

1-1-2013

Church Equipping for Missions in a Post-Christian United States of America

Dan Bouchelle
dan.bouchelle@mrnet.org

Jay Jarboe
jay.jarboe@mrnet.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>

Recommended Citation

Bouchelle, Dan and Jarboe, Jay (2013) "Church Equipping for Missions in a Post-Christian United States of America," *Leaven*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol21/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Church Equipping for Missions in a Post-Christian United States of America

DAN BOUCHELLE AND JAY JARBOE

Introduction

“We have a dream of our church sending an entire mission team to another country on our own. What advice can you give us?” “Can you help us figure out how much to pay our missionaries?” “Can you help us develop some policies that will determine how often our missionaries come home on furloughs and what kind of reporting we should expect from them? We are not sure how to hold them accountable.” “Our church has a dream of planting five churches on five continents in the next five years. How do we get started on that?” “Can you help us find other churches to support this mission project with us? It’s been great work for a decade but we can’t carry it all alone anymore.”

These are all real questions we have received at Missions Resource Network (MRN) in the past year. Some are rare mind-popping questions that make you want to say, “Wait a minute now, let’s talk about that.” Other questions are routine things we hear all the time and can readily answer with templates and referrals. What all of them have in common, however, is that they operate out of a paradigm of missions that is fading away, if not already antiquated.

Rethinking Missions and Ministry

There was a time in our near past when missions and ministry were seen as different disciplines requiring different training and methods. Ministry is what we did at home in a “Christian country” and consisted of taking care of established congregations and helping them to grow through increasing their attractiveness or improving their market share. It was mostly pastoral work, program management and member recruitment in a culture predisposed to believe in a Christian God. Missions happened overseas as we sought to convert pagans or people in a religious tradition we did not consider genuinely Christian. We were trying to make first-generation converts and plant brand new churches in parts of the world where our fellowship had no churches. In this way of thinking, missions flowed from the United States, where we knew how to do church, to the rest of the world. If we were more ecumenically minded, we might have thought of missions as “from the West to the rest.” The stronghold of the church was in the Western world of Christendom; mission, at least in practice, was a religious form of imperialism.

If that was ever a healthy way of viewing missions, which we doubt, it certainly is no longer. Today, as Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom*¹ and others have helped us grasp, the strength of the church is no longer in its traditional strongholds but is south of the equator and in the East. As Lesslie Newbigin reminded us, the church in the West needs to be on mission in our own countries. Largely because the Western church has forgotten its missional identity and role, the former sending nations have been surpassed by the nations we once considered the “mission field.” The church is growing most rapidly in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, while it is in rapid decline in North America and barely holding on in Europe. We have been told by various African missionaries that there are more members of Churches of Christ in Africa than in the United

¹Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

States. From our travels to Africa, Asia and Latin America, we can testify that there is a vitality to churches there badly missing in the West. It is time for us to reconsider a long list of assumptions that have been foundational to our thinking about missions, including the following:

- Americans are the best people to evangelize or at least oversee the evangelization of the rest of the world.
- God’s vision for every nation will be given to churches, missiologists, or aspiring missionaries in the West.
- Churches from the Western Christendom tradition represent the models of church that need to be copied around the world.
- The churches with the most money (or Christians in the richest nations) should be setting the vision for mission around the world.
- Missions and ministry are different activities or separate departments of the church.
- “Mission church” is a meaningful distinction rather than a redundancy.
- American churches only need to send money and hold missionaries (American or foreign workers) accountable for their results. We have all the knowledge and skills we need to do missions.

Suggestions for Moving Forward

Contrary to these and many other assumptions operational in many of our churches, it is well past time to rethink what missions involves. We need to engage in a sustained process of rediscovery and re-imagining of what it means to be serving the mission of God as the church. As we work with churches to equip them for excellence in mission, here is what we see routinely at MRN:

- It is a rare congregation that has a functional foundation for missions or even knows they need one. Most churches have inherited a set of practices and events which only make sense in a culture quickly fading away, but which they feel compelled to perpetuate not only at home but also around the world. They think about the church as institution rather than a people with a purpose. A church may consider tweaking their methods in order to attract a few more visitors, but rarely can they articulate the purpose of the church in God’s global work.
- This absent missiology is rooted in a vacant eschatology. Churches rarely understand God’s endgame or what their part is in helping it come to fruition in their community and around the world. We see the end goal as just “getting to heaven,” rather than being transformed into the image of Christ and seeing him glorified in the world through his increasing redemption and restoration of all his entire creation.
- Rather than read texts about ecclesiology with the mission in mind and with a missional awareness of the need for local incarnation, we tend to read ecclesiological statements in the New Testament in institutional terms that assume a Christendom infrastructure that did not develop for over three hundred years after the gospel began to spread throughout the globe.
- Missions is typically viewed as a parasitic department of the church which drains essential resources away from the local church, rather than mission as the bone marrow of Christ’s body that gives life to everything we do in the church.
- Ministers often compete with “missions” for resources rather than championing missions and leveraging what they are learning from their global connection for local application.
- Churches rarely feel the responsibility to provide ongoing spiritual and emotional support to those they support financially in other countries. Even more rare is the church that allows their missionaries to teach them what they have learned.
- It is a rare church that has a vision for its role in God’s global mission. Rather they tend to react like bad venture capitalists who don’t know what business they are in. They give money to a variety of people with whom they have some relationships or who make a compelling appeal, but have no clear criteria for determining what to fund and therefore don’t know what constitutes success in each venture.

We often use the following diagram with churches that call us for help.



Most churches that seek us out initially want help with the matters at the top of this pyramid, and tend to slowly walk down the left side without a foundation or the power only provided by God. In short, they work backwards—which is terribly inefficient as well as ineffective. In contrast, we recommend each church start with developing a theology of missions, go back to scripture to reexamine what the gospel and church are about, rediscover God’s mission, and then clearly lay out the values which grow from this understanding of God and his mission. Once that is done, and only then, are they in a position to discern and articulate a vision of their role in God’s work given their location, resources, experience and sense of calling. Once a church has a clear theological vision, then they can set priorities or goals and begin to proactively determine what their strategies and practices should be, as well as those partners through whom they should work. Churches who do this are developing a missiology that will not only shape their global investments; they are also building a foundation for their local work as well. They have a framework for decision-making and are not mere passive reactors to the appeals of everyone who comes along with a good story.

Vision Development in Each Congregation

In short, we believe that the vision for missions needs to be developed in each congregation and is a matter of spiritual discernment first. Strategic planning has its place, but it rests on several other foundations which need to be well built if they are going to be able to support something significant. Churches need to discern a call from God to extend his reign in the world in a particular place or with a particular people group. Then they need to ask how that can best be done and through whom they should work. As much as possible, churches should be seeking to shift the hands-on work for the mission to nationally led churches or Christians in the regions where they are called to serve. It is time American churches learned to partner with international believers who can provide expertise, a work force and accountability for the work in another country, and then open up a pipeline of learning back to the American church, so that we can learn and benefit from what God is doing in other countries.

In short, we are convicted that the church is God’s instrument in accomplishing his global mission. However, because of the failure of the Christendom model to capture the imagination of our contemporary

world and because of the power of globalization and shifting of the strength of the church toward the majority world, the role of the American church must change. As a result, we see churches facing two realities few are equipped to handle. Both are greatly influenced by our ever-changing world.

First, churches are sending out missionaries that are facing a new world with new challenges that they do not understand. Often there is no clear agreement between the church and their missionaries regarding the nature of the work that needs to be advanced on the foreign field. Churches assume this is the role of the missionaries and don't prepare themselves to understand it, but then find they can't evaluate the results. Churches need to understand and experience similar training to that of a missionary in order to properly equip and steward their mission work.

Second, the United States is now the third largest mission field. American churches are not only sending missionaries, they are being sent as missionaries to the mission field in their own backyard. The gaps between church culture and the cultures of various people groups in our secularized country are larger than ever. We already have most of the people we are going to get to come to the churches we currently operate. To reach more people, we are going to have to plant more churches in multiple forms that fit the communities we are not reaching. For that to happen, there is a huge need for churches and disciples here in the United States to receive special training like that provided to mission families going to other countries. At MRN, we have responded to the reality that churches are facing by recalibrating our mission team training to be received by churches that are called to send and be sent into mission fields across the street and around the world.

International Missions

With regard to international missions, churches also need training to understand their proper role in the current world reality. Part of that involves helping churches understand what time it is. One simple way to describe this is to identify four stages of mission and then learn to embrace the potential for international partnerships with mature churches in the majority world. The four stages of mission are listed below. Most of our mission efforts have been in the first two stages; we badly need to make the shift from stage two to stage three in most parts of the world.

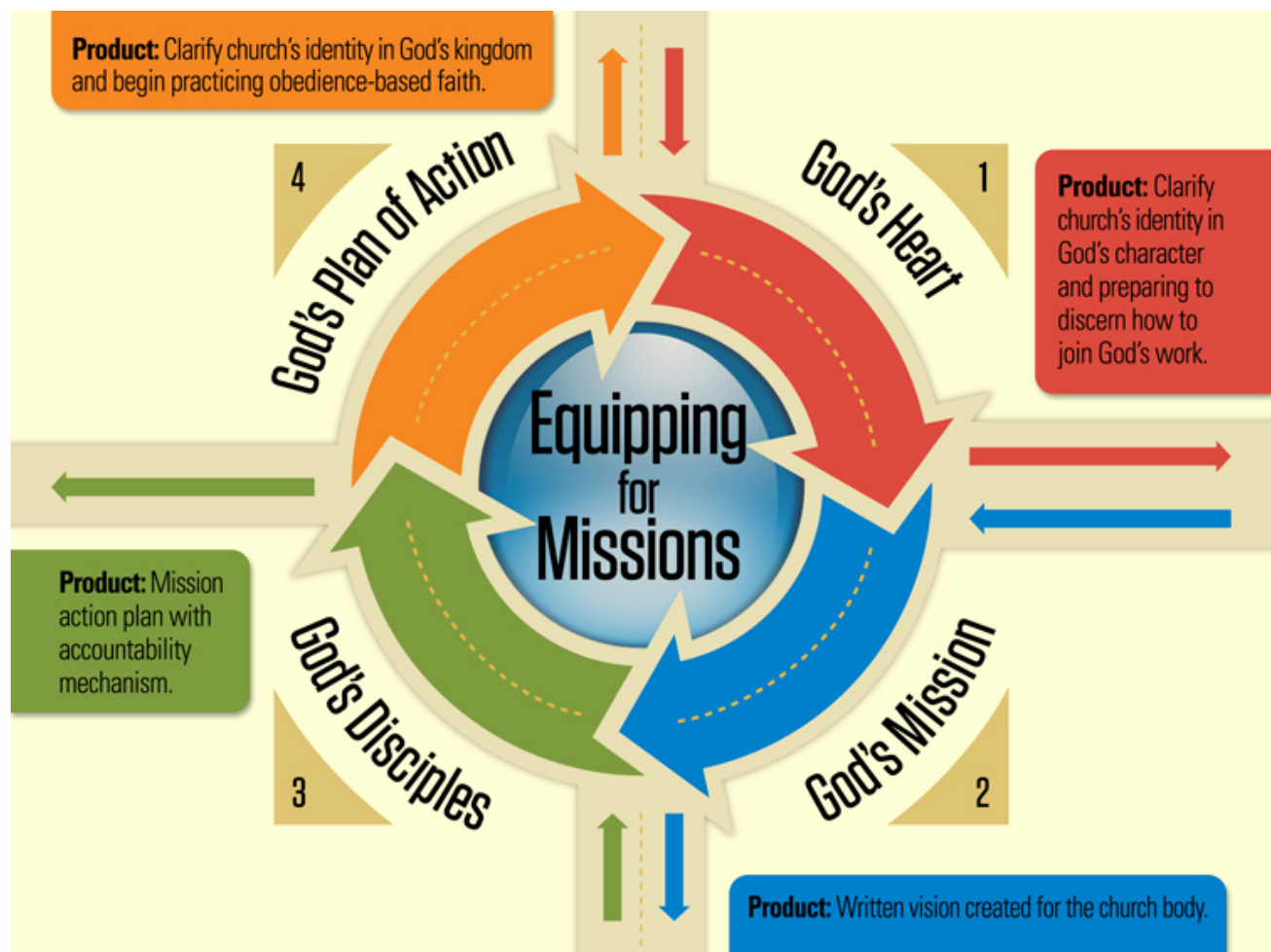
1. Send workers (sending pioneer evangelists into churchless regions).
2. Train workers (equipping nationals to extend the reach of the missionaries in the culture and style of the target people).
3. Missions designers (release and empower nationals to redesign the ministry to fit the local context and culture).
4. Mutually beneficial partnership (share learning and resources between mature churches in different countries).

We are regularly in communication with mature indigenous-led churches around the world that have great capacity to evangelize and even want to do so, but who have not been challenged to think of themselves as senders of missionaries. They still think of themselves as recipients of missionaries. They have outgrown the role they've been playing, but still tend to wait on the Americans to supply vision and money to make the mission expand. However, these same churches have a greater capacity to supply workers who already know the language and culture. They also have a greater capacity to imagine what the model of mission needs to look like in their region of the world and to hold it accountable in appropriate ways. Further, they also have some resources needed to support it. If American churches will learn to trust our brothers and sisters around the world (many of whom have been believers as long as we have and often surpasses us in spiritual insight), if we will facilitate the development of regionally appropriate visions in each area of the world, and if we will add our resources in strategic partnership with indigenously-led churches, we will likely enjoy better results. This collaborative approach is not only more sustainable long-term (without fostering dependency), but it is also more replicable without American funding and oversight. Beyond that, it more accurately reflects the collaborative nature of Christ's body as envisioned in scripture.

For that to happen, international congregations will have to develop four capacities that are, to be frank, missing in many American churches. Sending churches all need to develop the following:

- A Theology of Missions—*establish a solid biblical foundation rooted in “knowing God.”*
- A Strategy for Spiritual Formation—*missions is not primarily a strategic endeavor, it is a spiritual endeavor.*
- Skills in Team Building—*good collaborative relationships are essential in living on mission.*
- Strategic Preparation—*joining God in his mission and fulfilling our partnership role.*

To help churches develop these capacities, at MRN we have developed a series of equipping labs that we conduct with churches both in the United States and around the globe. Each lab helps churches walk up the pyramid of a God-directed mission. In the first lab we seek to help a church rediscover the God of mission, because our mission is rooted in the character of God, and in his covenant promises to redeem and restore all things. In subsequent labs we facilitate a discovery process to have a deeper understanding of the mission of God, the methods of God and to organize all we do to serve the mission. Here is how we envision this process. Notice that it is not a linear process, but an ongoing learning process as we move from scripture to reflection to practice and back.



Conclusion

We are living in exciting times for God's global mission. The good news is that God has been working around and through us in the last century in ways that have created a new reality. Despite our weaknesses and blind spots, God has used us to reach much of the world. The challenging news is that this new reality, in combination with other global forces, has created a new reality and the American church must adjust to this new reality. We must wake up to the fact that we are missionaries here in North America. We are also not the saviors of the world—God has servants all over the world through whom he will do his best work. Our role is now that of a servant who joins what God is already doing. That means we need to exercise less control and exhibit more trust. It means we need to listen more and talk less. Finally, it means that we have to go back and develop a missiological foundation which will support our work in our local contexts as well as in our global partnerships. We simply cannot take things for granted any longer. This is a new world and we have a lot of rethinking and development to do if we are going to be faithful stewards of the gospel in the twenty-first century.

DAN BOUCHELLE IS PRESIDENT OF MISSIONS RESOURCE NETWORK (DAN.BOUCHELLE@MRNET.ORG). **JAY JARBOE** IS DIRECTOR FOR CHURCH EQUIPPING, MISSIONS RESOURCE NETWORK (JAY.JARBOE@MRNET.ORG).

