

Joining in God's Mission to the World as Incarnational Witnesses

By George Moore

How do we begin in Mission?

The traditional starting point for mission in most American churches has been the Great Commission:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28:18-20

In the latter part of the 19th century and beyond into the first half of the 20th, there was a huge movement into "missions" (note the 's'). God used this call to motivate literally hundreds and thousands of people to travel across the world and seek to carry out this commissioning of our Lord.

There are, however, limitations to this understanding of mission. Too often when it seems God is asking us to "to go therefore" we assume the journey begins where we are in the American culture. This is accompanied by an underlying assumption the church in America has "arrived." It is this "already-Christianized-culture" assumption that establishes our attitude as we depart to "do" the real work of "missions" in a "foreign" (and therefore "pagan") culture. "Missions" with an 's' becomes a task, perhaps the most important task – but still a task that the church is called to do. Churches adopting this task-vision of "missions" made huge distinctions in the dollars given to "Foreign Missions" and those given to ministry of the operating budget of the church.

Far too often this assumption translated into an imperialist mentality where not only was the gospel taken to those foreign lands, but where the proper expression of the church, once established in these new lands would be in the likeness of the North American church in content and form.

The second assumption out of Matthew 28 came as we were asked to "make disciples." Again, how wonderful that our job was not simply to make converts. We are to build into a life the skills of faithful discipleship. So many of the results, praise God, of this period of mission movement were that God did establish faithful disciples in so many countries. In fact these disciples in many respects have proved more faithful than those who sponsored their missionary leadership! But again, just as the call to "go" often accompanied a predisposition to imperialism, so to the charge to "make disciples" too often was accompanied by paternalism. The missionary's home church seemed, in wealth and opportunity, to have it all together. Dollars and cents appeared to be the standard of the Spirit's blessing. Again, how amazing that in the second half of the 20th century it has been made clear that many of these new churches have exceeded the missionary's home church in faith and the gifts of the Spirit.

In the latter half of the 20th century then, both of these assumptions were well documented. In order to try and fight against them, the church moved to establish “partnerships” in missions (note the ‘s’). These partnerships were formed between a church and a mission agency. They enhanced the quality of ministry of both parties. But there were limitations. For one, the underlying mindset had not changed. The church was still doing “missions.” It was still perceived as primarily overseas (though the poverty and need of the inner-city now made it become part of the target). Because it was still a task of the richer, more established church, it still had the same paternalistic nature. Those involved in such partnerships often felt they were ineffective.

A New Starting Point: INCARNATIONAL WITNESSES!

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt (*pitched a tent*) among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.
John 1:14

The incarnation is not just the birth of Jesus. It is the whole Jesus Event – Birth, Life, Death, Resurrection. It is the transformation of our flesh. (see: C. S. Lewis, *The Grand Miracle*) With our final hope a final resurrection of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1). It will be a place where:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." Revelation 21:3-4

In the coming-in-the-flesh Event of Jesus – we see the Glory of God. That glory is FULL of GRACE (loving acts of unmerited kindness) AND the TRUTH of the Gospel story. Now we have grace to give in acts of kindness and we have a story to tell as we join in God’s mission along His path of the incarnation.

What was from the beginning, what we have **heard**, what we have **seen** with our eyes, what **we beheld** and **our hands handled**, concerning the **Word of Life-- and the life was manifested**, and we have **seen** and **bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life**, which was with the Father and was **manifested** to us-- what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. 1 John 1:1-3

Our having *seen* opens the doorway to proclaim. But what permitted the them to *hear* and to *understand*?

And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was *already* named, that I might not build upon another man's foundation; but as it is written, "They who had no news of Him shall **see**, And they who **have not heard** shall **understand**." Romans 15:20-21

So **faith** *comes* from **hearing**, and hearing by the **word of Christ**. Romans 10:17

They too must "see" in order to hear. When they see the Good News of Christ's love in our lives, the "not having heard" will understand. Our proclamation flows out of being sent in the same manner Jesus was sent (John 20:21 – "As the Father has sent me..." meaning in the same manner).

As we participate in being "incarnational witnesses," we are changed as much as the hearers. Our community grows and changes.

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No longer is there a divide in "evangelism" and "good works." Being "*Incarnational Witnesses*" with our lives, we meet people where they are and assist God in what He desires to do next in their lives! Sometimes no words are involved, simply a kind act of giving aid. Sometimes a proclamation must be made, God has come to earth in Jesus Christ and a life given to Him can make us new!

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:17

With this starting point several things change.

1. Mission is no longer the task of the church.

"God's church falters from exhaustion because Christians erroneously think that God has given them a mission to perform in the world. Rather, the God of mission has given His church to the world. It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission who has a church in the world! The church's involvement in mission is its privileged participation in the actions of the triune God. ...The church does not exist for mission. It exists for the Lord Jesus Christ. To set mission before the church as its essential reason for existence is to risk its devotion on an idol. ...There is only one foundation for a church's existence, and for mission involvement: Jesus Christ. The goal of pastors, (sessions,) and mission "fanatics" alike is singular: helping people grow in their love of Jesus Christ."

Beyond Duty, by Tim Dearborn, pp. 3-4

2. We are no longer sent out from where we are currently living.

Mission begins in the very character of God. It is the essence of the Trinitarian expression of the Father sending the Son, and the Son sending the Spirit to us, and the Son sending us (John 15-17)! We must begin with the understanding that it is no longer “missions” that we do. All of it is the mission of God. The whole church in every corner of the world is part of this same mission. Whether we minister in Omaha, India, Tulsa, or Beijing, we are a part of God’s loving mission to the world. Mission is now done from God’s perspective – which must always ask of us humility. This is a kingdom effort.

3. The manner of our going is now determined.

We are to go into mission as Jesus was sent. Jesus’ manner (the incarnation) becomes the determining factor of our approach:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death--
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.
Philip. 2:5-11

In the same way we no longer “do” missions. Now we seek to live as a part of the mission of God. Now we no longer “do” evangelism. We seek to be incarnational witnesses as we live out our relational lifestyle with the living Christ in the midst of our brothers and sisters.

While some may have the gifts of evangelism, others may have the gifts of care and others of hospitality. Hopefully all the gifts will be expressed in our church’s ministry and mission. As a church our call is to do three things. We are called to be in mission – using all our gifts – in this place where God has put us. We are to “support” in partnership those in mission in other places in the world, receiving their gifts for us, sharing our gifts with them. Finally, we are to encourage each of us, with whatever our gifts lead us to do, to hear the call of God to be *in mission* as incarnational witnesses locally, nationally and internationally. All of this with the goal that through our witness Jesus will be so honored that “*at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and*

on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10).

4. The gifts of the Spirit to the Body of Christ should be seen in a global perspective.

To do this, we must now understand I Corinthians 12:12-31 in a worldwide perspective. The body of Christ and our gifts in Him are referred to in this text. This passage has far too long been used to understand the life of a single congregation. I think it is far clearer if we understand that it applies to churches that are crossing cultures. This is as it was in Paul’s time. As the church in Corinth gave financial support to the church in Jerusalem, there are gifts in the church in Africa that we need in order to understand the mission of God in the culture where we are. There are gifts where we are that are needed there. No single church is the “have-it-all” church. Each church has gifts and needs. Each church needs the other. Every expression of the Spirit expressed in a community can be a gift that is needed for the whole body. It is this mutuality of needs and gifts that permits real partnership to exist. Every short-term mission trip sees its participants return to their home church in America feeling like they received more than they gave. We need to acknowledge this in a greater way. I can’t be the Christian God is calling me to be in Omaha without a knowledge of the gifts God has given the church in Cameroon. This challenge to a worldwide perspective, as we will talk about later, calls us to consider mission as something greater than we could possibly “do.” It calls us to dependence; to humility; to faith promise and trust. It breaks us and places us on our knees in prayer. It challenges our comfort zones of security and faith.

5. Our covenant/small group experience becomes a training ground for mission.

This definition of relational partnership in mission asks us to learn to be the church with each other through a community-based learning pattern and then exercise these skills of relationship on this international level. Every congregation must be the “church in miniature,” as small groups became part of the relational lifestyle pattern of life of the church. Every mission team must be a small group of people seeking to represent this reality.

But without the call to international partnerships in mission, this emphasis becomes ingrown “naval gazing.” The call to “covenant group life” is the call to missionary life. These covenant groups become the training ground of mission in an incarnational format.

The skills affirmed in our groups within our congregational life become the same skills that enable a group to become a mission team with each other. They are the skills needed to go into an international field without imperialism or paternalism. They are the skills needed to become a team with the international partners. As we gather in our covenant groups at home, we are becoming equipped to be able to go into mission and establish real partnerships in mission even across cultural lines!

Relational Partnerships in Mission

With all this before us, the task is to now define our targets in mission partnerships. As we do this through an incarnational witness we can expect certain things:

1. The path of mission partnerships through incarnational witness will follow the direction of God's path to the world.

God desires the "whole world," but enters into life in "Bethlehem." From Bethlehem His relationships spread to "Judea and Samaria," and then expanded out to the whole world. John 3:16 says that while God loves the world, Jesus is born in human flesh in Bethlehem. He ministers in a slightly broader region and at the end of God's path, the world hears the message.

Begin mission in any "Bethlehem" and it will take us into God's world! It can be anywhere in the world. Yet the incarnation asks us to pick a specific place. We choose a "place" where our partnerships are to be born. The incarnational path of witness says this relationship will expand. We can expect this partnership to branch out to Judea and Samaria. The work of incarnational witness will naturally take us into greater relationships. As we enter into these partnerships we should expect to be led to places we did not anticipate.

2. These partnerships don't begin immediately. They are grown over time.

It will take time to nurture these relationships. They are not contracts but covenants birthed out of time and contact. On the first trip only a small partnership will begin. Those we contact may need to come in our direction. (God is in mission in our culture too!) Missional Partnerships grow over time and contact. We must take care not to manufacture a partnership or to call something "a partnership" until it has really grown into one. This waiting period is not necessarily a sign that no partnership will happen. Often it is the invitation to prayer, to patience, to perseverance and courage. God will bring the fruit in His own time.

3. This incarnational path is not linear: It is relational. Paul's missionary journeys follow very crooked paths – but straight in line with the Spirit!

On a trip to begin a partnership in Germany, a member of a mission team met a person from Cameroon, Africa. Her heart was moved by God to make a further connection. When we returned home, the Mission Committee said, "Go for it!" A trip to Cameroon was put together and a new partnership was formed in Africa. Who could have predicted that going to Germany would produce a partnership in Africa? On a trip to Ecuador, a person is tugged by a past vision of mission to Native Americans and, returning home, leads the congregation to begin a partnership in Crow Agency, Montana. This is exactly the way the Spirit works in relationships.

4. The incarnational path crosses denominational demarcations, as it is a “Kingdom Path.”

Relational lifestyle and incarnational witness are not the property of any given church. Nor are the styles of all churches the same. As we seek this focus in mission we will be led to people seeking the same path of relationships that we are, but who are not necessarily like us.

A partnership is mostly charismatic in South America. It may be with Catholics in on a Native American Reservation. It could be Presbyterian in Africa. It is conservative evangelical in China yet without any denominational affiliation. We are led to cross lines, lines that, quite frankly, don't mean very much in the 21st century anyway. And this again leads us back into II Corinthians 12. It leads us to understand the Body of Christ in a greater way.

Here is a possible understanding of how to send trips in order to start relational partnerships in mission

1. Exploration Trip:

The primary purpose in this trip is to determine if a relational partnership is possible. There are some that will want to continue a previous understanding of missions (note the 's'). Some may not have the focus of incarnational witness. Care must be taken to enter into partnerships where a real equality in that partnership is possible. This is not an economic or cultural perspective consideration. It is equality in the Body of Christ.

This trip will most likely be a small two or three person trip. It seeks to discern if the possible partner made a connection to us and we to them. Much conversation and prayer will be needed upon return to ensure it is not simply our emotions leading us but the call of God.

2. Expansion Trip:

Upon determination that this is a possible target in relational partnership, a larger trip should be planned. This trip's primary purpose is relational learning and growth – this too is mission.

We cannot be partners with those whose stories we have not listened to. Our ministry at this point is to ask open-ended questions and listen to the stories that are told. God may still close this door. We also need to prayerfully listen to the call of the Spirit.

We should expect if this is to be a relational partner, our hearts will be open and people from our team will be stirred by the Spirit of God. At this point our relational partnership has begun!

A single “target” should be selected to be the channel for the partnership. This is at the very core of the relational partnership. *But it must always be remembered (and spoken about!) that we are called to a people, not a mission agency.* The target/agency will be the feathers on the arrow, but not the target. It is the call of God that directs us, not simply warm feelings of good friendship.

Someone now needs to be responsible to parent or foster the growth of this relationship both with the partner and with the congregation by serving on the Mission Committee. This person will want to form a team of people from those who went on the trip to be the contact group. Regular meetings of a team for this mission partnership will be important to continue the growth of the partnership.

3. Establishing Trip:

It is here that the real work of partnership begins. Small teams or larger trips can continue to grow the partnership. Contact at this stage must be in both directions. Here covenants of partnership, strategies for relationship growth, mutual ministry exchanges (interns, etc.), and other means of growing the relationship will be established by the partnership team.

4. Enablement Trips:

The relationship with the partner will need to be refreshed in order to continue to grow. New kinds of trips will be helpful both to the congregation here and the relational partner. Youth trips, inter-generational trips, mid-term and long-term stays by individuals called into mission will foster growth of the relationship, of our prayer life and the mutual learning by us and our partner.

5. Enduring Partnerships:

Over a period of time, some of the mission partnerships will reach a place of great importance for the congregation as a whole. We should not expect every relational partner in mission to come to this stage. Other relational partnerships will be clear only to the Mission Committee. This is to be expected. Not all personal friendships become “best friends.” As this happens care must be taken to both encourage this and defend other partners from being left out.

In all of this, we must remember that mission is not linear. The mission of God is explosive, right-brained, Spirit led – it will not be tamed or conformed to our lists and agenda. When we think in linear fashion, too often, mission becomes *ours* once again: We begin again to “*do missions*.” We must take care that we live on a growing edge of adventure in the challenge and promise of faith. **We must always dream a dream so big that only God can bring it about!**