

Are Americans Needed in God's Global Mission?

An Appeal for Global Justice Practitioners

By Joel Vestal

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What the world needs now, perhaps more than ever, is individuals and communities intent on the work of God in all places. And here's some great news: Every disciple of Christ, whether in Montana or Malawi is invited. All are necessary and the requisite is simple: Love God and be prepared to love the same world His Son died for. This means God has global openings for ambassadors¹, for those devoted to being salt² and light³. He's looking for reconcilers⁴, for witnesses who will follow Him even to the death⁵. He longs for His people to choose what's just⁶, to defend the cause of those who are weak and without a father. More than 2000 times, He brings up the poor and oppressed of this world – and tells us to do something about them. And on the heels of this, we're told to rescue the weak and needy⁷, seek peace⁸, plead the case of the widow⁹, and care for the orphan¹⁰. All this and more, we call the mission of God.

God's global mission in the world is central to His heart and purposes throughout history. Since God seeks to restore and redeem all humanity and creation to Himself, the work He authors¹¹ is always angled toward this highest goal of restoration and transformation. Each time a human life is changed through an encounter with Jesus Christ, God has a new witness, one who may also enter into the mission of His work in the world. Being a God-witness is more a promise to be trusted than merely a command to be obeyed¹². This promise is what Peter realized in his encounter with Cornelius in Acts, "Then Peter began to speak: I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism..."

In recent years, the North American church has deliberated over, and often debated, how westerners fit into the changing face of God's work in the greater world. Quite simply, the world is changing – and exponentially with the perpetuation of globalization. Not surprisingly, the church is shifting, too – and with equal impact. This is especially true as the gospel continues to sweep the southern hemisphere and ancient religions, tribal practices, and customs are challenging how Christ changes lives, then communities.

¹ 2 Cor 5:20

² Mat 5:13

³ Mt. 5:14

⁴ 2 Cor 5:18-19

⁵ Acts 1:8

⁶ Micah 6:8

⁷ Psalm 82:3-4

⁸ 1 Peter 3:11

⁹ Isa 1:17

¹⁰ James 1:19

¹¹ Bosch, David, "Witness to the World" Perspectives on the World Christian Movement. William Carey Library; Pasadena, CA pg 59

¹² Newbigin, Leslie. "The Church as Witness" Reformed Review. Vol 35, no 1; March 1978, pg 9

So what is the role of the Westerner in global mission? Indeed, our place may look different than in centuries past, but our function is no less important. Let me say this again: Americans are still needed in the world. America is still the largest sending nation of global mission workers (around 25,000). While there are those who accuse the western church for the mistakes it has made through the centuries (myself included), the fact is, we have invested in the nations in amazing ways. Even more, we've become determined to learn from our mistakes and build fruitful ministries in global regions. Despite the fact that we live in a post-colonial era where centuries-old suspicions may color our relationships and conversations (even after years of indigenous partnerships), American disciples have more than a short-term missions or check writing responsibility in global ministry. In keeping with ServLife's mission of taking the whole gospel to the whole world, I strongly believe that western Kingdom workers must create sending structures, affirming God's plan to send our own sons and daughters to the ends of the earth (Matt 28:19-20). Local churches are learning to create these "sending" units even as they partner with other mission organizations to see this happen.

This article is not merely looking at the "how" of sending structures but why they should be devised and used to accomplish God's mission in the world. True, it seems that many western church leaders are reluctant to send their own people as "missionary workers" in the world. Some of this is ideological, even cultural; there are different levels of desire to engage other cultures through mission dollars, and strategic partnerships and the term "missionary" carries with it different connotations. Perhaps if a new title was employed, one that replaced "missionary," the western sending structure might be deemed alluring and more readily appealing in a postmodern and globalizing world. Though "missionary" isn't really used in the New Testament, its meaning is prevalent throughout the Bible, demonstrating always the missional heart of God. God is a sending God, a Creator who wants to bless us, that we might be a blessing to all nations (see Genesis, chapter 12).

With this in mind, God is seeking global justice practitioners, those who work for justice in the world, and in Jesus' name, offer advocacy and hope to the lost, last, and least. Knowing that justice and mercy are central themes in the Holy Scriptures, the global justice practitioner has the dual role of incarnating and proclaiming the gospel. Incarnation looks like wrestling against injustice and working to inaugurate healing and hope. Proclaiming finishes what incarnation starts: It tells the oppressed in words that Jesus is Lord and once-for-all Freedom Fighter who saves both lives and souls.

One need not look far or read past the daily news headlines to see expressions of injustice in the world. The list is endless: civil war, pandemic disease, poverty, hunger, genocide, and ethnic/religious persecutions. Man's inhumanity to man and pointless human suffering – these are matters of our time, matters that should require a full measure of devotion from followers of Christ. If, in fact, we are part of His body, the western church, with all of her resources and talents has a responsibility to help relieve global hurt and suffering in Christ's name.

Let me share with you a few convictions that explain why western disciples mustn't merely agree that hell has broken loose in a fallen world. While we're thinking together, I'd like to examine how we can proactively engage, create, activate, and encourage the people of God in America to embrace new expressions of vocation and ministry that serve the world. Since I'm wholly convinced that deep within the western body of Christ is a desire to be a "missional" people, you'll see that dreams envisioned below are a logical outgrowth of trusting that God's people are meant to live and serve in both local and global communities. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we believe in a common Father, a global God who unites us into family regardless of nation, tribe, or tongue. And healthy families relate and work together for the common good.

Conviction #1: Churches in the west must send our sons and daughters

Sending our own offspring is not only being obedient to Jesus; it will yield healthy and vibrant spiritual life in the church. While I have no concrete evidence of this, I'm more and more convinced that apathy in today's western churches may be related to our reluctance in sending our children to the suffering nations. My guess is churches wouldn't readily assent to this idea. Instead, they would assert that those called to global service are affirmed and sent. But few houses of worship are proactively seeking ways to engage and catalyze their congregants to global ministry.

Think about the recent intervention of United States Armed Forces with me for just a minute, regardless of your stance on American involvement in the world. As our soldiers have chosen to defend our nation and her ideals, there's no denying the national pride, unity, and prayers that have ensued. After all, these young men and women are our nation's flesh serving militarily. On a similar note, but varying objective, I believe we must affirm and seek to send our own sons and daughters into the world – not for temporal military intentions, but for the eternal cause of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom.

Conviction #2: We cannot define global mission work based on "the return for our dollars"

The western mission and church community have been captured and made captive to American cultural realities, associating the gospel with economic and political pragmatism.¹³ There's a great mistake here, if we buy the notion that the world needs only more American dollars and some additional projects. We must dispel the fallacy that investment in global ministry will yield immediate results and gratification. For example, I frequently hear this, "My church drilled twenty water wells in India," or, "we planted twenty churches in Ghana."

Now I'm certainly not against these numbers, but I also know that we can't seek numbers alone to define our success in mission efforts. Growth in cross-cultural witness is often like the seed that Jesus said must fall to the ground and die. But beneath the earth covering the seed, life-change and authentic growth is fermenting, and when it's least

¹³ Dyrness and Engel; Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have we gone Wrong? Intermarsity. 2000. Pg 18

expected, the seed becomes a powerful, fruit bearing plant. Kingdom work is difficult to measure – and often “effectiveness” and “success” is as elusive as sand slipping through an hourglass. Yes, the book of Acts shows us thousands coming into the Kingdom, but then another look at Jeremiah finds the faithful prophet spending decades without verifiable “success.” In our eagerness to have humanly quantifiable results, we must stop and recognize that we might very well send our own children into regions of the world where few or no Christians live. And there, they may spend years seeing little to no fruit. Yet this hardly negates a greater truth: The soil of human hearts in these remote regions needs breaking and cultivation so that seeds of the gospel may later take root and bear fruit.

Conviction #3: An incarnational model of Global ministry is the model of Jesus

God is more concerned with people than projects. Far often, we get caught up with the grand schemes of world evangelization, statistics, and networking and forget the importance of simply having tea and conversation with those we’re serving. God has sent Christ into human flesh to live, minister, and die. The writer-apostle John speaks of this incarnation knowing that first century Jewish believers were embracing the Greek notion that Jesus was divine but not human. No wonder John kept driving home the point of Christ’s humanity throughout his gospel¹⁴. God becoming flesh has missiological implications for us as well as well as theological ones. Jesus came to the earth as a helpless infant, born of a human, and placed as a learner. We’re told He grew in favor with God and man over time¹⁵. Translation: Human beings matter. People are important to God and they should be important to us. We should always seek to be learners of other people.

Conviction #4: God has used cross-cultural witness for His purposes

Jesus encountered and loved people from other cultures: a Canaanite woman, a Roman centurion, and a Samaritan woman. Peter wins Cornelius and Paul’s journeys led him to demonstrate and proclaim the love of God to cultures and lands far from his own. Today, the open doors in cross-cultural friendship are unlimited. Maybe other countries shun America’s political positions and ideologies, but almost without exception, the United States evokes foreign intrigue. In our land of opportunity book-ended by Hollywood and Wall Street, this wealthiest of nations captures if not the affection, then the respect indexed to freedom and prospect for all. Those in remote countries often are intrigued when westerners leave the comforts of their home and family to live in a land not their own.

¹⁴ Wright, N.T., *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship*, William Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, pg 34

¹⁵ Lingenfelter, Sherwood G. and Mayers, Marvin K., *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships*; 2nd Ed., Baker Publishing, 2003

Conviction #5: The Great Commission is not bound to one culture or economic class

God's global plan invites all to participate. Regardless of vocation, age, or nationality all of God's people are made to engage and spend their lives (time, treasure, and talents) ensuring that His love is extended to every corner of the globe. This truth is simple and universal. It belongs to every follower of Jesus Christ, whether in St. Louis, Missouri, or Abuja, Nigeria.

I'll say it again: God's work in the world is to be carried out by His people so that all may know healing, hope, and life through His Son, Jesus. A movement is needed – and it can start with you!

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