

The Fish Scale

by Dr Jay Matenga

“As a Christian I cringe when I hear stories of evangelists traveling the globe in an attempt to ‘save’ non-Christians. A rude and self righteous practice in any age, proselytizing is especially inappropriate at a time when the rifts created by religious intolerance abound in the world.”¹

It may not be as ardently stated, but as a mission ‘mobiliser’² I occasionally receive similar feedback from pew sitters. What is it with people who consider themselves ‘Christian’ but feel no responsibility to the Christian mandate in which Jesus commands us to ‘Go and make disciples of all nations’³? In an age of tolerance-driven pluralism, the plight of the lost almost seems lost.

War Tales

In the bizarrely tragic counter cultural movie *The Fight Club*⁴, the non-character declares, “Our generation has had no Great Depression, no Great War. Our war is spiritual. Our depression is our lives.” On this gloomy treatise he builds a worldview around a reality of pain: “How much can you know about yourself if you’ve never been in a fight?”

What is it with people who consider themselves ‘Christian’ but feel no responsibility to the Christian mandate... to ‘Go and make disciples of all nations’?”

Although few would subscribe to such tenets, it is a direct response to the insipid political correctness which grips the lives of the masses as we search for some basis for peace in an increasingly culturally diverse West.

Humanity: Fighting for Survival

Western post-modern societies are desperately searching for some common ground upon which to build a utopian future. Apart from counter-cultural curiosities, like the above, the best that pop philosophers can come up with is a “live and let live” mantra that currently permeates our populations. Western culture believes that conflict born out of ‘difference’ is the root of all evil — and a precursor to the end of humanity. It is assumed that the best way to defuse the situation is to accept and live with our differences, because it is in countering them that conflicts arise. Change, for better or worse, is always painful. But it’s a pain we would rather do without.

So, status quo rules! “Don’t challenge me and I won’t challenge you and we can all live together in harmony”... until we clash, again. One hundred years from now Western society may realise that tolerance is no answer because, despite increased globalisation, tribalism will dominate. But in the meantime tolerance remains the primary rule of the jungle.

¹ Julia Burke in TIME’s ‘Letters’ section, July 21, 2003. p4

² “[The ways a country motivates, trains and activates people in a wartime situation] are probably exactly how you can motivate, train, and activate believers to their part in the global spiritual warfare against Satan’s false kingdom of darkness. To mobilize is to get them moving.” Sjogren & Stearns, p207

³ Matthew 28:19

⁴ *The Fight Club*, Twentieth Century Fox, 1999. Director, David Fincher. Book written by Chuck Palahniuk, Henry Holt Publishing, 1999.

Mission: Fighting for a Hearing

A group of young New Zealanders working in mission meet occasionally to encourage each other. Our objective is to discuss ways in which we can impart a vision for Evangelical mission to a post-modern generation(s) of young Christians in our country. It is a group similar to others in Australia, UK, Canada and USA which have similar aims. Some wonder if they are the beginnings of new “Student Volunteer Movements”, but that’s been said before, and I think not... new age, new thing.

“How do we impart a passion for unreached peoples (the ‘other’) to young Christians from pluralist societies?”

The question this paper explores is “how do we impart a passion for unreached peoples (the ‘other’) to young Christians from pluralist societies⁵?” This is a thoroughly counter-cultural mandate. It’s even counter some ‘Christian’ cultures, as evidenced above. I am continually amazed at how many closet universalists⁶ there are out there; who, when pushed to confess, believe that by some divine act of mercy those who have not accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord will be saved in the end. Similarly, the inclusivist⁷ belief that people will be saved on the basis of adherence to their own religion is prevalent, neutralising the message of mission.

Young people nurtured in a post-modern world are imbibing this as their common sense reality. It is a major paradigm shift to convince them that people who don’t know Jesus need to change in order to be assured of eternal life, let alone that we have a responsibility to carry the message across cultural chasms to ensure those who currently have no opportunity to hear it, get an opportunity — in a way they can best appreciate it.

Time: Fighting for Dominance

Give me a young person with whom to study the Scriptures from a post-modern, Evangelical, viewpoint and I’ll show you a worldview shift. Lights go on and suddenly the eternal plan of God comes sharply into focus... not only the plan of God for the world, but the plan of God for the young person’s life. When God’s ‘main thing’ is made our ‘main thing’ all the other things fall in line.

This is fine in theory. First of all we have to find a young person who wants to study the Scriptures! Then we need time for the message to take root and permeate, time for the Holy Spirit to bring conviction of truth. Finally we need some tracks for this person to run on in order to work out this new belief so it becomes a value system which is evidenced through habitual behaviour.

But, like any incubation period, this takes time. All the while we are fighting against the voices screaming for pluralism, tolerance and bland ‘understanding’. Most mission mobilisers are itinerant mission speakers and don’t have the luxury of long periods of time to spend with most young people. As a consequence we come in, lay down the challenge, leave, and hope (vainly?) that they will call us for more information at a later date. Only at that point can we invest some serious time into building a relationship in order to help them find and fulfil their purpose in light of God’s global cause.⁸

...we need time for the message to take root and permeate...

⁵ For further reading about Christianity engaging a Pluralist Society see Newbiggin’s “Gospel in a Pluralist Society”.

⁶ A ‘Universalist’ is one who believes that salvation will extend to everybody in the end, this view is rooted in a one sided view of God being a merciful God of ‘love’. It fails to account for God also being a judge who demands justice.

⁷ John Hick popularised an ‘inclusivist’ view of Jesus among the religions, boldly likening his theory to that of Copernicus’ statement that the earth revolved around the sun rather than vice versa. Hick, riding on a pluralist agenda maintains that it is arrogant for Christians to compare other religions against their own as the measure. Rather, he posits, they should consider their religion one of many orbiting ‘ultimate reality’. The only concession he allows Christianity is that it may be ‘closer’ to the God entity than the others. (For a concise overview ref. Wright, p71-85)

⁸ For more information about Relational Mobilising refer Donnie Scearce’s article “Mobilizing Xers” (a pdf version is available to be downloaded from <http://www.pioneers.org/international/about-us/key-value-documents/philosophy-of-mobilization.htm>).

Fish: Fighting against the Current

The small group of young New Zealand mission workers has discussed this frustrating reality and we have realised that mobilisation, like conversion, is a process of worldview adjustment⁹. Engel & Norton, in the book “What’s Gone Wrong with the Harvest...”, popularised a view of conversion as a process, neatly summarised in the ‘Engel Scale’¹⁰. This has provided Evangelical Christianity with a very helpful tool to understand how a person’s journey of faith moves from being entirely oblivious to the Gospel (probably even anti), to being thoroughly involved in Christian witness.

Similarly, I have tried to map the mission journey of a believer; from being totally oblivious to Christ’s Great Commission Mandate (and even anti), to being thoroughly involved in taking a Christian witness across cultures. In this process I must acknowledge using Engle’s Scale as my guide; after all, what good is a new paradigm if it can’t be applied in alternative ways?!

This new application of Engel’s work, developed below, shall be affectionately called “*The Fish Scale*”¹¹. It carries a double meaning:

1. It connotes the Apostle Paul’s massive worldview shift which had the following effect after Ananias’ prayer...
*“instantly something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized.”*¹²
2. It represents the struggle a ‘small fish’ has in fighting against the current of a pluralist post-modern society to attain a place of active involvement in cross-cultural ministry for the sake of the Gospel.

Worldview: Fighting to Change

Have you noticed the conflict motif in the section titles? I deliberately chose the motif to reinforce the fact that whenever you challenge a person’s fundamental understanding of ‘life, the universe, and everything’ (reality/worldview), a survival instinct invariably kicks in and the change agent meets resistance — unless of course the person’s worldview is ready for a change as a result of perceived deficiencies¹³. Such a phenomenon is often experienced by street evangelists challenging the worldviews of passers-by who sit at the extreme negative end of Engel’s framework — some street preachers get abused or even attacked: it’s a result of humanity’s innate worldview protection mechanism.

The Fish Scale attempts to map out the ‘typical’ process, or shifts, that a person undergoes before becoming a ‘Great Commission Christian’. While, as mission mobilisers, we are often the communicators of the message, it cannot be emphasised enough that the Holy Spirit is the change agent. Worldview shifts must happen at the very core of a person’s understanding of reality, a simple behaviour change will not cut it. The Holy Spirit is the one who brings conviction of the truth, it is He who must convince the receiver that mission is an integral part of the makeup of his/her reality under God.

The Fish Scale attempts to map out the ‘typical’ process, or shifts, that a person undergoes before becoming a ‘Great Commission Christian’

⁹ Acknowledgement must be made at this point to Sean Marston, a mobiliser with SIM (NZ) for bringing the idea of a Mobilisation Scale into being. His initial idea has been re-developed here to more closely map the Engel Scale.

¹⁰ Engel & Norton : The *Engel Scale* can be found on the internet at:
http://newwwway.org/engel/great_commission_in_modern_dress.htm

¹¹ View *The Fish Scale* graphically on page 8.

¹² Acts 9:18 New Living Translation. Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1996

¹³ This subject of conversion and change is far too broad to discuss here. However, there is ample evidence to equate conversion with worldview shift, resulting from a person discovering that their current worldview fails to adequately provide answers to the challenges he/she is experiencing in life. Hence, conversion often occurring when people are at a crisis point in their lives.

Fish Scales

As touched on above, scales of the fish variety are of particular interest here in mapping the journey of a Great Commission Christian in a post-modern world. From this point forward I'll leave aside the first scales metaphor — the effective way tiled scales can obscure vision — and concentrate on nature's genius. Scales provide fish with a mechanism which allows them to slipstream through the water, gracefully swimming to it's destination. Our **Fish Scale** may not provide as real a slipstream, but I hope it will help us get people there grace-fully (sic). Let's get behind the fish-skin...

Eggs: (re)Birth

[-5 to -4]

Far and away the most challenging role for the mobiliser is to break through the worldview shroud pulled over the eyes of a (pre)teenage youth group attendee. Young adults, especially if they are undergoing a University education, are more able to grasp and appreciate alternative worldview concepts. The level of critical thinking they are doing predisposes them to be refining their worldview and therefore open to new ideas. As they get older, people are less inclined to make adjustments but have the capacity to do so should the opportunity present itself.

Youth are at the same time the hardest and most desirable demographic to reach. So much of the propaganda poured forth via mass media is aimed at reinforcing a superficial, consumerised, materialist, humanistic worldview. A thoroughly secularised educational system (mis)shapes their cognitive frameworks. And to top it off, youth leaders who should be mentors and shepherds are burning out just trying to appease them (and their parents) enough so that they remain on the church register.

It's no wonder there is a spirit of indifference out there toward being Great Commission Christians. Hence, the starting point of **The Fish Scale** is here — **Indifference**. This scale starts on the positive side of Engel's, but remains negative in terms of Cross-cultural Ministry awareness.

Let's
get
behind
the
fish
skin... What is needed at this point is **Revelation**. During the **Proclamation** of the Great Commission mandate by mission mobilisers and others, we should expect the Holy Spirit to reveal something fresh about God's global plan to the hearers. For this to happen effectively among young people the message must first penetrate their barrier of acceptability¹⁴. In missiological terms, the message of mission first must be *contextualised* to reach a youth audience.

It may take many such proclamation presentations before people start to get the message. Specific revelation generally happens over a period of time, after multiple exposures to the one message from different angles and different people. Sustained exposure to the message should create a norm in a group enabling them to rapidly advance up **The Fish Scale**.

Unfortunately, itinerant mission mobilisers don't have the ability to provide sustained exposure to the message — church leaders do. If there is going to be a birthing of mission **Interest** among young people and church attendees in general it has to come from people of influence in the church who have a passion for advancing God's kingdom where it is not. Itinerant mission mobilisers can be catalysts, but every church must

¹⁴ For a message to be received by techno-savvy young people today it must first be delivered in (sub)culturally relevant ways. The barriers of acceptability are changing. Fewer than 10 years ago a vibrant story with colour slides and cultural artefacts was acceptable. Until recently PowerPoint presentations were an effective presentation tool. I would suggest that now multiple short, interactive and multi media (still pictures, drama, video, song, etc) presentations are required for a single message to penetrate effectively.

have its own mobilisers and an atmosphere of Great Commission acceptance for conception to happen — in other words, for **Conviction** to set in.

The process of **Conviction** is the beginning of a sense growing inside the receiver that God has a specific purpose for him/her in His global plan. It is the point where a person decides they should look into this issue further. It is at this point that s/he starts on a process of understanding, passing through **Ignorance** to the **Incubation** of a much broader Christian worldview.

Cockabullies¹⁵: Development

[-3 to -1]

At the **Incubation** stage the new idea of mission is starting to form as understanding grows. This is a fragile stage as there is potential for the idea to be stillborn if there is not enough nourishment available. It is vital that **Education** is available for understanding to develop and take hold. The inquirer is opening up his/her worldview to be adjusted and it is vital that the adjustments are made slowly, sensitively but also thoroughly.

*At the **Incubation** stage the new idea of mission is starting to form as understanding grows.*

The educational process, around the **Investigation & Intention** phases, provides the worldview foundation cross-cultural ministers need to survive the rigours of life on the 'field'. It also provides the foundation those called to supporting roles need to survive the rigours of a life lived swimming against the flow at home!

The growing **Conviction** eventually formulates a **Call** leading to the **Intention** phase. This is where the mission 'initiate' begins to search for his/her role in mission in earnest. Even more information is sought here but the amount of it can become confusing if there is no leaning toward a defined purpose in God's global cause. Seeking Him regarding clear direction in association with the call is often required (but some may already have this as part of the 'call' experience).

Finally, the process of **Clarification** begins where specifics start to take shape. This process can happen time and again as the minister shifts his/her ministry to different places, organisations, or even occupations. To switch to a building metaphor, if the foundation process is solid whatever is built on it can be pulled down and rebuilt as necessary. Hence, a lifelong journey as a Great Commission Christian involved in any number of activities, in any number of places can result.

Bones: Flexible Structures

[0 to +3]

By the time an inquirer gets to the point of **Intention**, s/he should have established mission **Relationships**; either in her/his home church or with a para-church organisation(s). Flexible and mutual **Relationships** are absolutely vital for the effective mobilisation of Great Commission Christians. Poor relationships will result in poor commitment, even leading to non-involvement (and a slip back down the **Scale**). In mission parlance, this is commonly known as attrition¹⁶.

*It is at the **Intention** stage that specialist consultants in mission organisations really come into their own.*

It is at the **Intention** stage that specialist consultants in mission organisations really come into their own. Most organisations would say that this is their primary level of engagement with mission interested people, and different organisations engage with

¹⁵ Cockabullies are small New Zealand fish (Tripterygion Nigrigenne) often assumed to be underdeveloped larger fish.

¹⁶ The attrition rate of cross-cultural workers from the regions of ministry back to minimal or even non-involvement at home has been well documented over the last five or so years (ref. Too Valuable to Lose). I wonder though, if the attrition rate of people dropping out before they even get to the field should be of more concern. Are we losing people between the **Intention** and **Involvement** stages due to mission organisations' inadequate relationship skills?

people in different ways. The chief aim here should always be to establish open and honest **Relationships** with inquirers — relationships that seek the best for the inquirer, not another ‘head’ for the organisation¹⁷.

A healthy **Relationship**, whether with an organisational representative or a church leader, should encourage the inquirer toward commitment to some involvement in mission — whether as a cross-cultural worker or support worker, full-time or part-time. This is the **Facilitation** phase. His/her involvement should grow a desire to explore, and probably develop a daring boldness (born of a certain amount of naivety). The best use of this energy is to channel it into an organised short-term cross-cultural exposure trip that lines up with his/her current preferences.

Intrepidity when vented can do wonders for solidifying one’s commitment to cross-cultural ministry, however it needs to be integrated into the whole process not simply a one-off experience. The briefing and debriefing of such an experience is as important as the experience itself to ensure the inquirer’s process continues and does not stall.

From his/her educational, relational, and practical exposure to mission, the inquirer will probably move quickly through the point of **Induction** — committing to a course of action — to full **Involvement**. Here s/he is well acculturated to the realities of being a Great Commission Christian and, while part of an on-going life-long learning process, should be able to stand as a role model for others back along the scale. At this point what the person needs most is **Support** for his/her ministry¹⁸. If s/he becomes a full-time part of an organisation this is commonly known as ‘member-care’, if s/he becomes a part-time supporter of multiple cross-cultural ministries then s/he deserves as much ‘partner-care’ as can be afforded to her/him by the partners to whom s/he relates.

Conclusion

It is all very well outlining the process of becoming a Great Commission Christian, it’s something else being involved in moving people along the scale smoothly — especially from -5 through to -2! Such is the challenge of the mission mobiliser.

Most mission organisations are ill equipped to pour time, personnel and financial resources into young Christians who are indifferent to their cross-cultural responsibility. However, the time is upon us when mission organisations can no longer assume some one else will do it.

It is hoped that mission mobilisers around the world will continue to develop ways they can help churches and mission organisations ignite a passion in young people to participate in cross-cultural ministry. The ways this can happen are diverse but the continuum needs to be in a good state of repair. If we as itinerant mobilisers visit, people of influence in the church need to be reinforcing the message. In order for that to happen, people of influence in the church need to be aware of the message themselves. . . and living it out in some tangible way themselves.

For too long has the mother of all theologies... been annexed in the church.

For too long has the mother of all theologies (missiology) been annexed in the church. The reason for everything that happens under heaven is ultimately a redemptive reason — a global redemptive reason. We remain on earth post-conversion to do mission. As Piper aptly put it, “mission exists because worship

¹⁷ For more information about Relational Mobilising refer Donnie Scarce’s article “Mobilizing Xers” (a pdf version is available to be downloaded from <http://www.pioneers.org/international/about-us/key-value-documents/philosophy-of-mobilization.htm>).

¹⁸ Refer *Postmission & Too Valuable to Lose* for investigations into mission organisation shortfalls in the area of support, especially for new recruits from post-modern cultures.

...it is out of a passion for God that the mission of God should flow!

doesn't"¹⁹. The Bible reveals that worship of our God should exist among groups from every nation, tribe, people and language²⁰, but the daily news reports reveal that it currently doesn't.

Not for some humanitarian, altruistic reason; not for some culturally imperialistic mandate; not even out of religious jealousy, are we to travel the world and involve ourselves with other cultures as Christians. But it is out of a passion for God that the mission of God should flow. Christians like Ms Burke should take stock of the reality of their faith because at the end of all things, when all conflict finally ceases, it will be measured by a different type of scale, weighed, and found wanting²¹.



About the Writer:

*At the time of writing (2004), Dr Jay Matenga (pictured 2021) was the New Zealand Director of **Pioneers**, an international organisation with church planting teams among unreached people. **Pioneers** in New Zealand is a 'Mission Service Provider' enabling Christians to minister with **Pioneers** teams worldwide.*

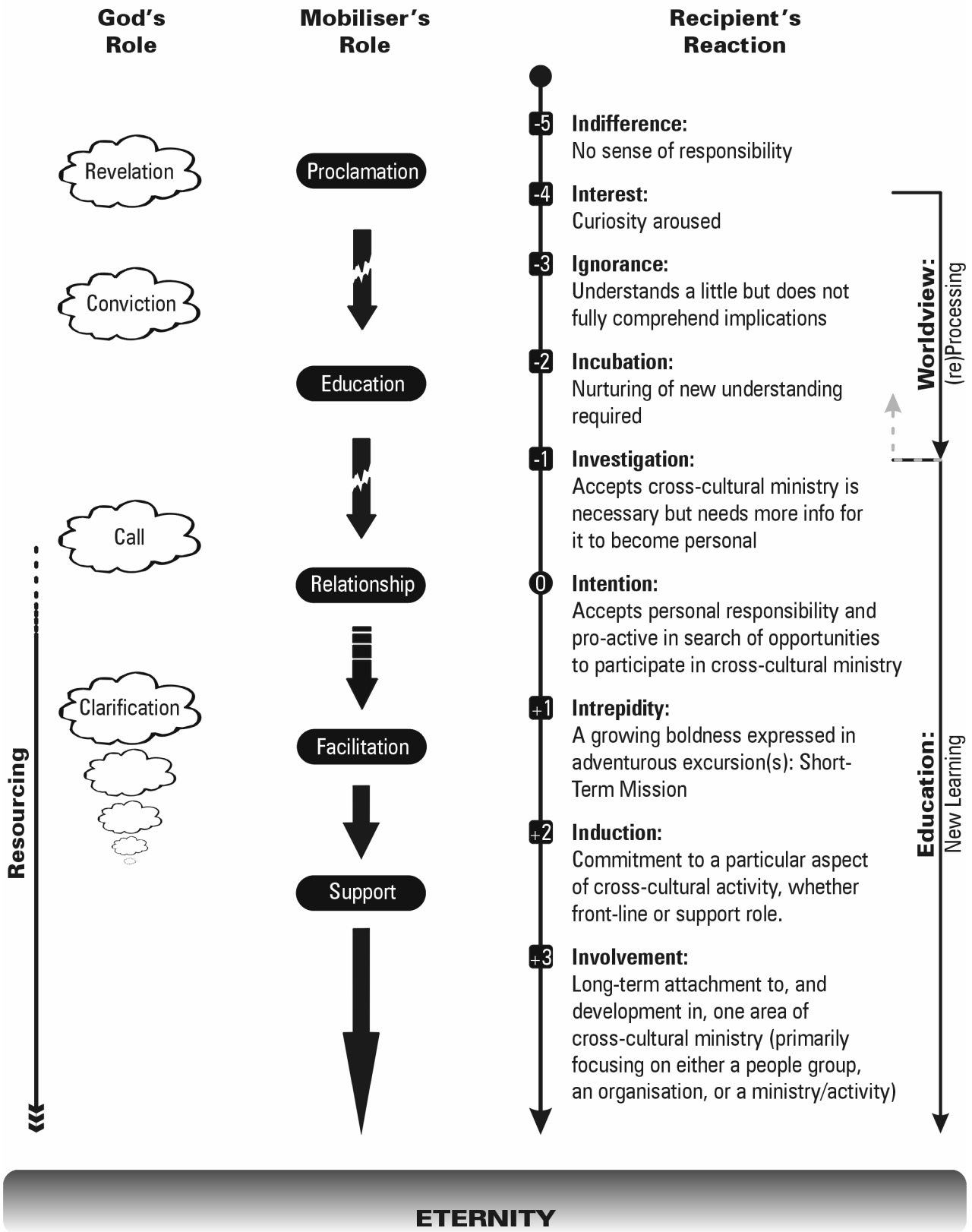
¹⁹ Piper, p17

²⁰ Revelation 7:9f

²¹ Daniel 5:27

The Fish Scale

The 'typical' process of mobilising Christians toward active participation in cross-cultural ministry



SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beyer, P. *Religion & Globalisation*. London: Sage Publications, 1994.
- Carson, D. *The Gagging Of God*. Leicester: Apollos, 1996.
- Engel & Norton *What's Gone Wrong With the Harvest?: A Communication Strategy for the Church and World Evangelization*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975.
- Gnanakan, K. *The Pluralist Predicament*. Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1992.
- Guinness, O and Seel, J. (eds.) *No God but God*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1992.
- Hick, J. & Hebblethwaite, B. (eds.) *Christianity and Other Religions*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980.
- McGrath, A. *Bridge Building*. Leicester: IVP, 1992.
- _____. *A Passion For Truth*. Leicester: Apollos, 1996.
- Middleton, J. & Walsh, B. *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be*. London: SPCK, 1995.
- Morris, B. *Anthropology Of The Self: The Individual In Cultural Perspective*. London: Pluto Press, 1994.
- Newbigin, L. *The Gospel In A Pluralist Society*. London: SPCK, 1990.
- Piper, J. *Let the Nations Be Glad, The Supremacy of God in Missions*. Grand Rapids: Baker Bookhouse, 2003.
- Race, A. *Christians And Religious Pluralism*. New York: Orbis Books, 1982.
- Scearce, D. *Mobilization on the Brink of the Next Millennium. "Mission Frontiers"*. Pasadena: US Centre for World Mission, January/February, 1999
- Sjogren, B. & Stearns B. & A. *Run with the Vision*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1995
- Taylor, W. D. (Ed.) *Too Valuable To Lose*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1997.
- TIME *TIME No.28, July 21*. New York: TIME Inc., 2003.
- Tiplady, R (Ed.) *Postmission*. Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002.
- Tomlinson, D. *The Post Evangelical*. London: SPCK, 1995.
- Veith, G. E. Jnr. *Guide To Contemporary Culture*. Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994.
- Wright, C. *Thinking Clearly About The Uniqueness Of Jesus*. London: Monarch, 1997.