



'Post'-Pandemic Possibilities

For Positive Missions Practice

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The pandemic may have locked down the world, but God's mission continues. In this transcript Jay recalls the indigenous spread of the Christian faith throughout history and affirms local expressions of the faith as having the most positive potential for societal wellbeing. He introduces Indigenous and Industrial as two complementary values systems in the world and calls the global missions community into a new era of integrated cooperation for the sake of God's glory beyond the boundaries of local church influence.

In the gospel of John, chapter 17 verse 18 Jesus prays to His father, "Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world". From verse 18 through to verse 26 is what I call, "The Great Commitment", in the hope that we are able to reframe our understanding of missions for a new era, rooted in the means of the Father's mission made evident in this passage and illustrated throughout the New Testament. The means of the Father's mission to be glorified in all the earth? Our oneness.

Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic Pause has provided the global evangelical church with an opportunity to positively re-orient our missions practice—from an impositional impulse to an indigenous initiative.

While the pithy theme of this OMSC Mission Leaders' Forum is: "Mission Post-Pandemic", my interpretation of it is, "missions following the advent of COVID-19". Here's why. At the risk of being pedantic, "mission" singular never changes. As affirmed by eminent missiologists such as David Bosch and Chris Wright, mission singular is the mission of God and it is therefore unaffected by world events. Missions plural are our human attempts to interpret and serve God's mission in our respective contexts of influence.

So, there is no 'after the pandemic' difference for the mission of God. As for the missions of Christ's disciples, we have no way of knowing when 'after the pandemic' will be. The latest US National Intelligence Report¹ projects that the COVID-19 event will continue affecting the world out to 2040 and beyond. Their word summarising our global future? "Contested". But the idea of post-pandemic should really be irrelevant for us. COVID-19 has happened, is still happening and it will continue to happen well into the future. We must fully engage that reality and adapt—not sit on our passports and wait for it to be over so that we can go back to our positions of control over whatever normal was.

That world no longer exists. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is this: that our sense of control was an illusion.

Having said that, I do want to *positively* frame some significant shifts in missions thinking that I see emerging out of the crisis. I will briefly present these as two fern fronds. These are not new things. The pandemic has merely disrupted the environment long enough for these things to unfurl. Their roots run deep.

As the neo-liberal economist Milton Friedman observed in 1982², "Only a crisis (actual or perceived) produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around." While this crisis has permanently disrupted Friedman's economics, my two fronds encapsulate some ideas that have been lying around on the margins of mainstream missions praxis, and I believe now is their time to become mainstream. The two fronds are: Indigeneity and Integration. The issues are interrelated, emerging out of one rootstock into one fern bush if you will. My presentation of them is a temporary separation for the purposes of investigation, but they should never be fully separated from the whole... lest they die.

1. Indigeneity

1.1 Indigenous History of the Church

In their book, "Christianity As A World Religion"³, Sebastian and Kirsteen Kim dare to suggest that "the



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work of the missionaries who originally carried the message is *only the catalyst* for the local activity of its reception, dissemination and transformation in a new cultural and social context.” (italics mine).

They make an important observation that “Christianity is increasing among indigenous communities”. This thesis, established by numerous other scholars, is well supported by Todd Johnson and Gina Zurlo’s statistical research in the World Christian Encyclopedia. Furthermore, in concert with Lamin Sanneh, they prefer to concentrate on *the indigenous discovery* of Christianity rather than the Christian discovery of indigenous societies. The spread of Christianity in the world, therefore, is not an expatriate spread, it is indigenous.

This verifiable fact is born out among my own people from late 1830’s. It took the missionaries a few years to break ground, but once a handful of young indigenous acolytes received the gospel, they proceeded to spread it. “Te rongopai”, the gospel, spread like wildfire amongst Māori by Māori until, by the 1850s, at a minimum, 60% of Māori throughout the islands of Aotearoa New Zealand were followers of Jesus... That is, until the colonial settlers came, and English expressions of the faith began to dominate. Add to that settler land wars and uncontextualized colonial law, and the numbers began to diminish—at least in terms of established church attendance.

The faith that originally spread amongst Māori was an indigenous faith and it was increasingly condemned by colonial settler Christians. To borrow the phrase Thomas Hastings uses in his January 2021 IBMR editorial⁴, it did not meet the Protestant “orthodox consensus”⁵, but it was no less a biblically authentic faith—and one that viewed the ‘Christian’ settler’s behaviour as biblically substandard. I am among a new generation of Māori participating in the process of reindigenising the Way of Christ among Māori as part of an exercise of decolonising our theology.

This is just one of many stories of the polycentric reality that is global Christianity. What is happening afresh among my people, is just one example of the indigenisation of the faith over against what has become understood in mainstream evangelical missions as the “contextualisation” of the faith. When the Reverend Dr Shoki Coe coined the term contextualisation in the mid 1970’s⁶, it was supposed to facilitate a gospel-meets-culture dialogue. Sadly, in most missions praxis today, it has settled as an attempt to translate a foreign faith experience rather than allowing for the indigenisation of a native faith encounter. Indigenisation treats the gospel as what Dr Hastings calls a “first-order” encounter with the living God in-Christ and allows the knowledge of

God to grow within a group of people, governed by them and their growing relationship with Christ in their context, and in dialogue with Scripture and the rest of the global Church.

Expatriates need to accept the self-determination rights of local believers to be guardians of the gospel for themselves. And if this causes us to worry about the emergence of aberrant theology, we need to check the log in our own eyes, repent of our attitudes of superiority and condescension, and get comfortable with co-learning.

1.2 Indigenous Future of Missions

From the advent of COVID-19 we have been reminded afresh that any expatriate involvement in the *missio Dei* must be undertaken with a great deal of humility. All of our grand plans ground to a halt.

Yet the mission of God continues. It continues in local expressions of faith and the boundary crossing of the faithful, to witness to Christ in myriad practical ways to those outside of their faith communities. Remember, the growth of the Church in the world is indigenous—neighbour ministering life to neighbour. Often, as it is right now, in the midst of brutal hardships. The primary role of expatriates in the global missions community is to serve that reality: local, whole-of-life manifestations of faith in-Christ.

Since the early years of this 21st century, mainstream missions has been confronted by the emergence of large movements to Christ of people from other majority religions. Spectacular growth stories abounded, were contested and too often dismissed. Nevertheless, robust research is ongoing, such that we can have some confidence today, according to Justin Long from the Beyond missions organisation, that around 1% of the global population belongs to one of 1350 new Christ-following people movements out of another religion — effectively, indigenous expressions of Christianity.

When Jason Mandryk of Operation World⁷ asked me in March 2020 what I thought would be the impact of COVID-19 on global missions I suggested back then that the future of missions would be indigenous. Aside from the historic evidence, the reason I was and still am so confident in declaring this is because the world was shutting down and the borders were closing. Expatriate engagement was going to be greatly hindered. The situation is not much different now, a year later—in fact in many important ways it is worse, and the effects of the pandemic will keep getting worse, and we continue in global lament. Nevertheless, the mission of God continues, within the local context, pressing ever wider

in its influence out to a suffering world. Welcome to our hyper-local missions reality.

1.3 Indigenous Validation in Missions

Is boundary-crossing local ministry missions? Well, with all due respect to those debating the semantics of the concept, who are we to say that it is not?

My rendering of missions is that it's *the demonstration and explanation of the shalom Kingdom of God beyond the influence of a local church*. Within the influence of the local church, call it what you will: ministry, outreach, evangelism, it's all an outflow of the body-life of believers within a certain catchment, a parish.

Maybe for some, beyond the doors of the church building is considered missions, but I see missions as a transboundary ministry: the sending of someone with a recognised grace and authority to go beyond the boundaries of local church influence and introduce Jesus where He is not yet known.

All Christ-followers are sent into the world but being a transboundary servant of the gospel is not for everyone, any more than celibacy or martyrdom is for everyone. But such a person could be the believing second cousin of a clan that has no gospel witness. Or the Jesus-loving family moving into a block of flats in a multi-ethnic housing estate where there are few or no known believers and everyone's struggling with the effects of impoverishment. Let's not restrict the gifts of God to our understanding of how or where those gifts can be used. Missionary service is a gift to traverse boundaries for Christ, but not one limited to crossing ethno-linguistic lines or one that requires an expatriate experience.

While I have so far used the term "Indigenous" to refer to localised expressions of the faith, my working definition of indigenous is not narrowly limited to a group or its geography. Indigenous technically means "of the land", but I focus more on the values shared by indigenous people worldwide—collectivist-oriented values. This faintly echoes Ivan Illich's⁸ use of "convivial". Both Illich and I adopt the term Industrial to refer to those who share Western European individualist values traits in contrast to Indigenous collectivism. So, for me there are two types of people in the world: Industrial and Indigenous. I use these instead of the way missions currently uses Global North and Global South, or Western European Diaspora and Majority World etc. Except my categories are based on values rather than force-fit geography, economic disparity, or competing demographics. In light of this brief explanation, I am confident that in concert with the likes of Johnson, Zurlo, Andrew Walls and Philip

Jenkins, the dominant and future expression of global Christianity is Spirit-filled, group-oriented, honour-loving, and Indigenous.

Here is the possibility for positive missions practice from this point. COVID-19 has disrupted the flow of influence from Industrial or traditional missions sending nations, allowing a fresh confidence to emerge from Indigenous-background missionaries to take their lead in missions. To set the beat. As a result, we will see missions shift from transactional relationships and translated theological concepts, to covenantal relationships and a collective understanding of God in Christ. What has been happening on the margins of missions thinking for some time, will emerge as mainstream. And history suggests that it will flourish in the challenging new normal ahead.

2. Integration

Having emphasised the importance of the Indigenous experience of faith to the growth of the Church and introduced the Indigenous as a category defined by values that will be important for the future of missions, I want to take care not to diminish the important history and ongoing role of the Industrial world for missions.

2.1 Integrated Missions Community

Missions is not a zero-sum game. God gifts the entire Church with people called to transboundary service. And I love serving in missions because all over the world missions groups exist as glorious points of cultural convergence. Obedient Christ-followers find themselves outside of their comfort zones alongside Christ-followers from completely different comfort zones, usually ministering to a people not like themselves. The intercultural missions reality has servants of God struggling with one another and growing together as a diverse cultural mix, not conforming to the pattern of this world but living as witnesses to the perpetual reconciling power of God, so that the world will believe and know that the Father lovingly sent the Son.

From the late 1980's, we saw a dramatic shift in missions service, with the majority of missionaries participating from new sending nations. Yet the control of missions remained under a traditional sending nation paradigm. Again, that can be seen in terms of Global South new sending and Global North missions control; or, Majority World new sending and Western missions control. In a similar way, I suggest here that we have had a burgeoning Indigenous missions sending and an Industrial missions control.

Rather than continuing to set one against the other, I believe we need to counterpoint the two sets so that we



might work towards harmony in the interrelationship—because they are complementary, and we must always view and work with the people of God in-Christ as an integrated unity.

2.2 Integrated Missions Impulse

Kenneth Scott Latourette coined the term pulsations for his thesis of eras of missionary engagement that resulted in the growth of the church after a period of recession throughout history.

As the tide ebbs and flows to the pull of the moon, so Latourette proposed the Church grows to the pulse of the Spirit of God, perhaps diminishing in one place but spreading ever further elsewhere. Even as we have been talking in past decades, and more so recently, of an ebb to the modern missions movement that began some 220 years ago, a new pulsation can be discerned. It is Indigenous in its values and view of the world, and it is mobile—it is migrant.

While the formal global missions community experienced growth in its Indigenously-informed missionary force, largely thanks to a growing middle class in new sending nations, an informal missions movement has also been swelling as the Spirit of God uses circumstance and desire to move people to other parts of the world.

They may be seeking a better life, but Christ-following migrants bring their faith, forged in hardship, with them, and they have positive potential to plant or revitalise faith in Christ wherever they settle. But, like other expatriates, if they wish to influence their locality as any church should, they will need to adapt.

A corollary to mobile followers of Jesus are mobile followers of other religions being brought within the sound of church and chapel bell. The Spirit of God is bringing the nations to the neighbourhoods of existing churches, so that the shalom life of our in-Christ covenantal communities can flow out as a blessing to the newcomers.

The positive potential of these informal expressions of a missions impulse is dependent on one thing: xenophilia—the love for those not like us.

The border lock-downs of COVID-19 may have paused migration, but the desire to permanently relocate has potential to be a dam waiting to burst. The US National Intelligence Council believes that “During the next two decades, demographic shifts and economic incentives are likely to increase pressure for migration out of developing countries...”. Back in October 2020, I asked Sam George, Director of the Global Diaspora Institute at Wheaton’s Billy Graham Center, what affect the pandemic might have on migration and he felt strongly that it will be

similar to the affect it has had on other things—it will be an accelerant, at least once the borders open again.

The highway to xenophobia is homogeneity, the antidote is integrated diversity. Christ’s ideal for His people is interculturality — a hybridization emerging from the breaking down of the dividing walls of hostility created by diversity (see Ephesians 2:14). We are to be living sacrifices in our mutually reconciled relationships that transcend worldly boundaries, the interactions of which transform us by the renewing of our minds, as interpersonal neurobiology is now proving. As hybridized and integrated communities of disciples we do not conform to the pattern of this world but are witnesses to the world of the transforming power of the Spirit of God — so that they will believe and know that the Father lovingly sent the Son.

2.2 Integrated Missions Practice

The witness that emerges from our love for one another across the boundaries that separate the world, is intensely practical. It is our faith integrated in all parts of our communal life in-Christ and flowing out into our societies and environments to positive effect. This is an innate by-product of the local church that refuses spiritual escapism. It requires being open to and enacting Holy Spirit inspired solutions within our societies’ problems.

But it must start with us as proof of concept—believers banding together to provide evidence of a better way. COVID-19 has created havoc in societies all around the world and the dominant Industrial world is scrambling for solutions and coming up short concerning issues such as the environmental catastrophe, a tsunami of poverty, ethnic divisions, nationalisms, corruption, abuse of all kinds, despair, and a projected decline in wellbeing among all but the uber-wealthy.

The best hope being offered by the world is excarnational—retreating behind the digital walls of cyber reality; but a new kind of slavery awaits us there, colonising our lived realities. Where is the possible positive potential for missions in this quagmire? It is in embodied and cooperative covenantal communities In-Christ.

Business entities, based on Industrial assumptions of capital, contractual relationships, productivity and profit for a limited number of shareholders, will not pull those in impoverished contexts out of the sharp decline they are in. Philanthropic holders of capital have no hope of imagining how best to invest to stem the tide of poverty.

The relief and development industry has known for some time that the most effective way to foster sustainable growth in the wellbeing of societies is to let the locals lead. I refer to this posture as centring the local⁹. Rather than

bringing in externally controlled capital to produce local products for external markets, let's all turn our eyes to my compatriot and friend Professor Viv Grigg at William Carey International University and learn from his method of 'cooperative economics', crafted from years of involvement in impoverished urban contexts.

What better way to traverse the boundary of faith than by witnessing to the power of God as the people of God living cooperatively for the betterment of their entire society? Is this not the sort of attitude that led to the church growth of Acts 2:47? We have been told by Industrial theologians that it is a Biblical anomaly, not possible to achieve these days, or that it is one tainted by a particular political agenda. Others point spuriously to the Jerusalem famine in support of the impossibility of cooperative living, but the early church clearly believed that this was what the new shalom Kingdom of God expected. A jubilee with—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, of the same heart and mind, one spiritual, socio-political, economic, community in-Christ, locally expressed and not of this world.

The late Alan Krieder's "Patient Ferment"¹⁰ book is compelling in the way it reveals how the early church was

convinced that their persevering common unity would grow their numbers and spread the Kingdom to all nations in fulfilment of God's promised future. You could call this missions, but I see it as the core DNA of the church; its purpose within its sphere of influence, it's acceptable act of worship to God. Personally, I reserve missions for the catalytic witness of gifted ambassadors who serve where there is little or no understanding of the benefits of an allegiant relationship with our Lord, and plant seeds there that take on indigenous traits but retain the same core DNA.

Speaking of seeds, let us not forget our Genesis 1:28 mandate that obligates us to make creation care an integral part of our local shalom responsibilities. I have reflected on creation care issues elsewhere¹¹, and I don't have time to develop it or many other aspects of integrated, whole of life missions activities here. Suffice it to say, the global Church has multi-faceted local responsibilities, each according to our gifts, with poly-faceted missions possibilities awaiting us in a pandemic-ravaged world in great need of shalom solutions.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion. In light of the pandemic, what possibilities exist for positive missions practice? People possibilities. It is always people. Opportunities abound, but it is the people of God gifted and moved by the Spirit of God that harness potential for the glory of God.

The era of missions ahead of us must be highly collaborative and deeply relational, with upmost respect for and inclusion of locals as guardians of the gospel. Those uniquely gifted to traverse boundaries as specifically sent-ones will find themselves working together for God's glory to bring a whole-of-life shalom Kingdom witness where there is none. They each bring their skills and God-given gifts, honed in their respective backgrounds, into the mix. Together creating an interactive harmony through counterpointed relationship tension.

As we learn from tuning stringed instruments, you cannot maintain a harmonic without tension. So it is with Industrial and Indigenous relationships in missions. Tuning is hard work. We need to surrender assumptions. It takes a lot of dialogue. It means giving way. It requires perpetual reconciliation, out of which cooperative action flows. This is the integrated unity Jesus prays for in John 17. This is the Great Commitment, by which the world will believe and know that the Father lovingly sent the Son. In my reading of Scripture, this integrated unity is HOW the Father sent the Son and it's the only strategy for the mission of God that Jesus ever gave. God's mission continues and it is the shalom Kingdom come in myriad local expressions right in the midst of a raging pandemic.

'Arohanui haere ra ki a koutou' — much love to you all as you go. Amen.

Source Locations:

- 1 https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/GlobalTrends_2040.pdf
- 2 https://amazon.com/Capitalism-Freedom-Milton-Friedman-ebook-dp-B08KYHC6QV/dp/B08KYHC6QV/ref=mt_other?encoding=UTF8&me=&qid=1619243468
- 3 https://amazon.com/Christianity-as-World-Religion-Introduction-ebook/dp/B01M1HVC52/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Christianity+As+A+World+Religion&qid=1619243769&s=digital-text&sr=1-1
- 4 <https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/ibmd/45/1>
- 5 A phrase developed by Jaroslav Pelikan, a professor of Christian history at Yale.



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- 6 See "Mission Trends No.3: Third World Theologies". G.H.Anderson and T.F.Stransky (eds), Paulist, New York, 1976.
 - 7 <https://operationworld.org/publications/global-transmission-global-mission-free-ebook/>
 - 8 https://amazon.com/Deschooling-Society-I-Grandi-dellEducazione-ebook/dp/B00EQZF474/ref=sr_1_2?dchild=1&keywords=Deschooling+Society&qid=1619246212&s=digital-text&sr=1-2
 - 9 https://jaymatenga.com/pdfs/MatengaJ_CentringLocal.pdf
 - 10 https://amazon.com/Patient-Ferment-Early-Church-Christianity-ebook/dp/B012H1045K/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=1619248235&sr=8-1
 - 11 <https://jaymatenga.com/articles/sdg-reflections.pdf>