



# The Mutuality Mandate

## Together in the Missio Dei

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*COVID-19 has given the global missions community a great pause for thought and an opportunity for emerging missions thinking to accelerate its influence and lead us into a new way of practicing missions in the era ahead. In this presentation, Jay articulates how a reorientation of our Biblical understanding of missions can help reframe our practice of missions. He anchors his thoughts on John 17:18-26, a passage that he calls *The Great Commitment*. From here, he argues that our loving unity, integrated into God in-Christ, is the only strategy for our participation in the mission of God that Jesus ever gave. It is by this that the world will believe and know that the Father lovingly sent the Son, and by this the Father is glorified.*

**T**he Apostle Paul often addressed ethnic tensions within the fellowships to which he wrote. To the Ephesians he noted that Jesus neutralised hostilities that emerge out of deeply embedded prejudices. If he were writing Ephesians 2:14-18 to an audience today, he might have written it thus...

*For Christ has made shalom possible. Those allegiant to him, from a vast diversity of backgrounds, are brought into unity as one people. By his sacrificial obedience, he tore down the barriers of prejudice between us, ending all criteria for legalistic judgmentalism. Instead, he invites us into his presence to participate in God's shalom together as one people of God, a new humanity. As covenantal communities in-Christ, our relationship with God and one another is harmonized. Our basis for hostility is ended. The good news is that this shalom experience is now available to those who are distant from him and those who are near. By the power of the Holy Spirit sent from him, we who are in-Christ all enjoy access to the Father, with whom we dwell in integrated mutuality.*

## Introduction

From my base in Auckland New Zealand, I serve the World Evangelical Alliance as the Director of the Global Witness department and simultaneously as the Executive Director of the WEA's Mission Commission, which is a subset of the Global Witness Department. I am seconded to the WEA for half of my time from Missions Interlink, the missions alliance in New Zealand which I also lead. It's a sister organisation to Global Connections UK. As you might imagine I have a few balls in the air at any one time!

If I were to put a label on myself to define my best contribution to God's mission, I'd probably nail it down to being a theologian of missions practice. My particular passion is to help navigate the way forward for missions in the new era ahead of us—one that's been emerging for some time, but accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis.

If I were to trace my discontent with current missions practice, I would point to my time at All Nations Christian College (ANCC). I studied my MA there in 1997/98 and Dr David Burnett took me under his wing.

He pointed me to theories about group development that were radically unconventional for missions research in its day. But what I learned then remains foundational to my ministry to this day. The subject matter is now emerging in the mainstream and finding stiff resistance among some sectors of conservative evangelicalism. I remember Dave telling me that it takes about 20 years for novel ideas in academia to emerge as popular thinking. He was more or less spot on if the philosophical roots of post-colonialism and critical race theory are anything to go by.

## 1. Mission/s Defined

My time at ANCC set me on a path of critical engagement with what we understand mission and missions to be. I use the terms very purposefully. I follow Hartenstein and Barth in viewing mission singular as God's self-revelation, the articulation of the character of God, with an invitation from God to participate in the self-giving life of God in-Christ. This, of course, is also known as the "missio Dei". Mission singular.



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Then there are missions, plural. These represent human activities that flow from our intention to participate in the mission of God in a given time and context.

Personally, I reserve missions plural terminology for transboundary service that is somewhat organisationally constrained. Service beyond the directive influence of the local church. Service within the directive influence of the local church I consider to be, well, ministry.

I think it is unreasonable to expect the whole church to be involved in missions plural, but I do believe, by our very nature, that all believers are participants in the *missio Dei*. I contend that only *some* are called to be transboundary servants. Transboundary service is a gift from God, like celibacy or martyrdom—it's not for everyone.

Lesslie Newbigin observed this in *The Gospel In A Pluralist Society*, where he states, "One searches in vain through the letters of St. Paul to find any suggestion that he anywhere lays it on the conscience of his readers that they ought to be active in mission(s)" (I interpret Newbigin as meaning missions plural). Service beyond the directive influence of the local church is a specialist role, deserving of support, but it need not be the lot or primary concern of every follower of Christ.

I try to keep these concepts of mission and missions separate. I acknowledge that the terminology of mission, missions and missionary is mired in contention. The terms were born out of a Christendom colonial impulse and are still tainted by that.

In his prologue to *Transcending Mission*, Michael Stroope observes "mission language forms particular ideals and notions that shape identity and purpose, that determines why and how we act". Stroope eventually expresses a desire to drop the terms altogether. However, I believe they remain functionally useful when reasonably defined.

I open with this semantic explanation because I want to affirm a different way of understanding our participation in the purposes of God for the new era that I see emerging. How are we to understand and live out the *missio Dei* in our day and in all contexts?

## 2. Mission/s Reframed

In *Missional Theology*, John R Franke observes that mission singular is, "an attribute of God, an essential element of the divine character... (therefore) it will never come to a conclusion and must continue throughout eternity. This eternal mission has its origin in the life of God who from all eternity has been in an active relationship involving the giving, receiving, and sharing of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit".

And we are invited to participate in that loving community as part of our being in-Christ.

This is quite the departure from our salvation-oriented perspective, where missions for some is limited to activities that get people 'over the line' and into the Kingdom of God. No, this framing of mission and missions continues far beyond that to include our very life in-Christ eternally, sharing in Christ's loving communion with the Father and the Spirit.

In agreement with Stroope, if we can conceive of our participation in the mission of God in fresh, biblically authentic ways, we can start to reshape the definition, identity, purpose and activities of our missions.

To that end, I believe we need to shift the anchor of our evangelical missions narrative from Matthew 28:18-20 to John 17:18-26. From what has been popularised as the Great Commission, to what I consider to be the Great Commitment. By doing so I believe we will successfully reorient the practice of missions from a Biblically questionable task-focus to a biblically defensible relationship-focus.

For example, Matthew 24:14 would cease to be read as an objective but return to its rightful place as a promise that God will fulfil. Agency for missions shifts from being anthropocentric to theocentric—or, more specifically, pneumacentric. It will prompt a shift from a colonial and industrial expansionist perspective to an indigenous governance perspective. From imposition to invitation... and so the binaries could continue. But I don't want to emphasize the either/or. Rather, I desire to articulate something I believe is better fit for purpose according to the biblical narrative and the needs of the era ahead of us.

In John 17:18 Jesus prays to the Father, "Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world" and Jesus proceeds to articulate *how* the Father sent the Son. We need not look elsewhere for the how. And we dare not interpret the John 20:21 restatement of this apart from what Jesus prayed earlier in this Great Commitment passage. The Father sent the Son in integrated loving unity, and this expression of unity between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit brings glory to the Father. And so we are sent into the world, wherever we find ourselves living, as participants in this integrated loving unity—and *as we do so* the world will notice. The world will believe because they see evidence of it, and the world will know, because they experience the positive impact of it, that the Father lovingly sent the Son.

### 3. Mission/s Outworked

It is by our Holy Spirit enabled, integrated loving unity, a reflection of the loving unity within the God-community, that we are witnesses testifying to the Lordship of Christ and the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. And it is precisely our loving unity that glorifies the Father.

As Lesslie Newbigin notes in *The Gospel In A Pluralistic Society*, “Mission is an acted out doxology. That is its deepest secret. Its purpose is that God may be glorified”. Newbigin may not have specifically had this in mind, but I believe Paul helps us understand how our missions mutuality relates to worship in Romans 12:1-2.

In the context of the chapter, book, and other epistles, I believe Paul is telling his readers that our self-denying one-anotherness is the living sacrifice that is holy and acceptable to God as true worship. We can worship God no more effectively than through our mutual obedience to Christ’s teaching that we love one another as the Father loves us in-Christ, because by doing so we affirm that God is love... And that, is the source and purpose of the mission of God.

If we are demonstrating the reality of the gospel in this way, our evangelism becomes the simple act of providing an explanation for why such unity in diversity is possible. Again, Newbigin observes, “almost all the proclamations of the gospel which are described in Acts are in response to questions asked by those outside the Church”. This is a phenomenon that continued beyond Biblical period, as Alan Kreider shows in his book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*.

As part of our explanation of this demonstration we then extend an invitation to those not in-Christ to join us through their penitent allegiance to Christ. What we commonly call ‘salvation’, then, is an invitation to belong. As Dallas Willard suggests, this is a soteriology of attachment—our new connection to God in-Christ and to one another is our deliverance.

Our loving commitment to one another in-Christ is both the objective of the *missio Dei* and the *only* strategy for our witness to the world and our discipling of nations that Jesus gave to his disciples and (crucially) those of us following after them. Where it could be debated that in Matthew 28:19 Jesus was only commissioning those disciples with him to go into all the world, there is no debate in John 17:20 that he’s sending all of us into the world to live out our loving mutuality with one another in-Christ.

### 4. Mission/s Extended

Transboundary missions practitioners will argue, “That’s all well and good, but what about the remaining billions who lack adequate access to the gospel and do not see this loving mutuality worked out to the benefit of their societies?” A fair point. That is why God calls and gifts *some* Christ followers with both the yearning and the ability to cross boundaries to serve God’s purposes elsewhere.

Such servants need to be identified, equipped and supported from their in-Christ communities and service organisations should continue to help them go and thrive while away from their home communities. We now live in a globalized and globally connected world, so I do not expect transboundary service to cease. However, we could do with new ways to integrate and support them.

While it may be normative to participate in the mission of God via local covenantal communities in-Christ, I serve the non-normative transboundary missions community. It is my great delight to serve in that space because in transboundary service you experience a greater degree of diversity. People from everywhere going to everywhere with a heart to demonstrate and explain the love of God in practical ways wherever they land. Serving alongside people from different nations and the host nation amplifies the challenges of living together in loving mutuality in-Christ, but it is precisely this experience that also amplifies the potency of our witness, and the transformation of our being. Our intercultural mutuality demonstrates to the world that Christ has indeed pulled down the barriers of hostility between us.

That’s not to say it’s easy, but it is possible to truly love one another in non-prejudicial common unity. Tensions don’t just magically disappear in-Christ. On the contrary, the epistles are written specifically into situations where the tensions of difference is present.

But we have to realise we cannot have harmony without tension. It is a musical fact. You cannot strike a harmonic on a stringed instrument until it is properly tuned under tension. As we dwell together, the Holy Spirit tunes us, and in kenotic fashion we need to yield to the Spirit’s turning of the screws, helping us to live in perpetual reconciliation. But it is precisely that, James says, that matures us. The more diversity, the more maturity. Transboundary servants need to hold on to this beneficial outcome as they experience their growing pains with one another. The growth that awaits us at the end of the process should be considered cause for great joy!



## 5. Mission/s Shared

As we have discovered during this COVID-19 crisis, traditional transborder missions have been greatly hindered, but the mission of God has not ceased. This has reinforced the realisation that the life and love of God, the mission of God, is best manifest through indigenous expressions of the faith.

Lamin Sanneh flipped the script when he identified that Christianity spreads globally through “indigenous

discovery” more than by expatriate discipling. We are now firmly in an era where Christ is represented to varying degrees in every region of the world, and certainly available via globally accessed media.

A Great Commitment perspective of loving mutuality reorients transboundary service from us-to-them to an us-with-them journey of collaborative service, helping the gospel flourish locally, indigenously.

## Conclusion

In sum, this is “The Mutuality Mandate” of the mission of God. Living and loving together as participants of covenantal communities in-Christ that glorify God. Wherever two or more gather, there such a community can be identified. The mutuality mandate holds whether it is a micro-community, an organised community we identify as a local church, a macro community such as a national or international ministry, or a transboundary community such as a cross-cultural missions group.

Whether interpersonally or inter-organisationally, every relationship we have with others in-Christ should be marked by our self-denying, kenotic, reciprocated loving mutuality—where we contribute the best of our giftedness and celebrate the unique grace of God that others bring into the collaborative relationship. Where we maintain the unity of the Spirit by our bonded commitment to God’s shalom. Where our loving mutuality flows out from us into the environments and societies around us, calling for justice and the restoration of right relationships, in radical collaboration for interpersonal, social, political, economic and environmental harmony.

As the *missio Dei* expresses the eternal love of God extended into the world, so that love is spread through our love for one another, as a shalom humanity. As we do so, then the world will believe and know that the Father lovingly sent the Son. Amen.

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