



# Missions in Global Complexity

## Navigating Participation in God's Purposes

*A commission for a chapter in a book that will be a primer on what is commonly called missions, translated and published in Portuguese primarily for a Brazilian audience. It has been lightly edited for reproduction in English here.*

*In this paper Jay shifts from what is classically known as “missions” by the Evangelical missionary industry to what he considers to be a better biblical rendering as “participating in God’s purposes”. As we do so we seek to co-create New Creation under the Lordship of Jesus in any given context. The global Church faces numerous challenges as it seeks to serve the purposes of God in our post-pandemic generation. From his indigenous perspective, Jay views these challenges like night-sky constellations that can help guide us toward our ultimate destination of New Creation in our chosen contexts as we participate in the purposes of God to be blessing to our societies and the environment around us.*

**K**ia ora koutou (life and wellbeing to you all). Being of Māori heritage I am obliged by indigenous custom to formally greet those I am communicating with. So, this paper begins with a shortened version of what is usually a much longer protocol in person. I greet you first in my native tongue, followed by a translation...

*Kia ora koutou katoa. Nga mihi nui kia koutou katoa. Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa. He iti noa tāku kōrero, nā, me iti noa ōku mihi. I roto i te poto, ko āku whakapapa iwi: kō Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, kō Ngāti Porou, Kō Ngāi Tahu ōku iwi. Kō Jay Mātenga tōku ingoa. Tīhei mauri ora!*

Life and wellbeing to you all. I bring you greetings, three times I respectfully acknowledge all readers. Conversation space is limited here and so must be my greetings. To keep it short, I have identified my three primary Māori tribes from my father's heritage. [On my mother's side, my English heritage can be traced back to the first settlers in Aotearoa New Zealand, with a Woiwurrung Aboriginal great great grandmother (according to family oral history) from my maternal grandmother's Australian line]. My name is Jay Mātenga. Let us acknowledge the vital breath of life!

## Introduction

Like the rest of life, our perspectives are always changing, maturing, shifting with new knowledge that we gain from our life experiences. Some ideas are found wanting and we need to let them go. Some opinions might be misinformed and need to be updated. Some beliefs can be proven unhelpful or just plain wrong and require repentance. What we have understood about what is commonly known as missions is no exception. What you read here is just a snapshot in time. It is but a glimpse from my perspective after more than 30 years' service to the global missions industry. The content is the result of using the best spiritual discernment I can, wholly reliant on the Holy Spirit to guide my thoughts. Some of what I write below I have presented elsewhere. Concepts that I might have already published will not be formally cited because they are original to me (shaped by what I have learned from many others), and I am not intentionally quoting from previously published

material. With that established, let us go on a short journey into the unknown as we explore potential futures of what we have called “missions” (plural), in our best attempts to participate in God's “mission” (singular), which I prefer to call “God's purpose” for the cosmos.

To further clarify definitions, I limit missions (plural) to service beyond the boundaries of one's home church, regardless of the location of that service (national or global) or our definition of “church”. It is service that does not provide material benefit for the home fellowship (e.g. new members, local reputation, volunteers, funding, etc.). Missions can be in relationship to local churches (and I hope it is) but it is not defined or constrained by the needs of a home or sending church. Typically, missions service does something that local churches do not have the resources to do or manage. Such service need not be with formerly registered ‘para-church’ organizations but that is the most common form of missions in a classic sense.



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That is, the concept of missions that was formally established by European Evangelical Protestants from the 1790's, which has now become quite a large global industry. Cross cultural ministry between churches in different contexts would not be seen as missions by this definition but it remains a very important factor in what it means to be part of the global Church.

Biblically, the main objective of our participation in God's purposes is to demonstrate the Lordship of Jesus in the world and especially in contexts that have little or no existing or sustainable Christian witness. Some missions industry influencers might want to include in their definition some sort of formal commissioning or 'sending' from a home church community to serve beyond its borders but, while advisable and helpful, it is not necessarily a biblical requirement for missionary service. At one level, Jesus sends all His disciples into the world (John 17:18) to declare the new era of His reign (Romans 10:15). At another level we have biblical examples of a church sending off individuals, such as the Antioch church did with Barnabas and Paul (Acts 13:1). But that example does not make it the norm for us, and we have little evidence of Paul's continuing connection let alone submission to the Antioch church. We must be careful not to make a particular biblical occurrence a universal requirement. The Church through the ages has spread far and wide without requiring a church or supporting organization to formally send message bearers.

I serve the purposes of God in the missions industry from my homeland of Aotearoa (the land of the long white cloud) New Zealand. It is a land and people that was formally colonised by the British from 1840 and remains dominated by a government of descendants from British and other European settlers. Despite the best attempts of the early missionaries to establish an equitable relationship between the British Empire and the original Māori inhabitants, our way of life is heavily defined by European thinking. At times that thinking can feel suffocating to our indigenous ways of knowing the world and living in it, including the way we express our faith in Christ. Every culture should be free to enjoy and mature in their relationship with God in culturally appropriate ways and not be restrained by the norms of another culture. Where followers of Jesus from different cultures intersect and interact, we should celebrate each expression for the unique grace they bring to the relationship from their experience of God in their context.

As noted in my opening greeting, I am a descendent of Māori. On my father's side there was no European influence in our family line until his father, my grandfather, married his mother who was of English and

Prussian heritage. With my mother also being of English background, I straddle two worlds. I am strongly influenced by the indigenous concepts and values of my father's reality while understanding the Eurocentric assumptions of my mother's world. I represent a blending, a hybridity. This is an experience that is becoming more common among colonized or migrant peoples and of great benefit to the world as we seek to live as one in our diversity as faithful witnesses to God's rule and reign.

## 1. Navigating New Waters

I would not exist if the early European explorers were not able to figure out how to navigate the southern oceans. In the northern oceans navigation is made easier because of the north star, Polaris, which allowed ancient mariners to find true north in the night sky. When explorers from the Northern Hemisphere made their first forays into the southern oceans they were immediately disoriented. They had assumed a law of symmetry in the heavens. They thought that which existed in the north would be reflected in the south, but it was not to be. There is no southern pole star!

My forebears were master navigators of Te Moananui a Kiwa, the great ocean of the mythical ruler Kiwa, Eurocentrically called the Pacific Ocean. Our mariners knew how to interpret the night skies, the tides, the currents, the winds, the seasons, one another, and the unseen world so that they could safely move from one place to the next as a group in massive seafaring canoes. For our people, the ocean is a great wet highway. Rather than positioning themselves by a single star, these maritime leaders used constellations like the Crux (Southern Cross) long before Portuguese explorers figured out how to do it. However, even with centuries of knowledge and movement around the Pacific Ocean from Asia to South America, it was not until the thirteenth century that my father's people discovered Aotearoa, the large islands to the south that the world now knows as New Zealand.

Although the reality is shrouded in myth and legend, it would be fair to say that it was a crisis that led to the discovery. The great chief navigator, Kupe happened upon my homeland while chasing a sea creature that was destroying his peoples' fishing grounds. Upon his return, resource scarcity and a vision for a better life compelled our people to move beyond the boundaries of their idyllic island comfort zones, much the same way as myriad crises and hopes for improved living motivate migrants today.

Missions is being challenged to move on in similar ways. Resource scarcity and a growing dissatisfaction concerning many aspects of classic Protestant missions models is encouraging us to move on. The frameworks

that we have developed around the why, how, and what-for of missions are struggling to be fit for purpose in our changing world. It is becoming increasingly uncomfortable to keep doing things the way they have been done for the past 220 years or so. Ideas have shifted and resources are diminishing, yet we remain unsure of how to do missions differently. It is as if global missions is adrift on an unfamiliar ocean and we are struggling to navigate it.

In the fog of uncertainty, we lack a clear vision of the beneficial future for the global Church and its commission to bear witness to the Lordship of Jesus. This witness should be evident through our communities of faith right now as an example of the coming fulfilment with the return of Christ in the fulness of time. If a shrinking vision for classic missions is not apparent in your context, it will come. Anti-colonial sentiments, rising nationalisms, and strained middle class discretionary incomes are among some major headwinds that inhibit the continued progress of missions. These headwinds might hinder our missions with their contemporary strategies and methodologies, but they are not preventing God's purposes. Like good sailors, we must learn how to recognize the value of new constellations and set our sails differently to capture changing winds so that we can move forward in our participation with God's purposes.

From the start of the COVID-19 global pandemic I sensed the event would mark a significant change in the way we live in the world and what it would mean for classic global or cross-cultural missions. Since the turn of this century, more than 200 years after the first modern missions organizations began, the challenges confronting people-sending missions increased. COVID-19 amplified challenges already apparent and accelerated our need to adapt. During the pandemic it was as if we had crossed an equator, left one ocean, and entered another where all the constellations are different. Missions groups whose activities and strategies are defined by the assumptions of the so-called global north have been finding it increasingly difficult to navigate this new reality as the centre of Christianity has shifted to the (poorly named) global south. This is where the majority of Christians now live, one reason why it is better that we call the world outside of the West the Majority World.

## 2. Making New Family

There are far too many challenges and changes to exhaustively explore here. As the stars in the night skies, challenges and changes are obvious, some big, some tiny, but there are also many invisible to the naked eye. I will, however, point to some major constellations that can

better help us better navigate as we pursue God's purposes in this increasingly complex world. Stars have their own gravitational pull, and these influence clusters are affecting the future of the missions industry similarly. While constellations might be visible, the experience of the captains of early European exploration teaches us that the location of stars in themselves will not help us much unless we can use them to our advantage in unknown territory. For the follower of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is like our sextant, our navigational aid a world in flux. We must not underestimate the power of prayer for wisdom, discernment, and clear guidance as we seek to understand our times and decide how we and our fellow believers should respond (like the sons of Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12:32).

The first constellation we need to notice has already been mentioned: the rapidly growing **Church in the Majority World**. This is like the Crux for the southern oceans. It does not point the way due south exactly, but we can use to keep us on track. If you want to be involved in God's purposes in our new post-pandemic era this is how to align with 'the way' of God's work in the world. In other words, we need to rely on local representations of the global Church to help us understand how best to serve God's purposes in their context. Developed well, local churches are indigenous manifestations of our faith. At their best, they are autochthonous, born out of the gospel's engagement with the local culture and environment in a way that results in unique expressions of understanding, worshipping, and obeying God.

Local churches are places where our witness to the reality of the New Creation is made known to the world around us. In the Gospels Jesus speaks of New Creation as the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God. In the Old Testament this aspiration is best captured by the concept of shalom made manifest in a new Zion. It is from the Apostle Paul that we call Jesus' reign New Creation. Regardless of the biblical terminology, we are speaking of manifestations of Jesus' Lordship and God's good reign in any given context. Our responsibility as communities of Jesus' followers is to co-create New Creation with God and one another—to learn how to be a new kind of family. This is why the writers of the epistles do not mention "disciple making". The metaphor shifts entirely from learning from Jesus as a rabbi/teacher to becoming brothers and sisters, adopted into the family of God, made possible by the blood of Jesus as our proto-sibling, leader, and Lord God.

If we think about this in terms of our participation in God's purposes, our responsibility as a newcomer to a context would be to serve local believers with our unique



gifts and talents to help them co-create New Creation in ways relevant to their context (not our foreign agendas, no matter how holy we think they are). So, what does New Creation look like? In addition to becoming a healthy character-maturing family in Christ, it looks like restored relationships within families, neighbourhoods, societies, and with our environments. It includes many other things like prophetically resisting injustice, improving economic wellbeing for the poor, healing disease, trauma, and other forms of psychological and social brokenness, defending the most vulnerable, and upholding God's ethics in a society. But absolutely central and essential to New Creation is introducing all people to the Lord of creation so that they too might enjoy the benefits of a life (temporal and eternal) lived in allegiance to Christ if they so choose.

To be authentically Christian in a local context all followers of Jesus must understand and remain faithful to the whole biblical narrative. Furthermore, as they develop their own expressions, all local churches should remain in conversation with the global Church as best they can. Not just with wealthy influential churches in the West either. Conversant with the global Church includes being familiar with the widely accepted creeds and writings of the Church through the ages. Local forms of Christianity might look quite different to an outsider and that is to be expected, but local believers must still hold to biblically non-negotiable aspects of faith in Jesus if they are to be considered part of the global Church. Then, as each expression of the faith shares their experience of God with others around the world, giving out of the grace that God has deposited in their culture, we are all strengthened, and our understanding of God becomes much larger as a result. This is a relatively new perspective for Western-influenced churches and the global missions industry. But for the future wellbeing of the global Church and God's purposes in the world through it, it is essential that we recognize and participate with the constellation of local Christianity maturing and expanding in glorious diversity throughout the Majority World.

There remain some isolated places in the world that have not yet heard of Jesus. There are also groups of people dominated by another religion that remain highly resistant to faith in Jesus. But there is now a Christian witness in every nation of the world. It might be very small in some places, but it is there, and it may be much larger than it appears to the uninitiated. Anyone considering participating in God's purposes beyond their national borders needs to respect the God-given authority of local believers as guardians of the gospel for their geography. They need to appreciate what it means to "[centre the local](#)".

A largely misunderstood concept popular in the missions industry today is something called "polycentric missions". Poly means many and centric refers to centres of authority or power. The term was originally developed for local politics where many specialist authorities need to work together well (police, fire, water, zoning, roading, medical, social services, education, etc.). Missions industry writers, however, have borrowed the term, using it to mean "from everywhere to everywhere", but that is not accurate. Yes, polycentrism becomes visible when there are lot of moving pieces and many actors involved. But polycentrism means that when people from different domains intersect and collaborate, they must honour the centre (the identity and authority) of each participant as they work together for the good of the overarching aim.

The most basic example of this in classic missions is when a foreign missionary enters a host community. In that instance the missionary needs to respect the authority of the locals, to centre their ways, desires, needs, and visions for a good life, and help them find renewal and fulfilment of those things in a relationship with Jesus.

Contrary to a lot of teaching about incarnational ministry, no foreign missionary can become embedded in a culture such as Jesus did when he came to earth as God in the flesh. Jesus was born into a specific time and place and became part of it from birth, with a long lineage in the land. The gospel can incarnate into another context, but foreign missionaries cannot. Missionaries can go a long way to understanding, identifying, and adapting to another context, but they will never truly become a native. That requires genetic inheritance (or, in the case of permanent migrants, adaptation over several generations). To effectively participate in God's purposes, cross-cultural ministers of the gospel absolutely must know how to maintain a humble healthy understanding of serving from the periphery. In short, the outsider defers to the insider as they work together for the good of the whole.

### 3. Meeting New Peoples

When we travel across cultures today there is very little tolerance of cultural condescension. We all carry a sense of our culture being the best, but visitors must learn to honour local cultures and respect their values. Many Majority World cultures are highly hospitable and superficially forgiving of visitor ignorance. But, beneath the surface, irritation and offence can manifest in unexpected ways if the visitor is not quick to learn and adapt. Well trained missionaries know to expect difference and learn swiftly, but **migrants** often must learn the hard way, with very little preparation and not



much assistance available to them from the host culture, even more so if they are refugees, suddenly forced from their homes. If the local, indigenous, church is our primary constellation, the influence of migration is another vivid cluster of navigable stars that we cannot ignore today if we want to effectively participate in God's purposes. If we scan the entire timeline of Church history from the early Church to today, we will see that the global Church has spread more through migration than any other means. Missions industry methods of the colonial era pale in comparison to the positive impact of migration on the spread of World Christianity.

Christian migrants bring their expression of the gospel with them to the new lands that they settle, and migrants from other faiths are initially more open to the gospel than they were in their lands of origin. Both experiences must not be ignored when it comes to a discussion about participating in God's purposes.

Everything noted above concerning cross-cultural Christianity today applies also to Christian migrants. They too need to honour the local. But it can be very difficult for them to thrive in their faith if they cannot express it the way they did back home. Rarely can they have a 'furlough' or retreat to get a spiritual top-up with their own kind like classic missionaries usually do. There are many differences between migrants and host cultures, yet we all lose if migrants withdraw to their own Christian faith communities within the new society and rarely interact with native believers. Here, the responsibility lies with the local church to make room for the foreigner in their midst. And not just the Christian foreigner either. In cosmopolitan societies there is rich opportunity for cross-cultural ministry with people who have had little or no access to the gospel. It requires intentionality and perseverance because incorporating foreigners into local churches can be challenging but it is also mutually beneficial.

To feel fully included, foreigners should be able to influence how some things are done. Whether that foreigner is a missionary or a migrant, catalysing change can be upsetting for the locals. Unlike missionaries, migrants usually keep quiet to maintain the peace, but by doing so they can wither away spiritually. This is where a vision of the benefits of diversity can be helpful. We see this in the Epistles where Paul, James, Peter, and John all address tensions of difference within fellowships. The solution offered is not a bland kind of sameness where everyone conforms to a dominant culture. No, the solution is something of a hybrid New Creation, a culture formed out of the tensions of difference, where everyone, Jew, Gentile, slave (poor), free (rich), male, female, all fully and lovingly participate

in co-creating the New Creation for the blessing of their context. It happens in the ebb and flow of relationships where conflicts are resolved by maintaining perpetual reconciliation with one another, forgiving and seeking forgiveness for offence, and maturing together.

This type of doing life together as the people of God, Paul says in Romans 12, should be an obvious or reasonable (logikos) act of worship. It requires an attitude of self-denial where do not consider ourselves better than others but instead present ourselves as living sacrifices before God. With this attitude (following the attitude of Jesus in Philippians 2:5-11) we do not conform to the pattern of the world, but rather we are open to being collectively transformed in the process as we challenge one another's thinking from our respective backgrounds. This example of Holy Spirit enabled fellowship, Paul says, is how we come to know God's good, pleasing, and perfect will, which John says is that we love one another (1 John 2:7-8). James says if we persevere through the trials with this type of faith we will mature and, over time, become complete, lacking nothing (James 1:2-4). When I read the Epistles through this relationship lens I cannot but conclude that the greater the differences in the fellowship the greater the return in terms of our maturity in Christ. What Paul calls transformation is a process of hybridity as we influence change in one another on the road to maturity, becoming full and complete in Christ (Ephesians 4:13-16). While they may not recognize this process as such, it is what theologians commonly call "sanctification". It is through our relationships with one another, insider and outsider, that we grow in holiness.

#### 4. Locating New Challenges

I have highlighted just two constellations that need to be noted as we participate in God's purposes for the beneficial future of the global Church and our world. In many ways, they are two aspects of a larger constellation. As we continue deeper into the strange ocean that represents our post-pandemic global reality, many more constellations become apparent depending on which part of the sky you are looking at. By this I mean many different opportunities for participating in God's purposes beyond the boundaries of a home church. We do not have time to explore them all, but I will touch on some obvious ones. **Local and global conflicts** are constellations that draw the brave of heart and sure of calling to follow Christ there. Great opportunities for whole-of-life, New Creation-demonstrating care exist in contexts of conflict. When shared alongside practical help, the good news narrative and power of Jesus provides tremendous comfort as people are introduced to the suffering one who promises to be present always.



**Emergent technology** is another big star cluster. The metaverse is a new context that too few Christians have ventured into to intentionally share the love of Jesus and explain the hope that He freely provides for those who follow Him. The online gaming world is its own diverse context with ways, desires, needs, and visions for a good life that Jesus can renew and fulfil there. If you are a gamer, you are God's representative in that space. Use your gifts there to minister to some of the billions online at any given time. Generative AI is an emerging challenge to our faith. It can be very beneficial as a tool, but we are wise to be cautious of relying on it as an advisor let alone a confidant. Never forget that our sole confidence should be in our creator God, not the artificial hope that technology wants to provide.

At the mercy of human and non-human forces, **economic crises** are accelerating poverty in ways that we cannot ignore. If you have equity and business skills, faith-based social entrepreneurs are sorely needed around the world, both to help resource struggling local churches and to demonstrate God's love to non-believers as you conduct business in a way that honours God and witnesses to Jesus' love. Poverty is also a primary reason for human trafficking and all manner of other behaviours toxic to human thriving. If you have a concern for the vulnerable caught up in foul play and some talents that can help free them, use them for God's glory.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we need to shift our orientation about participating in God's purposes away from a pathological perspective, seeing the world as diseased, condemning what is wrong with it, and presenting Jesus primarily as an escape option. To thrive in today's global complexity, we must adopt a **wellbeing perspective**. Not so much in terms of how we can fix the problems that Sin causes, but how we can rise above dysfunctions together as covenantal communities in Christ. The world needs to see that it is possible to flourish within the tensions of difference through healthy, perpetually reconciling relationships where we lift one another up and call others to join us there. To continue the ocean metaphor, we are much more buoyant on the uncertain seas when we remain tethered together like a flotilla, unified and stronger for our differences. It takes a lot of work and a lot of time, and it is only possible with the supernatural assistance of the Holy Spirit on whom we must depend for life-giving resource from God. But this is the witness we are called to be in the world. Our manufactured goals, aims, and visions of productive outcomes are worthless for God's purposes without our loving-one-another witness. If we aspire to see transformation happen this side of eternity, it happens within and flows from our polycentric self-giving relationships.

Transformation (metamorphoo<sup>7</sup>) is only mentioned twice in the Bible: 1) when Jesus was transfigured on the mount, and 2) when the people of God are transformed through the renewing of our minds. Transformation in this world is only possible through our communal metamorphosis as followers of Jesus, our hybridization into the full stature of the glory of Christ as a community. Whatever ocean we are attempting to navigate, however the constellations change in the atmosphere around us, the destination of our journey of participation in God's purposes is a regenerative New Creation. It is the Kingdom of God's shalom made relationally manifest in any (every) given context. Colonialism cannot achieve this. No power in this world can bring about its own utopia. Yet when we, from all over the world, participate in God's purposes by co-creating New Creation together, the world (kosmos) will believe (that is, find credible) and know (that is, personally experience) that the Father sent the Son because God so loves our cosmos (John 17:18-26, 3:16).

Arohanui ki a koe e haere ana ki te ao (love to you as you go into the world).

The **environmental crisis** is a vivid constellation in my part of the world that affects us all. The damage is real, and its impact is devastating. As followers of the Creator Jesus who holds all things together (Colossians 1:16-17) we have a responsibility to care for His creation. We are a part of it and wholly dependent upon it. Contrary to some interpretations, the full biblical narrative affirms the view that our current world will not be destroyed but renewed at the consummation of all things. And, just as Jesus' body bore the scars of the crucifixion, a glorified earth may bear marks of our maltreatment of it. We would do well to protect and nurture creation as proactively as we are able, for there appears to be a severe judgment awaiting those who intentionally destroy the earth (see Revelation 11:18). In contrast to an industrial interpretation of Scripture, the dominion mandate recorded in Genesis 1:26-28 does not provide license for humans to do whatever they want with creation (presumed by industry to be just capital). The mandate was given prior to the Genesis 3 event and was always meant to be a management responsibility under God's direction because at that stage humans had not eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that gave us an unholy autonomy. As we come back under Christ's reign, we once again must consider His will for right relationships with His earth and work to help all creation live and thrive, even as it groans with us awaiting complete regeneration (see Romans 8:20-23).