



Centring The Local

The Indigenous Future of Missions

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In this transcript Jay calls on the global missions community to prioritise the local, the host recipients of the gospel. Rather than 'decentring' the influence of the outsider, he encourages centring: an empathetic appreciation of the insider's perspective in cross-cultural missions relationships. Jay argues that the grace of God is experienced differently among different groups of people so that the particular or local experience can be shared as blessing to the universal or global body of Christ. Loving interaction in our integrated relationships in-Christ is a means to both the maturing of the saints and a witness to the world, so they will believe and know.

I am Māori by my father's line, whose father, my paternal grandfather, had only Māori heritage. But I was raised in the home of my mother and stepfather, both of European descent. I was educated as a white person under my stepfather's surname, which I held for the first part of my life. That I was a white person went without question due to my skin tone and stepfather's surname. That I am instinctively Māori has long been a source of confusion for me, and those who have suffered to work with me! But I have learned to embrace my hybridity.

This is my location, the lens through which I see the world. Intuitively indigenous yet Western educated. My visceral sense of things indigenous—my values and philosophies—have caused me to consistently question what I was being taught. What my teachers and most fellow students accepted as reality, I could not so easily accept. It did not fit how I perceived the world. I found myself asking, "who says?" and "what's the point?" — who says it has to be this way and not another way, and what have they got to gain from saying it's a certain way? I asked such questions because I could intuit alternatives.

I identify as an indigenous person, as a Māori; and I identify as a follower of Jesus the Christ. I am a student of The Way as it is described in the Protestant Bible. I am first and foremost a Māori, or if you prefer genetic specificity, a Māori-European hybrid. And, as a Māori, I follow Jesus. I think this is a critically important perspective. I never cease to be genetically what I am, and I bring that into my faith experience and my relationships. And, importantly, I bring my genetic and ethnic identity with me into local expressions of the covenantal community that all followers of Christ belong to, by virtue of our allegiance to Him.

There is a prevailing myth among Global North followers of Jesus that we should give up our ethnic or cultural identities to follow something called "the Biblical culture". According to them, this is backed up

by the Apostle Paul, who said to the Galatians that there is no longer a difference between one culture or the next, slave or free, male or female, for we are all one, together in-Christ — but what they refer to as "Biblical culture" is, more often than not, their interpretation of Biblical culture.

Furthermore, Paul was speaking there in Galatians of equality, of the giving up of power, privilege and dominance over others, not our genetic identities. In the terminology of this presentation, Paul consistently teaches us to decentre our preferences for the sake of others. In Christ, we cannot cease to be who we are ethnically, any more than we can cease to be our biological gender. We remain male or female, and whatever mix of Māori, Chinese, Indonesian, Papuan or European we happen to be. Yet the privileges of our ethnicity and social status are not something to be grasped, wielded or imposed. In-Christ we yield or surrender them to become servants of one another — for this is the attitude of Christ according to Paul in Philippians 2:5-8.

There is no globally homogeneous cultural ideal for followers of Christ. Our John 17 unity does not demand uniformity or conformity to another's preferences. The New Testament speaks of unity in diversity, a unity in constant tension. Just like you cannot find a harmonic note on an instrument string without tuned tension, so you cannot have relational harmony in community



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without persistently resolved conflict—perpetual reconciliation. Identifiable diversity in our faith is a given. At the consummation of all things there remain different nations, tribes, people, and languages. These diversities remain as gifts from God. For God manifests uniquely through every cultural expression in the world. There is neither one that dominates, nor one that should be allowed to shape the global Body of Christ in its image.

As a Māori follower of Jesus the Christ, the blessings I receive from God via my indigenous heritage and perspective, I bring into His global covenantal community as blessings to be shared—to add to our collective knowledge of God, in Biblically authentic ways. But I need to make it known that the ideas I share are not the opinions of the organisations I serve or represent. It is, however, my contribution to a larger conversation I am having within my spheres of influence that those roles open for me. This is just who I am, and it is my offering to God and the global community of Christ followers.

In this presentation I will introduce three interconnected themes that I believe we need to understand as missions moves into a post-pandemic new era. The three themes are: Indigeneity, Influence, and Integration. Indigeneity: collectivist values and local determination. Influence: the location and application of power. Integration: honour, mutual participation and growth.

1. Indigeneity

1.1 Interpretation

The term Indigenous literally means, “of the land”. So, it implies connection to a specific location. In many contexts this word has attracted a negative sense that diminished the dignity of people who were considered to be indigenous. It was treated like the concepts of ‘primitive’, ‘underdeveloped’, ‘uncivilised’, or ‘animist’. The indigenous were seen as inferior by their colonisers, and in many cases still are considered that way. In recent times, however, the term has gained higher status and there is a sense of pride returning to the idea of being ‘indigenous’.

My use of the word ‘indigenous’ in a missiological sense is rooted in the UN definition of indigeneity but extends much wider to describe the integrated values of people throughout the world who have a collectivist orientation. I contrast this Indigenous ecosystem with the one that is dominated by an individualist perspective, which I call the Industrial ecosystem.

Rather than speak of the Western world and the Majority, Developing, Third, or non-Western world,

highlighting their geographic, demographic or economic divisions. I prefer to see the world as two major knowledge domains or epistemic ecosystems: Indigenous and Industrial, with overlapping influence and hybridization developing between the two.

For me, the Indigenous domain is more about a set of values and a way of seeing the world, rather than a specific geography. While they might be formed in a particular place, values are held and passed on by the Indigenous that transcend their location of origin. Dislocated people can find it difficult to retain their collectivist identity, but it is not impossible. Our convictions and values continue with us long after we have left the land that nurtured us or our forebears. I include all collectivist-oriented peoples under the category of “Indigenous” because there are many commonalities shared by people whose culture is still very much guided by the ideals, the principles, priorities and responsibilities of a collective.

In contrast to the Indigenous, those categorised as Industrial belong to, or have adapted to, Western industrial enlightenment philosophies that have so influenced politics, education and commerce around the world that they can no longer be geographically linked to the Euro-American (colonial) West. Successive generations of formerly collectivist people, educated in Western-styled universities and living in urban centres, have become hybridized to individualist Industrial values to some degree.

Industrial values, arising out of Western Enlightenment-dualism, continue to be the dominant influencer on the world stage, but the crises that COVID-19 has accelerated are exposing the inadequacies of these values. The collectivist values of the Indigenous are coming into focus as the way forward, with potential to provide solutions to problems such as poverty, pollution, and political upheaval.

When Jason Mandryk of Operation World asked me back in March 2020 what I thought about the future of missions in light of the emerging COVID-19 crisis, I considered the immanent closure of borders and the effect it would have on trans-border ministries. I said to him that this could well be the catalyst some of us had been looking for to mark a new era of missions. He quoted me as saying, “The future of missions is indigenous”. The contrast between Indigenous and Industrial is what I was referring to, but I also had in mind the need for much greater local innovation and guardianship in missions.

While the collectivist values of the Indigenous can help global missions navigate its way into God’s future, I also believe local guardianship will be critically important in the days ahead. The concept of guardianship is drawn from my experience of collectives, where the idea of

personal or even group ownership is foreign. Guardianship has a protective and nurturing quality to it, with a focus on sustainability. Guardians are caretakers of what is precious to the group or community, to the collective. Embedded within the idea of guardianship is a responsibility to protect a group's self-determination—the ability for those local to an area to have the freedom to make the best decisions for their own wellbeing.

1.2 Implications

For most of the modern missions movement's history, missiologists would accept the indigenisation of the church, where expressions of the Christian faith were matched to the cultural preferences of those professing it. But the good news itself was fixed as a set of propositional axioms to be translated for the inhabitants of cultures, which were assumed to be fairly static. The homogeneous unit principle is related to this concept of a clearly definable fixed culture. In the mid-70's however, discussions about the indigenisation of church expressions rapidly dropped out of fashion. Perhaps it became so accepted that it was no longer controversial enough to discuss. Its place in missiological discourse was taken up by the idea of the contextualisation of the gospel.

I traced the shift from "indigenisation" to "contextualisation" back to an article reproduced in the book "Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies" (Edited by Anderson & Stransky and published by Eerdmans in 1976). The chapter, titled "Contextualizing Theology" is a shorter version of an article by Shoki Coe, then Director of the World Council of Churches' Theological Fund, originally written in 1973. In the article, Coe argues for a shift from static past-oriented indigenization to dynamic future-oriented contextualisation, where the gospel meets culture in dialogue and both are influenced in the process. This is obviously problematic if you hold that the gospel is a set of universal propositions that merely need to be translated sufficiently to be understood in another language.

If we understand the gospel as a relational narrative, however, it is easier to accept that when Christ meets culture, the story adapts according to the dynamic perspective of the recipient culture. There are necessary elements to an authentic gospel narrative but the setting, characters and plot are free to unfold in surprising and unique ways. The gospel as a commodity, a pre-packaged set of cognitive concepts, is not the reason why communities of Christ-followers spread globally throughout the centuries. Researchers of global Christianity argue that it is an indigenous Christianity, not a transplanted one, that takes root and spreads. Furthermore, as the work of Lamin Sanneh shows, the Bible in the heart language of a people, read through the

indigenous lens of that people, and applied to their relationship with God amidst local challenges, is the fuel that accelerates such growth.

Sadly though, a static understanding of culture persists in missions today. We may have traded the terms indigenisation for contextualisation but the outcome remains the same—because the concept is owned by the outsiders. We still view cultures in static and stereotyped ways. We use concepts like 'worldview' with its structural rigidity that has not aged well. We objectify and depersonalise and neglect to appreciate the lived reality of others as a dynamic, affected in myriad ways by forces constantly influencing them, their communities and their societies.

Cultures are dynamic ecosystems of understanding about the world from the perspective of a particular locality and or network. Classic anthropological constructs of culture must give way to emerging concepts that account for the interconnected dynamism of core assumptions, ways of knowing, systems of values, behavioural motivators and consequences of the complex shifting ecologies we experience as cultures.

Back in the 70's, contextualisation may have attempted to add a dynamism to the development of the gospel in a particular locality, but I believe the concept has long since been co-opted by the missions industrial complex to functionally mean "translating OUR concept of the gospel into the cultural context of another". I consider this part of an Industrial dominance of missions, which I argue has been ruled by an 'impositional missiology', rooted in enlightenment/colonialist values and methods.

I am lobbying for a return to indigeneity and a discarding of contextualisation in its impositional and cognitively-bound form. The gospel is not a set of cognitive concepts that are translated into another culture from the outside by expatriate missionaries. It is a narrative of God's faithfulness emerging out of the relational experience and ways of knowing of those who come to know Christ within a particular context. It is first and foremost a spiritual relationship that grows, guided by Scripture. By labelling it indigenous, I am joining a long line of so-called "Majority World" theologians arguing for a centring of the local experience and localised interpretation of that experience in-Christ.

This gives rise to questions of theological orthodoxy and syncretism. We must hold these things loosely and allow followers of Christ in particular places to grow in their relationship with God somewhat organically—while handling the truths of Scripture correctly and in conversation with the global Church. The power of recognising Indigenous expressions of faith is that outsiders do not get to define what it is in any given place.



Indigenous insiders, therefore, retain the power to invite others into their lived experience of the faith as they wish. The inviters as hosts not as students. This is the essence of my call to shift from an impositional missiology to invitational missiology. It is a matter of influence.

2. Influence

2.1 Issues

Where does authority lie? This relates to my lifelong nagging questions, “who says?” and “what’s the point?”—who is claiming authority and what is their motivation? I am not disputing centuries of accepted belief about the core essentials of our faith or condoning liberal aberrations. I am arguing for space beyond the core code of gospel DNA to allow an indigenous reading of Scripture to inform localised faith in ways important to the dynamics of their lived reality, rather than the imposition of concepts from outside of their reality that may or may not be relevant. What emerges may not look orthodox to outsiders, but it is not our job to make others in our image. Believers from other backgrounds are to become disciples of Christ, not us.

This is what I mean by centring the indigenous or local perspective. It is accepting that recipients of the gospel are in control of their experience with God. When it comes to developing theology, the role of the expatriate or outsider should be to help believers to ask the right questions of God and Scripture rather than to deliver them with answers formed in a completely different context.

Too often we understand contextualisation as trying to fashion our answers into their cultural concepts, rather than allow revelation to emerge from within their unique ways of knowing. In this process we need to accept that we serve a living God and that the Holy Spirit is quite capable of revealing God and God’s ways to new believers in their Indigenous understanding far better than any outsider can.

Much is being made these days about the concept of “de-centring”. That is, the acceptance that there are multiple ways to view a thing and that no single view should be privileged or dominate over others. It is related to relativism, which argues against absolutist perspectives about the world. Aside from the philosophical debates we can have around absolute or universal truths, there is a healthy humility in accepting that there are ways of viewing the world, and the God of the Bible, other than your own. In missions we accept this, at least conceptually. It is much harder to practice!

2.2 Implications

By phrasing the title of this presentation as “Centring the Local” I chose to focus on the positive rather than the

negative aspect of the centring/ decentering dynamic. By centring the local, I am effectively asking outsiders to surrender their privilege and give space for local self-determination in all matters. For its entire existence, the evangelical missions enterprise has assumed an implicitly superior condescension towards host cultures. It is inherent in the colonial impulse that has long influenced missions. So, by encouraging us to centre the local, I seek to expose an unspoken pride and dominance that is no longer tolerated in our post-modern, plural and globalized world.

Centring the local is not about empowering them. To empower, you give power to. It is not ours, as outsiders, to give. Rather than empower, we need to take our power out of the equation to create space for local initiatives to emerge. This is what I thought might happen as a result of the COVID crisis, with expatriate involvement diminished in missions. If faith is a flame, we need to create space for the oxygen of God’s Spirit to accelerate it. That requires patience, humility, and a servant orientation. It requires us to wait for an invitation to participate, and a willingness to accept the terms of that invitation.

Local believers are the guardians of the gospel for their communities. As I’ve already noted, guardianship is a significant value for indigenous peoples, in the tribal sense of the word. Throughout the Arab world, Africa, the Americas, large parts of Asia and Oceania, tribal peoples have a caretaker orientation to common wellbeing, including responsible care for creation. The same concept applies with sacred knowledge. The gospel is sacred knowledge and recognised leaders or elders are responsible to steward it well:

- to determine how their faith in Christ should manifest within their context;
- to assess what norms and mores should be challenged and changed in their social, economic and political setting;
- to affirm what practices enhance their relationships with one another, and how loving kindness and care is best expressed within their faith community and out to their neighbours;
- and, to discern what God has to say about the critical issues that confront them in their daily lives.

Authority, decision-making power, must be firmly centred on the local. This has wide-ranging implications for how we conduct missions. For a start, it humbles the outsider’s implicit sense of superiority and tendency to dominate. It repositions the outsider as guest, student and servant; as opposed to the leader, teacher or boss. It diminishes the outsider’s influence and places control

firmly in the hands of the insiders. As the history of the global church shows, this is the surest way for the indigenous roots of the gospel to grow deep and public expressions of covenantal communities in-Christ to multiply and flourish.

You may have noticed that I am assuming here that the gospel has been seeded in a particular location already, with believers already apparent. I acknowledge this is still not the case for around 5 billion people in the world with little access to the gospel. That does require outsider investment, but as soon as possible the local believers should become the prime influencers, with the gospel narrative adapting to local ways of knowing.

Until this point, I have also belaboured the particular over the universal. I have framed my presentation by the terms, insider and outsider. I concede that this can lead to unhealthy tribalism and an us-versus-them type of bifurcated conflict. You could be forgiven for wondering if I haven't simply shifted problems of power from one to the other; where previously the colonial outsider dominated the Indigenous, now the Indigenous dominates the colonial outsider. It is well established that the oppressed can very quickly become a ruthless oppressor if given the opportunity. This is the nature of sin-filled humanity. This is not the way of our Lord and Saviour. To mitigate this potential, we need to bring the local into the universal, to counterpoint the Indigenous and the Industrial, to aim for harmony in diversity. To realise our unity together in-Christ, we need to talk about integration.

3. Integration

3.1 Imperatives

The aim of covenantal communities in-Christ should be to harmonize difference. This is shalom. This is what unity means. In many ways this speaks of the delicate art of balancing power. Due to rapid migration and cultural integration in urban centres around the world, local churches are having to learn to accommodate other cultural expressions of our faith. Missions groups are ahead of the curve in this regard—not by much though. Cultural diversity within missions groups has been a pressure point for fewer than three decades. Prior to the early '90s, missions were dominated by the assumptions of the Industrial domain. As participation of missionaries from new sending nations increased, demand increased for Indigenous domain perspectives to be appreciated. Western individualism is being increasingly challenged by Majority World collectivism.

People may be introduced to Christ most easily by people like themselves, and they may prefer to worship with people like themselves—this is the core of Donald

McGavran's homogeneous unit principle—but the church was never meant to consist of hermetically-sealed pockets of like-minded people. From the earliest letter in the New Testament, the book of James, we see conflict. This was within a supposedly homogeneous church—a church of Jewish believers. Yet even here we see difference in conflict, between the haves and have-nots, the rich and poor. Easy unity, with people like ourselves, is a mirage.

Praying for his disciples, who were themselves from diverse backgrounds within Judaism, and for those of us who would come after them from every tribe, language, people and nation, Jesus asked the Father to make us one. He said, in effect, "Father, integrate them—as I am in you and you are in me, may they be in us". From our various local backgrounds and Indigenous expressions of the faith, we are, together in-Christ, integrated into God as a covenantal community. Now, here's the missions point of John 17:18-25 that I'm calling "The Great Commitment": to live out this integration so that the world will believe and know that the Father lovingly sent the Son... and, by implication, be attracted to join us in Christ's covenantal community. Unity (in diversity) is the only means of mission that Jesus ever gave us.

3.2 Implications

You can have your unreached peoples focus, and your church planting strategies and your goals to make the Bible available in every major language in the world. You can plan and scheme and motivate and mechanise, with the aim of accomplishing the task of global evangelisation, but the Bible doesn't actually ask us to do that. Sure, history will come to a consummation and the gospel of the Kingdom *will* be preached throughout the whole world, but that is a promise not an objective. The fact that we can go into all the world to make disciples, and not just minister to Jews, is a release not a task.

We will be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth until his return, not by our doing but by our being. By being one, by being integrated into the community of God through our union with Christ, we witness to the reality of the shalom-Kingdom of God. The entire New Testament is a primer on how we should do that in any given locality. It is about harmonising relationships, living together, loving one another, making way for others and honouring the gifts from God we have each been given. Our loving interpersonal relationships are how we live counter to the ways of a sin-influenced world as an acceptable act of worship where we simultaneously learn the mind of Christ and glorify God within our interpersonal and intercultural interactions.

When we cross-cultures and dwell together in-Christ in multi-cultural groups, our aim should be to be transformed into intercultural beings. I believe, in our day



and age, that this is the highest aim for a disciple of Jesus. Growing as disciples, as a positive outcome of the tensions of difference, is what James refers to as maturity. As we persevere in our faith, in our commitment to our covenantal community in-Christ, we grow as believers. We become more like Christ. The fruit of God's Spirit is

manifest in our communal midst. The shalom-Kingdom ethic of love becomes obvious to all in our wider societies. This is our missions responsibility. This is how the world will believe and know that our God reigns.

Conclusion

In our relationships with one another, we must “have the same mindset or attitude as Christ Jesus who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant...”

I just quoted, of course, from Philippians 2:5-7. This frames my entire presentation. Jesus was who he was. We are who we are. Local believers are who they are. We are all free to be who God made us to be and to bring the best of who we are into our covenantal communities in-Christ. We are not free to co-opt the identity of others or to pretend we are something we are not. This is a problem I have with how incarnational missiology or inculturation is lived out as a method of building cross-cultural relationships. Outsiders can never become insiders, but we can become intercultural, which enhances, rather than compromises, our authentic self.

But Jesus, knowing he was in the very nature God, didn't consider it something to be grasped or used to his own advantage. No. Instead, he enacted a process of “kenosis”, a surrender or giving up of his privileges for the benefit of others. Similarly, we have a responsibility to give way or yield to one another. To seek each other's wellbeing. To prioritise the preferences of others over our own. This attitude permeates the New Testament. It is the essence of mutuality and speaks of a community known for highly reciprocal relationships. Where this is difficult to achieve and impossible to sustain in most communities, we have the enabling of the Holy Spirit to make it so in our covenantal communities in-Christ—a witness to the reconciling and transformative power of the Gospel.

At heart, what I am calling for is humble empathy where we value alternative ways of viewing things and make space for the “other”. Particularly, the Industrial making space for the Indigenous, since the Industrial remains the dominant and most influential knowledge domain in missions.

By centring the local I am asking all of us to honour the unique grace of God we receive from our respective contexts. To not lord it over one another but to submit these gifts in service to the community and to learn from one another. To be servant-learners. To co-create our global Christian and missions realities. This intercultural integration is my interpretation of what some are calling “radical collaboration” within the network ecosystems of participants in God's mission. So that, at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11).

Amen.