

# Advancing Strategies of Closure From Mission to Evangelism to Mission

by *Ralph D. Winter*



The most likely interpretation of my topic as I have phrased it could readily be that of a sequence in which mission work produces a national church which then engages in evangelism and finally begins to send missionaries. That is certainly one of the most common and healthy sequences of events in the world today.

However, I would like in these few minutes to pursue a radically different interpretation. I would like to speak of a sequence (not often recognized) in which mission work produces a national church that unfortunately is not much more than a projection of the Western style church in the missionary's homeland, and then after a while the mission realizes it must go back and start over with a more indigenizing kind of mission effort which can produce a much more indigenous church than the one—call it a first try—which has inherited much of the missionary's culture.

Note that this line of thinking suggests that a people group may not really be reached at all if merely a Western style church is planted within it. That means we will probably need some radical reevaluation of how many groups are reached.

For example, is there yet a truly Japanese form of our faith? Many serious observers doubt it. This would mean there is still a need for cross-cultural mission in Japan, and that a truly missiological breakthrough is still in the future.

A further example might be the church in India. It consists largely of a Westernization of a population sector which has little to lose and much to gain by grasping for any kind of alternate cultural tradition. This perspective could imply that there is essentially little true mission work that has thus far been accomplished in India, and that the unreached populations there are far larger than we have commonly conceived them.

Before going further, however, I need to define some terms. I would like to suggest that there can be great value in making a distinction between a mission agency and an evangelistic agency. Obviously the phrases can be used interchangeably. But for the sake of discussion here I hope you will find it

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helpful to define evangelism and mission quite differently. This is a distinction so important, in fact, that I am convinced we would not even need to speak of frontier missions if we observed this distinction. In fact this whole conference might not have been so necessary if this kind of a distinction were well understood.

Many church people, for example, talk freely about evangelizing the world. So freely does this happen somewhat carelessly that I felt it necessary to develop years ago the distinction between E-0, E-1, E-2, and E-3 evangelism.

E-0 stands for evangelism within the church movement itself.

E-1 stands for outreach to those within the same culture as the church.

E-2 stands for a quite different type of missionary cross-cultural evangelism within a people quite different from that of the evangelist, different yet still somewhat similar. Enough different to need a separate congregation but still similar, like English culture and Spanish culture.

E-3 stands for an even more strikingly missionary cross-culture evangelistic outreach to people in a totally different culture from that of those workers who are reaching out, like the difference between English culture and Japanese culture.

In the first two cases you can use existing congregations or simply multiply the same kind of congregations. This is ordinary evangelism. By contrast, the second two cases, E-2 and E-3 types of activity, merit the designation mission or missionary evangelism for the simple reason that E-2 and E-3 efforts reach into strange situations that are so different as to virtually require separate and different kinds of congregations.

Using these terms, all true mission differs from ordinary evangelism because it is an activity involving the special problems of cross-cultural communication and contextualization. You can thus say that all mission involves evangelism but that there are types of

evangelism that do not involve cross-cultural communication and therefore are not true mission.

However, mission is not merely a communication problem. It is a creation problem. What is needed must be created by the Spirit of God as a new church tradition, not just the extension of a Western denomination but perhaps a worshipping movement with a decidedly different church life.

Suppose a mission agency goes to Nigeria and establishes fifty indigenous churches among the Yoruba, and those churches then plant even more Yoruba churches. In that case, the initial “missiological breakthrough” would be called mission while the further church planting expansion by the Yoruba churches would be considered evangelism. But if now the Yoruba send missionaries to break through to a cultural group where there is not yet an indigenous church movement, then you can say that the Yoruba believers are not only involved in ordinary evangelism but also in cross-cultural work, in the creation of a new worshipping tradition of Jesus followers. Such efforts classify as a mission activities.

We can further say that if the initial mission agency is not involved in that further outreach but is content to continue to work with the Yoruba church, then it ceases to be a mission agency but becomes merely what could be called a “foreign evangelism” agency.

Now, since most agencies of mission eventually go through the transition of becoming merely evangelistically involved (and that is certainly one measure of success) it may appear that this kind of distinction devalues much of mission work. On the contrary, the mission that continues in evangelism and allows and encourages an overseas church movement to become missionary is doing a very strategic thing.

However, let me freely admit that I have no power to define words for other people. Most people will go on using evangelism and mission in whatever way they wish. I am not

even terribly concerned to have it my way with these two often-used words. I would be willing to talk about, say, Type A work and Type B work. The main thing is to understand that reaching out in the same culture is relatively simple and is often automatic while breaking through to a new and different culture is both rare and complex.

I actually believe that the achievement of a true missiological breakthrough into a new culture is often grossly underestimated as to its complexity.

For one thing not many Christians realize how major a transition it was when our faith spread from its Jewish roots into the Greek and Roman world. The pagan holiday called the Saturnalia was converted into Christmas. So were a hundred other things adopted, such as the wearing of wedding rings and the throwing of rice at a wedding. In a further transition our faith spread into the Anglo-Saxon sphere, where early missionaries even made use of a pagan sunrise festival promoting a spring-goddess of fertility as our present-day Easter sunrise service. These were mission attempts to indigenize the faith, representing complex cross-cultural evangelistic decisions that went far beyond ordinary evangelism.

Perhaps we don't often think of the complexities of the past and we may wish they did not extend into the present. But if we take a hard look at the current expansion of the faith around the world from the standpoint of our distinction between evangelism and mission I am afraid that we must recognize the need for a great deal more in-depth mission than we have thus far accomplished.

For the most part the much heralded march of the Christian faith across the world has been successful mainly in subordinate cultures, where, say, the Koreans—oppressed for so long by the fellow Buddhist country of Japan— would grasp a foreign faith almost automatically.

For example, as already mentioned, are churches in Japan today sufficiently indigenous to conclude that all that is left to be done is for these churches to multiply with their relatively Western form of the faith? Some keen observ-

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ers, as I've said, suggest that there is not yet a truly Japanese church movement but only a relatively small Westernized following. Movements like Soka Gakkai are quite Japanese, although they embody some Christian elements, but by being rather more indigenous have grown astronomically, proving the existence of a spiritual hunger in Japan despite failing to provide even the minimal elements of Biblical faith.

We have often thought of Unreached Peoples as being small, but when you look more closely at the definitions it is clear that wherever an authentic "missiological breakthrough" has not yet occurred the size of the group does not matter.

From this point of view you can impellingly argue that the true missiological breakthroughs in Africa, India and China are to be seen surprisingly and precisely in movements that are "outside" of what we ordinarily identify as Christianity in those places. Such movements are not readily recognized as Christian despite their characteristically strong focus on the Bible. It is a little known fact that in three key places, Africa, India and China, the truly devout believers in Christ in radically contextualized groups may actually outnumber the truly devout believers in Christ within the more identifiable movements of missionary implanted Western-oriented Christianity.

It has never been true that a people group has been considered reached just because essentially foreign churches are present within that group. The definition distinctly requires an "indigenous" church movement.

Of course, there is room for discussion as to just what is truly indigenous or not. Indigenous churches tend to grow, sometimes very rapidly. They are often not initiated by foreign personnel but many times are actually heretical spin-offs which highlight certain cultural features lacking in missionary-established churches. They are not always Biblically balanced, although they are

often highly respectful of the Bible. Donald McGavran's perspective was for our relationship to them to be friendly and supportive if in fact they focus on the Bible seriously. That focus will level them out in the long run, he felt.

Thus, shocking though it may seem, the world may look substantially different from our usual take if viewed from the perspective of the essential importance of authentic indigeneity. Ordinary evangelism must thereby be seen as inadequate if it is going on in a situation still requiring true mission with true indigeneity at heart. The ordinary evangelism of an essentially Western Christianity may in such cases be little more than the promotion of a complex cluster of foreign legalisms which people in characteristically minority and oppressed cultures learn to wear like outer clothing with the hope that they will be benefitted thereby.

Ironically, we have been talking for years about the necessity of mission agencies moving intentionally beyond care-taking existing mission field churches to reach out to Unreached Peoples still untouched. That is we have been calling for mission in addition to evangelism when we might more accurately have been calling for a much more radical and penetrating mission instead of evangelism. We may have too easily accepted the birth of a new national church as truly indigenous when in fact it was still substantially foreign. And, instead of expecting the birth of a new substantially strange and unpredictable movement to appear which could then by itself grow automatically by evangelism, the movements we have planted may themselves need to be subjected to an on-going attempt at true indigenization, which is the object of true mission.

Thus, my title, "From Mission to Evangelism to Mission" can be utilized to describe the ideal sequence of events in truly successful work. However, that sequence may not have truly happened beyond the spread of a church pattern which is still significantly Western.

This is not bad. It is not illicit. It may be superficial, however, and it may be a cultural phenomenon in which people under oppression gladly accept anything with promise.

But at the same time the truly successful missiological breakthroughs, such as the Pauline breakthrough to the Greeks, and the Lutheran breakthrough to Germanic culture, have characteristically involved the actual creation of new movements which the older source culture could not recognize as true to the faith. It is thus an hypothetical thought that a true missiological breakthrough will almost always create a church movement which will believe for a good long time that the source culture form of the faith is seriously flawed, and vice versa, the sending culture will characteristically reject the validity of the new form of the faith in the receptor culture.

The blunt meaning of this kind of thinking is fairly easy to illustrate from major movements and events that have already taken place in the mission lands. We hear reports that there are 52 million followers of Jesus Christ in Africa who do not belong to any standard Christian tradition. The same is true in India where smaller estimates (14 to 24 million) caste Hindus are reported to be devout followers of Jesus Christ even though they do not call themselves Christians. Finally, much of the most vibrant work in China is not to be found in the state recognized churches but in the millions of followers of Jesus Christ who are to be found in the so called "house churches."

Thinking along these lines involves receiving and digesting information which we do not expect and are not well prepared to believe. It is a major new frontier that must be recognized as soon as possible, and dealt with strategically in ways that are practical and possible even if not conventional. Are we ready to do that? **IJFM**