

## Navigating a Strategic Missions Course in a Changing Church Context

by **Mark Naylor**

*“My frustration,” said Tom, his voice rising, “is that missions has no boundaries nowadays. We’re told ‘North America has become a mission field’ and ‘missions is from everywhere to everywhere,’ and ‘everyone is a missionary.’ Our task as a missions team has become too broad and undefined.”*

*Mariam responded, “God’s mission includes everything He is accomplishing in the world. So shouldn’t we have a part in whatever God is doing?”*

*“But we can’t do it all, so how do we choose a part?” Tom countered. “And shouldn’t there be a distinction between missions and local outreach? The missions portion of our church budget includes support for camps, church planting, chaplaincy, short-term missions teams...even our denomination’s head office. Is that really missions?”*

*“At the same time,” Guljan interjected, “many people still think you have to travel somewhere else to call it missions. But today the traditional boundaries of missions have broken down. What really belongs under the missions heading?”*

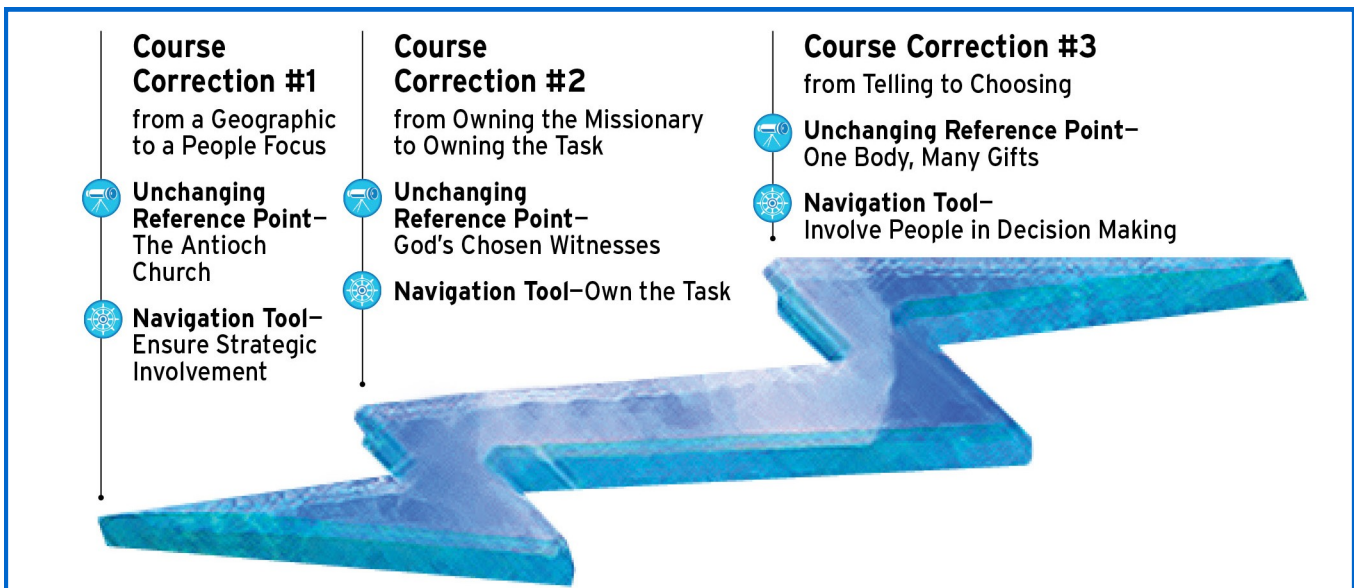
### Charting Our Course in a Changing Context

The confusion and frustration described here are not uncommon in church missions circles today. In the past, churches usually operated according to a simple pattern. On behalf of

the church, the missions committee maintained contact with missionaries who went to other countries for years at a time. But a number of global changes are altering the landscape—immigration, the development of Majority World missions, an increasing awareness that North America is also part of God’s mission, and the rise of hands-on involvement through short-term missions trips, to name just a few. In today’s world, church missions teams must guide their congregation’s global involvement in a context of constant change.

Their task is similar to that of a ship’s navigator who must determine a course in seas that are constantly shifting. A navigator can steer toward the intended destination only by fixing on unchanging reference points *far beyond* the constant movement around the ship. In a previous era, navigators relied on the north star; today, satellite signals provide the information they need to accurately chart their course.

In order for church missions teams to chart a wise course, they need to focus on the unchanging reference points of God’s Word and His global mission. Then they can set their course toward the right destination and use their navigational tools to plot their path. We will look at three major course corrections I believe church missions teams need to make today based on unchanging principles of Scripture. For each course correction, we will suggest navigational tools for plotting this new path.





## Course Correction #1: From a Geographic to a People Focus



### Our Unchanging Reference Point— The Antioch Church Example

In Acts 13:1-2, the church at Antioch, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, sent Barnabas and Paul away to accomplish a special work. Suppose that one week after Barnabas and Paul left, a deacon from the Antioch church found them running a soup kitchen in Antioch? He would have been shocked. “We sent you away,” he would have said. “It is the church’s job to share the gospel in Antioch. Your task is to proclaim the gospel in places where our church cannot reach—to those who have not heard.”

Fortunately, the ministry of Paul and Barnabas was in tune with the desire of the church and the moving of the Holy

Spirit. It was the “sending” aspect of the mission as well as the nature of their “work” that provided the basis for the modern missions movement:

1. They went where the gospel was not being preached (crossing new barriers).
2. They did the work that the sending church could not do (proclaiming beyond the church’s reach).

These priorities are clear from Paul’s ministry. He declared that he did not want to “build on someone else’s foundation” (Rom. 15:20), and whenever a church was planted in a particular region, he considered his work completed and so moved on. Why? Because it is the role of the newly established *church* to be a witness to Christ in their area. Paul’s apostolic (“being sent”) ministry was to go where the gospel was *not* being preached and do work that was beyond the reach of the established churches.

### The Four Rings of the Church’s Portfolio

Acts 1:8 provides further clarification of the relationship of missions to the local church. The geographical descriptions of Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth have commonly, and helpfully, been understood as a “portfolio” of involvement for the local church.<sup>1</sup> Seen as a series of concentric rings, the first two (Jerusalem and

Judea) can represent the *evangelism* work of the local church, and the third and fourth rings (Samaria and the ends of the earth) correspond to the *sending* work of the church, i.e., missions. In this scenario, “Samaria” represents culturally distant people groups in which local churches have been established. “Ends of the earth” refers to unreached people groups.

This interpretation underscores God’s validation of the cultural identities of ethnic groups and the lengths to which He is willing to go in order to provide redemption. The issue is not merely *geography* (an understandable emphasis before the impact of globalization), but *any and all barriers* that separate people from God’s salvation in Christ. God is a missionary God who overcomes barriers.

### A Strategic Focus on Peoples

While physical distance has been the most obvious barrier in the past, it has not been the most significant one. God’s mission is not focused on geographical distance but the separation between the “nations” (e.g., Mt. 28:19-20: “make disciples of all nations”). The term “nations” refers to distinct people groups, underscoring their unique linguistic, cultural, and historical

identities. These are the primary barriers irrespective of geographical location.

Thus, the *sending* aspect of missions remains, but missions is defined by cultural, rather than

geographical, barriers. This orientation was consolidated in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the emphasis of Donald McGavran on the distinct cultural identity of people groups and by Cameron Townsend, who sought to provide the Bible in their heart language.

As churches adopt the Acts 1:8 paradigm, their portfolio becomes a “slice” of God’s mission to the world. The inner circles (Jerusalem and Judea) refer to local outreach where the church is directly involved. The outer sections (Samaria and ends of the earth) require cross-cultural “sending” beyond normal, local involvement of the congregation. This orientation limits and clarifies the focus of the church’s *missions* emphasis.

---

**The issue is not merely geography...  
but any and all barriers that separate  
people from God’s salvation in Christ.  
God is a missionary God who  
overcomes barriers.**

---



---

**As churches adopt the Acts  
1:8 paradigm, their portfolio  
becomes a “slice” of God’s  
mission to the world.**

---



## Navigation Tool— Ensure *Strategic* Involvement

In this paradigm, it is only “Samaria” and the “ends of the earth” of Acts 1:8 that are considered to be the responsibility of the missions team. This means that the team will be concerned with (1) establishing and broadening the impact of the gospel cross culturally *where the church has already been established*, and (2) bringing the gospel to the *unreached*. But how can a missions team be sure that their efforts are *strategic*?

When working cross-culturally with a reached people group (Samaria), a danger is that the partnering church can take on responsibilities that should belong to the local believers in that setting. This can undermine their spiritual growth and the impact of the gospel within their community. Two helpful guidelines to avoid this pitfall are (1) avoid duplication and (2) develop healthy partnerships.

First, it is important to ensure that the ministries promoted by the partnering church do not duplicate or usurp local

endeavors. Look for ways to extend the impact of those on site. Find out what their vision is and how God has gifted them to fulfill it. Then contribute only in areas where your addition will complement their efforts. Second, ensure that the beneficiary of any cross-cultural partnership with a national church is a third group that is outside, not a part of, your national partner. This arrangement enables the partners to work together, synergistically focused on benefiting others, not themselves. This principle helps avoid paternalistic relationships and unhealthy dependencies among partners.

This perspective on Acts 1:8 can be summarized into four criteria for *missions* that align the church’s work with God’s mission:

- A concern for people groups (the “nations”)
- A “sending” that crosses cultural boundaries
- Involvement both in strengthening established churches *and* where the gospel has yet to be heard
- A strategic task with a gospel focus that the local believers cannot do by themselves



## Course Correction #2: From Owning the Missionary to Owning the Task



## Our Unchanging Reference Point— God’s Chosen Witnesses

We are *appointed* and *chosen* as God’s people to take an *active* role within God’s mission. Supporting and praying for others who are sent to serve is an essential part of this, but it is important that we also *own the task*, and not pass off that responsibility and level of participation to others. We have unprecedented opportunity to play a direct role in the impact of the gospel around the world. God gives His people an invitation to be involved in His mission.

**Appointed as witnesses of God’s redemption.** Before Jesus went back to heaven, He commanded His followers to wait for the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit came, the message of redemption was heard in all the languages of the known world through the believers. The power of God breaks down the barriers, but it is through His people that God acts. It is His mission, but we have a role as witnesses to His redemption. Even those of us appointed as “senders” can play a significant role in shaping the missions concerns of the church and those sent.

**Chosen for others.** In the Bible, to be “chosen” of God is not a matter of being privileged *above* others. Rather, it is being privileged *for* others. The emphasis on being “chosen” is not so that we can be *saved*, but so that we can *serve*. Abraham was chosen to be a blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:3). Jesus was known as God’s Chosen One (Jn. 1:34) because He came to serve, not to be served (Mt. 20:28). Paul was stopped on the road to Damascus

because God had made him His “chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15 TNIV).

As followers of Christ, we are appointed and chosen to be part of God’s mission. *Owning the task* is part of that responsibility.

---

**...today if it is the missionary  
alone who has the mission,  
vision, and task,  
the congregation will not be  
motivated to make  
an emotional investment.**

---

## Becoming Task Focused

For the past couple of centuries, most missionary-sending churches have *owned the missionaries* but *not owned the task* of missions. It has been the missionaries, with the over-



sight of missions agencies, who come to the local church with a mission, vision, and task already developed. The local church's role has been primarily to provide support for the fulfillment of the missionaries' calling.

In stating this, I do not criticize or devalue the faithfulness of God's people who have prayed and supported missionaries over the years. The opportunity for churches to be strategically involved in missions was limited in the past,

and the need to trust those being sent to define their own mission, vision, and activities was imperative. However, today if it is the *missionary* alone who has the mission, vision and task, the congregation will not be motivated to make an emotional investment. In order to revitalize North American churches in their involvement in missions, this process needs to change.

What is the difference between a *missionary* focused church and a *mission*<sup>2</sup> focused church?

Missionary Focused	Mission Focused
When the church announces, "Read our missionaries' latest prayer letter to find out what they are doing."	When the church announces, "The mission of our church has been to establish an orphanage. Read our missionaries' latest report about how our mission is being accomplished."
When a missionary changes assignment or leaves his field of service, the missions team asks, "Where should we re-assign our money?"	When a missionary changes assignment or leaves his field of service, the missions team asks, "How will our goals in that area of ministry be fulfilled now?"
When the church sends a short-term team, their primary concern is "I hope that this will be a good experience for them."	When the church sends a short-term team, their primary concern is "We need to make sure that what they do strategically advances our missions goals."
When the church says, "We support missionaries who work for XYZ missions agency."	When the church says, "We have sent out missionaries with the support of XYZ missions agency."

*Owning the task* does not mean that missionaries are *abandoned*—quite the opposite. When a missions team works with their missionaries to discover a common purpose, the partnership and commitment to the task deepen. To use a sports metaphor, the church shifts from merely cheering on the sidelines to being a part of the team.

to the task. This emotional investment is necessary for people to develop a deep commitment to missions and to be capable of leading the church in fulfilling its missions task. This type of investment is best facilitated through an

experienced coach who can lead the team through mission-building exercises.

Ownership of a mission and vision provides the missions team with the ability to discern what are legitimate missions activities for church participation, gives the team the perspective needed to

evaluate the ministries of the missionaries supported by the church, and enables the team members to plan strategic initiatives. As a clear vision develops, cross-cultural workers sent from the church become key *partners* in fulfilling the church's obedience to the Great Commission.



### Navigation Tool— Own the Task

The transition to a *mission* focus involves the development of a purpose that is *owned* by the missions team. Ownership of a common purpose only occurs when *people are involved in a decision-making process*. As members of the missions team spend time exploring the possibilities for global participation, they are *investing* in the development of a unifying vision that excites them. This focus becomes the framework used for partnering with missionaries and missions agencies as *joint owners* of a missions vision.

The greater the level of input by the team in the development of this vision, the greater the passion and commitment

---

***The greater the level of input  
by the team in the  
development of this vision,  
the greater the passion and  
commitment to the task.***

---



## Course Correction #3: From Telling to Choosing

Once a missions team has a purpose to which they are committed, they can still fail to create excitement for their vision. Rather than *motivating* the congregation to participate, the team often settles for *communication*, which has limited impact. This is because they have not engaged the church in a similar process that brought them to the point of “buy-in.”



### Our Unchanging Reference Point— One Body, Many Gifts

Using the analogy of a human body, Paul informs us that all believers have a coordinated role to play in building each other up. However, an important basis for the unity of the body is found in the *individual* connection of each person to the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4). It is *God* who puts the body together (verse 24).

One implication of this teaching is that all believers can make a contribution to the mission and direction of the church, based on what they have been given by the Spirit. Their ministry tasks should grow out of the concerns God has placed in their hearts. When believers work together to shape the vision of the church in a way that is significant for *and revealed through* each individual, the result is commitment and ownership of the task.

### Ineffective Communication

In a recent conversation with a pastor's assistant, I mentioned the name of a missionary supported for years by that church. She was unaware of who he was. I was not surprised. Despite the best efforts of many missions teams, the majority of people in the congregation remain unaware of what God is doing around the globe.

The answer is not more communication. We are bombarded by an overwhelming flow of information from all directions, and people have developed keen filters to identify the small percentage of news that immediately relates to them, while instantly dismissing the rest. If they do not have a personal investment in a missionary, incoming information is filtered out.

As a result, mission teams need to shift their effort from *communication* to *motivation*. And motivation is generated through participation in a decision-making process. When the missions team discovers how to empower others to invest in and shape the direction of missions in the church, then the excitement begins to grow.

### How Motivation Works

**Motivation flows from ownership.** Your neighbor's comment that his car needs a tune-up is not likely to move you to action because you don't own the car and aren't responsible for it. However, if it is *your* car, you are likely to take action. Information is deemed valuable when (and only when) there is perceived relevance. Perceived relevance stems from a sense of ownership (buy-in) to a particular issue.

**Ownership is responsibility initiated by commitment.** When you purchase a house, get married, or merely order a pizza, you have committed yourself to follow through—make the monthly payments, care for your spouse, pay for your pizza. Ownership carries obligation and requires an act of commitment.

**Commitment is the end result of a decision-making process.** A series of decisions precede the act of commitment, whether it is something as simple as ordering pizza or as life-changing as getting married. This consideration process may be incremental and slow, or it may occur quickly.

If people are not motivated about missions, the likely cause is a lack of perceived relevance. In that case, more or better communication is not the solution. Rather commitment can be nurtured by involving people in a decision-making process. When people invest in how a project or ministry is shaped, perceived relevance increases. Engaging the congregation in making choices may be more complex and less controllable than taking a vote in a committee meeting, but

the process will pay dividends through increased commitment and greater global impact.

---

**When the missions team discovers how to empower others to invest in and shape the direction of missions in the church, then the excitement begins to grow.**

---



### Navigation Tool— Involve People in Decision Making

How could your missions team involve the church in focusing your missions efforts? Here are three ideas:

**Selecting a Financial Project.** Some missions teams choose an annual project and ask the congregation to fund it. Instead of presenting just one option, churches could select five suitable projects and provide information about each. On a particular Sunday, each person could be given five \$100

bills of play money. Five buckets, each marked for one of the projects, would be set up, and the congregation would be asked to deposit their play money in the bucket designated for the project(s) they believe are the most worthwhile. They can spread the money around to as many as they like or put the whole amount in one bucket. The project that collects the most play money will be the one adopted and promoted that year. The purpose is to increase the congregation's interest in, and commitment to, the project as they are actively engaged in evaluating and prioritizing via a process in which their vote really counts.

**Self-Defining Missionary Advocates.** Encourage suitable individuals in the congregation to consider becoming advocates for a missionary. Hold a workshop where potential advocates grapple with what this role would involve and encourage each person to define the task as he/she would be willing to engage in it. Individual agreements can be drawn up that reflect each advocate's participation level. Motivated by the job description they created for themselves, these advocates can look for opportunities and create venues where their missionary's efforts can be promoted for prayer.

**Build on Existing Interest.** Discover what missions efforts people in the congregation are already interested in or committed to, and use those concerns as a springboard for the involvement of others. The next step is to invite people to participate in a process of advising, guiding, and shaping these current missions activities. By speaking into the development of a significant missions initiative, people become participants in the ministry and are drawn into a deeper commitment.

In one church that used this approach, the senior pastor declared, "This is changing our church!" Because people participated in a process through which they came to *own* the task, missions has become a significant part of that church. Rather than trying to find people to support the activities of the missions team, the team now empowers and supports people in the fulfillment of their *own* missions visions.

**In this era of constant change,** church missions teams need to navigate with great wisdom. First, they must always be oriented to the unmovable reference points of God's Word. Second, they need to *own* their missions purpose and destination. Third, they must lead their church in a decision-making process towards significant global involvement.

<sup>1</sup> The concept of the "portfolio" along with the concentric rings diagrams is further discussed and developed in the Cross-Cultural Impact article, [Balancing your Missional Portfolio](#).

<sup>2</sup> "Mission" (singular) in this article is distinct from "missions" (plural). Mission refers to the expressed purpose or aim for which a group exists. Missions refers to the fulfillment of the Great Commission within people groups beyond a local church's immediate area of influence.



**Mark Naylor** is the coordinator of international leadership development working with Northwest Baptist Seminary (ACTS seminaries @ TWU) and Fellowship International, the mission organization of the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches of Canada. With his wife, Karen, he served in Pakistan for 14 years in the areas of evangelism, church planting, and Bible translation. He currently provides coaching and workshops on missions and evangelism to Fellowship Baptist churches.

### Interchange Postings

Catalyst's **Postings** e-newsletter is a monthly publication designed for mission agency personnel and local church leaders involved in collaborative global efforts. The practical articles highlight what churches and agencies are doing to mobilize believers, especially those of younger generations, to expand the Kingdom.

#### Don't miss future issues!

To subscribe to future issues of this FREE e-newsletter, go to [www.catalystservices.org/resources/IP-sub.shtml](http://www.catalystservices.org/resources/IP-sub.shtml).

#### Want to read more?

Find past *Postings* at [www.catalystservices.org/resources](http://www.catalystservices.org/resources).

#### Contact us

To ask questions, suggest future topics, change your email address, or unsubscribe to this monthly publication, email [info@catalystservices.org](mailto:info@catalystservices.org).

#### Contribute

If you appreciate *Postings*, please donate to help fund future issues at: [www.catalystservices.org/donate](http://www.catalystservices.org/donate).

© 2011 Catalyst Services, Inc.