WhaT's UP

– Going Deeper –

Contextualizing Church in Other Cultural Contexts
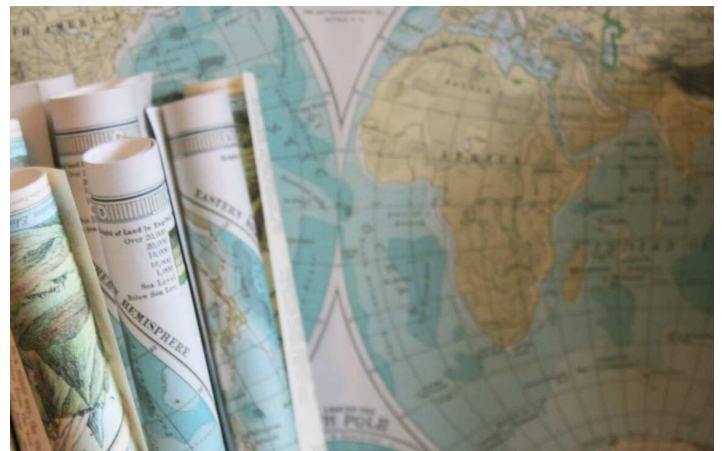
World Team

The following short story is a way to open a discussion about what we mean when we say "church":

Jared & Jenna were able to attend one of the last WIN conferences (World Team Institute of Church Planting) that was held. They learned a great deal about (and experienced) WT values such as community and the gospel. However, they left WIN with a feeling that something was missing. No one had taught them what it meant to do the job that they were being asked to do (i.e., establish communities of believers). To their surprise when they arrived on the field, they experienced some dissonance between what they heard at WIN and the values that were actually being lived out. Again and again, Jarred & Jenna probed the team to help them understand what it was they were supposed to be doing with their time. They struggled to get a handle on the definition of the "church" and the elements that constituted a "community of believers". They began to realize that there was no common definition of the church among their co-workers, let alone in WT. As the years past, Jarred & Jenna made decisions about what was a church for them. To their surprise, their field director expressed disagreement with their conclusions.

This fictional story represents some of the struggle I have heard from different members of our WT community.

How do we begin to describe what we mean by "church" so that it provides a common base for all which respects the culture we are working with and in?

David Riddell
International Director

What do World Team Churches look like?

I know one church that meets in a bamboo bar at the beach. Two others have started in homes nearby. Another that meets in an open-air restaurant. Some in the crowd are former Muslims. Others remain Muslims for now, but are there to learn about Jesus. I've seen a few meet under trees. Others meet in houses. And plenty meet in storefronts.

Some members arrive in suits or dresses, others in sandals and shorts. A few come in nothing but a gourd or grass skirt. Recently after a church meeting I ate roast pig with former Muslims — their idea, not mine. After church meetings in other places people share beans and rice, meal worms and crickets, or noodles. Some use the word "church," but others prefer "fellowship," "community," or cell group. Recently I heard a new one:"*eukueneme.*"

But what do World Team-related churches look like?

During recent years, World Team leaders have been asked, "What does World Team mean by 'church?'" There are, already, three places where we partially answer that question. Our doctrinal statement, The Global Policy manual, and the annual vital signs report each include statements about the nature of the church. Even still, many church planting practitioners in World Team were looking for something more helpful in practice.

Earlier this year, we decided to work on a more specific answer to the question. After David, Jay and I worked on it for a few months, a working group was formed to take it further. Eleven World Teammers collaborated on it until, in May, the Area Directors and other global leaders adopted the document during meetings in Toronto.

The first page, "Defining the Local Church for Cross-Cultural Church Planting" is a simple, one-page statement of what the church is in its essence, its functions, and its form. This is not a theological treatise, but a concise statement of what we believe the church is, what it does, and what it looks like. That third element, "what it looks like," describes a critical approach to contextualization in partnership with local church leaders and points forward to the second part of the document.

The second part of the document, "The Shape of the Local Church in Cross-Cultural Church Planting" describes a missiological approach for practitioners like us who work with new disciples to establish the local church in its context. At the heart of this process is the development of a hermeneutical community that includes primarily local insiders working with cross-cultural church planters. They collaborate in a critical process to discern appropriate forms for the church in the local context in light of their reflection on Scripture and exegesis of the local culture.

Contextualization has become, in recent years especially, a controversial subject among

evangelicals. Some have shied away from the idea citing fear of syncretism. Paul Hiebert's described "critical" contextualization, based on critical realism, in a landmark article that showed a path forward that avoided the errors of cultural relativism on the one hand and cultural imperialism on the other hand.

Recent writings by R. Daniel Shaw and others have begun to explore the new concept of Hybridity as a further development of a realist approach that recognizes the need for the church to adapt to local culture while remaining faithful to the Scriptures. Hybridity strengthens the role of cultural insiders in the process and emphasizes a facilitative role for cross-cultural workers.

This document on the shape of the church is intended for us to use in practice and focuses on the process. Plenty of work remains for church planters who are working in varying contexts around the world. In places where church planters as well as new converts face hostility from individuals, families, and even government structures, innovation will be required and the conversation about insider movements (including C-1 through 6 Christ Centered Communities) will continue.

Closely related to this matter is the issue of identity and integrity for our own workers who must keep a careful balance between security concerns and the need to openly and effectively share the gospel. How do we both sustain our presence in different venues around the world while also making the gospel of Jesus Christ known abundantly in those hostile contexts? How do we manage the potential disparity between social identity and truthfulness?

How does the newly emerging discussion of hybridity help us think more clearly about the shape of the church in each context?

You can find the document "Defining the Local Church for Cross-Cultural Church Planters" in the Mission Practice area of Sharepoint. Or, contact karry.kelley@worldteam.org and he will be happy to send you a copy.

*Karry Kelley -
Director of Global Mission Practice*
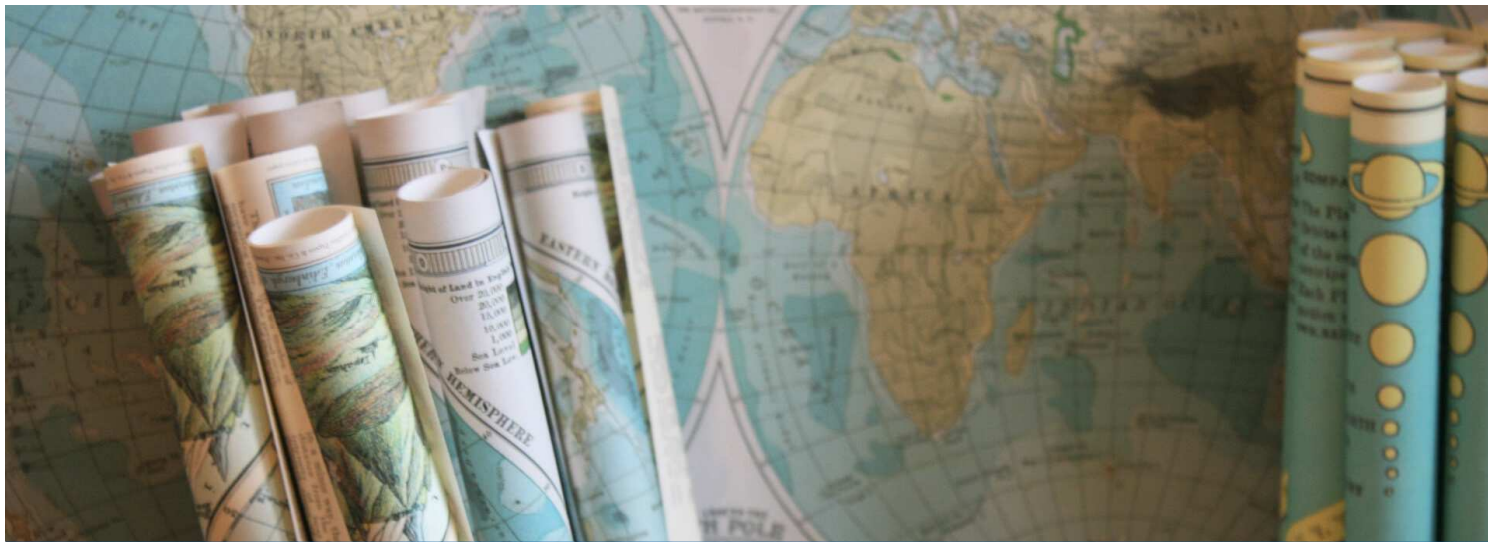
Toward a 21st Century Model for Enabling Mission

The systems of the world at large—sociocultural structures, political relationships, interdependent financial arrangements, and even manifestations of increasing religious fundamentalism—all indicate that radical changes are afoot.

Old ways of interacting with and becoming knowledgeable about these world systems no longer work. Similarly, we have begun the transition to a new missiological model that radically reshapes how we go about connecting human beings with the Gospel. Relevance theory is more than a theory of communication. It is a philosophy of how we are to relate to each person we meet. Relevance theory offers a fresh understanding of the Gospel, with its potential to transform both those who bear the message and those who hear it. As we reach out missionally, we, like Paul, are blessed (1 Cor. 9:23). But our attitude as we connect with the world at large is critical. God gives us relationships with believers (for training and equipping for further ministry), as well as with nonbelievers (for being Jesus in the midst of needy people). We must follow the example our Lord set in sending his disciples to the ends of the earth. He encouraged them, as well as us, to connect with people wherever they might be found, to build them up in the faith, and to encourage them in turn to do the same for others (Matt. 28:18 –20).

The implications of transformational development are multitudinous and must always be weighed within a context. The exact manifestations of transformation in various contexts, academic and otherwise, are relative to the time and place and to the needs of the people with whom we interact. Working out those details is part of the ongoing task placed before the wider missiological community. As a professor, my desire is for students to go from my classes prepared to reenter the environments from which they came, challenged and encouraged to develop new and contextually relevant applications of missiological perspectives. My prayer is for them to bring change to the church in those places and, in the process, send others forth to be a witness in other places.

As an anthropologist, I realize there is much that I can learn from every sociolinguistic group. Others know so much about spiritual power, about relationships, about what it means to be human. If as message bearers we are to communicate with people everywhere, we first must truly hear their voices and allow them to move us beyond what we already know. Reconceptualizing the praxis of mission on the basis of relevance theory and an inferential understanding of cognition calls for a major overhaul of traditional missiological models. Jesus came to connect with real people who expressed human need. To do so, he entered their world, took up their language with its implicit categories, learning the shapes and contents of their mental and conceptual "boxes." We who call ourselves by his name must, as he did, go beyond our context, learn from those with whom we interact, and become God's intention to them—the Word in their midst.

Shaw, Daniel. Extract of "Beyond Contextualization: Toward a Twenty-first-Century Model for Enabling Mission". International Bulletin of Missionary Research. October, 2010.

TESTIMONY

What do you do if your church plant doesn't look like a church?

Sometimes there are strategic reasons not to have the classic building with worship services at set time on set days.

Last week I had this very discussion with two of my team leaders in France. How do we present a project that does not look like a church so that it can be supported and prayed for by other local believers? I was visiting a Church Planting class at a Bible School in Sydney last week. In its essence, the professor said, the church is a group of people gathered together to help each other become more like Christ and live out his mission. Some in the class argued that this left out so much like teaching and worship and discipline. In both cases the document "Defining the Local Church for Cross-Cultural Church Planting" recently prepared for our use at World Team was very helpful. It separates the definition of the church into three parts, its essence, its function and its form. Like the professor in Sydney said, a church in its essence is a very simple thing. But it also exists to fulfil certain functions. How these are achieved are going to vary according to context but they will be present. After that is the form and this is the most contextualized part of all. We have wide latitude to adapt the form to the people we are trying to reach.

So we decided in France that we would consistently show how our projects in their essence and in their function were a church and then demonstrate how the form, even if it may not be traditional, was created to serve the lost we are trying to reach.

JERRY - WT France / WT Australia

"The systems of the world at large [...] all indicate that radical changes are afoot"

– To Go Deeper –

CRITICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

Hiebert, Paul. July 1987 - International Bulletin of Missionary Research

METATHEOLOGY: THE STEP BEYOND CONTEXTUALIZATION

Hiebert, Paul. July 2001. Reflection and Projection: Missiology at the Threshold. By Hans Kasdorf

THE GOSPEL IN HUMAN CONTEXTS: ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY MISSIONS

Hiebert, Paul. 2009

BEYOND CONTEXTUALIZATION: TOWARD A 21ST CENTURY MODEL OF ENABLING MISSION

Shaw, Daniel. October 2010 - International Bulletin of Missionary Research

BEYOND SYNCRETISM: A DIMAMYC APPROACH TO HYBRIDITY

Shaw, Daniel. - International Bulletin of Missionary Research, Volume 42(I)

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