

Missio Dei:

CHANGING TIMES, CHANGING LANDSCAPE



BY REV DAN YARNELL

The landscape for our understanding of God's mission, like the landscape of what was normal before the Coronavirus pandemic, is ever changing and evolving. During the turbulent times of cultural change and uncertainty during the 1960s, Bob Dylan sang 'The times they are a changing'. These prophetic words rang true then, and in many ways are still poignant for our times. We have seemingly entered a new 'normal' for mission, and I would like to explore five areas where these changes are,

and will continue, to impact our understanding and involvement in the work of partnering with God in His mission today. These are 1) the growing mobilisation of movements of people across the globe, and the recognition of diaspora mission; 2) the hope of becoming a multicultural and intercultural church; 3) the growth of many who have become prodigals, or 'nones', in their spiritual identity; 4) the ongoing discussion and deconstruction of our Anglo-centred approach to informing

and engaging in mission; and 5) the emergence of the importance of hospitality, and the church as a community - as a paradigm of a new humanity and a sign of the inbreaking Kingdom of God.

It is worth noting, that I believe all these matters impact the greater issue of discipleship, and disciple-making, which I am not directly focusing on - but see these as components and key issues that help us to explore this more intelligently.



Global mobilisation of people diaspora mission

The UN migration data noted in its 2019 publication that there were over 272 million migrants in the world, or 3.5% of the world's total population, Report 2020:3). and this is set to continue to increase. (United Nations Migration Report 2020:3). One key missional response, following on from the Seoul Declaration on Diaspora Missiology in 2009, was the acknowledgement and development in the identification of diaspora mission and missiology by the Third

Lausanne Movement conference, held in Cape Town in 2010 (Lausanne Movement 'Diasporas'). Since then, a large growing recognition of this important aspect of mission is being embraced by existing church frameworks, as well as many academic institutions.

Diverse publications, such as Wan (2014), Olofinjana (2010, 2020), and Tira and Yamamori (2016); various conferences and bespoke institutes have been established, and are contributing to our understanding and practice of the missional

significance and opportunity that this creates. An important sign of the times is that many theological and Bible colleges, are also embracing this changing focus and including this in their own academic programmes - as either stand-alone topics, or more intentionally informing their curriculum.

Migratory people movements are often acknowledged as either temporary (such as academic study or short-term employment opportunities) or more permanent (economic migrants, internally-

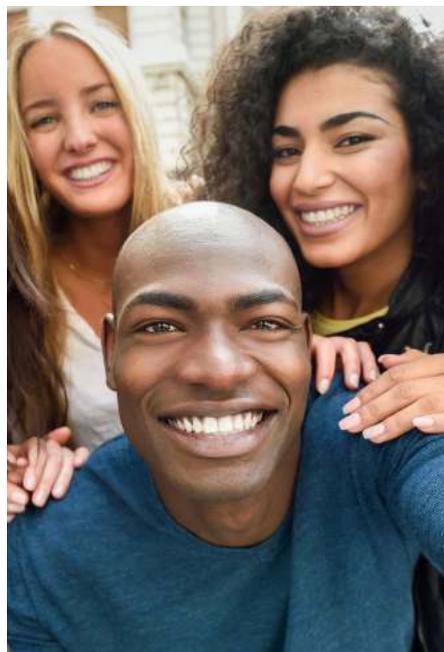
displaced peoples due to natural disasters or conflicts, victims of ethnic cleansing, religious persecutions). These movements often include peoples of faith, who, either, seek to join existing religious communities, or quite often form new ones. Sadly, the track record in many Western nations has not always been very good news for these migrants, who have often found themselves marginalised by the peoples who originally brought them the gospel. One specific example is the traumatic experiences of the Wind Rush generations in Britain (and other migratory people groups who followed), which demonstrates the continuing challenges of finding appropriate integration methods that work in the context of life and faith. While there are some small signs that times are beginning to change, there is still a long journey ahead.

Becoming a multicultural and intercultural church

At the heart of mission is the love of God for all people. The scattering of the nations at the end of Genesis chapter 11 is offset by the heavenly picture of every people, tribe, tongue and nation worshipping God together in Revelation chapter 7. As the gospel is for all nations (Matt 28:18-20), the dream of a multicultural church has re-emerged as a sign of gospel integrity. In addition, we see all around us that global movements of people have led our Western cultures to become multicultural, although our churches, and approaches to mission, are often still mono-cultural in their understanding and methodology. These are matters that are in desperate need of being effectively addressed.

Part of this is the emergence of reverse mission, where those who were on the receiving end of Western mission have returned with the intention of being missionaries and church planters, or unintentionally due to migration, to minister to indigenes. Walls notes that reverse mission is a term that needs to be understood as the offshoot of reverse migration (2017, 49-51). He identified two great migration patterns, the

first being the great European Migration (mid 15th century to late 20th century) where Europeans moved to Africa, Asia and Latin America. The second is the reverse pattern of majority world peoples coming to the West. Scholars such as Kwiyani (2014), Olifinjana (2020), and Hardy and Yarnell (2015), are a small sampling of those who are exploring how we can address, and more importantly partner together, to foster growing multicultural churches, as well as help second and third generations find ways of expressing their faith with integrity and intentionality. This will be an important contribution to indicate that changes are being welcomed and embraced.



Changes in Spiritual Identity and the Nones

Deconstruction is often the buzz word for those who have found their experiences and hopes of the Christian faith to be frustrating and no longer fulfilling. This in turn has led to new generations who have seen the abusive practices of those in faith communities, which has led to rising distrust in organisational power structures, which have encouraged them to self-identify as having no religious belief (i.e. in many of the recent national and international surveys). This is not to say they have no beliefs or are not spiritual, but they have often found

challenges in some Biblical narratives, or in certain practices and expectations, that have left them floundering, trying to reconcile any continuing beliefs or engagements.

Some of this has been motivated by new paradigms of understanding society and culture, such as the rise of postmodernity as well as spiritual practices without organised hierarchies. Where, previously, people would have self-identified as Christian, but were effectively nominal at best, this has begun to dissipate in national figures. More concerning are the ways in which Generations X and Y have positively identified themselves as either unchristian (Kinnaman 2007), or de-churched (Jamieson 2002, 2004; Richter and Francis, 1998). Creating environments and spaces to engage with these groups will be a strategic learning exercise for the church in its mission. In addition, understanding the developmental ways adults express faith, and how they often engage and work through doubt to find a new harmony of life and belief, will also be essential (McLaren 2021). This group may represent up to 40% of adults in the UK, and continues to be on the rise.

Deconstructing our Anglo-centred approach to informing and engaging in mission

For many centuries, mission has been informed by theologies that have been largely White, and either European, or North American. The continuing demise of Western Christianity has been tempered by the rapid growth of Christian communities by non-Anglos, who are often migrants that have come from displaced contexts. Various theologies of liberation have advanced the voices of these African, Asian, and South American scholars, bringing a much-needed deeper understanding of being a world church. Key appointments across the world in positions of influence in churches, and academia, have helped to improve the imbalance of those who have often been marginalised by colour or ethnicity. Recent challenges in society from the



Black Lives Matter experiences have highlighted the continuing need to decolonise our curriculums in academia, as well as work towards developing healthy partnerships. Along with some already mentioned authors, other key thinkers include Adogame (2013), Reddie (2009), and Adidebu (2012), who primarily focus on African contributions, while Sugirtharaja (2015) considers various contributions from the global South.

Hospitality and community as a paradigm of a new humanity and a sign of the Kingdom

The Western church paradigm has been challenged by those who address the demise of Christendom, as well as those who are re-exploring a more local flavour, which often seeks to develop holistic communities. For some, the church and its mission has flourished best before the advent of Christendom, and so believe the ending of a Christendom framework will help to explain to society the Christian faith in a more authentic and prophetic manner – suited to its context. This includes the important After Christendom series of books (Murray 2004 and many others), written from

a radical Anabaptist perspective, as well as the important book on mission by Smith (2003).

For others, the shift to more local and smaller expressions of mission expresses a more fully human, decentralised and post-modern approach to demonstrate God's love in action, and in community life. Small acts of kindness, treating others well, and listening are equally valid expressions of mission, which can be encouraged and celebrated. Foundational to this has been the rediscovery of the importance of hospitality and the value of friendship – as a key component to life and mission. Sharing food, which is central to all our lives, has once again become valued and celebrated in smaller communities of faith. Learning from a literary-critical reading of Scripture has highlighted how this has been integral to the life and mission of God's people in Scripture and in history. Various expressions of Christian community life have been exploring being places of welcome, of providing relational and practical support to those who are powerless (the poor, refugees, asylum seekers). It has equally been informed by the mission efforts of

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dispersed migrant Christians who have demonstrated how vital this is for expressing God's love in action (Francis 2012).

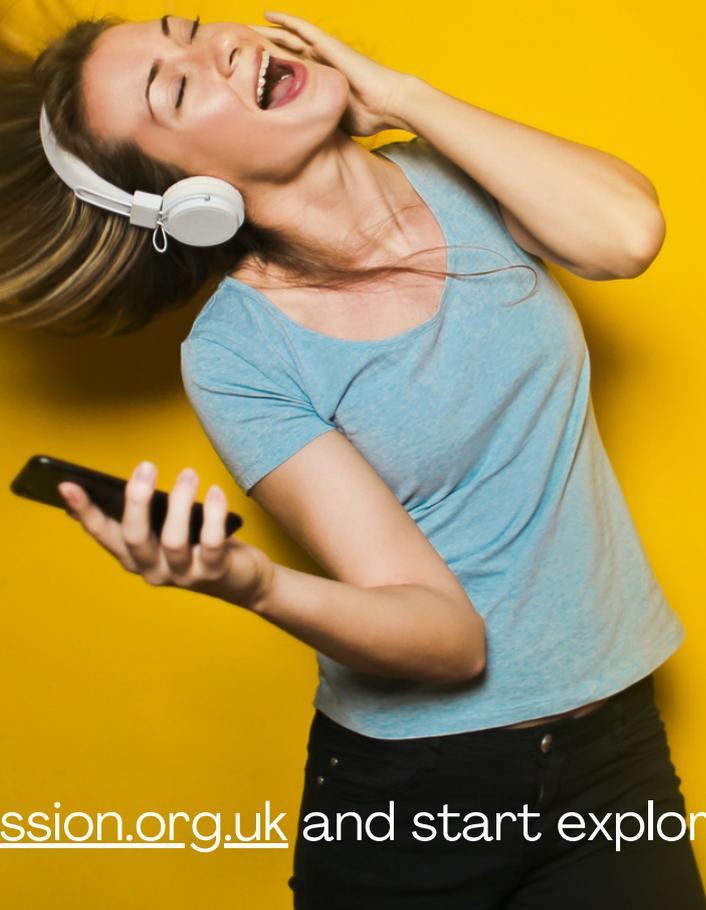
These are, of course, not the only areas of change, but I believe they point to some significant markers of where we may need to refocus our prayers, energies and efforts as we seek to see the Kingdom of God come in our generation. My hope is that the new normal for Christianity will be informed by these issues, and will help all of us in our daily following of Jesus.

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