

Centring the Local: Indigenous Missions in Today's Context

By Dr Jay Mātenga

PRELUDE

Kia ora koutou katoa, e nga rangatira i hui hui nei,

Life and wellbeing to all the respected leaders who are gathered here,

Nga mihi nui kia koutou katoa. Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

I bring you greetings, three times I respectfully acknowledge you.

He iti noa taku wā, na, me iti noa ōku mihi.

My time is limited and so must my greetings be.

I roto i te poto, kō aku whakapapa iwi kō Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, kō Ngāti Porou, Kō Ngāi Tahu ōku iwi.

To keep it short, I have just identified my tribal heritage.

Kō Jay Mātenga tōku ingoa.

My name is Jay Mātenga.

I serve in a half-time role as the Executive Director of the World Evangelical Alliance Mission. The WEA is the recognised representative of over 600 million Evangelicals to political and religious leaders around the world as well as global institutions like the United Nations. The Asia Evangelical Alliance is a regional expression of the WEA.

The Mission Commission strategically serves to strengthen participation in God's mission throughout the world. We are an international and inter-generational community of leaders, thinkers, and practitioners of global missions, missions related networks, and national and regional missions associations or alliances like the AEA Mission Commission.

Tihei mauri ora! (This phrase acknowledges the vital life force).

1. INTRODUCTION

"Indigenous Missions in Today's Context." There is much in the title of this presentation that requires further definition and explanation. One of the problems with current discussions around issues related to missions is that we may use the same English words, but we do not necessarily all understand or agree on what those words mean, especially with respect to their relationship with the biblical narrative. For today's contexts missions concepts are being and need to be examined afresh.

I am not going to tell you today what you should think about local or indigenous missions, but I will tell you what I think about it from my background, context, and experience, and I will leave you to decide how much of what I have to offer here is of relevance to you.

Each of our contexts are unique but we all in one way or another are struggling with conflicts arising from differences—whether colonialisms, ethnic clashes, religious challenges, or ideological conflicts. As Christians, our commitment to Jesus should lift us up above such differences to work together in Christ to bring peace and reconciliation at a grassroots level. We transcend our differences in Christ and descend to do missions in contexts with social impact. We are not escapists, we are here to fulfil the purposes of God, which I now refer to as co-creating New Creation.

Most of us do not have power to influence nations, but we can influence neighbourhoods. To do this, we need a concept of missions that embraces the local, including the indigenous, so that we represent Jesus well in our contexts today. If we look for answers from outside a context, or if we think we can solve problems as outsiders, we will not succeed in finding or providing sustainable solutions. The key to sustaining eternal life within any given context is that it must emerge from within.

In this presentation I will illustrate some difficulties emerging from external impositions, from outside-in. I will give some definition to context and indigenous, and then present a broader perspective of missions that I believe we need to embrace as we work together to co-create New Creation often in the midst of great civil unrest and other societal problems.

2. The Outside-In Problem

One of my World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission Deputy Leaders recently shared that during a seven-week speaking tour around Eastern Africa he spent too much of his time dealing with conflicts related to Conservative Reformed Theology promoted globally by some leading figures in the United States of America. Patrick Fung of OMF, who serves on the Mission Commission's Executive Committee noted a similar thing happening in China. I have also heard some frustration about similar influences affecting Latin America. It is becoming cultish.

As an example of an outside-in problem we need to ask, why are Eurocentric theologies tearing apart the unity of the Spirit in East Africa, East Asia, Latin America and probably elsewhere? Why are local Christians settling for people from outside of our cultures telling us how to understand our experience of God in Christ according to their cultural biases? Why is the deep reading of Scripture by us and our elders and teachers for our contexts not seen as acceptable? And why is our practice of the faith invalidated by outside expressions even though it is just as biblically faithful? It might even be more so because the Majority World tends to

be much closer to biblical cultures than that of privileged Enlightenment-educated Westerners.

There is a prevailing myth among Western-influenced 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 there is no globally homogeneous cultural ideal for followers of Christ. We cannot cease to be who we are ethnically any more than we can cease to be our biological sex. We remain male or female, and whatever mix of Māori, Korean, Chinese, Indonesian, Indian, European, etc. that we happen to be. Paul was talking about equalising power. It is this privilege of our ethnicity and social status that should not something to be grasped, wielded or imposed. In Christ we yield or surrender privileges and power to become servants of one another—for this is the attitude of Christ according to Paul in Philippians 2:5-8. It is the love of God in action. This is our transcendent reality in Christ.

I am not criticising Western Christian practices, and neither am I suggesting that Eurocentric theologies are wrong or bad. They are thoroughly valid, needed and welcomed as part of the mix. They are just appropriate to their context, developed as they are in a particular place and at a particular time. And we must always weigh up how much outside thinking is relevant to our contexts. The responsibility lies with us in our contexts to answer the theological questions that arise within. Theological meaning and doctrine should be an intercultural dialogue not an impositional monologue, where outsiders impose an interpretation upon us.

When it comes to theology, biblical scholars from different parts of the world throughout history have done most of the heavy lifting for us. We have robust foundational doctrines that distinguish between orthodox beliefs and heresies. There are guidelines for how to extract appropriate meaning from Christian Scriptures. We have the creeds; and systematic theologies have confirmed for us some essentials of the Christian faith, but theologies developed afar do not tell the whole story of God for us and our people.

Local or indigenous believers must nurture the message of Jesus’ ancestors, his origins, his ministry, teachings, death, resurrection, and early church understandings, for what this message can teach us in our contexts, and what the Holy Spirit wants to transform in our selves, our families, our neighbourhoods, our societies, and our habitats or environments. In this way the gospel becomes incarnated, and eternal life emerges and is sustained from within a context.

3. Locals In Context

When it comes to indigenous missions in today’s contexts, remember this: the authority of the local matters. Throughout the world today, self-determination or

the authority of the local have become very important. For missions this means that believers from within a local context deserve to be valued and respected as guardians of the gospel for their people; as God, through the gospel presentation and the historical record of Scripture, speaks to and impacts issues that are specific to your context. As recognised leaders in your context, you have God-given authority there, and nobody has the right to take that from you. The authority of the local matters.

But how do we define a context? What do we mean by local? And, who is indigenous?

Let's "reset the table", as the saying goes. Let us pretend there are no nation states or hard boundaries that separate one people group from another. Let's ignore state, national, regional, or even city governments. Let's consider the world as just full of people. People who have some discernible ethnic heritage, or a combination of heritages, and religious affiliations even if that religion happens to be secular materialism, or industrial capitalism or communism. Just groups of people trying to do life together in overlapping and intersecting communities. In these communities we have inhabitants of the land for thousands of years; and we have more recent settlers of 500 years or less. Here, we have people in a context.

A context can be defined in many ways, but I prefer to see it as a sphere of common interest and shared meaning. It is a place where people cohabit and work together for mutually beneficial outcomes. An interconnected identity emerges there even if there are differences in ethnicity, religion, or political commitments. You might then imagine a context is as small as a neighbourhood or as large as a nation, perhaps even extending to a continent, but that would be stretching it unhelpfully thinly.

When people become strangers to you, you know that you are out of your own context. You recognise that they are different. You are local to a context if you feel like you belong. But, while you might be local, you are not necessarily indigenous.

The term indigenous literally means, "of the land". So, it implies a deep connection that has formed over many generations, thousands of years, in a specific location. The environment has deeply affected your DNA. The United Nations has developed a very specific set of criteria for determining who indigenous peoples are and what rights they retain in terms of sovereignty over the land of their ancestors. From my perspective as a descendant of the original inhabitants of the islands of Aotearoa New Zealand, I agree with these protections of native peoples. I believe first peoples have a God-given authority over the land that should privilege them as guardians, retaining a good amount of decision-making influence within their customary territories.

It is not so clear-cut when cultures become blended and land borders are contested by multiple ethnic groups with a long history of conflict, but the principle

of self-determination for people inhabiting lands long before colonial occupation still stands. These are the indigenous according to United Nations criteria, but they still might be only a subset of who is considered local to any given context today.

4. Expanding The Indigenous

This has potential to confuse matters, but my use of the word 'Indigenous' (with a capital I in English) is much broader than indigenous (with a lower case i), which I still use to refer to the UN definition of autochthonous, tribal, original, native, or first peoples. My broader categorisation includes them but extends the scope wider.

Much of my work involves contextual theology from a global or macro large scale perspective rather than at the local, micro grassroots level. My research is seeking to find ways to encourage intercultural and interpersonal mutuality at the intersection of difference that can be applied in any context.

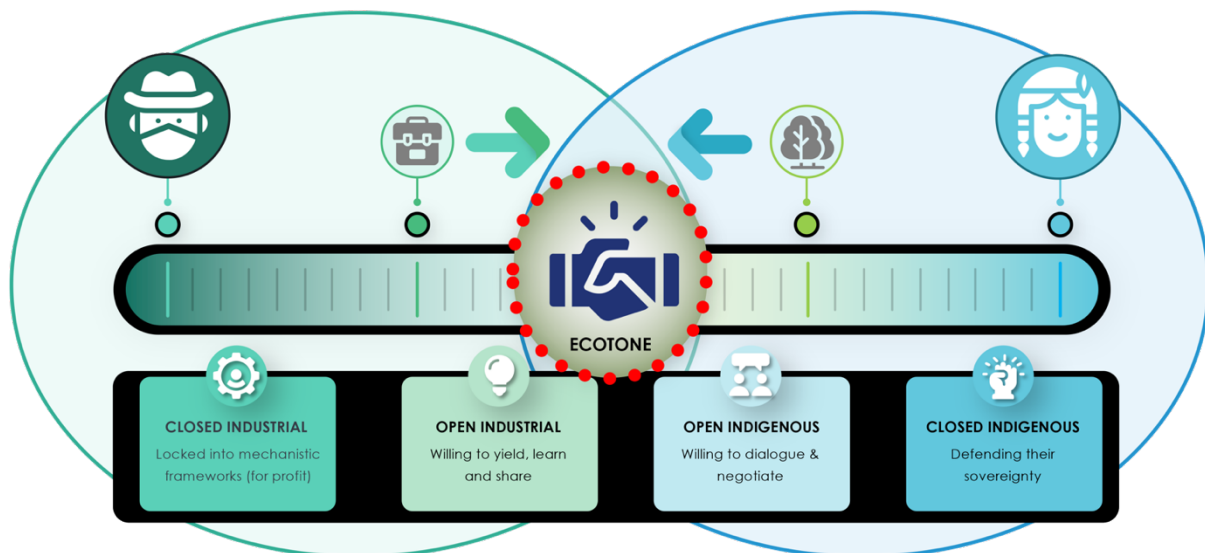


Fig. 1 An Intercultural Spectrum

In my schema, the worlds of the Industrial (on the left) and Indigenous (on the right) overlap and intersect along a spectrum, but they are like two distinct epistemic ecosystems, two different realms or ways of knowing. But it's not the Western world and the Eastern world. It's not the Developed world or the Underdeveloped world. Not even necessarily the minority West and Majority World. We need to break out of these restrictive geographic, economic, and fixed demographic mindsets such as 'people group' terminology because the world we live in is far more complex and we must do our best to avoid stereotyping.

Instead, Industrial and Indigenous represent unique sets of values, and they tend to be much more mixed. The categories are more about innate, usually subconscious, assumptions about the world and associated values than they are about one's location or status. Geographic location or economic wealth does not

determine whether someone engages with the world from an Industrial or Indigenous values perspective. I don't have time to discuss the values sets further, but we do well to note the impact of these different ways of understanding the world as they become increasing intermingled around the world.

For example, successive generations of formerly collectivist people, educated in Western-influenced universities and living in urban centres within the Majority World, have become hybridized or adapted to individualist Industrial values to some degree over time so they are much further along the Industrial end of the spectrum. Conversely, we have people comfortable with relating to the world from the Indigenous end of the spectrum who are thriving in urbanised contexts or outside of the land of their ancestors. We only need to consider migrant populations who are bringing a more Indigenous or collectivist influence into their host societies that are traditionally part of the Industrial West.

At both extreme ends of the spectrum, you have people who strongly identify with the values of their knowledge systems and are not at all interested in changing. Militant nationalists and religious extremists would sit at these poles. Whether they are fiercely individualist and capitalist Industrials, strongly anti-colonial and communist Indigenous, or Christendom, Muslim, or Hindu empire builders. I do not believe the future of God's green and blue earth belongs to any of these closed hardliners, they are not the humble or meek of which Jesus spoke.

Closer to the middle of the spectrum you have the majority of the people more open to difference, more open to change. Open Industrials, whose ways of knowing still hold the majority of the power and influence in the world, are those more open to learning and more willing to yield to alternative perspectives. Open Indigenous, who have typically been subjugated by the powerful, are those more willing to come to the table to dialogue and are open to negotiation. In both worlds the open ones are ready to adapt for the common good.

Right in the middle there, where there is complete overlap, is what I call the "ecotone". This is where I believe God's purposes are powerfully performed. This is the space where indigenous missions is conducted in today's contexts. Ecotone is a term borrowed from environmental biology that speaks of a place where two ecosystems blend together as they do in wetlands, where the ocean meets the land. In these places we see hybrid species develop as well as completely new species not found anywhere else.

I believe the ecotone is a great image of the Kingdom of God, where different human worlds overlap and intersect and blend to form something unique and new. The result still retains the distinct attributes of the original contributors, yet they are transformed into something new, co-created from the elements of all—like a child created from the combined DNA of two unique parents.

Secularism won't take us there. Humanism cannot achieve it. No conservative religion is willing to concede the purity of their belief system. No nation wants to give up its sovereignty. Virtual worlds will try to replicate it, but it will be a fantasy without substance that will ultimately be revealed as a mirage, a mere shadow of the real thing.

Only in Jesus is something like an ecotone reality possible. Only Christ can bring all things together in harmony and hold them there in the transformative tensions of our differences. Only by the power of the Spirit will we be enabled to fully yield to one another in God's loving kindness so that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds by our interactions with one another, as Romans 12:1-2 describes. Our logical or true and proper act of worship to God is submitting to God and yielding to one another in all our differences as we live out God's ways together in a hurting world. The Holy Spirit works the transformation, but it happens in our interactions with one another at the intersection of our differences.

In Christ we become a transcendent community, rising above the rivalries of our contexts. In this way we witness to the reconciling power of God. This is a reality where Jesus has broken down the walls of hostility between us and God, and between us and each other with all our background differences. Furthermore, in every place and for every generation newcomers to the faith influence how the unchanging character and power of God is made manifest anew in each context as a blessing there and for the global Church. It's like the river of life flowing ever fresh—"spring up o' well!"

In biblical terminology, I call this ecotone-like process "co-creating New Creation".

5. Participating In God's Purpose

I use the term "missions", plural, to describe our participation in God's purposes and "mission", singular, to speak about God's purposes. If I have to define missions, I consider it to be "ministry beyond the direct influence of a local church". Whereas I would see Christian service within the control of a local church would simply be body ministry or outreach. Missions is where our transcendence, our being one in Christ, reaches down to the grassroots to reveal Jesus to those who don't know Him yet.

We could debate what sort of ministry we're talking about "out there" where there is no local church influence, but suffice it to say, it should be both a demonstration and proclamation towards the propagation of the gospel in new territory. Deeds and declarations that co-create New Creation communities that serve as a blessing to their societies. There is no place for a false dichotomy between words and works. We have no need to prioritise anything. Our participation in God's

purposes is an inseparable whole. Practices have no meaning in missions if there is no preaching. Speaking without signs is just talking.

To better understanding our commission as disciples of Jesus in any given context, local or cross-cultural, I see it as “the people of God participating in the purposes of God to co-create New Creation for the glory of God.”

“New Creation” is a term used by the Apostle Paul to speak of working out our new life in Christ in our societies and for our environments as a witness. There is no New Creation without Christ of course. The Kingdom of God is made manifest within our transcendent communities in Christ, New Creation is the outflow of God’s reign made manifest down in the broken stuff of the world. In Christ we are part of New Creation and we’re helping to co-create it with God and one another in our neighbourhoods. It is influencing our society with the love of God as examples of New Creation and representatives of the Kingdom of God.

While we all live out our New Creation reality locally, the Spirit of God leads some further afield. Some receive a particular grace to minister beyond the direct influence of a local church. We call them “missionaries” and I believe that missionary service is a spiritual gift. But like the gifts of celibacy or martyrdom, not everyone is gifted to do that. For those who are, we need to recognise and develop that giftedness and encourage our churches to release and support them. There are still far too many places that need the gospel seed planted and nurtured so that New Creation can flourish there.

Again, when they or we go, we must remain conscious that we are the outsiders bringing the good news like a seed that must take root deep within a context and become indigenous so it can flourish there and begin to transform it from the inside out, establishing the eternal life of New Creation. We might bring the message, the proclamation, but it requires the evidence, the demonstration, in order to thrive and affect the context, the propagation of the gospel.

6. CONCLUSION

According to the grand narrative of Scripture, the overarching purpose of God is to co-create Jesus’ New Creation, providing evidence that the dwelling place of God is among humans. While we, we know that it is still yet to come in its fulness with Jesus’ physical return.

Whether we hold to Industrial individualist values or Indigenous collectivist values, in Christ we transcend differences that separate humankind into factions. In missions we descend to the grassroots to plant the gospel as indigenously as possible in new contexts. Regardless of whether we’re working as insiders or outsiders to a context, our focus at all times is to nurture New Creation, the loving reign of God made manifest on the earth. For this is the objective of indigenous missions in today’s contexts, ministering in anticipation of Jesus’ physical return in glory.