

The Theology of Mission in Contemporary Practice

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Six Imperatives

I take it to mean that “domestic mission” implies a movement of the local church toward a group or area that is of a markedly different culture than that of the congregation reaching out. This applies equally to ministry with ethnic minorities as to certain aspects of youth work or industrial mission. I also have a conviction that certain basic principles of operating remain the same whether the missionary-in-charge is of the culture of the sending or of the receiving group. Many mistakes have been made in recent years by missionaries ostensibly of the tradition of the receiving group who have become so inculturated by the sending group that they have in practice lost touch with the customs and thought of the group of which they were once a part.

The first imperative is that missionaries must listen. Too much of the history of missions is a tale of “salvation models” being imported into indigenous cultures, a one-way traffic where missionaries assume moral superiority and greater knowledge than those to whom they are sent. It accounts, for example, for why early European missionaries to the Americas thought that native peoples had no religion when they saw no buildings for it and discovered the very word did not exist in their vocabularies. Rather, contact must be in the nature of dialogue, in which each party listens and shares, and mutually decides what sort of communication is desirable.

This heralds the second imperative, which is that the missionaries themselves must be prepared to be evangelized. Even liberal Christians tend to assume that, in the end, if this dialogue takes place, the other side will see the light and want conversion. But in truly open

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conversation either side may be convinced by the other. I found that my whole prayer life was reinvigorated by learning how to pray with the native peoples who welcomed me. We also tend to assume that a pristine gospel exists somewhere out there in the ether that merely needs to be pulled down into our situation to be understood and accepted. But the gospel has always been inculturated, that is, expressed in the form of its receiving culture, whether Hebrew or Greek. It is our task to re-express it in different cultural forms as it goes global so that it may be “understood of the people” (Article XXIV). In the process we may find our own expressions of belief challenged and in need of modification.

The third imperative is, don’t evangelize! Mission precedes evangelism. The World Council of Churches has defined mission as “bringing all the resources of God to bear upon all of human need.” Particularly in situations of extremity we offer the love of God in practical form without stint and without conditions. “Nothing can separate us from the love of God”—or shouldn’t! There will be times, however, when it is appropriate to give an account of our involvement, especially when asked, and it is then that evangelism happens—but, again, by conversation and dialogue, not by argument and hectoring, which is an affront to the hospitality with which we are normally received. Missionaries tend to be better at the gospel than at the cultures they enter, and they need to be good at both. Adequate preparation is vital.

Fourth, the local culture must be respected and entered into. This is a slow process of learning when we may appear to be doing nothing. And this involves at least some attempt to learn a foreign language where appropriate. Native American languages are usually very difficult for outsiders, but even a poor attempt to speak is appreciated, and a study of the language reveals much about ways of thinking and believing. If you cannot express your faith in similar ways it will not be heard and understood in the local culture. You will perhaps spend more time in learning than in doing what you thought an effective missionary should.

The fifth imperative is that leadership style must reflect that of the local group. Sitting in a large circle guarantees more democratic participation than sitting in serried ranks and this is the norm among Native American and many African societies. Examine how women and children may participate: they may exercise more equality than you would expect. Leadership is best exercised collaboratively and in

community. We often fall back into “the teacher (or Father) knows” mentality because we lose patience with the time required for more consultative procedures. First peoples operate on an expansive time-scale and so, often, do young people of all traditions.

The sixth imperative is, as has been suggested, substantial preparatory training. Missioners need to be persons of great self-reliance: they will often be in situations that cannot be foreseen and in which no support is ready to hand. Acquiring survival skills may be as important a part of training as acquiring theological skills. Secondly, missioners need a personal spirituality of real depth to sustain them, a capacity to live with and out of silence, a regular pattern of prayer, a still center and beliefs that have been tested in the trials and tribulations of life. Missioners then require a breadth of learning, both in study and in situ, that is not skimmed or dumbed down, as is the present trend. Not a minute of extensive preparation is wasted. Without it people’s lives may be damaged and wasted—as has often been the missionary’s legacy.

God himself is the Great Missioner. God is in perpetual engagement with the created world, seeking always to bring order out of chaos, good out of evil. God seeks our cooperation in this task, and works with and through us, or, if we fail to respond, entirely without us. But the mission is God’s, not ours, and is to be done in God’s way, not ours. We are given as models the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, the taking on of our humanity by God in the Incarnation, and the waiting upon the Father of Jesus in his passion. We are not given the model discerned in the angry, impatient priest by so many first peoples over the ages of a wrathful and vengeful God, in comparison to whom their traditional deities were preferable. So let us now move with a new modesty and grace, humbly recognizing that in those to whom we minister God is already present and in their faces smiles out at us.

Three Questions

Of what I have just written I am confident. I am also sure of what I now offer for reflection, while being aware that these issues are enough to deter the most conscientious outreach worker. I am not confident of the answers.

The point about missionaries being open to change as much as their charges raises a huge potential problem. It could be that missioners will find themselves in conflict with their sending body over

adopting measures that, while making perfect sense in context, may appear strange and unsettling to those in ultimate authority. So sending bodies ideally need to have a real understanding of the issues we are considering. Furthermore, it could be that, in certain cases, if a truly indigenous local Christianity emerges, it may not look totally like its origins. For example, were an indigenous form of Navajo Christianity to develop, I feel that Jesus would not appear quite as unique as in traditional western expressions. He would be one of the “Yei,” the Holy People, probably chief among the Yei, but not the absolutely unique Son of God that we know. Indeed, the Navajo already experience a multiple incarnation in the masked dancers on the last night of the Yeibichei ceremony. We are faced with the dilemma, Is this acceptable? Are we willing to travel this road? Are we ready to be the midwives of a new and different sort of Reformation?

Then again, native peoples are shaped by their relationship to the land, just as some disaffected youth groups are formed by the security they find in their ghettos. Yet this sort of identity is not understood by western, urban Christians who have lost this sense of attachment, this ability to live as part of the natural world rather than as its exploiter. So we do not understand one of the vital components of the lives of many of those to whom we would seek to minister—unless, perhaps, we can find the courage to sit alongside them, learn from them, and find our own lives enriched. The Hopi, for instance, have opened more of their traditional ceremonies to outsiders because they are convinced that they have knowledge of how to live in the world that all of us need to participate in if we are not to destroy it.

But the most frightening thing of all is that true missionaries inevitably become what has been described as “social martyrs”: cut off to a large extent from their own roots, yet never able to become full members of the groups to which they go. Missioners are stretched between the two—one might say in a cruciform position—belonging to neither the one nor the other. They will commonly be misunderstood, sometimes shunned, sometimes reviled. Yet for the sake of the work they must endure. Minorities are only too used to well-meaning rich and/or white people bursting into their lives, usually uninvited, promising the world, and then not able to stand the pace and disappearing. Endurance is the key mark of the missioner but it may come at great cost. The isolation can be a heavy cross to bear.

Any candidate must consider these issues. Any sending body must know into what situation they are dispatching people. No obvious success can be expected. Even youth situations can be fraught

with danger. In my ministry with bikers in the seventies I had to submit to all sorts of hair-raising escapades—on bikes—to become accepted by the group, and only then could work begin. Young people stand a better chance of surviving these challenging vocations and this is in itself a great challenge to the whole church in its nurturing of its youth.

In fact, we need, as never before, missionaries of the character and vision of those who brought the faith first to Europe and then across the seas, but also missionaries who would perform the task with more understanding and compassion than they often did. This is the real call of God to the church today.

