
Evaluating Transformational Development as Christian Mission¹

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Transformational Development (TD), sometimes referred to as integral mission or holistic mission, is an approach to Christian mission that strives for improved quality of life for the whole person and the whole community. Many Christian organizations engaged in international development refer to their work as TD. This paper argues that effectiveness in alleviating poverty is not, on its own, an indication of effectiveness in Christian mission. It suggests that themes from missional theology can be used to shape program design and evaluation in ways that bring greater clarity to TD as an engagement in Christian mission. Because meaning is conveyed in and through actions, TD organizations should assess what beliefs, aims, and values are conveyed through their practice. Evaluation of TD effectiveness in Christian mission should therefore take into account whether it influences people to consider the significance of what God has done and is doing in history to reconcile all things to himself.

Introduction

Many Christian organizations involved in international development use terms such as *integral mission*, *holistic mission*, or *transformational development* (TD) as an indication they consider their work to be an aspect of Christian mission. Their effectiveness as relief and development organizations can be assessed using robust monitoring and evaluation tools based on generally accepted development aims and standards.² How to evaluate their effectiveness in Christian mission, however, is less clear. There is no widely held consensus on what aims and standards are appropriate to Christian mission,³ nor is there clarity on what, if anything, should differentiate the work of a Christian organization from the work of any other organization involved in international development. This paper argues that missional theology is such a

resource for TD practitioners in their efforts to both understand their work as Christian mission and assess its effectiveness as such. After summarizing how TD emerged as a contemporary mission model, the paper highlights two key themes of missional theology and their relevance to TD. Finally, the paper concludes by showing how the influence of missional theology on TD's design, monitoring, and evaluation could further strengthen initiatives that aim for fullness of life for the whole person and the whole community.

The Emergence of Transformational Development as a Model of Mission

The term *transformational development* has been attributed to Wayne Bragg, who raised the idea at "The Church in Response to Human Need" conference hosted by the World Evangelical Fellowship at Wheaton College in 1983 (Myers 2011, 16).⁴ This

¹ This paper is adapted from the author's dissertation project "A Study of Christian Witness in the work of Canadian Protestant Community Development Agencies," McMaster Divinity College. An earlier version was presented at the 2020 National Conference of the Evangelical Missiological Society.

² Such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

³ David Bosch suggests four broad aims of mission: conversion to Christian faith, the planting of new churches, philanthropy and social justice, and the establishment of God's reign on earth (Bosch 1993, 5). For a thorough discussion of TD as a model of mission, see Myers 2011, Offut 2012, and Offut and Reynolds 2019.

⁴ Myers states that Bragg proposed the term in the paper he presented at the conference. The paper by Bragg, however, that was published in Samuel and Sugden 1987, 20–51, is entitled "From Development to

conference was considered the culmination of a decades-long debate within evangelical missiology concerning the relative importance of verbal evangelism versus social development work within mission. Evangelical emphasis on the priority of verbal evangelism and personal conversion was in some ways a reaction to the rise of the *social gospel* movement around the beginning of the twentieth century. Later, disillusionment with modernity's narrative of progress, especially after the carnage of two world wars and the collapse of colonialism, reinforced the idea that the world is what we need to be saved from, as opposed to what we should be trying to change. Concerned with a growing focus in the World Council of Churches on mission as the human establishment of *shalom* in the present, many evangelicals feared that the Church was losing sight of the importance of eternal salvation and was therefore less committed to the proclamation of a gospel of repentance and conversion to personal faith in Jesus (Stott 1975, 20).

At the World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin in 1966, some participants reiterated an understanding of the Gospel as salvation *from* the world, rather than hope for change *in* the world (Stott 1975, 23). The subsequent 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization, brought 2700 participants from over 150 countries to Lausanne, Switzerland, in an effort to further evangelistic impetus around the world (Stott 1992, 9).⁵ Ironically, it was at this conference that evangelical voices from contexts of oppression and exploitation in the global south called for a deeper consideration of the role of relief, development, and justice work in Christian mission. Contributions from leaders like Samuel Escobar and René Padilla from Latin America were so compelling that when the Lausanne Covenant was subsequently drafted, it included a whole section on Christian Social Responsibility (Myers 2011, 48).⁶ Nonetheless, Lausanne still prioritized verbal evangelism. In the Lausanne Covenant, the section on "Christian Social Responsibility" (Article 5) is placed between "The Nature of Evangelism" (Article 4) and "The Church and Evangelism" (Article 6), and the latter states in no uncertain terms that "in the Church's mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary."

Less than a year later, John Stott, the main drafter of the Lausanne Covenant, articulated a different

understanding of the relationship between word and deed in mission. In his short book entitled *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, he described how social action was understood by some as a *means* to evangelism and by others as a *manifestation* of evangelism, but suggested it was best defined as a *partner* of evangelism. He described the relationship in this way: "As partners the two belong to each other and yet are independent of each other. Each stands on its own feet in its own right alongside the other. Neither is a means to the other, or even a manifestation of the other. For each is an end in itself" (Stott 1975, 27).

This understanding of social action and evangelism as partners in mission was reinforced in 1979 at the All India Conference on Evangelical Social Action in Madras (Christian 1999, 67–68). The resulting Madras Declaration began by thanking God "that social concern has been a partner of evangelism in our land with a variety of expressions and richness of results" (Madras Declaration, 89). It then went on to confess a number of ways in which Indian churches and mission initiatives had failed to adequately demonstrate God's concern for this world. These included narrowing God's salvation to "the rescue of His people from a corrupt world," the failure "to define and defend" human dignity and rights, following "false gods of mere economic growth at the cost of human rights and progress towards God," and inactivity "on issues of justice in the interests of our personal and institutional security" (Madras Declaration, 89–91). Following each acknowledgement of failure, the authors then offered an expression of repentance and a commitment to corrective practical action.

A similar perspective was expressed at a consultation hosted in Grand Rapids by the Lausanne Committee in 1982. The consultation's report, entitled "Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment," still asserted the priority of evangelism over social action, but was careful to stress that "in practice, as in the public ministry of Jesus, the two are inseparable, at least in open societies. Rather than competing with each other, they mutually support and strengthen each other in an upward spiral of increased concern for both" (Stott 1982, Section 4 D). The report also suggested that it was equally valid to view social action as a consequence and aim of evangelism, as a

Transformation" and, although it critiques *development* and suggests we should aim rather for *transformation* that only God makes possible, it never actually uses the specific term *transformational development*.

⁵ Jayakumar Christian also offers a helpful summary of these developments (Christian 1999, 65–72).

⁶ Stephen Offutt notes "Most evangelicals in Latin America who were educated enough to read Liberation theology found it to be at odds with how they read the Scriptures. One reason was that evangelicalism and Pentecostalism in particular, had a pacifist bent at that time. But if liberation theology was not the answer, then how were evangelicals to respond? It is in their approach to this question that the beginnings of the Transformational Development paradigm can be found" (Offutt 2012, 39).

bridge to evangelism, or as a partner with evangelism (Stott 1982, Section 4 C).⁷

The Wheaton Conference mentioned earlier took place the following year. “The Church in Response to human Need” capped five years of “study and reflection on the nature of development from a biblical perspective” initiated by Wayne Bragg, Bruce Nicholls, John Robinson, Vinay Samuel, and Ronald J. Sider (Samuel and Sugden 1987, ix-x). With contributions from such known figures as Tom Sine, Tito Paredes, Chris Sugden, Tito Tienou, David J. Bosch, Vishal Mangalwadi, Chavannes Jeune, and Samuel Baah, the conference represented a wide spectrum of contextual experience and addressed themes ranging from the history of secular development theories, to contextual evangelism, to social transformation, and eschatology. Acknowledging how the term *development* is often associated with humanistic and even colonial agendas of progress, the authors of the Wheaton ‘83 Statement favored the term *transformation*, which they defined as “the change from a condition of human existence contrary to God’s purposes to one in which people are able to enjoy fullness of life in harmony with God” (Samuel and Sugden 1987, 256-57). For its part, evangelism was described as “an integral part of our total Christian response to human need” rather than as a separate theme (Samuel and Sugden 1987, 254).

More recent consultations have affirmed an integrated understanding of mission. For example, “The Micah Declaration on Integral Mission” from the inaugural gathering of the Micah Network in 2001, opens with this description of integral mission:

It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ (Micah Declaration, 1).

Ten years later, the 2011 Capetown Commitment struck a similar chord:

We commit ourselves to the integral and dynamic exercise of all dimensions of mission to which God calls his Church. God commands us to make known to all nations the truth of God’s revelation and the gospel of God’s saving grace through Jesus Christ, calling all people to repentance, faith, baptism and obedient discipleship. God commands us to reflect his own character through compassionate care for the needy, and to demonstrate the values and the power of the kingdom of God in striving for justice and peace and in caring for God’s creation (Cape Town Commitment, 1.10.B.).

This more holistic understanding of mission has been further fostered in North America by the theological reflection of practitioners, as well as the work of researchers and educators like Bryant L. Myers, professor of TD at Fuller Seminary, Brian Fikkert, founder and director of the Chalmers Center and co-author of the widely influential book *When Helping Hurts*, the editors and contributors of the Accord Network’s peer reviewed journal “Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy,” and the directors of Wheaton College’s Humanitarian and Disaster Institute.⁸

One of the distinctive themes to emerge within TD discourse over the last decade concerns the relational dynamic of poverty, arguing that broken and dysfunctional relationships are not only symptoms, but also core contributors to conditions of poverty. Accordingly, many TD theorists and practitioners point to the healing and renewal of four fundamental relationships as essential if people and communities are to fully flourish: relationship with God, neighbor, self, and the rest of creation (Myers 2011, 96-97; Fikkert and Mask 2015, 81-84; Offut 2012, 2). The correlation between these aims and the historic emphasis of Christian mission on reconciliation with God, neighbor, and all creation, is fertile ground for new frameworks and metrics to evaluate TD’s effectiveness not only as development work, but also as Christian mission. The following section discusses the potential of missional

⁷ Considering that this document was drafted by a committee once again chaired by John Stott, the fact that it affirmed all three relationships as equally valid shows a significant shift in both Stott’s own thinking and that of the wider evangelical missiological community.

⁸ Although there continues to be resistance among some evangelicals to an integrated understanding of mission (See “The Statement on Social Justice and The Gospel,” <https://statementonsocialjustice.com>), the concept of TD has gained momentum in North America. The Accord Network, which has over 100 member agencies in the United States, and the Canadian Christian Relief and Development Association with over fifty member organizations, both refer to the work of their members as TD. The global Micah Network, with over eight-hundred-member organizations, uses the language of integral mission more than transformational development.

theology to provide even further definition to the practice of TD as Christian mission.

Which Story are We in? Themes from Missional Theology

Aristotle taught that every *techne* (art, practice, technology) is tied to a *logos* (rationale, account of the world) (Kroecker 2015, 163). If that is true, then what we do, and how we do it, is rooted in and conveys particular ways of understanding the world and our place in it. The question then arises as to what story is told through the practice of TD. Is it the standard development story that poverty can be overcome through human ingenuity and initiative, or does TD practice point to a larger story and to realities beyond materiality and human capacity?⁹

Some Christian organizations express the need to “integrate aspects of Christian faith into field programs” (Norman and Odotei 2019, 31) or employ faith as a “competency” (Faith as a Competency 2020). Yet this does not address the possibility that the programs themselves might be designed and implemented in ways that reinforce understandings of the world and humanity’s place in it that are at odds with Christian visions of human flourishing.¹⁰ Even TD’s emphasis on the healing and restoration of relationship with God, self, neighbor, and the environment, lacks specificity as to which deity is referred to, or what particularly is involved in restoring relationships with self, neighbor, and environment. Adherents of nearly any belief system or spirituality could affirm these aims. No doubt, there can be great benefit in finding common ground with others, but if a Christian worldview has unique value, then it is important to be clear on what that value is and how it can be offered for the benefit of others.

Although the term *missional* has become somewhat of a buzzword over the past twenty years or so, the core theology associated with it has much to offer in bringing greater definition to TD practice as an

aspect of mission. In *The Mission of God’s People*, Christopher J. H. Wright describes mission as being grounded in “the living God and his grand plan and purpose for the whole of creation” (Wright 2010, 17), and the Church as a people co-laboring with God in that mission because they “know the story they are part of” (Wright 2010, 35). Key aspects of that story, according to Wright, include: the metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, new creation, including the centrality of the cross, care for creation, engagement in the public sphere, and working for the wellbeing of all peoples (Wright 2010, 8–13).¹¹

Christopher Schoon, in his doctoral thesis on the role of worship in the missional church, identifies five similar themes, all of which are rooted in the writings of Lesslie Newbigin and further developed in the North American context by authors involved in the Gospel and Our Culture Network (Schoon 2016, 22–25).¹² These five themes are: the *missio dei* (*trinitatis*), the Church sent to participate in God’s mission, incarnational and contextualized ministry, the end of Christendom, and a holistic Gospel that addresses every aspect of creation (Schoon 2016, 39–40). Each of these themes is relevant for TD, but for the purposes of this paper, only two will be discussed: the *missio dei*, and the Church sent to participate in God’s mission.

Missio Dei: Which God?

When missional theology refers to the *missio dei*, it refers to the specific actions in history of the God proclaimed in the Bible as the one and only true God (Wright 2006, 71; Newbigin 1991, 94). The *deus* of the *missio dei* is not a generic term to be used of any apparent deity worshipped by people. Nor does the *missio dei* refer to just any historical development that humans perceive to be good. In contrast to liberal Christianity’s drift toward an understanding of God as either a deity disengaged from the world, or an impersonal life force propelling history toward an

⁹ By raising this question, I do not intend to infer that humanity is not able to improve quality of life. The history of international development has shown that we are able to develop better education, better agricultural methods, better business practices, better legal and political systems, better health care, better technology. We should expect no less if humanity is created in the image of God and called to be God’s image-bearers as stewards of creation. But where is God in the international development story? And does it even matter? The more successful we are at development through human knowhow and effort, the less room there seems to be for God. God is relegated to those few areas we still are not able to explain and control. Merely trying to integrate God back into the story, only reinforces the message that God is not really that relevant. For TD practice to be an aspect of Christian mission, the story needs to be reframed.

¹⁰ Jayakumar Christian, former National Director of World Vision India, points to “ideological centres” as the inner spirituality of structures and systems (Christian 1999, 129).

¹¹ Wright’s language for these themes is: “People who know the story they are part of”; “People who care for creation”; “Missional engagement in the public sphere”; and “People who are a blessing to the Nations.”

¹² For more detail concerning Newbigin’s appropriation and adaptation of Barth’s concept of *missio dei* see Guder 2000, 19. For a description of Newbigin as “something like a father to the movement,” see Hunsberger 1998, 3–8.

inevitably better future, Newbigin grounded his theology in the personhood and action of the triune God as revealed in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures (Newbigin 2003, 11–12; Hunsberger 1998, 67). Yet even the classic formula of the *missio dei* as the Father sending the Son into the world, the Father and Son sending the Spirit into the world, and the Father, Son and Spirit sending the Church into the world, can easily devolve into ambiguous theological abstraction (Bosch 1993, 390). David Bosch recalls H. H. Rosin's criticism that such abstraction allowed for the concept of the *missio dei* to function as a "Trojan horse through which the (unassimilated) 'American' vision was fetched into the well-guarded walls of the ecumenical theology of mission" (Rosin qtd. in Bosch 1993, 392). Presumably the "American Vision" referred to here is that of ongoing progress toward security and prosperity, propelled by human ingenuity and industry. Without adequate definition, the language of *missio dei* can be bent to whatever ends are desired, rather than providing direction and parameters to the work of Christian mission.

Newbigin provides such definition. While he certainly understands God to be involved in "the whole historical process," it is precisely in the specific events referred to in the Bible and in the ongoing participation of the Church in God's mission that he sees that involvement taking place (Hunsberger 1998, 113–55; Newbigin 1991, 93–99). Newbigin insists that the Father's sending of the Son, the Father and the Son's sending of the Spirit, and God's sending of the Church, are actual events within human history, past, present, and future, as opposed to timeless truths that we contextualize (Newbigin 2003, 34). He argues that history itself is "the sphere in which the acts of God are accomplished and in which His will is being executed in judgment and mercy" (Newbigin 2003, 8). The *missio dei* is not an abstract concept of inevitable progress, nor a generic affirmation of the love of God; it is rather what God accomplishes through particular engagements with the world, engagements that are witnessed to in the texts of the Bible. There are therefore parameters to what the Church is sent to do in the world, and there is specificity as to what the Church is to communicate within the world. Those parameters and that specificity are determined by the story found in scripture of creation, fall, the election of one people for the blessing of all, the centrality of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the sending of the Church to bear witness to this history, and to the coming Kingdom of God, the foretaste of which is

already available through the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit (Newbigin 2003, 106).

The significance of this for Christian witness in the work of TD is considerable. International development is by definition focused on human progress. Its values, objectives, and methodologies are rooted in the plausibility structure of secular social science, which is assumed to be religiously neutral and universally valid. Although religious faith and spirituality have recently been recognized within development discourse as important to many societies' conceptions of what constitutes human wellbeing, religious beliefs tend to be lumped together as if all are equal or simply different expressions of the same fundamental human spirituality.¹³ This is evidenced, in part, by the use of the generic term "Faith Based Organization" to refer to any organization involved in development "whose philosophy, mission, values, or vision is knowingly inspired from a religious belief" (Audet et al. 2013, 295), rather than naming to which specific faith the organization adheres.

But missional theology insists that it does matter which faith is embraced, which God is worshipped, and in which story we see ourselves. What could mark TD as distinct from other approaches to international development, is whether or not it communicates this story and plausibility structure, while respectfully and humbly exposing and challenging the dominant development plausibility structure of on-going progress toward an eventual utopia accomplished through human ingenuity and effort.

This does appear to be one of the reasons why the drafters of the Wheaton '83 Statement preferred the language of transformation to that of development. Yet as Ravi Jayakaran (President/CEO of Medical Ambassadors International) rightly points out, many TD practitioners struggle to define what is actually meant by the term transformation. Jayakaran suggests that transformation is "progressive, permanent, and God-intended change" (Hill 2018), but this definition does not capture the difference between developmental change and transformational change. Developmental change is progressive, incremental, and linear. Transformation is more radical. As with the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly or, to use a more biblical metaphor, a seed into a plant, transformation entails a fundamental undoing of something, and then a re-forming into something new. The butterfly is the same species as the caterpillar, but it is a completely new organism. The kernel of wheat ceases to exist as a seed, and transforms into a shaft of wheat producing exponentially more kernels. With

¹³ For example, the World Bank's study, *Voices of the Poor*, shows that the majority of the world's marginalized and vulnerable people consider spirituality and relationship with the divine as integral to their perception of wellbeing (Narayan et al. 2000, 38).

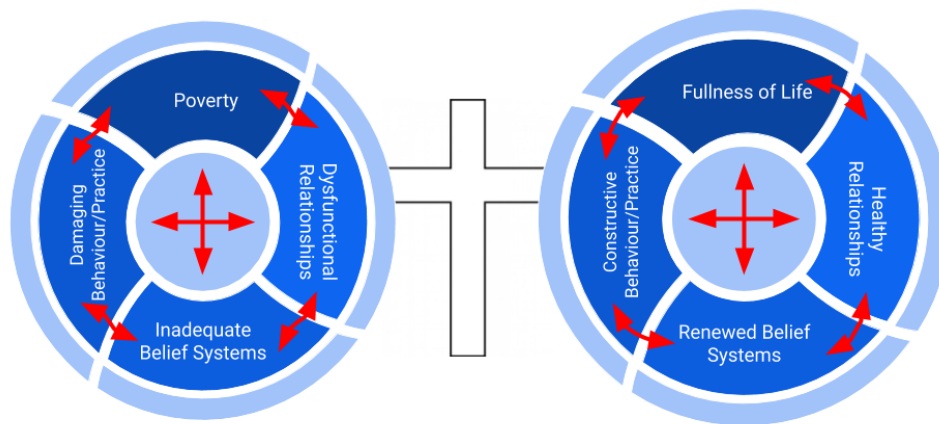
both developmental and transformational change there is continuity between what was, what is, and what will be. But unlike developmental change, transformation also results in a radical discontinuity between what is and what will be. By using the metaphor of the wheat kernel, Jesus evokes the dynamic of his own coming death and resurrection. The risen Jesus is still Jesus, but he is now in the reality of the coming Kingdom, and therefore radically different from what he was before the resurrection. Newbigin describes the path from present social, economic, political, and relational realities to the flourishing of life in God's Kingdom not as progressive development by human achievement, but as a radical undoing and re-forming in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus. This does not negate the value of development work, but relativizes it within a larger story, and frames it as "a kind of acted prayer for the coming of God's reign" (Newbigin 1991, 136-37).¹⁴ Wright also stresses that "it is vital that we see the cross as central and integral to every aspect of holistic, biblical mission. ... It is a mistake, in my view, to think that, while our evangelism must be centered on the cross ..., our social engagement and other forms of practical mission work have some other theological foundation or justification" (Wright 2006, 314). The challenge for TD practitioners is how to design, monitor, and evaluate programs that not only result in developmental change, but are also signs and symbols, and perhaps even catalysts, of the kind of Christ-centered transformation that is at the very heart of God's mission.

One of the organizations grappling with this challenge is World Renew. Their Global Ends Policy

articulates a theory of change that is clearly rooted in and shaped by their faith commitments as an agency of the Christian Reformed Church of North America:

Communities and constituencies undergo transformation when members are increasingly able to embrace and live out their calling as human beings bearing the image of God, marred by sin but being restored in Christ Jesus, receiving and expressing justice and mercy and peace, as evidenced in healthy (Shalom) relationships with God, neighbor, self and the creation. ... Capacity building activities therefore become transformative when they are undertaken within the broader missional aim of renewing belief systems and restoring broken relationships through peacemaking, reconciliation, advocacy, creation care, justice awareness and action and the renewal of systems and structures" (Global Ends Policy 2019).

This statement is an example of high-level organizational aims emerging from deeply held theological convictions. World Renew believes that dysfunctional relationships, inadequate belief systems, damaging practices, and conditions of poverty are all intertwined, and that renewed belief systems are integral to healthier relationships, constructive practices, and conditions of flourishing.



A Christ-Centered Theory of Change

¹⁴ Developmental change can still point toward the *shalom* of God's coming Kingdom, but it infers that fullness can be achieved through the steady progress of developmental change and does not require a more radical, cruciform transition.

There is an inherent tension, however, at the operational level, because of how counterproductive it can be when beliefs and aims are imposed on communities from the outside. Cognizant of this tension, World Renew takes a participatory approach to program design and evaluation and has stated that it “does not use humanitarian assistance or development programs to coerce people into its denominational membership nor use such interventions as a condition of receiving assistance or training” (Harris 2014, 481). Nonetheless, their Global Ends Policy makes clear their desire that people consider and even experience the transformative power of Christian faith.

When Christians engage in development in ways that are merely successful according to the principles and metrics of the social sciences, they reinforce that way of understanding the world, that plausibility structure. This is not to say, of course, that Christian organizations should not contribute to agendas like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, but that for their contribution to be an aspect of Christian mission, it should be reconceived in terms of the biblical narrative of which the life, death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus Christ is the core.¹⁵ A fundamental implication of the *missio dei* is that, in Wright’s words, “Mission is not ours; mission is God’s. Certainly, the mission of God is the prior reality out of which flows any mission that we get involved in” (Wright 2006, 62). Effectiveness in terms of missional theology is therefore not a matter of accomplishing God’s mission for God, but of bearing witness to God’s character, intentions, and actions (Hunsberger 1998, 196-97). It is a matter of communication, and other metrics are only significant to the degree they impact that communication (Budd 2018). Effectiveness in communication can be measured, at least to some degree, by whether people encounter another way of understanding the world and humanity’s place in it, and specifically the significance of the life, death, resurrection, and imminent return of Jesus Christ. This may result in improved standards of living, changes to culture, or even personal conversions to Christianity and numerical growth in churches, but communication can be effective whether or not this happens. Effective communication is measured by understanding, not necessarily by acceptance.

Local Congregations as the Hermeneutic of the Gospel

Another theme of missional theology is that the very nature and purpose of the Church, especially at the

level of the local congregation, is to participate in God’s mission. As Craig Van Gelder puts it, “The church is missionary by nature, created by the Spirit to participate fully in the redemptive reign of God” (Van Gelder 2000, 125).¹⁶ A number of missional authors take this to mean that congregations should spend more time, energy, and money on engaging the world outside of the church than on facilities and activities that serve those who are already part of the church. In the words of Milfred Minatrea, “when the activities of a church focus inward, the church has exchanged its mission for maintenance” (Minatrea 2004, xvi). Schoon, however, argues convincingly that the apparently inward-focused activities of the church, such as liturgy, worship, and discipleship, have an essential role to play in “forming God’s people within the character of Jesus Christ as active participants within the *missio trinitatis*” (Schoon 2016, 49). Schoon’s important point is that for effective outward engagement, there has to be healthy inward formation.

Effective outward engagement in TD, though, requires more than Christ-like character and vibrant faith. Specific expertise and technical skills are also essential. As Myers contends, “The poor deserve better than gifted amateurs with their hearts in the right place” (Myers 2011, 2). What then, is the role of local congregations in TD? Some participate by helping resource the work of parachurch organizations that specialize in TD. Others function as the spiritual home community for congregants who work professionally in TD. And some develop their own TD programs and projects which they manage directly.

Missional theology suggests that there is another, more fundamental role for local congregations in TD. Newbigin insists that “the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. ... The only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live it” (Newbigin 1989, 227). When development projects help improve aspects of life, just as when evangelism techniques persuade people to change their beliefs, that does not necessarily mean that the God of the Bible is at work. It could simply mean that the methods employed are effective and that certain goals have been accomplished by human ingenuity and power. If that is the case, then a plausibility structure other than that of the *missio dei* is likely being reinforced. But if the work of TD, or evangelism, or any other mission endeavor, is in some way connected to the transforming communal life of local congregations that are rooted in

¹⁵ I am grateful to Dr. Steven Studebaker for the language of “reconceiving” development goals within a Christian framework, as opposed to “layering” so-called spiritual values over materialist agendas.

¹⁶ Bosch put it this way: “It is not the church which ‘undertakes’ mission; it is the *missio Dei* which constitutes the church” (Bosch 1993, 519).

and shaped by the life, death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus, and the outpouring of the Spirit, then a whole other dimension of witness becomes possible.

Newbigin identifies six characteristics of Christ-centered life that are uniquely embodied by local congregations and that, therefore, can only be conveyed by other entities to a limited degree, if at all. The first characteristic is praise and thanksgiving, which is an acknowledgement of dependence on and loyalty to God (Newbigin 1989, 227–28). The second characteristic is truth. In the face of both modern positivism and postmodern relativism, Newbigin constantly contends that “a Christian congregation is a community in which, through the constant remembering and rehearsing of the true story of human nature and destiny, an attitude of healthy skepticism can be sustained, a skepticism which enables one to take part in the life of society without being bemused and deluded by its own beliefs about itself” (Newbigin 1989, 229). The third characteristic is that of living for the sake of neighbors, and the fourth is the preparation and support of congregants in their own “exercise of the priesthood in the world” (Newbigin 1989, 229).

The fifth characteristic is mutual responsibility. Newbigin contends that “if the Church is to be effective in advocating and achieving a new social order ..., it must itself be a new social order” (Newbigin 1989, 231). This new social order is built on the renewed and reconciled relationships of people being transformed by the gospel (Hunsberger 1998, 66–72). The resonance of this characteristic with TD’s aim of restored relationship with God, self, neighbor, and environment, is obvious.

The sixth characteristic is hope. The field of international development is rife with both extreme optimism, and disillusionment verging on despair. In contrast, the hope in the coming Kingdom of God, of which Spirit-filled congregations can be a foretaste, enables an anticipation that is both “eager and patient” and cultivates a humble confidence that pulls us back from both dangerous utopian dreams and disillusionment in difficulty and failure (Newbigin 1989, 232).

Congregations that embody these characteristics allow others to see and experience life that is ordered around and empowered by the death and resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit. They allow others to see, in ways that no other entities can, what life

is like when it is oriented to the already present yet still coming Kingdom of God. When TD practitioners do not (or cannot) introduce people to such congregations, they are severely limited in what they are able to communicate concerning Christian faith.¹⁷ Yes, they can speak to how Christianity inspires and sustains them in their work. Yes, they can talk about the difference Christianity makes in their own personal life. But faith issues may then come across as nothing more than a set of privately held convictions that help people in their individual lives. They are not presented as public truth that exposes and, ultimately, overcomes injustice, forms renewed communities, and invites all to “taste and see that the [one and only] Lord is good” (Ps 34:8). For TD organizations to reach their full potential as Christian witness, they need to relate to the reality of the local congregation that, in Newbigin’s words,

stands in the wider community of the neighborhood and the nation not primarily as the promoter of programs for social change (although it will be that) but primarily as itself the foretaste of a different social order. Its members will be advocates for human liberation by being themselves liberated. Its actions for justice and peace will be, and will be seen to be, the overflow of a life in Christ, where God’s justice and God’s peace are already an experienced treasure (Newbigin 1989, 231–32).

Conclusion: Toward Missional Metrics

There is now a growing body of research published around the world focused on the role of faith in international relief and development. Some voices are highly critical of faith-based initiatives, especially of those that identify as Christian. Others are cautiously respectful and acknowledge examples of development initiatives undertaken by Christians that are at least as effective in overcoming aspects of poverty as are those engaged in by secular agencies.¹⁸ Helping marginalized people and communities improve their quality of life is not, however, on its own an indication of effectiveness in Christian mission. For TD to be effective as Christian mission, it also needs to contribute to the accomplishment of aims that are particular to Christian mission.

¹⁷ There are obviously contexts in which open connection between a TD organization and a local congregation would be dangerous to both. And there are other contexts in which no local congregation exists. I am not suggesting that without explicit connection to a local congregation, a TD organization cannot be engaged in Christian mission, but that the TD organization’s witness is enhanced when it is in open relationship with local congregations.

¹⁸ See, for example, the June 2013 edition of the *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d’Etudes du Développement*, which was completely devoted to debating the relationship between religion and development.

Missional theology suggests that a fundamental aim of mission is to bear witness to what the God of the Bible has done, is doing, and will do to reconcile and renew all creation. A TD organization's effectiveness in Christian mission could therefore be evaluated, at least in part, by the degree to which its work contributes to people's understanding of this narrative, one that is centered on the life, death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus. Missional theology also suggests that such witness can be enhanced by appropriate, mutual partnership with Christian congregations.

It is one thing to aim for restored relationships, and growing understanding of the life, death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus. It is quite another to measure the degree to which these things are happening, why they are happening, and what difference that makes in the lives of individuals and communities. One small step in that direction might be to experiment with qualitative research methods (interviews, focus groups, etc.) that explore participants' perceptions of the organization's beliefs, aims, and values. The findings of such research could indicate what meaning is being conveyed through the organization's work, and what plausibility structure is being affirmed.¹⁹

More highly complex work would be needed to devise better models for partnership with congregations, missional metrics that are appropriate to TD, and data-gathering methods for the purpose of evaluation that are both ethical and effective. If TD is able to further formulate such models, methods, and metrics, it will not only increase its effectiveness in helping people overcome poverty, but will also contribute greatly to the witness of God's people in the public sphere.

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¹⁹ The author's dissertation project tests a qualitative methodology for determining the degree to which Christian organizations' efforts to overcome poverty cause people to consider the validity, value, and implications of convictions concerning Jesus of Nazareth.

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