

MISSION NEWS

JOURNAL

THE MASTER'S MISSION

A MISSIONS JOURNAL FOR PASTORS AND ELDERS

NUMBER 4

Incarnational Ministry In a Day of Specialization

by David Blackney

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory.”

With these profound words the Apostle John begins to teach us the gospel. Inherent in these words is revealed a significant principle by which the Savior conducted his ministry. He chose twelve to “be with him”—the purpose was the same, so that they could behold His glory. His being among them became the avenue for his most powerful lessons—as the living Word demonstrated the fulfillment of the Word of God. His method became the standard of apostolic ministry. The apostles dwelt with those they served, working along side them and living with them as the avenue by which they taught. Paul commends the Thessalonians for becoming “imitators of us and of the Lord” (I Thes. 1:6). They received the apostolic team (v.9) who proved

to be certain “kind of men” in their presence: men of conviction, power, and the Spirit (v.5). The result was that the Thessalonians turned from idols to serve the living and true God (v.9). This first century missionary band, by their presence among the people of Macedonia, provided the arena of learning that made the difference in establishing a church that became an example for all the other churches to follow (v.7). This ‘church plant’ gained a reputation with their “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope” (v.3) that contemporary churches long for. It is the premise of this article that a return to this type of missionary methodology, i.e., a return to living with and among the people we serve, will produce similar results.

Assuming the missionary is sound in doctrine, this principle of incarnational witness—ministry by dwelling among—reveals the biblical solution to a significant problem in missions today. As it is often expressed, the problem is that ‘the church is a mile wide but only an inch deep.’ Many in church growth and mission circles are concerned that many churches here and on the mission field report large numbers in attendance and baptisms, but are virtually powerless in ministry and void of qualified and trained leadership. Subsequently their memberships are spiritually shallow, knowing little of what it is to live effectively for Christ. Some say the solu-



tion is to be found in better follow-up. Some work to provide further training for the leadership through correspondence courses or academic training by extension. Others argue that this problem need not concern us. They say the Spirit will do his work of growing up new converts and our missionary focus must remain personal and mass evangelism. **The problem is not the ability of the Spirit to do the work of sanctification but our misunderstanding of how the Spirit has ordained that we do evangelism and follow-up.** His way is through establishing churches ‘in the midst’ as the hub of evangelism and whose congregations provide the context of discipleship and follow-up. The incarnational principle states that churches can be better served by having missionaries who actually reside with the people among whom they seek to minister.

The principle exhibited

A survey of the New Testament shows that churches were established by the intense involvement of those that founded and later led the new congregations. These churches were characterized by an emphasis on fellow-

ship and togetherness.¹ When Paul departed Ephesus, he exhorted the elders to guard themselves and the flock. They were to shepherd God’s church. Shepherding is a rich metaphor for church leadership. It emphasizes the personal care and knowledge of the flock and its needs that a shepherd gains from the time he spends with his animals. The elders learned this kind of involvement by Paul’s example among them.² He told Timothy to remember not only what he learned but also the way he learned—through the example of those who taught him. Timothy followed not just Paul’s teaching but also his “conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, sufferings.” For those lessons to be grasped, time spent together with Paul was required so that Timothy could observe the

apostle’s behavior in the crucible of life. He was to follow his mentors’ example and be an example to others.³ He was not only to “prescribe and teach” the doctrines he

followed, but was to be a sterling example of those truths.⁴ The example Paul gave was of a leader who not only imparted the gospel but also his own life. A life that demonstrated affection and devoted care. He was gentle “as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.” He was diligent, like a father who with his own children, exhorted and encouraged and implored each of them.⁵ He instructed the missionary pastors Titus and Timothy that a requirement for those put in leadership is that they be examples in the home as well as the world—“visual aids” for others to follow so that they could learn how to walk in ways that please God.⁶ To the Philippians, Paul could write, “the things which you have learned and received and heard and *seen* in me, practice these things; and the God of peace shall be with you” (emphasis added).⁷ The apostles had caught this method of doing ministry as they experienced it with Jesus by being with him. The Apostle John **proclaims** what he has seen and heard and handled of the Word of Life so that others will enter into **fellowship** with them and indeed their fellowship is with the Father.⁸ The church family, regardless of where or in what kind of facility it meets, is the best venue for this kind of time and observation to take place among the members. When this kind of involvement is lost, the church grows weak along with its ministries and outreaches.

This kind of involvement takes time and commitment for real communication to develop. The weakness of the *quality time versus quantity time* argument in child rearing was exposed by understanding that quality times only show up in the quantity of time spent across the broad range of activities and experiences of normal life. In a similar way, mission ministry—the influencing of lives, is more effectively accomplished to the degree that more experiences of life are shared between the discipler and his student. The quality events can thus be captured. One missions writer observing this principle stated:

Effective missionary identification lies at the heart of making Christ known across cultures and **involves all that we are as human beings.** A superficial missionary identification merely imitates the local customs of a people hoping to gain access for a hearing of the gospel. With time, however the receiving culture will recognize such identification as a gimmick. [T]he

4. 1 Timothy 4:11, with verses 6b and 12

5. 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12

6. 1 Timothy 3:2-7 with 1 Thessalonians 2:12; note the Berkeley Version of the New Testament translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:1 “to continue advancing in the ideal **you caught from us**, how to behave in a way that pleases God,” emphasis added.

7. Philippians 4:9

8. 1 John 1:1-3

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1. Acts 2:42, 46

2. Acts 20:28, with vs. 18-20, 31, 35

3. 2 Timothy 3:10-11, 14

goal is... to identify with them so as to communicate more clearly with them. This can only come about by **being with them where they are and working with them** rather than *for* them. (emphasis added)⁹

Again, it takes more than *a hearing* to get the gospel established. And 'going native' is not the issue. We will never be completely like them (they don't expect us to be!) but we can be with them to model how to respond to life's challenges. And this is why Jesus spent time with his disciples. Coleman observes,

He ate with them, slept with them, and talked with them... they walked together along the lonely roads; they visited together in the crowded cities; they sailed and fished together... they prayed together... they worshipped together... while Jesus was ministering to others, the disciples were always there with him. Whether he addressed the multitudes that pressed on him, conversed with the scribes and Pharisees which sought to ensnare him, or spoke to some lonely beggar along the road, the disciples were close at hand to observe and to listen. In this manner, Jesus' time was paying double dividends. Without neglecting his regular ministry to those in need, he maintained a constant ministry to his disciples by having them with him. They were thus getting the benefit of everything he said and did to others plus their own personal explanation and counsel.¹⁰

It was this 'on the job' training 'in residence' with Jesus that enabled the apostles to establish churches which did the same thing. They adopted the same method. Indeed this defined the mission of the church. Coleman continues:

Really the whole problem of giving personal care to every believer is only resolved in a thorough understanding of the nature and **mission** of the church. [T]he emergence of the church principle around Jesus, whereby one believer was brought into fellowship with all others, was the practice in a larger dimension of the same thing that he was doing with the Twelve. (emphasis added)¹¹

This **mission** of the church is expressed in 2 Timothy 2:2—faithful men finding other faithful men who can teach others also. Doing this required the first century

'church planters' to not lose sight of the **mission** in all the activity of the various **ministries** that were the normal part of the life of God's churches. Their mission was training others (by being with them) as they had been trained by Jesus. They would do other things, but this was foremost of all. Again, Coleman highlights this principle:

Preaching to the masses, although necessary, will never suffice in the work of preparing leaders for evangelism. Nor can occasional prayer meetings and training classes for Christian workers do this job. Building men and women is not that easy. It requires constant personal attention... This is something that no organization or class can ever do. Children are not raised by proxy. The example of Jesus would teach us that **it can be done only by persons staying close to those whom they seek to lead.** (emphasis added)¹²

The apostles understood and stayed close. If missionaries today are to be most effective they must do the same.

The trend away from "staying close"

It was not always intentional, but still it happened. The reasons were usually apparent: churches became established and less dependant on expatriate missionaries. The need to model was taken over by nationals and appropriately so. Missionaries began to serve in other roles, often as specialists or advisors. The problem came about when the shift in roles, and often residence, of the expatriate missionary or qualified national was premature.

When the basic lessons are not fully *caught*, specialization will be less helpful. Specialization works the best when augmenting foundations that are in place. Specialization by design does not

have the same context or arena in which to perform. And specialization itself is not the problem. It is only problematic if we expect it to do what it is not designed to do. With specialization, the **ministries** of the church and the **mission** of the church have often been confused. Many now think of the individual aspects of a church's various ministries as

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9. A. Scott Moreau, gen. ed., **Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions**, 2000 ed., s.v. *Extent of Missionary Identification*, by R.R. King, Baker Books.

10. Robert E. Coleman, **The Master Plan of Evangelism, 30th Anniversary Edition**, Fleming H. Revell, 1993, pp. 45-46.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

missions itself. While each specific task or ministry has a virtuous role to play, they are not intended themselves to fulfill the fundamental mission of the church which is to establish reproducing congregations. They are designed to lend support to that purpose in the area of their expertise, but cannot replace the objective of church planting where that is needed.

Most mission periodicals illustrate this specialization in the world of modern missions ministries. There are calls for missionaries to serve in all of the following ways and/or areas:

- Agriculturalists and Community Development specialists
- Accountants and Administrators
- Engineers, Mechanics, and Maintenance Personnel
- Musicians
- Media: literature, radio, film, video
- Crisis and Famine Relief
- Personal and mass evangelism
- Medicine & Dentistry
- Education: theology, literacy, for missionary children
- Linguists and Translators
- English Second Language specialists
- Creative outreaches utilizing art and drama, clowning, sports, etc.
- Logistics and aviation

Mission agencies and organizations have been developed to conduct and promote each of these individual activities. The people sent out by them to be involved in these pursuits are each called missionaries. But they are not missionaries in the traditional sense, meaning that although they fulfill the definition by being sent out from their home church they are not involved in the traditional activities of establishing churches that used to be commonly associated with the missionary task. Their focus is more restricted and seeks to strengthen the ministries of existing churches or provide special benevolent services on behalf of churches but where no churches locally exist.

As requests come from the field for more missionaries, we must look closely at the request or we may recruit the wrong personnel. The number one request from the mission fields remains the same and is still the least fulfilled. Whether from the national church bodies, the mission agencies, or missionaries (regardless of specialization) the request is the same: send more church planting missionaries. Others expressed it by saying we need more disciplers rather than evangelists. The struggle to communicate clearly the need behind the request for church planters has led to various labels: “classical missionaries” or “pioneer-type” missionaries. Some refer to the “field missionary” or the “evangelist/church planter” or

the “career or vocational” missionary. These labels all have their limitations and own set of confusions: to some, ‘classical’ means only those missionaries going to where Christ has not yet been named; ‘specialists’ have a career and are sent out, with many staying long term. Further, classical missionaries have always been involved in most of the specializations. They can not easily be “pigeon-holed” into a modern category of ‘church planter or discipling’ specialist that somehow divides the ‘physical’ or ‘social’ needs from the ‘spiritual’ needs. Some contemporary mission leaders, understanding the priority need for establishing churches, have artificially made the church planter a specialist. They have defined his role in ways that rule out many of the activities of a fully orbed ministry and thus have restricted the kinds of activities they will allow their missionary to engage in. But a review of eighteenth and nineteenth century founders of the modern missionary movement will find most of them involved in most of the ‘specialty’ areas as a function of the churches and/or ministries they were establishing. **Missions meant establishing and strengthening new congregations that with maturity conducted ministries in all these areas.** The primary function of the missionary was the establishing of churches and disciples that were taught the benevolence and ethics of the Bible while their founding missionaries modeled the very actions that led them to these virtuous ends. Often it took several generations for lasting fruit to appear.

What made them similar to the first century church planters and at the same time different from much of today’s specialized missionary is that they lived among the people who observed their responses to life. Not all, but most specialists serve needs by coming in and addressing problems in the areas of their expertise with training events or serving activities and then in a few days or weeks they move on. Often they function from centralized cities where they can then venture out in all directions and then return again to home base to regroup and re-supply before going to the next place of need.

A new category being reported by agencies is “non-residential missionary personnel”. It is defined as ‘persons not residing in the country(s) of their ministry focus but

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assigned to overseas duties and traveling overseas at least 12 weeks per year on operational aspects of the ministry.”¹³ This kind of missions is on the increase. Fully supported non-residential personnel went from 507 in 1996 to 1815 in 1999 while at the same time the ‘long term’ (overseas more than 4 years) personnel declined.¹⁴

While some would insist that a non-resident missionary is an oxymoron, it is not the purpose of this article to be uncharitable or critical of the role ‘non-residents’ provide. Many provide significant benefits and training for the national churches that request their services. Indeed, the specialized tasks—such as theological training, relief projects, and medical clinics—are intended to support and strengthen the ministries of new mission churches or provide preliminary projects where there are no churches in place. But sometimes they are running ahead or beside the new congregation because the young congregations for lack of maturity and/or resources, cannot yet perform those functions. Any church worth its salt will eventually be involved in most of these areas—for where do you stop biblical compassion? But it is incumbent upon us to realize how such maturity comes. God’s usual method is that the importance of these activities and ministries are taught as part of the change that the gospel brings. These specialized ministries are demonstrated and practiced first by missionary church leaders in a church setting among those they are teaching. The disciples in turn become equipped for these special ministries as they observe and imitate their missionary shepherds.

With these factors in mind, perhaps the label of “resident church establishing missionary” communicates better the need represented by the vast majority of requests. The need is for personnel to come and be involved with the people over the long haul while modeling and conducting a wide range of activities while the church is being established and strengthened.

The challenge to return

One of the chief blessings of God is His grace in allowing us to do what our hearts desire. One of the greatest responsibilities of man is to evaluate our investments and priorities so to better bring glory to God.

The prominent request coming from all sources of missionary endeavor is for us to send more “resident church establishing missionaries.” Why? Obviously some areas have no churches. But while many areas already have churches and would not at first seem to need resident disciplers, the “only an inch deep” problem exists and also generates the call for this kind of help.

Nominalism has become a major issue. In many countries the ‘Christians’ themselves

need to be evangelized. Their spiritual needs cannot be ignored. Many traditional Christian populations know nothing of a personal faith, true repentance from sin and a trust in the finished work of Christ for their salvation. It is estimated that 1.2 billion (60%) are nominal and non-practicing ‘Christians’. Many millions more trust more in their good deeds than in God’s grace for salvation. Many areas of Europe, Latin America and parts of Africa and Asia are Christianized but unconverted. Occultism and sin reigned unchallenged... Christo pagans, who while statistically counted as Christians, are practicing occultists, shamanists, fetishists, etc. under a veneer of Christianity.”¹⁵

Indeed the need is great, and it requires the only adequate solution: the long-term ‘resident missionary’ who can address every challenge with both words and example to show what Biblical Christianity really is. This requires two things. Missionaries who are trained in the right message and secondly, who are trained in the skills that enable them to go and live where the people they want to reach actually reside. It assumes a commitment to stay long enough for relationships to develop in which the life changing lessons can be passed on to others. It requires the time necessary to give those, who are learning to pass on their faith, adequate supervision until they can do the process themselves. **This ‘on-the-job’ supervision is the hedge against syncretism and nominalism.**

How great is the need? Our lack of providing ‘resident missionaries’ is catching up with us. We are not replacing the veteran missionaries who are now retiring and returning home. “A slight trend across the 14 years [1984-1999] is a 2.9 % decrease in the proportion of long term personnel.”¹⁶ Some argue that these numbers are more than offset by the great increase in the numbers of short-term missions volunteers

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13. **Mission Handbook 2001-2003**, 18th edition, John A. Siewer and Dotsey Wellivert, ed., EMIS, Wheaton, IL, p. 504.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

15. **Operation World**, 21st Century Edition, pp.13-14.

16. **Mission Handbook 2001-2003**, p. 75.

that we are sending. But is this really fair to place the same responsibility of fulfilling the demands of the Great Commission on these untrained volunteers? Short-termers do not know the language, have a limited grasp of the culture, do not intend to serve as elder/shepherds, and by design are not serving in a resident capacity. They were never meant to! To say the decrease in resident career missionaries is offset by non-resident short-term mission volunteers is to commit the old error of comparing apples and oranges. The failure to replace trained veteran career missionaries is worth noting. We should be further challenged in light of the fact that of 693 mission agencies in the United States only 158 or 22.9 % , in a self-defining exercise, indicate that *church establishing/planting* is their primary activity.¹⁷ The other activities that have become primary to the majority of agencies, as good as they are, can not meet the church planting need, they are not designed to. The nationals, although greatly increasing the number of their own that they are sending cross-culturally, can not fill this gap. Even if they could, the command of Jesus for *us* to go is still our responsibility and privilege.

Understanding the nominalism of much of the world's "Christianity" and the current trends away from residential missions can enable us as elders and church missions leaders to re-evaluate the priority of sending resident missionaries who are committed to the apostolic incarnational model of missions. In addition, hearing the call for reaching the yet un-reached, we must ask ourselves if our primary activities match the requests we are receiving from the field. We can then prioritize our resources and focus our efforts in identifying and training missionary candidates who are uniquely qualified to meet these needs as we enter this new century.

Such 'resident missionaries', beyond having a thorough grasp of the Scriptures, must have two essential and additional skills: the ability to get to the people they are called to serve and the ability to survive once they arrive. These

skills will allow adequate time to proclaim and model the message of Christ. In some cases these destinations are relatively easy to get to, others present almost overwhelming political and logistical challenges just to get there or remain once there. Non-resident and specialist missionaries are often asked to come permanently or stay longer among those to which they have ministered. Too often their answer is "I'd like to, but I'm not able to." Sometimes the inability is a technical matter—they lack the skills to go. Sometimes it is a philosophical issue—the church or agency has decided to follow a different method of ministry. We should re-evaluate and address both issues as we plan our involvements in global outreach.

It was T.M. Rankin of a past generation who "spoke the truth when he stated that the most effective witness the church makes will always be the lives of those who in Christ's name bury themselves in the lives and struggles of another people—missionaries who serve the people, learn to speak their language, develop the capacity to feel their hurt and hunger, and who learn to love them personally and individually."¹⁸

Paul said we must hold to the Word of God so that in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation we can shine as lights. We invite you to join us at The Master's Mission in giving missionaries the skills to 'get in the midst' that the glory of the gospel may shine forth through churches known for works of faith and labors of love!

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We welcome your feedback on this article! You may mail us at feedback@mastersmission.org.

17. *Mission Handbook 2001-2003*, p. 43.

18. T.M. Rankin, *The Commission* 15, (June 1952), quoted in Alan Neely, *Incarnational Mission*, *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 2000 ed., A. Scott Moreau, gen. ed.

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What Makes an Effective Missionary?

Being Sent Like Jesus Was

Dr. Titus Kivunsi, former head of the Africa Inland Church-Kenya and current professor of theology at NEGST (National Evangelical Graduate School of Theology) in Nairobi, Kenya, when asked what kind of missionaries he would ask American pastors to send, emphasized the principles of *incarnational missions* in his response:

- Send those who are mature in Christ. Those who have grappled with life and know what life means, who can articulate the fundamental teachings of the Word.
- Send those who go to the people, see them as human beings, send those who are willing to work with the people, eat their food, appreciate the conditions of their lives, who can sympathize and yet never compromise the truth
- Send people who are burdened with the lostness of mankind, those who are determined to come to help the people, not as tourists, but as those who come to help with a definite call to ministry.
- Send people who respond to ministry whole-heartedly, who are willing to spend and be spent for the cause of Christ.

He continued, "I personally believe that missions as established by the Lord Jesus Christ, hangs on the statement, 'as the Father has sent me, so send I you,' and is binding to this day."

Contact dblackney@mastersmission.org for a free copy of the full interview
Exclusive Interviews: Dr. Titus Kivunzi & Baruch Maoz available on videotape.



Dr. Titus Kivunsi
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