



Reimagining Mobilisation

A Call To Realignment

A presentation prepared for the 2023 Global Mobilization Network Conference in Chiang Mai, Thailand, 16-19 October 2023.

In this paper Jay revisits theological and missiological assumptions that led to the development of the missions mobilisation industry from the mid/late-1990s up until the global pandemic at the start of the 2020's. The pandemic marks a new era of missions that call into question assumptions that guided the former era and therefore also call for a reimagining of our assumptions about participating in God's mission. Here he argues that we need to repent of our anthropocentric perspectives of God's mission and realign ourselves to a pneumaticentric commitment: to obedience to the Holy Spirit as the sole determiner of how we ought best to participate in what God is doing.

Kia ora koutou (life and wellbeing to you all). In keeping with Māori custom, I am obliged to locate myself, to establish from where I stand and under whose authority (that is, my family's) I speak as Māori. Since I identify most strongly with my father's world, though I was brought up in my mother's, what follows is my turangawaewae (standing place) in time and space...

Kō Takitimu te waka (my tribal canoe is the Takitimu). *Kō Te Waka o Kupe me Tuhirangi ngā maunga* (the mountains I belong to are known as the canoes of high chief Kupe and Tuhirangi, the sea serpent that Kupe chased along the Pacific in his discovery of Aotearoa New Zealand). *Kō Ruamahanga te awa* (my river is the Ruamahanga—it was in this river that I was baptised as a new believer in Christ in 1984). *Kō Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, kō Ngāti Porou, kō Kai Tahu ōku iwi* (I have direct genealogical connections to these three tribes which span the East Coast of both the main islands of Aotearoa New Zealand). *Kō Ngāti Rākaiwhakairi tōku hapū* (my primary clan or family group name means to lift or hang in adornment). *Kō Kohunui tōku marae* (my clan's customary meeting place is called Kohunui—a physical piece of land on the outskirts of the village of Pirinoa, shared by our family groups, with buildings for meeting/sleeping, cooking/eating, and keeping tools and supplies). *Kō Jay Mātenga tōku ingoa* (my name is Jay Mātenga), *kō Aperahama Kuhukuhu Tui Mātenga tōku tupuna* (descendent of Abraham Kuhukuhu Tui Mātenga). *Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa* (and so, three times respectful greetings to you all).

On my mother's side, my English heritage can be traced back to the first settlers in Aotearoa New Zealand, with a Woïwurrung Aboriginal great great grandmother (according to family oral history) from my maternal grandmother's Australian line.

Introduction

My wife and my mobilization involvement stretches back to doing Perspectives in 1990, then running courses, and dedicating ourselves to missions mobilization. After undergrad missionary training, we mobilized with WEC international for 5 years, before I was invited to become the New Zealand Director of Pioneers, a role I held for 15 years. I have a master's degree in mobilization studies from All Nations Christian College and I extended that a decade later in my doctoral work at Fuller Seminary. All my ministry and research has been focused on strengthening

participation in God's mission. Back in 2003 I created the "[Fish Scale](#)" of mobilisation that has been helpful for some. If you want to know more about that, click on the link. The article is also available from the articles section of my website: jaymatenga.com. Scroll down to the bottom and you'll find the article just above my book listings. All the more recent articles on there are freely available. Please help yourself.

I've been involved with the World Evangelical Alliance's Mission Commission (MC) since 2007 while I was still leading the missions agency Pioneers in New Zealand. I picked up the leadership of the MC's Mission Mobilization Research Team from 2011, resulting in



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the 2016 book, “[Mission in Motion: Speaking Frankly of Mobilization](#)”, which I wrote from the final research analysis provided by Professor Malcolm Gold of Messiah University.

I now lead Missions Interlink New Zealand, the missions association back home, similar to Missio Nexus, Global Connections, COMIBAM, NEMA, GEMA etc. And I am seconded from Missions Interlink for half my time to the World Evangelical Alliance, where I have served as the Executive Director of the Mission Commission, which sits within the WEA’s Global Witness department, from 2020.

1. Dynamic Momentum

The theme of the 2023 Global Mobilization Network Conference is “Dynamic Momentum” and there seems to be a certain expectation that we all understand what that phrase means. In a previous presentation, Dr Ferdinand Nweke (Coordinator for Eternity Ministries) helpfully provided a mathematical explanation of momentum (which by its very definition is dynamic). In short, it is “mass in motion”. While the meaning is universally understood, there might an assumption that we are singularly minded about the objective or direction of the momentum we seek to build in support of God’s mission.

Wanting to generate momentum is all well and good, but we must ensure that we are creating it in the *right* direction.

One of my Māori fathers in the Lord likes to say, “a point of view is a view from a point” and what I am about to present is my point of view, from where I stand. And where you stand will always determine what you see. Shift your *perspective* and you see a bit differently (pun intended). As a veteran mobilizer I have moved on from some of the convictions I used to have, which some of you may still have. But it can be very healthy to sit in the tensions of difference, to live with the discomfort of differing perspectives. Because I believe it is in such tensions that new innovations emerge.

And so let us begin... Are you able to complete this phrase: “Houston...”

“Houston, we have a problem” is a paraphrase of the comment from the Apollo 13 astronaut when the mission encountered a potentially catastrophic problem. In our case, in our ‘mission’ I refer to a problem that has been brewing for some time but, like most things, the global pandemic has greatly accelerated it. It’s not a problem for God’s mission or even the global Church, but it is a problem for missions—plural, our human response to the purposes of God. I reserve mission-

singular for God’s purposes and missions-plural for the activities we do in response to our understanding or our interpretation of God’s purposes.

I believe we have a mobilization problem that we can simply no longer ignore. And it is this: **the greatest problem with Missions Mobilization today is that we are in danger of motivating and equipping believers for a world that no longer exists.** Furthermore, our vision of God’s mission is far too narrow and stops short of the fulness of God’s purposes for the world.



Like Apollo 13, I believe the traditional global missions community is veering off course and venting oxygen (i.e., losing life-giving resources).

(Remember, my primary motivation is to strengthen participation in God’s mission. My intention here is to strengthen, not undermine.)

It is an undeniable fact that in spite of increased mobilisation efforts in traditional missionary sending nations, the number of missionaries in longer-term service continues to track downward. For example, in New Zealand alone, with the worldwide highest rate of missionaries sent per capita in the 1970s, we have experienced a net-loss of 1,000 missionaries from foreign field service in the past two decades—and that’s after a big spike in missions recruitment in the 1990’s early 2000’s largely because of the *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* course. So, we have dropped from about 1700 in the year 2000 to around just 700 foreign missionaries today.

These diminishing returns for the traditional missions community are symptoms of some massive change. A change that is creating seismic shifts in attitudes and resource allocation for missions. **I predict new sending nations will follow a similar trajectory with regard to old sending models**—especially as their middle class starts to disappear. Over the past 220 years, the cross-cultural missions activity has tended to track with the development (or devolution) of the middle class in societies with sufficient numbers of believers.

We could “double down” on old convictions and work harder at trying to motivate more involvement, with more prayer, more training, more effort, but I think we will continue to see diminishing returns if we don’t urgently realign ourselves. Are we actually channelling our resources in the right direction?

I suggest the former paradigm of missions is no longer fit for purpose. The world has changed and, with Isaiah 43:18-21, the Spirit of God is doing a new thing, but are we perceiving it? Are we noticing the unchangeable nature and purposes of God being embraced and worked out in new ways in new contexts?

My suspicions about these changes were somewhat validated in 2021 when I joined a Zoom event during the lock downs. We were separated into break-out groups and encouraged to share what God was doing in each of our spheres of influence. One US American fellow, in his late 30’s or early 40’s shared how he had been mobilized, took his family with him through seminary missionary training, got recruited to a missions agency, hit the fundraising trail, moved to the location of their people group of choice and started learning language and culture learning.

After three years they went home on furlough and cast the vision for how they were finally ready to activate the church planting strategy they had been planning over the years to reach their ‘target people’...

Back on the field they began looking for their person of peace, only to discover that person after person was already part of an underground movement of Jesus followers. A church planting movement had been birthed that he had no idea about and he lived right there among them for years! By the fact that those people are still considered ‘unreached’, I’m guessing very few know about that movement even still.

This husband and father of two children looked straight at us on screen with a pained expression, and said something to the effect of, “...they don’t want me, an outsider, involved. It’s too risky for them. I just don’t know what to do with my life anymore.” I saw tears in his eyes. He seemed to be experiencing an existential crisis. As a mobilizer, I sat back in my chair thinking, ‘we sold him a lie’.

I no longer believe that focusing on task first, will release the power of the global church in fulfilment of the promise of God to fill the earth with the glory of God. The purposes of God will be better fulfilled when we focus on who we are our collective maturity in Christ—inputs before outputs. **Focus on faithfulness and fruitfulness follows.**

2. A New Era

We desperately need to reimagine our understanding of God’s mission because a big part of mobilization is teaching, and as it says in James 3:1 there is a stricter judgement for teachers. We are not simply enthusiasts encouraging people to get with the programme. We are teachers and we are influencing peoples’ life trajectories. That’s a heavy responsibility, do not take it lightly.

We need great spiritual discernment. Have you ever noticed that for every 1 cross-cultural minister in Scripture, there are likely thousands of believers in local fellowships that never moved beyond their towns and cities? It’s too easy to focus on the exceptions and make them the rule. We are all called to follow, to abide, to obey. We are NOT all called to serve beyond our culture of origin. I’d suggest those who perceive such a conviction from Scripture do so because they have received the spiritual gift or grace to serve in such a way. Cross cultural ministry is not for every believer any more than martyrdom or celibacy is a spiritual gift for everyone. That is not to diminish those who ARE genuinely gifted for such service, just to emphasize that it is a gift, not a general rule.

I say this because I have sat in too many member care situations with missionaries who responded enthusiastically to calls to “Go...”—and went without a call to go, or at least the giftedness for such a ministry. At times this has had devastating results for the wellbeing of the missionaries and their families. Again, we need to allow the weight of our influence to sit heavy on our shoulders.

A very unhelpful and unbiblical fallacy is the idea that if you are not serving or supporting cross-cultural ministry in some way, you are being disobedient to God. If you think that cross-cultural ministry is the only means of serving God’s mission, you’re not reading Scripture well enough. God has 2.6 Billion—BILLION—people faithfully following Jesus and witnessing to the gospel in their everyday lives as best as they know how. We greatly dishonour them if we accuse them of living in disobedience. More importantly, we are diminishing the Spirit of God by thinking that the Spirit can’t move them into service without our help. They might need more guidance, more education and encouragement to be salt and light more effectively, but let’s not suggest they are anything less than beloved of God.

One of the issues that is veering us off course and consuming our precious life-giving resources is that we have become far too anthropocentric—too human centred. We think God’s mission is something that WE need to do, otherwise it won’t get done. By “we” I mean



the expatriate missions community. We presume to think that God has made plain a plan and that all that remains is for us to do it.

While there is some truth to that, we must never forget that it is God's plan and God is actually working that out. If COVID-19 showed us anything it is how minuscule and impotent our grand strategies and plans actually are. David Bosch has written that the Holy Spirit is the Director of Mission, but some of us act like the Director has been made redundant and we're now in charge. This is what is known as functional Deism. God has left the planet and left us to complete the task. But that couldn't be further from the truth and my Zoom friend's testimony and millions of believers in new movements proves it—the Spirit is very much active and growing the Kingdom of God even when we're all locked down. We need to return to being Pneumacentric—putting the Holy Spirit in the centre, in charge. And we need to realise that God's mission is far larger than the reduced version we've been marketing for the past 50 years.

Australian missiologist Michael Frost makes this point in his fabulous new book, "Mission is the Shape of Water". He rightly states that,

The exact shape and contours of the mission of God's people is fluid. It's like water. It is determined by the container into which it's poured. It will take different shapes depending on the culture in which it is being presented. And throughout history it has been shaped differently, depending on the challenges and interests of people in each epoch.

We are now in a new era of missions. Earlier this year the Mission Commission held a Global Consultation in this very city to explore that very issue under the title of "Our Missions Future". I won't elaborate on that further. You can find a written review on our website here: <https://bit.ly/GC23-Report>.

As I consider the eras or epochs of missions in global Church history, from the perspective of World Christianity, not just Euro-centric Christianity, I see modern missions epochs falling into three categories: At, To, and With. The middle category being quite a brief epoch in comparison. My explanations are far too brief and may read like a caricature of reality, but I have attempted to strike at the essence of core underlying motivations as best as I can discern from a wide reading of history.

"*Missions At*" describes the Colonial era, where European missionaries came with the strong assumption that they were a superior race, the bosses come to bring the 3-C's: Christianity, Civilization and Commerce to

ignorant beasts who were barely considered people. For many there was also compassion, but it tended to be tinged with an unhealthy dose of condescension and a lot of retention of control.

Condescension continued with "*Missions To*". After World War II the arrogance of European colonialism quickly waned, and missions activities became developmental. The paternalism of the past was downplayed with the sense that the infantile heathen were maturing into adolescence and therefore could be trusted with more. Not wanting to be seen as bosses, missionaries took on something of a teacher or consultant vibe, which still put them in the superior position but with a little less control—or, let's say, control at more of a distance. The very word 'empower' implies that you are giving someone else authority to act. We need to be very cautious of how we use that word because it implies that we are the source of that power and are delegating it to others, when in fact we are not. In the new era expatriates actually need to remove our power from the situation.

I believe we have now entered a "*Missions With*" epoch. This is "our missions future". Cross-cultural missionaries are much more appreciative of the maturity of those they are joining in missions service. There is a growing awareness of the need for deep collaboration and shared participation in missions activities between expatriates and locals. But the condescension and control of resources stubbornly remains. We can do a lot better with letting the locals lead. In this era, the expatriate or outsider becomes more peripheral to missions activities and at best helps to enable (rather than empower) locally inspired innovations that will bear witness to the whole gospel and multiply faithful disciples. It is an era of much greater Philippians 2 humility, where we empty ourselves of our privileges, preferences, and power and instead sacrificially serve the purposes of God in a foreign locality. I call this sort of thing "mutuality as missions". And I believe it is this for this reality that we should be training those with a genuine giftedness to serve cross-culturally.

Below is a diagrammatic representation of the life we are all called to lead as disciples (*fig.1*), as witnesses, as obedient followers of Christ revealed in Scripture. I believe it can help strengthen our participation in the full mission of God. I call it the Mission Cycle—again because it is God's mission (singular), not our missions (plural), that is central to this perspective.

One way of understanding God's mission is to view it as extending God's influence in the world, helping the world to see the benefits of God's rule and access those benefits through total allegiance to Jesus. Another way

The Mission Cycle

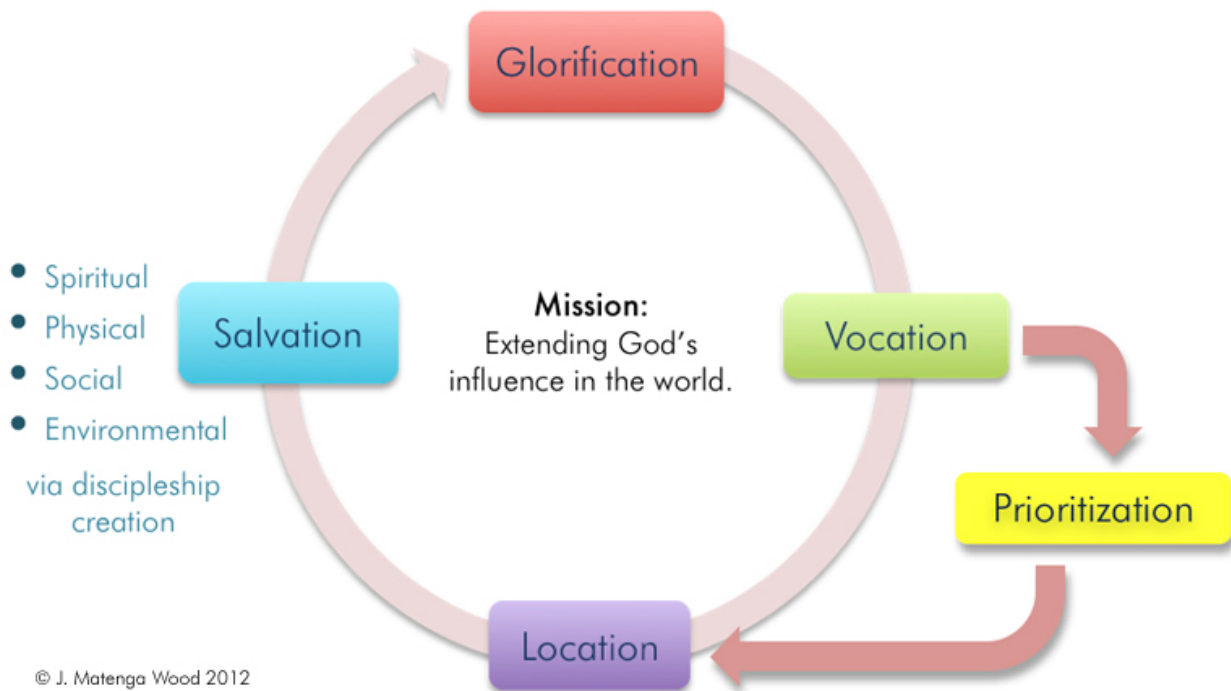


Fig. 1

of talking about this is “New Creation”, with our responsibility to manifest New Creation in our contexts. It’s like creating a movie trailer, providing a taster, a teaser of the main event that is to come. This is the Kingdom of God made manifest. Now but not yet. And, extremely briefly, this is how we are all called to do that...

We always start (and end) with **Glorification**—with worship. Worship is a very big topic we don’t have time to go into but suffice it to say it involves our entire personal, familial, communal, vocational, societal, and environmental lived experience.

Next, we move to **Vocation**. This is our unique contribution, applying our unique personalities, strengths, and talents to the betterment of our worlds. It encompasses our sense of purpose and giftedness. I echo other mobilisers’ appeals that we need to help 2.6 billion followers of Jesus around the world to better understand their roles as light bearing witnesses to God, wherever the Spirit of God has them to reside.

And so we move on for the moment to **Location**. God places us in places for God’s purposes. Some of us never move, but we cannot say that God has not ordained that to be so. Our place is hugely significant for us as people. It shapes who we are and gives meaning to our existence.

Finally, we find ourselves glorifying God with a vocation in a location so that we might be agents of **Salvation** there. Not that we save, but that we testify to the One who saves.

And this salvation has a whole-of-life impact as we help people mature as disciples, as part of the family of God, even as we are maturing in-Christ ourselves, always working for and giving glory to God, which closes the circle. Note carefully that the task is not finished when the gospel is planted in a place. It has only begun! We’ve just got people to the threshold. The mission of God is to take them beyond the threshold to live out New Creation as a positive influence on their societies. If all we are focused on is getting people to the threshold of atonement, to convert, our “finish the task” paradigm is much too small!

Now, where we tend to be most concerned as mobilizers is that yellow box between vocation and location. In some ways our role is to act as a prophet—a prophet-teacher perhaps, still judged strictly. We can unsettle even as we instruct, as we challenge people to go to GOD (not to us) and take stock of their priorities before God.

So, the disrupter there is **Prioritization**. And the mobilisation question I ask people is, “is there something



The Motivation Cycle

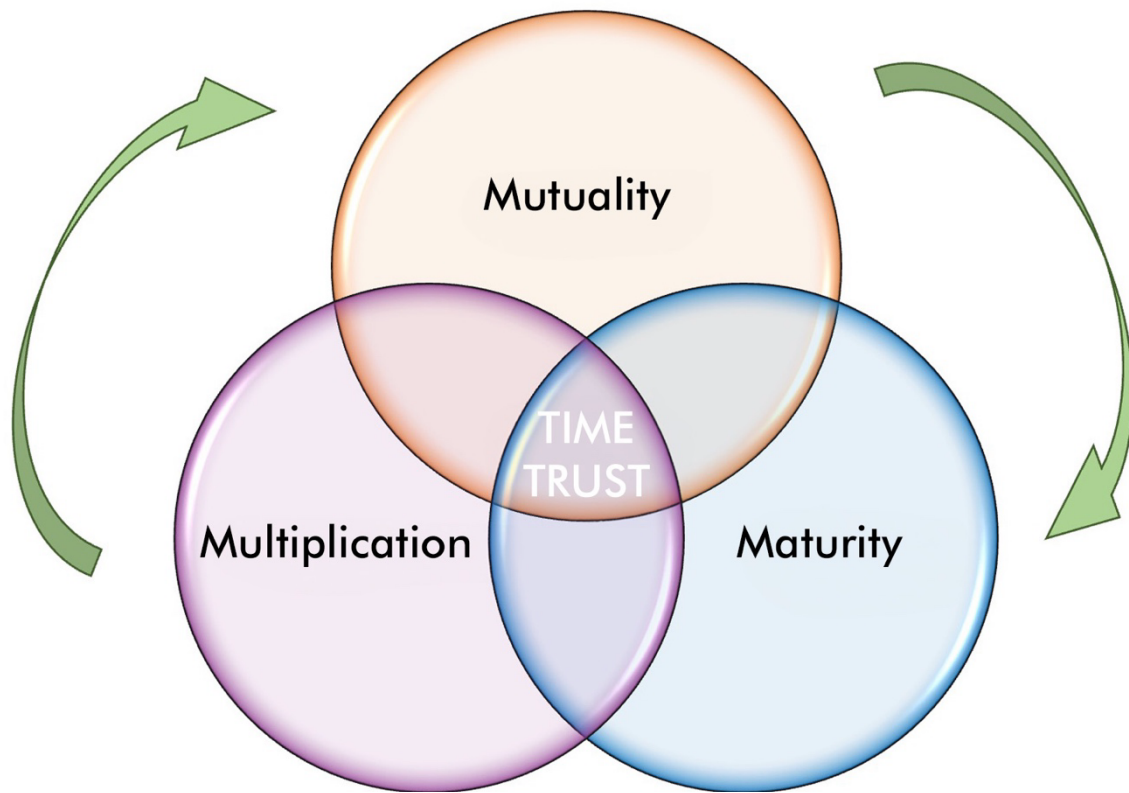


Fig. 2

in your life that is holding you to your location, which could be considered idolatrous?”

Be careful with this though, because it is too easy to lay an unhealthy and unhelpful guilt trip on people. Yet sometimes disruption can be the very thing that awakens the missionary calling on some peoples’ lives. But not everyone, remember. It is a unique gift.

3. Aligning Motivations

So. As I start my descent and bring this in to land, I believe we need to reimagine mobilization as a ministry that equips the local church globally to be effective witnesses wherever God calls them to dwell. To marshal resources toward co-creating New Creation in a way that positively influences their societies and habitats and beyond. And this will be a training ground for some to be sent as trans-boundary co-labourers, co-creating New Creation in foreign places, with local believers in the lead. **Focus on faithfulness and fruitfulness follows.**

Shoulds and oughts are no longer motivating new generations. In fact, it probably repels them. By should and oughts I mean guilt trip type of motivation to encourage missions involvement. But if we don’t resort to what I call “Industrial ‘unfinished task’ language—like

“we *ought* to be finishing a task”—what will motivate people to participate in the important and urgent need for the gospel to be seeded where it is currently least accessible?

The key to that question is to better understand the purposes of God as revealed in Scripture and why God has given us the privilege of participating. As I said, belief in, and penitent allegiance to Jesus is just the threshold. The full purposes of God lie on the other side of that cross-shaped portal. Life lies beyond, in the life and influence of the community of God’s people in-Christ that we commonly call the local church.

Strip away all the institutional scaffolding and **at base we are all called into a new covenantal community in-Christ to co-create New Creation**, and in the process, we are being transformed by the renewing of our mind as we live lives of mutual submission to one another in obedience to the leading of the Spirit of God.

A better motivation for ministry beyond the direct influence of a local church in my view is a focus on maturity. Ministry beyond our place of origin and our people is a fast-track to maturity. Transformative personal & relational development is amplified in cross-cultural missions like no other context, and the global

Church needs to value that as a rich prize. We should all be pursuing maturity. With what little we are told in Scripture, it would be difficult to argue that this was a primary motivator for the first Apostles, but it is most certainly the motivator that James, Paul, Peter, John, and the writer to Hebrews passed on to the Church. And, contrary to some opinions, cross-cultural missionaries are not Apostles in the biblical sense. That is claiming far too much authority, especially for expatriate missionaries.

If we are to see maturity as a prime motivator for believers engage in cross-cultural ministry (whether in their own context or further afield), we need to understand how a pursuit of maturity can strengthen participation in God’s mission. Once again, above I have presented it in a cyclical diagram (fig. 2) to help us make the connections. My time is rapidly running out, so I will just introduce the main concept.

The process starts with *Mutuality*. That is, mutual submission in committed community in-Christ with people different from ourselves. Culturally diverse missions groups are a great context for this! I could show you from the start of James’ epistle that persevering in diversity accelerates our maturity in Christ. In Ephesians 4, Paul tells us that becoming mature in the Lord and “measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ” is the ultimate objective for us as disciples in our diverse faith communities. And it is there that we co-create New Creation, otherwise known

as the shalom kingdom of God (if you haven’t yet tuned into the terminology). We do not individually become new creations (as some interpret 2 Corinthians 5:17). No, we participate in co-creating New Creation. New Creation has come. This is an important distinction. And as we participate as citizens of New Creation, we are transformed in the process, sanctified if you will.

This new community, this New Creation, is what Jesus prayed for in John 17:18-26, which I call the Great Commitment. And when the world sees this, they will not only believe (i.e. find credible), but they will also know, (i.e. personally experience), the impact or reality of the shalom Kingdom New Creation that we live in and out as Christ-followers. Thereby, as in Acts 2:33-47, the mutuality that generates *maturity* will lead to attractional *multiplication* through demonstration, explanation, and invitation to join... in expansive ways to the ends of the earth, just as Jesus promised.

But. See the centre point of the diagram? This all takes *time* because it is a process of *trust*-building. **Focus on faithfulness and fruitfulness follows.**

It cannot be rushed. It is a relationship process and I believe a better interpretation of Scripture than a missional hermeneutic, is a relational hermeneutic. We will be far more effective in participating in the purposes of God if we read Scripture through a relationship lens. We don’t have time to explore that further, except to say that mobilisation should be highly relational too.

Conclusion

In our book, “[Mission in Motion: Speaking Frankly of Mobilization](#)”, after all the data was collected from 9 regions of the world, thousands of pages of transcript, a chunk of it translated from languages other than English, we could only identify one common denominator that the vast majority of people interviewed pointed to that was a catalyst for their involvement in missions (whatever they understood missions to be).

That single most common factor? A nascent (that is, undeveloped) irresistible, supernatural sense of call to serve God in a context they were not familiar with. We go on to say that, “We are not suggesting that a calling is only ever an independent supernatural event, but rather that the mechanics of an institutionalized mobilization process with its plans, systems, strategies, and devices are not, first and foremost, the mechanisms through which people are awakened to mission(s).”

Rather, we concluded, the thing that accelerates missions flame rather than retards it, that adds life-giving resource to the fulfilment of God’s purposes, is prayer. Prayer is like oxygen to the purposes of God. Not prayer according to *our* will or plans or convictions (anthropocentric), but aligned with God’s will, with what God is doing (pneumacentric). We must be very careful to ensure we align with God’s priorities not ours. As I wrote on the last page of the book...

For the fire of mission
God’s Spirit is flame
prayer is oxygen
actions are fuel
influence is felt.

We need to reimagine mobilisation with a fresh orientation to God’s mission and our participation in it for a new era.

- To align our motivations with Scripture that sees and pursues the benefits of relational maturity in-Christ.
- To trust the Holy Spirit to raise up workers uniquely gifted for cross-cultural service (not coerced into it).



- To wisely discern who those people are and help them along the way.
- To persevere in our calling as disciples, as witnesses to the reconciling goodness of God through our culturally diverse common unity in-Christ.
- To use our blessings to be a blessing with all peoples for all people.
- **Focus on faithfulness and fruitfulness follows.**

Since the call is supernatural and not something we can manufacture, we must pray and mobilise prayer that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven—in our day, in our contexts, and especially among those who have little or no access to the gospel.

Amen.

Arohanui ki a koutou e haere ana ki te ao koe. Much love to you all as you go into your world.