

Identity Implications For Missions In A Covid Crisis

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In this article Jay reflects on the growing evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic will irreversibly affect the way we have conducted missions over the past 220+ years, yet will also provide an opportunity to reframe what we understand to be the objective of missions as we move forward in uncharted waters. He draws on his favoured maritime analogy to encourage persistent faith by discarding former navigational assumptions and identifying new guiding lights, with the understanding that they will lead us to transformative growth and fresh discernment regarding God's mission.

“**T**he Pole Star... is visible only in the northern hemisphere. When European navigators first entered the southern oceans, they searched the sky for a southern counterpart, believing on the grounds of symmetry that there must be such a star; but there is none.” (Parry, 1981, p26)

1. Introduction

With every week that passes, more information amasses that points us to the inevitable conclusion that we have transitioned into uncharted waters—there are no maps to guide us. Our common sun rises, the water looks the same, the winds feel similar, the cloud formations are somewhat indistinguishable. Yet, the constellations that missions have relied on over the past 220+ years have given way to a new set of stars. Like the European navigators, we might notice the Crux (the Southern Cross) above us in the night, but we will need to learn new navigation techniques before we can use it to guide us. In uncharted waters we become dislocated and our very sense of self is threatened.

This article attempts to provide some consolation to missions leaders and servants in missions that what missions is experiencing is relatively light and momentary trouble, which will have a beneficial effect (2 Corinthians 4:17). Our identities as participants in God's mission are being forced to change. But that is OK. We did not choose it, but it is a necessary transition. Human missions in service of God's mission will be the better for it. It will feel painful. Missions leaders and practitioners may resist it. Yet it is the necessary process of growth.

2. We Have Permanently Relocated

I have heard it said that in spite of our current challenges, the *why* of missions is not changing. That may depend on what you think the *why* actually is. Some missions organisations have been around longer than my passport

nation (New Zealand). They have endured many challenges: civil wars and unrest, two world wars, a flu pandemic, a Great Depression, the rise of Communism, a nuclear cold war, globalisation, terrorism, another recession, and many other localised setbacks. Do not be quick to think, however, that our missions as we have known them will rebound as they have in the past. This situation is not like the past. Other crises were experienced under a 'northern hemisphere' sky of colonialised modernism that guided industrialisation and led it to globalisation. In this new era, the northern stars of expansionist enlightenment-certainty are yielding to the relational fluidity of a post-colonial networked age.

If you are a missions leader and you are not at least *considering* a scenario that involves the cessation of (or at least greatly hindered) trans-border missionary movement, you are not doing your job. I am not saying it will happen. I am saying the paradigm is being seriously unseated. Protecting your identity as a missions leader, as a missionary, and acting defensively will not help your organisation or those you lead. Pulling out all your maps and adjusting your sextant in the hope that it will help you navigate, is not the way forward. Your scenario planning must include the option of a kind of death and rebirth, in ways true to your core essence, but transformed.

Only when we can identify those indigenous to this new hemisphere will we be able to learn from them how to put our hand to the sky and figure out what the sextant could not—there is no single Pole Star here, multiple stars need to be aligned. Only then can we find our bearings and map the direction to our mutually beneficial future.



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3. Yield and Grow

The consolation I promise is to be found in the sovereignty of God and yielding to the winds of the Spirit. This is the way—the way of our Lord. “Father... not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Our strategies, as fine as they have been for a particular epoch, need to be laid aside. And, for the moment, we should lean on the wisdom of Alexandre Dumas’ *Count of Monte Cristo*, “...never forget that until the day when God shall deign to reveal the future to man, all human wisdom is summed up in these two words—‘Wait and hope.’” (Dumas, 1844)

This article is intended to help frame the hope that we have as we pass through the “darkest valley” (Psalm 23:4) with confidence that the path in front of us will lead to an overflowing of blessings. For this is the way—the way of our Lord. This is how He matures us, improving us for His service. It requires a surrender to the rupture, a laying down of our hard-won identities, and allowing the Spirit to work, preparing us for life in a foreign hemisphere.

In his 2015 book, *The Intercultural Mind*, intercultural educator Joseph Shaules observes,

When we spend long periods in foreign environments, and integrate many new patterns into our intuitive mind, we may go through a process of deep adaptation... Deep adaptation often requires an adjustment in our sense of identity. We may start to wonder where we belong, or feel that family and friends back home don’t understand us anymore. This is sometimes talked about in terms of marginality, a feeling of not quite belonging. People who have long experience in foreign environments may develop a sense of identity centered on this marginality. One might feel like a kind of bridge person who has entry into different cultural worlds, but who also remains in some sense detached from them. (Shaules, 2015. Kindle Loc. 1606).

A transformation based on what Shaules refers to as ‘deep adaptation’ is a common experience for cross-cultural missionaries and is becoming more scientifically understood by missionary carers and mainstream cross-cultural psychologists alike. We are missions people, we know how to do this. We can use our understanding of this experience to help make sense of the transition we are going through as a global missions community, and a global Church, affected by the COVID-19 catalyst.

4. An Amplification of Difference

The acceleration of globalisation gave birth to numerous investigations into diagnosing difference and coping

with difference, as our worlds sought to navigate heightened tensions amplified by increased plurality (diverse views of reality) and polycentrism (diverse centres of power). Living in this tension, this *ecotone* between distinct systems, is the adopted habitat of the missionary. You migrate into these spaces and adapt as best as you can in order to achieve the purposes for which you leave one system (your home culture) while seeking to function purposefully in another (your host culture). All the while, you remain simultaneously “other” to the hosts, yet strangely transformed into something different from who you were at home. You no longer completely fit anywhere. If you think that you will eventually fit the host culture, it can lead to destabilising dissonance if it is not resolved over time. This is to say, the ‘incarnation’ of the missionary into another culture is an unhealthy, impossible-to-realise, myth. It is an illusion to think otherwise.

Dislocation is also the experience of migrants. *A Hybrid World* (Tira & Uytanlet, 2020), released just last month by William Carey Publishing, discusses something of this experience. It is a welcome addition to a conversation that needs to be distilled further by the global missions community. I did not feel the tantalizing promise of Michael Rynkiewich’s forward was entirely fulfilled by the content. Yet there are many highlights, such as when Harvey Kwiyani (Chapter 5) speaks helpfully of cross-pollination and hybridity as “mixing two distinct things to produce something genetically new”. This transformative amalgamation, such that the origins become undetectable, is hybridity in its fulness. In missions studies, we need to delve deeper to see transformative processes at work that create true hybridity—a creation of something unique, not merely a mixing of parts that remain identifiable to their sources.

In ecological biology, an *ecotone* is the blended space (a region of flourishing marginality) that becomes a habitat for many species not found outside the convergence of the ecosystems bordering it. In a similar way, over time, the adaptation process related to intercultural engagement is deeply transformative for a person. We become uniquely and beautifully formed in that space.

5. Goodbye to Globalisation

In Chapter 6 of *A Hybrid World*, Calvin Chong observes that hybridity was considered “the new normal” because of increased globalisation. In light of the COVID-19 crisis we can now see how ironic the globalisation premise of the book has already become. Simultaneous with the book’s release we moved into a new hemisphere. The constellations have changed, and mainstream commentators are watching globalisation

(as we have known it since the 1980's) disappear over the horizon behind us.

The May 14, 2020 edition of the *Economist* is titled, "Goodbye Globalisation", with the lead article asking, "Has covid-19 killed globalisation?" After providing some compelling geo-political rationale, they answer with, "wave goodbye to the greatest era of globalisation—and worry about what is going to take its place." While the principles of hybridity will continue to provide missions with a helpful paradigm for transformative growth, it will not be because of continuing globalisation.

We are all—missionary, migrant or stay-at-home mom—now experiencing a dislocating rupture in some measure. Since this reflection is written for leaders in the global missions community, I will focus my attention on disrupted missionaries and missions. The principles for finding meaning in the midst of the process of deep adaptation are, however, quite translatable to other contexts. They are also deeply theological, because these principles help us to reframe our understanding of the process of discipleship (otherwise called sanctification). Which will be necessary if we are to navigate healthily through this transformative transition.

6. A Coming Care Crisis

Principles that I believe lead to what I call "epistemic transformative growth" are drawn from a diverse range of related disciplines: post-colonial thought, postmodern anthropology, organisational and cross-cultural psychology, educational theory, and interpersonal neurobiology, as well as various philosophical and (obviously) theological reference points. If I were to locate the process in a Biblical passage (as an indicator of the Biblical narrative, not as a proof text), it would be James 1:2-4. Here we see the wisdom of God revealed that leads us to full maturity: faith, trial, perseverance, strengthened faith, trial, perseverance and so on in something like an iterative spiral until we reach complete perfection, requiring no more refinement (ultimately, a full resurrection). The transformative process happens in our fully-embodied 'knowing' (epistémé) and leads to growth as defined by the character of God becoming more innately manifest in our person.

There is no doubt that we are all undergoing a testing of our faith. By the time it is conquered, the COVID-19 trial will leave nothing in our worlds untouched. The impact on missionaries will be especially great. Early in the developing crisis, Mission Commission Deputy Leader, Evi Rodemann asked the Global Member Care Network's Facebook group, why missionaries were returning home due to the virus. Some early

respondents were defensive, but it was an innocent enough question. I collated the answers and wrote an article for the Missions Interlink NZ *Bulletin* (Matenga, 2020. p14-15). Most of the rationale presented was pragmatic and will be of no surprise to leaders of organisations that deploy trans-border workers. But as the virus spreads to farther-to-reach missions locations, as borders close, as the economic decline affects donations, and duty of care responsibilities call more missionaries off the field, it is becoming obvious that we are heading for a major missionary care crisis.

Thankfully, the global missions community has developed robust member care resources over the past 30 years, due in no small measure to my predecessors in the Mission Commission promoting the need for better missionary support. Harry Hoffman, leader of the Global Member Care Network, started offering a foundations course in Member Care via Facebook early in the crisis and demand for this grew so much that he offered a second one. To date, 4,000 missionary carers have participated in the training course. He is now offering a year-long C.A.R.E course (<https://harryhoffmann.global/care2/>). As missionaries return to their sending countries, the need for highly competent debriefing services and grief counselling is going to be great—right at the time those services are likely to be in high demand by their compatriots who are struggling in different ways from trauma related to COVID-19. Harry is going to write a post for the WEA Mission Commission website in due course so I will leave the member care discussion to him. Suffice it to say, missionaries who abruptly leave their place of purpose, with very little hope of return (whether they realise it or not), will face a significant identity crisis.

7. Our Hybrid Identity

Whether we like it or not, or believe it or not, we live in an age of identity politics. We have for some time, but this has rarely been discussed in missionary circles. If there is one thing Evangelical influencers need to wrestle with more, it is how the gospel can work with, rather than against, identity priorities. This is not just a Western phenomenon, even if it is often articulated in Westernised terms.

Identity runs deep, and flippantly quoting Galatians 3:28 in an attempt to sidestep the discussion is unhelpful. "But our identity is in Christ", I often hear. This is true in a sense, but it is not as simple as it may seem. As Miroslav Volf, points out in *Exclusion & Embrace* (Volf, 1996), Christ comes into our lives and decentres the self, but He does not eclipse it. With Christ residing at our core, a new hybrid identity emerges that continues the best of who God originally



created us to be, as a person developed within our respective environments, and then blends it with the Holy Spirit, who forms in us the character of Christ as we continue to interact with our worlds; as we continue to know and be known by others. Unity exists in-Christ, but diversity is expressed through our many different uniquenesses. Cognitive learning plays a part in this process, but as disciple-makers and educators will realise, most of our transformation as learners in-Christ happens through life on life interaction, not primarily through information transmission.

That we as persons are formed, along with our identity, in our communal interactions is a point well made in the science of interpersonal neurobiology. Dr Curt Thompson, in *Anatomy of the Soul* clarifies,

The interactions within interpersonal relationships deeply shape and influence the development of the brain; likewise, the brain and its development shape and influence those very same relationships. (Thompson, 2010. p6)

Our relationships quite literally make us who we are. Resonant with the quote above from Shaules, Thompson continues,

“Integrating our understanding of the mind and behavioral development, along with our spirituality, is now becoming a well-accepted, necessary paradigm for engaging our interpersonal and *intercultural* problems” (emphasis mine).

When you, as a missionary, leave home and are received by your hosts, you begin a tough process of transformation. Not inculturation but transformation. Using the term ‘inculturation’ too readily locates change in the realm of cognitive understanding and neglects to appreciate the process as a whole-person change. Cross-cultural missionaries, to borrow from 2 Corinthians 5:17, become “new creations” in a transformative process many degrees more intensely than those who remain among their own people. A missionary’s sense of identity changes along with it.

According to educationalist James Loder (Loder, 1989), this process happens incrementally and over time by a process he identified as epistemic rupturing—disruptions in our understanding of the world created by challenging events. These may be minor irritations or major crises, but they require us to undergo a process of adaptation that needs to find resolution, which leads to growth—in a person and the contexts they influence.

From the mid-1990s similar principles have emerged as “post traumatic growth” in psychology, although they tend to be somewhat fuzzy on articulating what growth actually means. Nevertheless, there is mounting

evidence that people can emerge better off in themselves following a traumatic event. Psychological debates aside, we have theological rationale for a process of personal growth through trial—Christ’s resurrection provides the ultimate example.

8. The Transforming Moment

Quoting Friedrich Nietzsche, holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl believed, “he who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*” (Frankl, 2017. p104). If the hope of perfect maturity (James 1:4), even if by resurrection, is not “a *why* to live for”, I do not know what is. But let us not be content with the so-called “pie in the sky when we die” as the critics say. The *why* we live for is a life continually transformed into the likeness of Christ as we face trial, temptations and testings external to us and allow them to do a refining work within us. For this to happen, we must be willing to let go of our perceived identities—as a missionary, teacher, commander, expert, influencer or leader—and allow a new, humbler, identity to emerge under the constellations of a different hemisphere: a servant-learner.

It will not be easy, nor painless. In *Necessary Endings*, Henry Cloud insightfully explains,

If you have emotional and other energy invested in something, when you pull that out, and let go, you are going to feel it. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, so if you make a move to end something you are invested in (or are forced to do so), there will be an impact. And if you do not deal with those feelings, you are going to have to do some funny things to get around them. (Cloud, 2011. p212, parenthesis mine)

What is felt when things change is dissonance, and you cannot function well with dissonance, at least not for long. The solution? Cloud refers to it as a metabolising, taking time to process an experience so that it can feed you as a person—effectively seeking resolution. Trying to ignore it is dangerous and often leads to unanticipated negative consequences.

Drawing from Loder, I describe the journey to resolution, or the return to resonance, as a 5-cycle process: Rupturing, Rumination, Revelation, Revitalisation, and Reinforcement. In other words, encountering a crisis (dissonance), considering its implications, coming to terms with the ‘new normal’ (sometimes as an ‘a-ha’ moment), embracing and adapting to the new terms (resonance), then encouraging others to embrace the new as well (influence). This is not specifically a grieving process, but it fosters hope in growth that can help move us beyond loss. The growth outcome is evident by our

increased ability to make a beneficial contribution to our context and community. In our maritime analogy, applying these principles to missions: if you are a captain of a ship, growth will mean you have learned to navigate by the new stars, and are moving your crew more confidently toward what lies beyond the new horizon.

9. New Navigation Lights

Treating the COVID-19 crisis as a catalyst for a necessary growth process, and holding onto hope that the outcome will be for our good (maturity in Christ), can help reorient us to a much more positive embrace of any situation, including the great losses we will experience within the global missions community.

As it is for our personal development, the *why* we live for in missions is also the promise of epistemic transformative growth—in the case of missions it is growth in our knowledge of God’s mission. I believe in

order for this to happen in the hemisphere of our ‘new normal’, we need to alter our navigational orientation.

If an expansionist interpretation of Matthew 28:18-20 (the so-called “Great Commission”) is your Pole Star, you will have great difficulty navigating the new oceans. Instead, I recommend we turn our attention to the constellation of what I call “The Great Commitment” in John 17:18-25. This is because the objective of missions is not about territory-taking relocations, it is the emergence of myriad shalom-communities worldwide that live and love in such a way as to witness to the world that the Father lovingly sent the Son. Our common unity is what glorifies the Father in all the earth. Of course, it is not an either/or option, the scope of God’s mission to be known all nations remains a promise to be fulfilled, but I believe navigating by John 17:18-25 will help us recalibrate our *why* so we can endure and grow in our present *how*.

Cause to Rejoice

In sum, experiencing rupturing in our person or organisations is somewhat like building a muscle. As a muscle is stressed under repeated load, it creates micro tears that grow even more muscle tissue in the repair process. Similarly, as circumstances and loss strip away the props that reinforce our identities, and as we hold fast to our faith (our foundational trusting relationship with God in-Christ) over time (perseverance) the repair process will enlarge our faith, grow our character, and mature our person ready for the responsibilities God has in store for us over the new horizon.

I believe this faith-filled orientation of growth-in-process is why Paul could so confidently declare, “always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). In spite of the circumstances around his writing to the Philippian believers, Paul knew God’s plan was unfolding—and so must we. Meditate on Philippians with transformative growth in mind and you will find hope for a better tomorrow—for yourself, for your missionaries, for your organisation and for this world. Wherever the new stars guide us, whatever the ‘new normal’ has in store for us and our transformed identities, God is both with us and already present where we are going, ready to fulfil our hope.

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