

Global Missions in New Church Starts ***Distraction, Diversion, or Directly on Target?***

by Milfred Minatrea

I spend quite a bit of time with church planters, even though my primary ministry role is assisting existing churches in transitioning toward a missional posture. Both church planting and refocusing involve congregational DNA.

New church starts are crafting their culture. One of the most significant roles any new congregation will address is the formation of their DNA. For missional churches, the essence of their culture will be incarnational. The Great Commission will be the mandate for their mission—their *raison d'être*.

I have long said the easiest way to have a missional church is to start one with that culture at its origin. Every congregation's DNA contains the values and behaviors endemic to their way of being church. One major component of a missional DNA is the passionate desire to proclaiming God's glory among the unreached people groups of the nations.

Recently I have visited with a number of church planters who have been counseled to avoid global mission engagements during the early days of their new church. They are told to concentrate their attention locally, with the assumption that focusing time and energy on international involvement will distract from the primary task of reaching the local community and divert their limited financial resources away from the essential development of the local congregation.

While respecting those who may hold this view, I nonetheless disagree for a variety of reasons. The rationales I share here specifically address the objections described above. Mission trips are not primarily for the good of the sending congregation, yet they are the recipients of wonderful by-products. The primary motivation for mission engagement is God's glory and the blessing of the nations.

GLOBAL MISSION ENGAGEMENT REFLECTS GOD'S HEART

It is always the right time to expose believers to the heart of God! While the church is still in its most formative state, in

my opinion, is the optimum time to allow the congregation's vision and values to coalesce with those on God's heart. If our goal is to plant a body that is truly His Body, a congregation reflecting His image in the world, then exposure to that which is on God's heart is paramount. Clarity about the biblical reason for the church's existence is critical at the earliest stage.

Aubrey Malphurs has written extensively on church planting and counsels, "It's important that church planters periodically ask themselves the basic questions, 'What's Christ's church supposed to be doing, and who are we trying to reach?' Asking these questions forces us to return to the basics. The answers to the questions undoubtedly are the Great Commission and lost people." (Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century*, 1998, pg. 121)

Years ago, Leroy Eims said we could leave off the word "Great" in Great Commission because it is the *only* commission Christ gave the church, not just the greatest one! Discipling the nations *is* our commission.

Scripture from beginning to end is a stethoscope through which to hear the heartbeat of God: "I will make you a great nation...and in you all the nations of the earth will be blessed." (Gen. 12:2-3)

"I will send them to the nations...that have neither heard of My fame nor seen My glory. And they will declare My glory among the nations." (Is. 66:19) "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to the nations..." (Matt. 24:14) "After these things I looked, and behold a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne...and they cry out...Salvation belongs to our God." (Rev. 7:9-10)

If a passion for the nations and unreached peoples is not developed during the earliest days of a congregation's life, that body has failed to connect with the primary passion of God's heart. Unless they adopt that passion early on, His

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passion will most likely not become a core value of the developing congregation.

GLOBAL MISSION ENGAGEMENTS INCUBATE COMMUNITY

Church starts bring together a disparate group of people who must be formed into a unified entity, one body sharing a common vision. I frequently speak with church planters struggling to build a team from the variety of believers present at the new church launch. Often these leaders utilize team-building exercises and retreats as resources toward this end. Experience has taught me that mission trips are very natural environments for team building.

Short-term team members spend extended time “doing life together.” For example, a team that lives for two weeks in a refugee camp in northwest Africa will be stretched well beyond their comfort zones. They will likely sleep in a Bedouin-style tent, eat and drink things dramatically different from their normal diets, and survive with what they consider minimal sanitation facilities. Even with adequate preparation, the dramatic differences will create an emotional and often physical culture shock. Team members will become “family” and care for one another. Like family, they also will get on each other’s nerves. A by-product will be increased awareness and appreciation of strengths and weaknesses of those in the body.

Ultimately such experiences may be an incubator for authentic community and real *koinonia*. The group experiences an impact similar to spiritual retreats—accomplishing more in an intensive time away than investing the same amount of time in multiple, one-hour-per-week meetings.

GLOBAL MISSION ENGAGEMENTS PREPARE FOR EFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO DIVERSE CULTURES

A few churches may be planted with the intent to attract already church-ed people, but most church starts purpose to reach those who *do not* have a faith relationship with Christ and His church. And whether we apply the term “post-Christian” or “unchurched,” ours is an unchurched culture. George Hunter was correct in his assessment that the church in North America no longer operates with “home court advantage.” Virtually all ministry is cross-cultural. Therefore, the vitality of new churches depends on their ability to bridge the gaps that separate those within the church from those without.

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Often those who make up the core of new church starts have long been part of existing churches. While they may have a strong commitment to reach the unreached in their community, when suddenly placed in a new church start, they struggle to establish comfortable relationships with the unchurched.

Three Rivers Community Church ♦ Rome, Georgia

Mitch Jolly, Brad Hankins, and Emmett Long met in Texas and believed God was calling them to plant a church together. From the very beginning, they knew the new congregation would have to be both global and local. Today Three Rivers Community Church (TRCC) is a congregation of about 150 people.

“Seeing God’s glory proclaimed among the nations was our mandate from the beginning,” Brad shares. “All who became a part of Three Rivers from the outset understood that. In fact, we knew we would adopt an unreached people group in Central Asia before we knew where the church was going to be located.”



Brad Hankins

“I would strongly encourage every church planter to begin with a ‘both/and’ approach to global mission and local ministry from the church’s inception,” Brad continues. “I was actually in Central Asia among our adopted unreached people group the very day TRCC had its official launch in March of 2003.

Sending teams on site has been a priority from the outset. Three Rivers never allowed their size to be a hindrance or excuse for not going.

As the executive pastor and international mobilization director at TRCC, Brad is a bivocational leader (he has a full-time job as a commercial building inspector). However, he still finds time to mentor other churches in global engagement. One of the congregations he has helped was a new church plant in suburban Philadelphia. With Brad’s encouragement, they also launched an unreached people focus very early on in their life as a new church start.

“‘Is it safe?’ and ‘Can we afford it?’ are the wrong questions,” Brad emphasizes. “The question church planters must first ask is, ‘Is God calling us to do this?’ If the answer is ‘yes,’ then the questions of safety and finances are in the hands of God; we must simply step out in faith and obey. The key is faith in God’s promises of accomplishing what He has said He would do.”

Global mission engagement provides an excellent classroom for learning how to cross cultures. Since linguistic, racial, social, and cultural differences are expected in the mission context, teams usually receive orientation and training before leaving for the field. But because the cultural differences are not as easily perceived at home, churches do not typically provide comparable orientation and training for local mission engagement or church starting.

The international mission partnership may result in greater acuity in “seeing” and enhanced comfort in entering relationships with those from a very different cultural background. For example, outside their own environment, mission team members may more readily understand that multiple worship forms can best accommodate the cultural nuances of the target population. They may come home more ready to say that their way is not necessarily right or best, and that forms may need to be adapted in order to more effectively craft worship indigenous to the cultures of those the new plant is reaching. An Acts 15 reality often takes place among those who participate in global mission partnerships: “People do not have to become like us in order to become followers of Christ.”

GLOBAL MISSION ENGAGEMENTS STRETCH FAITH

One of the objections to new church starts being involved in global mission is the expense. The costs to send an international mission team may represent a significant percentage of the total annual budget for the new church plant. How-

Cool River Church ♦ Superior, Colorado



“We believe that God is the God of the nations, so we must be people of the nations,” Kevin Colón, church planter and lead pastor of Cool River Church, declares. “We are already living in a global society, so we understood our priority of global engagement from the first. Even before day one, we started talking about reaching the nations. By our launch, we had already begun mobilizing to engage an unreached people group (UPG) in Southeast Asia.

Just like other parts of church life, Cool River’s “glocal” DNA has grown and matured among their people over time. First it was just Kevin going, but now, six years later, Cool River takes two to three trips per year with five to six members participating each time.

“Because we are a consumerist society and consequently tend to be a consumerist church, the church in the East has much to teach us,” Kevin explains. “When our people see brothers and sisters suffering for the sake of their faith, they come home spurred on to authentic discipleship in sacrificial ways with an intense mindset for the nations.

“Regarding finances: From the beginning, we decided to give away money, using funds in intentional, strategic, and purposeful ways. Our global mission investments are an integral part of our mission,” Kevin concludes.

The Journey ♦ Lubbock, Texas

“After 17+ years on church staffs, I was hungry to experience the Great Commission ‘up close and personal,’” church planter Jason Bishop says. “So in May of 2005, we planted a new church with the purpose of being missional disciplinarians of the whole world.”



Since its inception, Journey has been involved in international mission and church planting. Today one couple from the Journey live and minister among an unreached people group in Northeast Asia. Over the last two years, the church has been involved in six short-term mission engagements among two Asian people groups with whom they have ongoing strategic relationships. They have also planted two other churches in Lubbock.

“Journey realizes many benefits from our global/local mindset,” Jason continues. “Equipping and releasing people for God’s mission is one. We have trained more than 80 believers who are now in other new church plants or living internationally. For us that is success. Journey keeps formal ‘programming’ to a minimum so that our people can be free to do life together and live among the culture we are here to reach.

“A significant percentage of the cost of every trip we take is underwritten by sources outside Journey,” Jason adds. “As others hear of our care for the nations, they want to help. We have unchurched people come up to us at the coffee shop where we meet asking if they can give toward our global mission engagements.”

ever, it is inaccurate to assume that those same funds would otherwise have been contributed to the general budget of the church plant.

Those with long involvement in short-term missions have demonstrated repeatedly that their funding comes from different sources and is in addition to, not subtracted from, the regular gifts to local churches. Extended family members, work associates, and caring friends out of the community contribute. The faith of a congregation that has committed to an international mission is often stretched as they ask and observe God’s provision of resources beyond the perceived capacity of the local congregation.

GLOBAL MISSION ENGAGEMENTS MOBILIZE THE BODY

Participation in well planned and executed global mission experiences raises the ministry capacity and confidence of team members. Time and again, I have watched team members joyfully use a skill or gift that had never been called on within the local-church setting. It might be as simple as a mathematician who recalls the formula for converting Celsius to Fahrenheit to know if Joe really has a fever. It may be the ability to dribble a basketball or juggle pins that opens the door to relationships with national children. It might be finding that a team member speaks a language understood by many where they are serving.



As Ephesians 4:11-12 teaches, body life is the amalgamation of the total capacity of all members of the church offering their gifts in service to Christ and the community. Those who have been used by God while on mission will not be content to “sit and soak” when they return. Global mission endeavors offset a new congregation’s tendency to adopt a passive or consumerist mentality that expects the church planter or other vocational staff to do the “work of ministry.”

GLOBAL MISSION ENGAGEMENTS FOSTER HUMILITY

In some parts of the world, North Americans are often perceived, true or not, as arrogant “know-it-alls” who think their ways are best, their intellect superior, and their culture “advanced.” As members of a new church plant participate with, and serve among, peers from other nations, this divisive stereotype gives way to authentic appreciation.

Suddenly mission is not about “doing for” those with profound needs but partnering with believers who are witnessing the power of the gospel among their countrymen. Transferable and applicable insights gleaned in the mission context would likely never have been discovered apart from the international experience.

Westerners do not go with all the answers to nations that have all the needs. Inevitably if they serve alongside broth-

ers and sisters in Christ, they will learn things unique to that context. Many of those lessons may be adapted to dramatically enhance the vitality of the local church plant at home. Exposure with global Christians breeds a spirit of humility and encourages participants to seek fresh, creative ways to fulfill God’s mission when they return home.

CONCLUSION

An individual’s DNA is formed at conception, and I am convinced that global missions must be woven into the fabric of congregational culture from the outset. Otherwise, it may become an add-on rather than an integral component of their DNA—an “option” rather than a part of who they are. My challenge for new churches: Be who you intend to be from the first moment of life, or you may never become who you could have been.



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Discussion Starters

FOR NEW CHURCHES

1. Have we been assuming that international involvement would be added later in our congregation’s experience? Why should we reconsider our timeline?
2. What factors indicate that God is already moving us toward international missions, perhaps with a particular people or place?
3. What gifts can we identify that God may have given members of our new church specifically for cross-cultural impact?
4. What would be a good first step into global engagement?
5. What kinds of partnership would make us most effective in cross-cultural missions efforts?

FOR CHURCHES BIRTHING NEW PLANTS

1. How can we encourage daughter churches to include missions in their DNA from day one?
2. In what practical ways can we support effective global engagement on the part of our new church plants?
3. What kind of international experience and training should we provide for future church planters?
4. How could mother and daughter congregations work together in global contexts to maximize the gifts of all?

FOR AGENCIES

1. How well do we understand the uniquenesses of new church plants? How could we learn from and be more responsive to church planters?

2. Do we have options for missions involvement specifically scaled to fit new church plants? What would be the criteria for such?
3. What cross-cultural training and resources could we offer that would specifically help new churches build bridges to the unchurched in their community as well as in an international setting?
4. How could we nurture natural connections between new church plants in the West and in the Majority World?

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