



Future of Missions? Adapting To Shifting Paradigms

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Kernel ideas for this article were explored in a conversation on the future of missions held at Carey Theological College on August 21, 2019, with 25 participants from the missions community of Aotearoa New Zealand. Together with input from the gathered missions leaders, here Jay Matenga adds to a global conversation on the future of missions by reflecting on colonial-oriented motivations for missions in the past and suggesting that the future of missions beyond 2020 lay in a more communal orientation. Furthermore, if this motivation is to take hold, it needs to be passed on to the next generation.

Kia tau te aroha noa ki a koutou me te rangimarie, he mea na te Atua na to mātou Matua, na te Ariki hoki, na Ihu Karaiti. (Grace and peace to you [all] from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ). Tīhei Māori ora! Ehara taku toa, i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini. (It is not my strength or the strength of one, but the strength of many [that brings success]).

1. Introduction

As we hurtle headlong toward the year 2020 global missions conversations are popping up around the world, contemplating the future of missions from 2020 onward.

2019/2020 is one of those decade switching times that motivate us to reflect on the past and speculate about the future. Being 2020, it is also tempting to leverage an optometry metaphor and focus on "vision". What do we see behind us, along the road we have travelled, and what can we see emerging now that has the ability to reshape what we know about missions in exciting new ways into the future?

2. The New is Emerging

We are in a time that resonates with Isaiah 43:19—God is about to do something new and it's already begun. I'm not sure that we should just forget the former things (v18) as it can be very helpful to "walk backward into the future" (as the Māori proverb "ka mua, ka muri" suggests), learning from our past to guide us ahead. Either way, most leaders I speak with in missions (and many in churches) sense that we are on the cusp of a significant shift. Isaiah 43 can be interpreted in various ways, and we see the advent of Jesus as THE new thing, but history shows us God at work in continual renewal, from one epoch to the next, as the old passes away and the new is come.

My conviction is that the world is rapidly changing around us and our theological and missions frameworks are now woefully dated. A great deal about how we frame our calling as the People of God is no longer fit for purpose in our post-colonial global contexts. The undeniable decline of institutional church attendance by those from Industrial¹ backgrounds bears this out.

I am speaking of paradigm shifts. They do not happen overnight. They are slow, often underground movements that seem to break suddenly onto the mainstream. The transition from one paradigm to the next can take as long as a century or more. In the interim there is increasing conflict and unease as the 'powers that be' seek to retain their privileged positions as influencers of the regime passing away, while forward thinkers fight for legitimacy as they articulate with increasing coherence, what they believe needs to emerge.

3. Old Modern Missions

As we apply these thoughts to missions we need to realise that it is about 230 years since the emergence of missions organisations as we know them today. They were born of an accelerating British empire expansion and grew significantly during the tech revolution (mid-1800s to mid-1900s), which became known as the 'late-modern' era. This is significant because the way evangelicals conduct missions is deeply influenced by the values and principles of that era—which still hold sway even today.



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Forty five years ago missions received a vital injection of vision right when some were arguing it was time to shut up shop.² Thanks in large part to the genius of Ralph Winter, the Lausanne 1974 Congress on World Evangelisation revitalised missions by revealing a great unfinished task. At Lausanne we were made aware of "unreached peoples". While churches may be established within geographic reach, vast populations remained without access to the gospel. At best guess, today 7,148 people groups remain "unreached".³

These concepts matured with the start of the digital/information age, bridging the analytical approach of the modern era with the technological advancements of the emerging information era. Statistical global "mapping" became vogue and helped locate areas of the world with least access to the gospel.

That the concept of the "task remaining" has some inherent problems is becoming increasingly obvious from our vantage point today. The idea held sway for twenty years either side of the turn of last century (1990s-2000s), but it is a child of modernity—probably the last child. This child has children too but they are largely dependent on their parent. For example, the Business As Mission philosophies, the missions mobilisation industry and (to a lesser degree) the member care movement.

4. Suspicious Minds

Our vantage point today is post-colonial/post-industrial/post-modern. Generations born from the mid 1960s and later are increasingly wary of the colonial motivations that fuelled the modern missions movement. A colonial impetus can be detected in the way we map territories to be 'taken' or how we 'target' groups of people. This is the language of invasion and occupancy. It's revealed in the metrics we use to measure missions' success by conversions or churches planted (usually with Western theological orthodoxy assumed). It informs the way we keep trying to 'recruit' people to 'serve' in foreign 'fields', much the same way the New Zealand company enticed settlers to leave home to civilise our islands into empire-enhancing productivity, leveraging cheap capital that was acquired through dubious ethics. Our ideals might be more sanctified, but they are still informed by the same paradigm.

By identifying these correlations, I am not seeking to undermine missions or criticise the way we have done things. I'm just observing that the way things were done and why they were done was informed by the era in which they were done. We are in a new era, but God's mission is not finished. Missions continue. Before we can move into what's next, however, we need to

understand that we have framed God's mission in a certain way and that way is now no longer working for us. We need to imagine the new thing (cf. Eph 3:20).

5. Relatively Speaking

Painting the immediate future with a very broad brush I would argue that we are moving from an authority-based reality to an authenticity-based reality. This is a by-product of the unfairly maligned and misunderstood relativism that is now core to our reality, Relativity is here to stay. There is no winding back the clock. With colonialism, singular certainty is in our rear-view.

We can lock on to God as our authority within our faith communities but we can no longer impose that view on others—they won't allow us to. Imposition was a colonial privilege. Our perception of Divine authority and its universal application is relative to our faith. Other faiths look to other authorities and hold to other consequences of contravening that authority. Railing against this is pointless. Missions needs to adapt. To borrow a seafaring metaphor, when the wind changes and the current shifts we need to plot our course and set our sails differently.

Authenticity, in contrast, carries with it the idea of integrity. Integrity does not mean obeying a particular external code of conduct. It is being true to yourself and living according to your values, thereby minimising dissonance. It also relates to identity and belonging. Because your authentic self requires external validation, you will tend to gravitate to where you find that and will identify with that group.

To my mind, it is not at all difficult to see how this shift aligns Biblically, but some conversations I have had with leaders still rooted in the former paradigm suggest it can be too much to imagine.

6. Thy Will Be Done

Another major shift is from centralised control to dispersed control. Again, the relativity paradigm applies. The world is fragmenting back into almost tribal affiliations with overarching imperial powers no longer holding sway. "You're not the boss of me" could sum up this shift.

Friedrich Nietzsche introduced the idea of "will to power", which other philosophers and psychologists have developed further since. It is an ancient concept though—going right back to the fall. It speaks of the propensity to impose your will on another and Nietzsche, quite depressingly, saw this as inevitable in relationships.

The new era assumes that power is at play in all relationships. Inhabitants of the new paradigm are

careful to resist oppressive power and assert their own will to achieve aims that align with their values. By and large, younger Christians from the Industrial world adopt this view when they engage in what they understand missions to be. This is the root motivation for justice-oriented missions—combating oppression and working toward emancipation (from poverty, slavery, etc). The danger here is that as outsiders we can impose our own sense of justice on a reality that is not ours. Sure, there are basic human rights issues to champion, but we must be careful not to engage in *neo-colonialism*.

The new era of dispersed control means that people within an oppressive context need to be enabled to apply their power to resolve the issues, in ways best suited to their values and ways of interacting with the world.

We Versus Us

So, what is the alternative to colonialism? Are we doomed to revert to tribalistic nationalism? The world news would suggest so. I do not believe we'll see a complete fracturing. Rather, we're seeing the death knell of an old order. I envision a new communalism in place of old colonialism. I do not mean communism. I mean a shift to collaborative mutuality and reciprocity, where the benefits to "we" (humankind) outweigh the defence of "us" (our-kind). We're seeing this in the embrace of difference and the combating of racism. Among some in the USA, evidence of this shift can be seen in 'decentering whiteness'. It is the language of post-colonialism.

We're also seeing the new communalism emerge in academics and business where silos (self-contained units) are breaking down and cross-discipline collaboration is being encouraged. This is where multiple entities work together for the common good, whether to solve a problem or to improve something.

I hesitate to use the word 'partnership' to define collaboration, because 'partnership' comes pre-loaded with contractual assumptions. A new communalism runs much deeper than a contracted agreement to achieve predetermined outcomes. It is more about doing life together and being surprised by the mutual benefits that emerge—it's much more, covenantal.

What's Yours Is Ours

These concepts all dance around another core shift; one that a Ghanaian environmental physicist introduced me to in 2005, years before the emergence of AirBnB (2008) and Uber (2009). He explained that we are entering the "age of access". By that, he meant we are moving away from the concept of ownership. We will

simply hire what we need when we need it, without the overhead, depreciation or maintenance costs.

A move away from personal ownership to communal sharing is taking some time to take hold, but it is happening. The lag is due to the way we (influenced by the Industrial world) shape our identity with things that 'belong' to us.

A sense of ownership is a powerful inhibitor against collaborative communalism. It prohibits us from benefiting from a much larger pool of shared resources. I'd like to think we are on the brink of a new age of sharing, but human nature would suggest that might be a bit too much to ask

We're Banking On It

These are nice ideals, but we still need to make a living. One of the most marked shifts missions is experiencing is the disappearance of the donor dollar. It is well documented that the modern missions movement was largely made possible by the movement of funds around the colonies thanks to new financial institutions created to support the colonial expansion. New banking technologies enabled wealthy patrons and others to transfer funds into the accounts of agencies that could ensure those funds were made available further afield.

Patronism is an ancient means of supporting members in society who invest their time and energies into serving the public good. Priests, scholars, monks, artists, musicians, health workers, etc. were supported by wealthy aristocrats and merchants. We can see patron philanthropy at work in the stories of God providing for missions, particularly "faith" missions.

Patronism is not a bad thing as such and it is still alive and well in many parts of the world. Perhaps we will see it revived in the form of Universal Basic Income. For good or ill, many missionaries are seen through a patron lens by those they are trying to 'reach'. Regardless how it emerges, patron responsibility needs to be treated with much care and sensitivity.

Giving Time

Patronism tends to be viewed negatively these days and the preference is shifting towards generating income by one's own skill in missions. Technology is matching this bi-vocational impulse, providing opportunities for income generation in the digital/virtual sphere as well as commercial ventures in foreign locations for those with the skills to utilise the opportunities—but this shift is not without challenges.

God's mission has always ridden on the coattails of commercial innovation and reach, from the Roman



roads to the Colonial expansion and now through digital technological advancement.

While commercial methods have changed, time itself has not. We still only have 24 hours in a day. We still have to decide how we will invest our energies, and the activities of mission take time and energy. To invest some of that time and energy into commercial ventures is often overwhelming for those with a missions passion.

In spite of Paul's temporary stint at tentmaking, Jesus warned us that no one can serve two masters (Matt. 6:24). This remains a perplexing issue in the shifting paradigm. Missions will always require material resource.

The temptation from some is to call for the desacralising of ministry, to deconstruct the set-apart, patron-supported 'priesthood'. But through every era of Christian history we see dedicated ministers supported by others and I do not expect that to change for missions in this new era. Instead, I suggest the patrons are changing—and those of us with leadership influence would do well to educate the new patrons (emerging entrepreneurs and commercial geniuses of the new era) of their responsibilities to both participate in and support missions.

Let The Children Come (& Go)

After all, it was an education process that created the modern missions movement in the first place. Dr Roshan Allpress, Principal of Laidlaw College, in his doctoral research⁴ reveals how the Sunday School movement of the late 1700s-early 1800s was a major catalyst for a large influx of candidates for the new mission societies from the late 1820s, some of whom ended up serving in New Zealand.

These Sunday schools and the deliberate selection, encouragement and education of potential

Succession Planning

We are all of generations that bridge the era passing away with the new one that has come. Children and youth of today will be responsible for carrying the flame of missions forward.

Theologically and practically, we should direct significant resources towards equipping young people for their missions responsibility in covenantal collaboration with their age mates from the diverse global Church. They need a missions theology for their era and clear pathways for sustained service (starting as young as possible). It is they who will do the new thing, and in them lies the future of missions.

ministry/missions recruits by patrons was a significant factor in modern missions becoming a movement. Evangelical aspirations (as we see promoted by the Clapham community) were passed on to the next generation and 20 years later it was that next generation that went out to transform the world. They were undoubtedly men and women of their era but as the work of Robert D. Woodberry⁵ shows, protestant missions achieved a great deal of public good for the foreign lands in which they ministered.

As Kiwi missions leaders discussed the Sunday school influence on missions, we wondered what our children in Sunday schools today understand about missions. An OMF mobiliser recently spoke with some young people about their perception of missions and the responses included:

- Missions is dangerous and challenging to their safety.
- Missions carried a possibility of prosecution (imprisonment for sharing your faith).
- Missions requires a great deal of courage.
- Where do missionaries come from?
- How do you get a call?
- Missionaries go to the most needy.
- Some children exposed to a certain type of narrative perceived the rest of the world as living in slum conditions.

Left to their own devices, children form opinions that last into adulthood. How much better to intentionally shape their understanding of missions for this new era and their purpose in God to courageously see Christ's kingdom extended and God glorified in all nations? We do this most effectively by telling a variety of missions stories where the children can visualise themselves participating in a valuable (Godly and Biblically-informed) cause—using their marketable skills and gifts towards inviting people into God's global community through faith in Christ.

¹ Our world today can be dissected in many ways. I prefer to identify two major blocs: the Industrial (individualistic, usually West/Global North/First World) and the Indigenous (collectivist, typically East/Global South/Majority or Developing World).

² In 1971, John Gatu, General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, recommended a moratorium (cessation/ban) on foreign missionaries and funds. This was further promoted in 1973 at the World Council of Churches "Salvation Today" assembly in Bangkok.

³ See Joshua Project's *Unreached Peoples Database*: <https://joshuaproject.net>.

⁴ An as-yet unpublished work.

⁵ Woodberry, Robert D. 2012. *The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy*. *American Political Science Review*, 106 (2):244-274.