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The Mission Field Next Door: A Status Report on North American Missions

STAN GRANBERG, KENT SMITH, AND GAILYN VAN RHEENEN

North Americans today find themselves in one of the world's great mission fields. In this article we outline three major realities that define our missionary challenge and opportunity here: theological realities, cultural realities, and church realities. Considered together, these realities offer compelling evidence that we live in a time and place calling for serious, concerted missionary focus. We then describe three new initiatives that are proactively bringing the good news to unreached Americans: Abilene Christian University's Missionary Residency for North America, *Mission Alive*, and *Kairos: Church Planting Support*.

PART 1: WHY PLANT CHURCHES IN NORTH AMERICA?

Theological Realities

The rationale for church planting is rooted in fundamental themes which, like threads, are interwoven through the tapestry of the biblical story. Three of these are *missio Dei* (the mission of God), incarnation, and the kingdom of God.

Missio Dei. God has consistently called his servants—from Moses to Micah, from Abram to Zerubbabel, from Peter to Paul—and sent them to accomplish his purposes. This calling and sending is uniquely seen within the Trinity and played out within the church. “The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another ‘movement’: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world.”¹ The church then is God's people sent on a mission to accomplish God's purposes. *Missio Dei* recognizes that “mission is not the invention, responsibility, or program of human beings, but flows from the character and purposes of God.”² This theology challenges our Modern, secular thinking and affirms that God calls leaders and sends them as his missionaries.

Incarnation. Because our God is holy and loving, he takes on human form in order to reconcile searchers and skeptics to himself. The greatest example of this is his Son, who “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1.14). Jesus became part of a specific culture in order to point people to the kingdom of God. Jesus was both distinctive and engaged—“in the world” but not “of the world” (John 17.14–16). The church, as the “body of Christ,” incarnates the nature of God in the world. “If mission originates in the character and activity of God,” the incarnation of Christ is the most significant “means by which God engages in mission.”³

Kingdom of God. God the creator is the exalted King over all the world (Ps. 47.7–9, 95.1–7). This king is “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.” His reign, or “dominion” is characterized by “glory” and “splendor” and “power” and “mighty acts” (Ps 145.8–13). Many created beings, however, have forgotten their King and follow other gods. The kingdom, as defined by the Lord's Prayer, is the rule

1. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 390.

2. Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 39.

3. *Ibid.*, 42.

of God in which worshippers are giving praise to God, asking for his kingdom to come, and following the will of God “*on earth as it is in heaven*” (Matt 6.9–10). The coming of Christ—his incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection—is the pivotal point in human history. He came to bring the kingdom of God and break the slavery of sin and Satan. We currently live between the times: God’s kingdom has already come into the world but will only be brought to completion at the end of time.

Christians are God’s kingdom messengers. We proclaim that the world is God’s by right of creation. Humans were not created to rule themselves but to live in submission to God, who is King of kings and Lord of lords. Christian living is therefore centered around the nature and work of God. “If [churches] are functioning properly, [they] will be agents of the kingdom, signposts of the kingdom, sacraments of the kingdom, proclaiming and demonstrating the kingdom, pointing to what is coming when the kingdom is fully established, but they can never be equated with the kingdom”⁴

These understandings of the nature and work of God provide us not only with motivation for church planting but conceptual frameworks for our practice of ministry.

Cultural Realities

As we join God in his work of calling Americans from every population segment into God’s reign, we face a time of radical cultural change. The world American Christians encounter today is fundamentally different than it was even a generation or two ago. To name a few of these accelerating changes underscores that for us to be faithful to God’s mission now we cannot escape becoming cross-cultural workers. Ministry in America today *is* cross-cultural.

Urbanization. The country is moving to the city. Our grandparents were born when 75% of the population of the United States lived in rural areas. By the year 2000 that figure had reversed—over 75% of the population lived in cities. Our churches have not kept pace in that move, culturally or geographically.

Pluralism. The social doctrine that promoted America as a “melting pot” is finding a shrinking place in our imagination, as well as our reality. *E Pluribus Unum* (from many, one) has morphed into the land of many tribes. Our differences, once downplayed in the interest of a common good, are now often celebrated. Such distinctions can present major barriers to sharing our faith.

Globalization. The world is moving to North America. Our cities of all sizes are increasingly diverse. Public schools where dozens of languages are spoken have become commonplace. Overall, this growing international diversity is not well represented by our churches.

Segregation of the Poor. It is true that the poor have always been among us. What is changing in America is the concentration of the poor into ghettos and the character of their poverty. The layers of brokenness among America’s poor recently won the distinction of having the most disadvantaged poor children of the developed nations.⁵ With some important exceptions, the church is not reaching these people with good news.

Decline of Institutions. Many forces are weakening the loyalty and interest people have in institutions of all kinds.⁶ Related to this, the rise of widespread access to information-sharing technology such as the Internet signals an end to many forms of institutional power concentration. At the same time, doors are opening to new ways of relating and connecting to one another. These changes press the church to re-imagine what it means to be faithful to our ancient faith and our current neighbor.

Post-Christendom. From the time of emperor Constantine until the recent past, the church has had a privileged place in the Western world. In some unique ways this remained true in the United States longer than elsewhere, but signs are that those days are ending. In a culture now being described by many as neo-

4. Ibid., 47.

5. <http://www.unicef.org/media/files/ChildPovertyReport.pdf>.

6. See for example, Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* (New York: Portfolio, 2006).

pagan, the church is often disrespected and marginalized. This presents great challenges but also new opportunities for those inviting others to follow Jesus.

Because of these and other major changes, America today is a patchwork quilt of people groups. Often they are only separated by a street, but are culturally continents apart. These cultural realities invite us to fresh thinking and monumental new initiatives to bring the good news to the vast mission field that is North America.

Church Realities

Closely tied to many of these cultural changes, Americans are walking away from church. The United States is now the world's third largest mission field (behind China and India), with more than 246 million people *not* attending church on a given Sunday, and more joining their ranks every day.⁷ With each succeeding generation, fewer people call themselves Christians. While as many as 60% of people born before 1946 attend church, Dr. Thom Rainer cites this data: "Our recent research on the younger generation, the Bridgers (born 1977 to 1994), indicates that only 4% of today's teenagers and college students understand the gospel and have accepted Christ, even if they attend church."⁸ Further evidence for the faltering of American faith: in 1990 20.4% of Americans were in church on any given Sunday, in just thirteen years that number declined to 17.8%.⁹ The rapid growth of megachurches in the last few decades is misleading, since no county in America has a greater churched population than it did ten years ago.¹⁰

In our own Churches of Christ, the trends are similar. Director of the Harding Center for Church Growth, Flavil Yeakley, notes that the Churches of Christ have experienced no significant growth since 1980. Even in "strongholds" of our fellowship, total membership fell: Oklahoma down 13%, Tennessee down 3%, and Arkansas down 1.5%.¹¹ In the same period the total American population increased more than 32%. Facing these facts, we are challenged with the importance of British church planter Stuart Murray's question: "Can we expect to successfully plant new churches in the West?" Remembering our history and observing what is happening today, we have good reason to believe the answer is yes. The apostle Paul faced an overwhelmingly hostile culture on two fronts: belligerent Jews and disinterested Greeks. And yet the great commission power of the gospel prevailed, transforming the face of the world through the planting of thousands of faithful communities of God followers. Paul's declaration in Romans 1.16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God," is as true in our day as his.

Like Paul, throughout our nation we are seeing the gospel meet a belligerent and disinterested culture, and leaving new churches in its wake. These new churches are creatively engaging in faith conversations with people across the entire faith spectrum. While we do not expect the type of receptivity in America we have seen in Africa and India, there is a new responsiveness awakening in America's spiritual heart.¹²

PART 2: THREE INITIATIVES

Recognizing North America as one of the world's great mission fields has prompted several new initiatives to equip and empower cross-cultural leadership for our continent. While each work is distinct in emphasis and strength, we share common convictions that the time for serious missionary engagement on our continent is at hand, and that the new kingdom communities that rise from that engagement will be as diverse as our multicultural population.

7. David Olson, <http://theamericanchurch.org/12supm.htm>.

8. Thom Rainer, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 33.

9. David T. Olsen, *Quick Facts About the American Church*. <http://theamericanchurch.org>, 2006.

10. Ron Sylvia, *Starting High Definition Churches* (Ocala, FL: High Definition Resources, 2004), 26.

11. Flavil Yeakley, *Growth and Decline Among the Churches of Christ in the United States* (Searcy, AR: Harding Center for Church Growth Studies, 2006).

12. Our thanks to Jason Campbell and Scott Lambert for their assistance with this section.

The Missionary Residency for North America

What will it take to prepare leaders with the capacity to join God in reaching North America's vast unreached populations? To answer this question, Abilene Christian University (ACU) began designing a new graduate program in 2003: The Missionary Residency for North America (MRNA). Combining the academic resources of ACU's Graduate School of Theology with the missionary training experience of the Halbert Institute for Missions, MRNA is a graduate residency in missionary living. Under the direction of Dr. Kent Smith, MRNA accepts up to six graduate students each year for intensive residency training. This training prepares domestic missionaries by equipping students in these important areas:

- **Spiritual Formation:** Resident interns are challenged and given opportunity to develop the sane, God-centered lifestyles vital for effective, enduring kingdom work.
- **Missionary Training:** Missionary students leave with proven competencies in sharing faith and forming spiritual families that will be foundational for their ministries.
- **Team Development:** The residency equips students with core skills in forming and nurturing healthy teams wherever they serve.
- **Field Selection:** Interns learn to bring discipline and spiritual attention to the process of discerning their future bases of work.
- **Church Support:** The combination of early field selection and team formation provides time for missionaries to develop solid working relationships with supporters.
- **Leadership Replication:** The residency gives interns experience with learning/teaching models that they can reproduce among new believers on the missions field.
- **Movement Initiation:** True North American church planting movements become possible as students learn to train next generation leaders in ways they in turn can use to train others.

At a practical level, interns learn through a variety of experiences including regular tutorials, lectures, seminars, and travel, combined with a strong emphasis on missionary practice and reflection. Most importantly, students help to plant churches as they learn about church planting. Up to twenty-seven hours of graduate credit is available in the first year to qualified interns. Coming out of the internship, MRNA students receive ongoing support in team formation, leadership development and field preparation while they complete their graduate studies. After finishing their master's degree and arriving in their field of work, missionaries continue to be supported through regular coaching, field visits and the ongoing programs of the Halbert Institute and the Graduate School of Theology.

Mission Alive

Mission Alive, initiated in 2004 by Gailyn and Becky Van Rheenen, exists to equip church planters, provide church planter care, and work with churches to plant churches in the urban contexts of North America. The Van Rheenens bring fourteen years of experience as church planters in Africa and seventeen years as teachers and mentors of church-planting missionaries at Abilene Christian University. God has worked through them, their board, Dr. John Cooke (*Mission Alive's* Director of Church Planter Care), and coaches and mentors to plant nine churches in the last two and a half years in such diverse places as Atlanta, Austin, Denver, Fort Worth, Forney (a growing area East of Dallas), Lexington, and Savannah (an emerging suburb of east of Denton, Texas).¹³

The purpose of *Mission Alive* is to "discover, equip, place, and nurture church-planting leaders who will plant Christ-formed churches in suburbs, city centers, university contexts, and poverty areas with unbelievers as the primary target." *Christ-formed churches* focus on the gospel, how the gospel is formed within us,

13. Descriptions of these church plantings can be found at <http://www.missionalive.org/news.asp?newsid=108&cat=6>

and how gospel connects with contemporary culture. Christ-formed churches grow like the early Christian church—radiating God’s light in darkness (2 Pet 2.12).

Church planters in *Mission Alive* are trained to think theologically and intentionally move from theology to practice.¹⁴ Their practices reflect that the church should be shaped by the calling and sending of God, reflect God’s redemptive reign in Christ, and incarnate the nature and mission of God. The church is to be “a holy nation, a people belonging to God” so that they “may declare the praises of him who called [them] out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2.9). They believe that the kingdom of God must not be syncretized with the kingdoms of this world.¹⁵

Christ-formed churches are characterized by distinct practices:

- Telling the story of God’s salvation
- Walking intimately with God reflecting his love and holiness
- Growing in Christ within Christian community
- Overcoming sin and Satan
- Cultivating spiritual friendships with searchers
- Equipping for works of ministry
- Practicing hospitality
- Serving the poor, sick, and oppressed
- Fellowshiping all of God’s people (Gal 3.28)
- Living for the sake of the world

2 Cor 4.7 describes Christ-formed church planters. They consider themselves fragile clay lamps through which the light of the gospel shines. They should never picture themselves as prestigious powerhouses, jars of gold, silver, or bronze. The mission is not theirs, for self glory. The mission is God’s, for his glory!

Kairos: Church Planting Support

“New churches for new people in new places” is the first directive of *Kairos: Church Planting Support*, a two-year-old ministry whose mission is to recruit, equip and support church multiplication leaders to seek and to save God’s lost people. *Kairos* is the heart-felt response to God’s call that Stan and Gena Granberg experienced when after a decade of involvement in God’s work in Kenya, they returned and found our American fellowship in such decline. At the same time, God was working in Jonesboro, Arkansas to prepare the Southwest Church of Christ to dream of a church planting movement in the Churches of Christ. *Kairos* formed out of this partnership, which now also includes Scott and Kim Lambert with the Hilltop Church of Christ in El Segundo, California, and Larry and Leslie Deal.

The heart of the *Kairos* work is to provide the best planting experience possible for gifted, willing lead church planters. Lead church planters come in all shapes and sizes, ages and with various levels of experience. *Kairos* does not envision a one size fits all approach. In fact, *Kairos* believes that to reach different people groups, it will need a variety of leaders willing to start churches that engage these new people. Presently *Kairos* is working with thirty planter couples and teams.

After extensive interviewing, the church planting couples and their teams attend Strategy Lab. This is a weeklong intense training period full of biblical teaching, theological reflection and practical application for a new generation of churches. Planters develop timelines, strategies and plans for these launches. Worship,

14. Gailyn Van Rheenen, From Theology to Practice: The Missional Helix (<http://www.missionalive.org/default.asp?id=80>) and The Missional Helix: Example of Church Planting (<http://www.missionalive.org/default.asp?id=81>).

15. Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Contextualization and Syncretism*. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006); cf. http://www.missionalive.org/assets/articles/contextualization_and_syncretism.pdf.

prayer and community commitment are major components of the week. As each planter moves to their chosen area they begin working with a coach, who will partner with them. The coach provides regular guidance, expertise and accountability. Each planter (and spouse if applicable) also selects spiritual mentors who offer friendship and support for their unique journey. *Kairos* works with the coaches and mentors to provide them training, encouragement, and resource networks. *Kairos* is presently coaching eight church plants in Vancouver, Washington; Portland and Salem, Oregon; San Clemente and East Hollywood, California; North Brunswick, New Jersey; Chapel Hill, North Carolina; and Jonesboro, Arkansas.

These new churches are active in their communities. They are focused on revealing to God's lost people that He is active in their lives and is calling them to him. Faith in Jesus as the Son of God is often reached by experiencing life in the community of believers first. *Kairos'* desire is for each new church to have an established church as a sponsoring church; the established churches are being reinvigorated by the stories and faith of these new young churches. There is growth in the mother churches as a result of their involvement in church planting.

Kairos is the Greek word for *in God's appointed time*. In this new century as Western Christianity is declining, this is God's appointed time to ask new questions. What does it mean to be a Church of Christ? How is the gospel preached to unbelief? Does Sunday assembly look different when half the people there are not yet Christians? Those at *Kairos*, *Mission Alive* and ACU's *Missionary Residency for North America* are asking questions, training others to ask and explore answers to these questions, and most importantly seeking to live out these answers amongst God's lost people.

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