

REFOCUSING WESTERN MISSION AGENCIES TO FULLY ENGAGE THE 21ST CENTURY CHURCH

By Ellen Livingood

The earth is shifting under our feet. The church of Jesus Christ is changing its role in missions. Powerful forces have already been released, but the effects are just beginning to be felt on the surface.

Some of the tectonic plates are realigning because our past missions efforts have been supernaturally successful. Seemingly overnight, the church in the Majority World has become a powerful missions force in its own right. Not only is the church moving south, it is moving out!

Other powerful shifts are the result of the pressures of cultural change, technological advances, and new challenges. Forces such as globalization, AIDS, and new perspectives on the part of younger generations are fast reshaping the landscape. These changes have been identified in numerous places, but their implications for Western mission agencies are still being defined. Here we will explore just five of them. While couched in either/or language, each in reality is a continuum.

1. 100,000 OR 1 BILLION

Will our agency become convinced that the greatest force for missions lies in the untapped potential of millions and millions of lay Christians? Will we therefore choose to become an agency eagerly and creatively rethinking the task in light of today's work force? Or will we continue to be an organization comprised of a small group of professionals supported from the sidelines by local churches and their largely passive members?

Potential Implications of Refocusing

- We will analyze the unfinished task of missions in light of the global church's available resources. While highly valuing professional missionaries, we will recognize that for many, their primary role will be to deploy, train, and assist other workers, using their specialized expertise to make a host of others most effective.
- Our message to the Western church will not only present the needs of the unreached but will also highlight the potential of the new global missions force and the amazing opportunities for "average Joe" Christians to make a significant impact on the lives of needy people.
- We will learn from current partnerships and encourage the launch of creative new endeavors in order to establish many types of models demonstrating the impact of the new missionary force. While appreciating

their value, we will not avoid acknowledging limitations and errors. We will work together with church leaders as fellow learners.

- Training and resourcing nationals to mobilize their own churches for missions will become one of our top priorities.
- We will applaud rather than criticize missions efforts concentrated in settings highly impacted by globalization. We will apply our expertise and understanding of language and culture to expand the impact of these initiatives beyond the globalized community and into the mainstream culture.

2. RECRUITERS OR MOBILIZERS

Will we broaden our agency's purpose because we believe that our greatest impact in the 21st century will come from helping ignite churches' missions vision and then mobilizing and training the entire church both in our traditional sending countries and the Majority World? Or will we continue to see ourselves as an organization that recruits in the West and ministers in the field without taking responsibility for grass-roots mobilization in either church?

Potential Implications of Refocusing

- We will measure success not by the number of missionary members we have recruited but the degree of mobilization we have helped to launch in local churches both in "sending" and "receiving" countries.
- Recognizing that Paul the missionary raised personal support from churches and launched a business to support his own work, we will be open to using multiple models of funding the missions enterprise, even when it includes some risk to the organization's status quo.
- We will resource and train missionaries to be mobilizers at home and on the field. At times this may require an adjustment in length and priorities for home assignment.

3. EQUAL OR RANKED POSITIONS

Will we accept that commodities like peer relationships, marketplace and professional expertise, and holistic life-on-life impact are equally, and sometimes more, valuable than professional missionary skills in accomplishing our task? Or will we continue to consider language proficiency, cross-cultural understanding, and biblical training to be the *only* true measures of missionaries' value and effectiveness?

Potential Implications of Refocusing

- Ministry teams will give equal value and status to professional missionaries and to short- and long-term workers with other types of expertise. Each team member will be committed to maximizing the contribution of the others, refusing to dichotomize between the “secular” and “sacred.” Jointly they will also focus on benefiting the churches committed with them to the task.
- The involvement of lay Christian professionals will be expedited by tracks designed specifically to prepare them for, and engage them in, highly effectively ministry built around their gifts and experience.

4. DOERS OR FACILITATORS

Will we become an agency that sees the most effective service of our long-term personnel as connecting global resources with global opportunities? Will we, with a servant attitude and humble teachability, share our experience with the new ground forces from the West and the Majority World—recognizing that by aptitude and numbers they can do much of the job better than we can? Will we come to see our most needed missions roles as that of facilitator and mentor rather than pioneer and project manager? Or will we continue to prioritize our tasks as planting churches and running programs, aiming our own resources at addressing the areas of greatest need?

Potential Implications of Refocusing

- We will rethink the roles of our professional missionaries in terms of where they as specialists can complement the ministry of the church rather than vice versa.
- Recruitment primarily will target a different type of long-term worker (facilitator/networker) for a different task (partnership development, connecting, resourcing).
- Qualifications, skill sets, and job descriptions of facilitators will need to be defined. In some cases, donor churches and individuals will need to be educated to the priority of this new type of missionary work and helped to adopt different ways of measuring their effectiveness.
- Mentoring experience will be a prerequisite or a key part of ministry preparation.
- Geography will become secondary. For example, we will make available our expertise to the North American church reaching its Pakistani neighbors as eagerly as we assist them to work in Islamabad.

5. MANAGERS OR PARTNERS

Will we become an agency that utilizes the stability and strengths of the organization while functioning primarily as a partner in networks and cooperative efforts, collaborating with local churches and other entities both in resourcing and ministry? Or will we continue to be an organization convinced that we Western professionals are best equipped to set strategy and direct ministry?

Potential Implications of Refocusing

- As the majority of efforts become truly international in scope, we will recruit leaders who speak Korean or Chinese or Hausa (for example), not to minister to those peoples but in order to minister well alongside them.
- We will explore ways to use the systemic continuity and stability of our agency as a “docking station” for fluid networks and partnerships. We will measure our success largely by the success of these cooperative efforts.
- Our missionaries will be trained to guide strategy development and implementation processes which involve a number of disparate participants.
- We will provide training, resources, guidelines, and coaching on how to develop and maintain healthy networks and partnerships. These will be available to our members and church-based facilitators around the world.
- We will steadfastly refuse to choose ministry priorities based on whether our agency will control the decision-making or get credit for the fruit.
- One of our priorities will be helping churches to navigate the complexities of working on an international team and/or as part of a partnership or network.

The earth *is* shifting. The factors mentioned here are only parts of the new landscape, yet they certainly deserve prayerful consideration and wise leadership. Some agencies may take a hard look at the changing church environment and their unique purpose and then opt to stay with their current agency/church model. Especially for those in niche ministries, such a choice may be appropriate. No one size fits all.

But for most, some significant and perhaps painful changes will be required for greatest Kingdom effectiveness. Agencies may make radical adjustments; others may determine to change incrementally and affect only a portion of their missions force. Major change will require new attitudes, new procedures, and in some cases, new wineskins. Regardless, let's rejoice in the rising of a global church committed to taking the gospel to the ends of the earth and wisely steward the resources in our hands.

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How do you react to the description of these five potential agency shifts and their implications? Are there other important aspects you would like to add? Do you disagree with these assessments? The Catalyst website includes an **Interchange Postings Forum** for your reactions at www.catalystservices.org/forum/. We look forward to a stimulating **interchange** of ideas there!

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