



Indigenous Implications For The Future Wellbeing of Missions

A paper presented at the WEA Mission Commission's 2022 Online Conference via Zoom on April 8, 2022.
The presentation, with slides was pre-recorded on video and it can be found on the Mission Commission's
YouTube channel here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUD6IFK1BpM>.

In this seminar Jay once more addresses the need for unity in the Body of Christ, and explains his Indigenous and Industrial 'schema' as a way to view differing ways of knowing and interacting with the world and the need for the global Church and missions to learn to counterpoint the differences. It is as we sit in the tensions of counterpointed difference, Jay argues, that we grow into the full maturity that James and the other Apostles present as the core purpose of Christ's body, the Church, in its local, national, and global manifestations. It is by our reconciled interrelational harmony that world will believe and know that the Father lovingly sent the Son (per John 17). But, in order to develop true harmony (or maturity), we need to create space for the Indigenous voice to be heard in counterpoint to the dominant Industrial voice.

Kia ora koutou (life and wellbeing to you all). Kō Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, kō Ngāti Porou, kō Kai Tahu ōku iwi (These are the tribes that I have birth heritage connections to, which span the East Coast of the North Island and some of the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand). Kō Jay Matenga tōku ingoa. My name is Jay Matenga, and I am the Director of Global Witness for the World Evangelical Alliance and the Executive Director of the Mission Commission, which sits within the WEA's Global Witness Department. Nō reira, tēnā kotou, tēnā kotou, tēnā tatou katoa. (three times greetings to you all, in the Maori tongue of forefathers).

Introduction

Tibi mauri ora! (This is the vital life force). Today, we are reminded that the vital life force comes from the only true God, as we read this passage from 1 Corinthians 12, verses 12-13 (NLT)...

The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles... (some are Ghanaians, some are Costa Ricans, some are Māori, some are German, some are Russian, some are Ukrainian, and we could go on and on, but returning to the Scriptures,) some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share (that is, drink from, are watered by, or soaked in) the same Spirit.

We are all one in the same Spirit. We are indivisibly connected. We are a singular global body of Christ made up of many parts. We are so different, yet we are one. The global church is very diverse, yet it is one. We have different opinions and perspectives and privileges and challenges and authentic readings of Scripture and experiences of God... yet we are one in the bonds of love. Amen. Hallelujah. Glory to God.

I present here before you as one who is indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand. I am Māori by my father's line, whose father, my paternal grandfather, had only Māori heritage. As a Māori, I identify as an Evangelical Christian since I hold strongly to a biblical, allegiant and activist faith. Allegiant in the sense that I follow the crucified and resurrected Christ as Lord and experience God by the enabling of the Holy Spirit given to those who follow Christ. Activism is simply the living out of my faith in this world of broken relationships that we inhabit, wherever the Holy Spirit leads us to live.

It is my great privilege to be able to touch on issues of indigeneity with you today, with particular focus on the implications of an Indigenous (upper case I) perspective for missions. In its technical use, indigenous (lower case i) means "of the land" or the environment. And it usually refers to first nations or pre-colonial peoples.

But, for those who haven't heard me speak on this before, I use the term Indigenous (upper case I) to mean more than just the technical or United Nations definition. I extend the meaning to encompass all collectivist-oriented people in the world, because we share so many life values and ways of knowing in common.



Jay Mātenga

Dr Jay Mātenga is the author of "Mutuality of Belonging: Towards Harmonizing Culturally Diverse Missions Groups" and co-author of "Mission in Motion: Speaking Frankly of Mobilization". Jay is the Executive Officer for Missions Interlink NZ, the Director of the World Evangelical Alliance's Global Witness Dept. and also serves as the Executive Director for the WEA's Mission Commission. Jay maintains a blog and publishes his articles on his website: <https://jaymatenga.com>.



I use Indigenous to counterpoint the Industrial (upper case I) world. By Industrial I mean ways of knowing that have emerged out of European enlightenment and Euro-centric Christianity.

Two Worlds

If it helps, I use Indigenous to more or less refer to the Majority World, and Industrial to refer to the West. Although, there is significant overlap between these two systems or ways of knowing. You can have urban and educated people living in cities within otherwise Indigenous geographies, who have adapted to Industrial ways of knowing. And you can have Indigenous knowing people migrating into Industrial contexts. Used in this way, Indigenous and Industrial helps avoid categorising people by some random geography (Global South makes no sense to us who live in the South Pacific) or some constructed economic bloc, like 1st, 2nd or 3rd Worlds. Indigenous and Industrial focuses more on broad spectrum values and ways of knowing and interacting with the world.

I see these, as two great knowledge ecosystems with overlapping areas of interaction and... tension. When we experience a clash of ways of knowing, I argue that we should view the tensions as opportunities for maturity. I use the musical term 'counterpoint' to help us realise that our objective should be to strive for harmony by allowing multiple voices to sing different melodies to the same beat. Sometimes, the Industrial voice is clearly heard, but other times the Indigenous voice needs to bring a counterpointed melody. Sometimes we need to highlight the gaps in the Industrial melody and amplify the Indigenous voice in order to establish an effective counterpoint harmony. Because, only when matched together, in the "unforced rhythms of grace" (Matt 11:29 MSG), do we create harmony.

Did you know that harmony does not come from resolution? There is so much talk today about resolving things, but it is a pipe dream. Rather than resolving the tension, harmony comes from holding the tension.

As any stringed instrument player knows, you cannot hit a harmonic note without tuned tension. If you slacken off the string you get nothing. And so it is with the body of Christ. We grow under the tensions of our differences as we each seek to do God's will. For as we persevere in our differences, bearing one another's burdens, surrendering our privileges and preferences, in mutual loving kindness, seeking perpetually reconciled relationships, we will be made perfect, lacking nothing. Or, so the Apostle James promises (see James 1:2-4, against the context of the entire epistle).

For more than 240 years, protestant missionary endeavour has been dominated by an Industrial perspective, strongly influenced by a European colonial paradigm. Since World War II, the European colonial paradigm has been waning and the global context changing—and it is changing again, rapidly. In my estimation, traditional Evangelical missions mindsets are no longer fit for purpose.

We are now in an era where Indigenous ways of knowing are influencing the global Church and global missions. The World Christian Encyclopedia statistics show us that the global Church is Indigenous more than it is Industrial. Since the last decades of the 20th century, global missions has reflected this shift; becoming more Indigenous as Majority World Christianity climbed into the middle class, which is typically the economic strata that makes trans-border missions plausible and possible.

Implications

What are some of the implications of a shift towards an Indigenous future for missions? To answer that, first let me try and concretise some of the differences between Indigenous and Industrial for you, because therein lie the implications for missions. This is obviously simplified, but it is far from simplistic...

For Industrial ways of knowing, relational expectations develop contractually, are transactional, and usually productivity or outcome oriented. Word pictures like team and part-nership are used, which assume autonomous agents in working together within an atomised or disconnected world.

Groups that are formed and dominated by this individualist perspective hold together because of a common aim or objective. Group cohesion is dependent on a goal or outcome. Collaborative relationships revolve around applying one's resources toward the achievement of a task. The individual or organisational contributor retains ownership of their resources and the reward or return on investment is individually meritorious.

In trying to mitigate the destruction that industrialisation has caused to our habitats, a lot of the talk in the Industrial world is around sustainability, which effectively means, to enable continued consumption. A concept growing in popularity, in the climate change and creation care space at least, is that of stewardship, which is not wrong, but it tends to have underlying assumptions of control or mastery over the world, with people presumed to be separate from it.

As a counterpoint to this, Indigenous ways of knowing are more interconnected, and spiritually aware. We are indivisibly part of the world. Indigenous people have a

collective understanding of reality where the social agreement is covenantal rather than contractual. Relationships are mutual, reciprocal, and familial.

The outcome is less important than the relationship enhancing processes undertaken along the way. Sharing is more important than acquisition. Very little is individually possessed, and nothing is autonomous. Everything is inter-related and affected by human agency. Ideally, the Indigenous seek to honour and value and give toward the common good without much thought of direct return.

When faced with the broken universe around us, we seek vitality, to promote life in all things fostered by reciprocity. A prevailing image for creation care and life in general is that of guardianship, where the underlying motivation is that of protection and mutual growth.

This is somewhat idealised, but both Industrial and Indigenous people will likely recognise these as values they more or less hold, even if they are a little aspirational in places. For those with ears to hear, you might sense that our missions visions, strategies and activities are still firmly aligned within the Industrial paradigm. Yet frustration is rising, and we heard it expressed at the 2022 MC Onlin Conference, that it's time for the Indigenous influence to emerge as a true counterpoint in our global missions practice. Without it we will not mature as a global missions community.

One of the most significant implications for missions, if we enable the Indigenous counterpoint to lead us forward, is that we ought to have a far deeper appreciation of the role of honour in our co-labouring for gospel growth. That came through in the conference too, and strongly. Please hear me. I said honour, not "honour and shame". I am not referring to the way well meaning folk from an Industrial perspective in missions have characterised one of the most foundational attributes of the Indigenous experience. To view such things through a pathological lens and tag shame onto honour, is highly reductionistic and it *dishonours* us.

When I speak of honour I mean that we seek to lift up the dignity of others. One of the most effective ways to elevate dignity is to acknowledge the other's authority. We see this throughout Jesus' ministry and especially his kenotic final act, where he did not consider his privileges as God to be something wielded as influence over others, but laid them aside and became a servant even unto death (as Paul wrote in Philippians 2). Jesus let the rich young man leave. He asked the man beside the Bethesda pool if he wanted to get well. He invites us to follow Him, but he never imposes his will upon us. God honours us, and acknowledges our will, our authority. In the Pacific, we refer to the honouring or recognition of

another's authority or will as "mana"—effectively, the manifestation of the life force of God at work through that person's character, giftedness, and contribution to the community. The more mana recognised, the greater the authority of that person.

As I have said elsewhere, I believe missions needs to "centre the local". We need to recognise the mana of the people, by acknowledging that those who receive the gospel become the guardians of the gospel for their people. We need to give them room, time, and resources to help them grow in their relationship with and understanding of God. It is an organic process, at the pace of the Holy Spirit.

As my dear brother Fred Dimado illustrated in the previous conference session, we need to allow Indigenous or local recipients of the gospel to take centre stage and dance to their own beat. Expatriates, or outsiders to the culture, should then adapt our moves to the local beat as we dance... on the periphery.

There is a fair bit of talking in missions at the moment about something called "polycentrism". It was the theme of the Mission Commission's 2016 Global Consultation in Panama and it will be the theme (more or less) of Lausanne 2024. It is a term from the realms of Industrial political sciences. Someone in missions has suggested it means "from everywhere to everywhere", but it does not.

It means, multiple centres of authority within a larger system. It means 'centring the local'. This is what Indigenous people have always known. We live within circles of honour which overlap and interact with other circles of honour, which all together make up an entire system. Whether it is a larger tribe of sub-tribes or large geographic regions of interconnected tribes like we have across the great wet highways of the Pacific Ocean, throughout Africa, or up and down the Americas. Indigenous peoples have always been polycentric, honouring and respecting other tribes authority. Well, ideally anyway. We can discuss the implications of dishonour another time.

Honouring the authority of the local, then, fundamentally changes missions. I'm not talking solely about trans-border or cross-cultural service either. As Bijoy Koshy noted in his presentation at the conference, we need to put such archaic and unhelpful categories behind us. When I speak of missions, I refer to "a whole-of-life witness beyond the direct influence of a local church". It is not a perfect definition, but we still need a way to speak of places that remain in need of a gospel witness. Furthermore, churches still need to recognise, train and send those gifted and called to provide a gospel witness beyond the bounds of the local church, whether



that is across town or into a completely different cultural reality. But once there, the missionary needs to honour the local.

Honouring the authority of the local means that we share our lives with mutual reciprocity wherever the Lord leads us to live our Christ-like lives. And we do so openly with our neighbours, being ready to explain our faith whenever questions arise. It is invitational rather than impositional. Living attractively and waiting for an invitation to share Jesus. It is not passive. Our loving kindness should be powerfully active for the benefit of others and our habitats, but it does honour the will of our neighbours. In this way, the word of our testimony—that is, our lived experience of God and our learning about God—is seeded in that place. When that seed takes root... well, we know well the parable, and look forward to seeing a rapid multiplication produced from the seed that falls into fertile soil.

As our brother Dave Coles illustrated at the conference, in some parts of the world this is happening at an astounding rate as indigenous movements multiply. Justin Long, working with Dave in the mission agency

Conclusion

That is, if we honour the local, recognise their authority as guardians of the gospel for themselves, and allow their voices to rise in counterpoint harmony with more established expressions of our faith—holding that tension, for it is there that the Spirit of God is doing a new thing.

We are all part of one body. We belong together and we strengthen each other. Industrial parts cannot say to the Indigenous parts I have no use for you and the Indigenous parts cannot separate themselves from the Industrial parts. In-Christ we are immersed and enlivened by the same Spirit, and we WILL mature each other.

Arohanui i a koutou e haere ana ki te ao (much love to you all as you go into the world).

Beyond, estimates (from robust analysis) that over 1% of the global population now follow Christ as part of an indigenous people movement. That is, 80-90+ million new believers in Christ out of another major religious group in the past few decades.

There are those who would sit in judgment and dispute the authenticity of these believers. But such criticism usually rests on what I call a commitment to a Eurocentric theological consensus. That is, the critics are sitting with a false sense of superior judgement over a biblically authentic experience of Christ that is emerging from these new Indigenous centres of authority. The days of the Eurocentric theological consensus being able to impose their theological perspective upon the rest of the global Church are over. I am not suggesting for a second that foundational Christian orthodoxy is dismissed, but I am suggesting that the experience of Indigenous followers of the Jesus way will discover new, biblically authentic, perspectives about God and the Kingdom of our Lord, to share with us and to mature us all, as we interact globally as sojourners and co-learners.