission organisations; they cannot live on their glorious past. What counts is not their past achievements and missionary zeal, but their present faithfulness to God's truth as it is revealed in God's Word.

Sending churches: choose your missionaries wisely!

The idea that missionaries are Christians who are called to go without the support of their local church cannot be found in Scripture. The biblical pattern is that missionaries are sent out by their local churches and remain responsible and accountable to them (e.g. Acts 13:1-4; 14:27). Usually, churches have known the missionaries they send out for some time. The future missionaries have been members of the church, served in different areas, and shown an interest in cross-cultural ministry and world mission, and the church leadership has had enough time to test and confirm their missionary call. But their responsibility does not end here. They need to actively accompany their future missionary in the process of finding a suitable mission organisation which recognises the God-ordained role of the local church in mission. This may include pointing them to particular mission societies which are clearly Gospel-driven and church-minded and directing them away from others which are not.

Sometimes it happens that church leaders are approached by other churches or mission organisations asking them to partner with a new or serving missionary who lacks the necessary funding. While there is nothing

wrong with this, the church is still obliged in such a case to test the call of this missionary and his character, as well as his theological convictions in general and views on mission particularly.

Mission organisations: choose your leaders wisely!

When a large evangelical mission organisation started the process of seeking to appoint a new international director its officers drew up a list with gifts and qualities they wanted to see in their future leader. They were looking for a truly spiritual person, a careful thinker, a visionary and effective communicator, someone who was able to delegate work and exercise fiscal discipline. What was missing on this list was the ability to teach sound doctrine and to correct those who don't. If this is the case for an appointment at senior leadership level it is very likely that this quality will not be an important criterion when it comes to choosing leaders for other positions within the organisation.

To choose mission leaders wisely surely means to make sure that they are committed to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, that their lifestyles are Christ-like, that they have a serving spirit, love for their fellow workers and for those they serve, a good knowledge of the Word of God, appropriate gifts of the Holy Spirit, and biblically-informed convictions about the nature of God, human beings, the church, the work of Christ and God's mission. In other words, what is required of them is commitment, character, conviction and competency. The latter also implies that evangelical mission leaders do not hold unorthodox views. On the contrary, they should be able to grapple with heresies and controversies, such as Open Theism, Emerging Church and the New Perspective on Paul, as well as the hot issues of mission theory and practice.

Receiving churches: choose your partners wisely!

Many churches and para-church organisations in Africa, Asia and Latin America have longstanding relationships with evangelical mission organisations from Europe or North America. Often Mission Initiated Churches can directly trace back their beginnings to the work of evangelical missionaries from the northern hemisphere. The same is true for many theological seminaries and Bible colleges. Because of these special relations African, Asian or Latin American churches often feel some degree of loyalty towards the western mission organisation. In addition, western mission organisations continue to provide them with funds and personnel they are struggling to raise themselves. Sometimes, mission organisations find it difficult to release hold on power and control. As a result, they are in danger of creating a cycle of dependency. However, a strong sense of loyalty and financial and institutional dependency can easily prevent churches and para-church agencies questioning the suitability and theological soundness of missionaries seconded to them.

What is needed is a stronger involvement of the African, Asian or Latin American partner churches in the selection of missionaries. The final decision whether a missionary is given 'the go ahead' must lie with them. To welcome pastors, church planters, youth workers, or theological educators just because they have been recommended by a reputable mission agency can have serious consequences when these missionaries later turn out to be less theologically orthodox than assumed. Ultimately, it is the receiving churches' responsibility to decide who is serving in their congregations and church organisations. If they take this responsibility seriously, they sooner or later may be confronted with a situation where they have to break up with some old partners and look for new ones who truly value gospel truths and a biblical understanding of partnership in God's global mission.

The Bible tells us that at the heart of God's mission is his desire to see 'a great multitude that no-one can count, from every nation, tribe, people and language' standing before his throne in worship (Rev. 7:9). It also tells us that his Church is entrusted with his mission to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19). What is needed for the 21st century Church to be faithful to her commission globally is mission-minded local churches, church-minded mission organisations, and theologically-minded missionaries who have a passion not only for people but also for God, his Word, his truth, his glory, and the advancement of his kingdom.

Thorsten Prill is a lecturer at Namibia Evangelical Theological Seminary (Windhoek) and a Crosslinks mission partner.

Mission Matters is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues in World Mission. It is published on line by the Affinity World Focus Team. Its purpose is to stimulate thinking on significant issues in World Mission. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Theological Team.

Other Online Resources from Affinity

Table Talk is a series of occasional papers published on line by the Affinity Theological Team. Its purpose is to stimulate theological thinking on significant issues. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Theological Team.

Foundations is an online journal published twice a year by the Affinity Theological Team. Its aim is to cover contemporary theological issues by articles and reviews, including in exegesis, biblical theology, church history and apologetics and indicating their relevance to pastoral ministry.