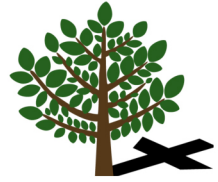


**groundwork**

*TRAINING FOR THE ORDINARY CHRISTIAN LIFE*



# Reaching Christ's World

Stuart Heath

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# Overview

This module has three primary aims:<sup>1</sup>

1. Explore the relationship between global mission and the local church.
2. Discuss some issues that a local church must consider when engaging in global mission activities.
3. Give tools to help facilitate a local church's involvement in global mission.

## Assignment

The purpose of the assignments is to help you reflect on how the materials can be applied in your own church context, as well as to help other Groundwork participants benefit from your thinking. They are designed to help you with the materials, not to be a hurdle.

With this in mind, we ask you to prepare a brief written assignment (no more than 500 words). This can be a personal reflection in informal English — you do not need to write an essay! If you want to quote someone else's thoughts, indicate where they come from, but your paper does not need to be academically rigorous, with footnotes and bibliography.

Please e-mail us your assignment within a week of the end of term.

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<sup>1</sup> These aims reflect those of the unit 'Local Church and Global Mission' taught at Sydney Missionary and Bible College. I acknowledge the help of the faculty of that college (particularly Bruce Dipple and Tim Silberman) in shaping my thinking on this topic, as well as in the specific task of creating this module.



Prepare something that would be useful for you to encourage your church in global mission. This could take any form, so the following are not prescriptive, but merely ideas to help you:

- a 'global mission' awareness programme for your church (perhaps spanning several years);
- a tool to equip people to share the gospel with a global focus;
- activities targeting 'spiritual reformation' — some concrete encouragement to pray, or a form of teaching on our place in God's global mission;
- ways to support your church's current missionaries: what are some concrete steps you could take to develop real relationships between your local church and theirs?
- a plan for a 'returnees ministry': how could you shape local mission to have a global impact when foreigners in your local community return to their home countries?

For your assignment, present what you have prepared. If you have chosen the spoken assignment, this might involve taking your group through a particular tool or programme you have developed, or simply giving an overview and explaining your rationale.

As always, if you have had opportunities to *use* your assignment, it will benefit your group members to know what has worked and what has not.



# Unit 1.

## God's love for the whole world<sup>2</sup>

### Reflection

- Why did God create the world?
- Why has Jesus not yet returned?

## The gospel is the key to history

[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things were created through him and for him.

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<sup>2</sup> This chapter is expanded from a section of my article, 'Doing good: The shape of the Christian life (Part 2): Why we can', online at <http://matthiasmedia.com.au/briefing/longing/5272/>



And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:13–20)

The gospel about Jesus Christ is the high point of history and the key to understanding what God is doing in the world. This is because it causes us to look both *backwards* to God's creation and *forwards* to Christ's return and the new creation while we seek to live rightly *now*. The gospel fulfils God's plans and promises, and it reveals the path for the rest of history.

Many of our contemporaries read history as the march of human progress, or as an endless parade of meaningless events. But in truth God has his own purposes for the world's history, and it is a *salvation-history*. He is the director and the principal actor: he "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1:11). And he has revealed that history's goal is to see all things, whether on earth or in heaven, come under the headship of Messiah Jesus (Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:16).

## One creator God...

We might see 'uniting all things under Christ' as an outworking of the fact that God is the unique creator. That is, there is only one God, and he is the creator of all things. It follows, then, that he should care for all the things he has created. Humanity has a special role within the creation, and so the gospel shows us



how this final goal of seeing all things under Christ is in line with God’s original purposes for humanity.

## ...who blesses creation through humanity

For in the beginning, God declared that his intention was to bless his “very good” world (Genesis 1:22, 31; 2:3) through the agency of humans. Humanity had a dual role: to rule (Genesis 1:26), and to perform the priestly task of bringing God’s blessing to the creation beyond the Garden (Genesis 1:28; 2:15).<sup>3</sup> The Fall frustrated those purposes to an extent (Genesis 3:16–19), but God promised to undo the Fall’s effects by bringing blessing to all the families of the earth through the seed of Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3).

We see this promise partially fulfilled in Abraham’s physical descendants, the nation of Israel, who were like a new Adam. They were placed in an Eden-like land of fruitfulness and rest, watered and blessed by God, where they could enjoy God’s presence (Deuteronomy 3:20; 8:6–10; 11:10–12; 12:5–10; 26:15). Israel was singled out and chosen by God: the LORD by grace set his love on them (Deuteronomy 7:6–7).

While he called Israel a “treasured possession among all peoples”, God also insisted that “all the earth is [his]” (Exodus 19:5). Israel’s shared life, governed by God’s word (inscribed in

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<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew words translated ‘work’ and ‘keep’ in the ESV are commonly used for priestly service in the tabernacle or temple (e.g. Numbers 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6). For a fuller discussion, see Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco: Word, 1987), *ad loc.*



Law or 'Torah'), was supposed to represent the LORD to the nations:<sup>4</sup>

See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? (Deuteronomy 4:5–7)

In this way, Israel had the task of fulfilling Adam's kingly and priestly roles: they were to mediate God's blessing to the rest of creation (Exodus 19:6).

However, just as in Eden, God's continued blessing in Israel depended on their obeying his word. God warned that when Israel disobeyed, they would be expelled, even as Adam had been (Deuteronomy 28:1–68). As Moses had foreseen, Israel *did* disobey the LORD, thereby incurring his wrath and expulsion from the land:

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<sup>4</sup> For a more thorough Biblical theology of 'the nations', see Unit 9 of the Foundation Year Porterbrook module *Introducing Exposition and Biblical Theology*. Let it suffice to say here that the prophets juxtapose paradoxical images of 'conquest' (*i.e.* Israel shall inherit the nations, who shall grovel and come to her in chains, and foreign kings shall lick the dust from her feet — Isaiah 54:3; 46:1; 47:1; 45:14; 49:23; 52:1) and of 'salvation' (*i.e.* with Zion's glorification, the nations shall escort her citizens home and be welcomed as they come to worship there — Isaiah 49:22; 51:3; 54:11–17; 55:5. Salvation is declared to the coastlands and the ends of the earth — Isaiah 45:22; 49:6). Perhaps it is best to synthesize these by saying that blessing (or salvation) comes to the nations *through* submission to Israel — precisely because the nation has this royal-priestly role.



The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, when the house of Israel lived in their own land, they defiled it by their ways and their deeds. Their ways before me were like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual impurity. So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed in the land, for the idols with which they had defiled it. I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries. In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them.” (Ezekiel 36:16–19)

Strangely, it is when judgment falls on Israel that we again see clearly God’s concern for the entire world. For the LORD is angered by the fact that his name blasphemed *among the Gentiles* on account of Israel:

But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, “These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land.” (Ezekiel 36:20).

God’s decision to redeem Israel, then, is a way of defending his name *in the sight of the nations*:

But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came. Therefore say to the house of Israel, “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD,’ declares the Lord GOD, ‘when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.’” (Ezekiel 36:21–23)

God’s concern for the whole world is also plain to see in the way that the exilic prophets can cast the return from the exile in terms of a new creation. Israel’s rescue from Babylon can be



tied not just to the *covenants* God has made, but to the fact that he is the *creator* (Isaiah 43:1–3, 7).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the restored Israel shall be a new Eden:

I will open rivers on the bare heights,  
and fountains in the midst of the valleys.  
I will make the wilderness a pool of water,  
and the dry land springs of water. (Isaiah 41:18)

For the LORD comforts Zion;  
he comforts all her waste places  
and makes her wilderness like Eden,  
her desert like the garden of the LORD;  
joy and gladness will be found in her,  
thanksgiving and the voice of song. (Isaiah 53:1)

The grandeur of these visions was clearly never fulfilled in the history of national Israel: it was not until Jesus Christ appeared that an adequate new Adam was found.

## Blessing in and through Christ

Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of all God's promises: he became God's means of bringing blessing to the world.<sup>6</sup> He is the true Israel: throughout his life, we see points where he typifies everything Israel was supposed to be. For example, although Jesus did not need to repent of sins, he was baptized in order

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<sup>5</sup> The use of the Hebrew word *bara'* ('create') is very significant here: it is used sparingly in the Scriptures, and generally refers to the LORD's special creative activity (as in Genesis 1). It is surprising, then, to find it so commonly in Exilic prophecy (e.g. Isaiah 40:26, 28; 41:20; 42:5; 45:12, 18; 43:1, 7, 15). For a longer discussion, see Watts, *Isaiah* (Dallas: Word, 1989), 35.

<sup>6</sup> This is not the place to develop this in depth, but note that it is not just *humanity*, but the *whole of creation* which is caught up in God's redemption through Christ. See Romans 8:19-23; cf. Acts 3:21, Colossians 1:20, James 1:18; cf. Leviticus 25:23-24, Isaiah 35:1-9, 44:23.



to identify himself with faithful Israel: he was declared to be God's son (Matthew 3:17), just as Israel had been (Exodus 4:22–23). However, where God's son, Israel, failed (e.g. Hosea 11:1–2), Israel's new representative, God's son, Jesus, triumphed (Matthew 4:1–11).

But the life of Jesus has echoes back beyond the formation of Israel, and even beyond the promises to Abraham (though his work fulfils those, too — Acts 3:25–26; 7:2–3, Romans 4:16; Galatians 3:7–16). Luke in particular goes to great pains to show not just that Jesus is a true Israelite who will bring about the consolation of Israel (e.g. Luke 2:24–27), but that he will be “a light to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32). He traces Jesus's ancestry back not just to Abraham, but to Adam (Luke 3:23–38). This becomes a key theme in the New Testament: Jesus is the new Adam (Romans 5; 1 Corinthians 15). He is the ultimate king and priest (Revelation 5:5; Hebrews 7), and the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham of blessing (Galatians 3:29). In this way, the gospel is God's final and decisive word on the life of humanity's first, fallen representative. That is, because of Adam's sin, God could have left the sentence of condemnation and death on humanity. But by his grace, God in Christ broke into history to bring forgiveness and life (Romans 3:25–26; 5:17; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22).

Again, the New Testament is emphatic that, as creator, God is the God of all people, of Jews and Gentiles alike — there is but one God (Romans 3:29–30). Marvellously, this ‘one God’ is the ‘one Lord, Jesus Christ’ (1 Corinthians 8:6): the blessing of God's presence that was found in Eden and then in Israel is now found only in Christ.



When God says that his purpose now is to sum up all things in Christ (Ephesians 1:10; *cf.* 1 Corinthians 15:28), he is also pointing to a new creation where he will be present in blessing, even as he was in Eden (Revelation 21:1–5, 22; 22:1–5). Moreover, through the Christ event, the life of that new age has irrupted into our present reality.

If we want to live rightly in the present, we have to recognize that this world groans in the overlap of the old age (of sin and death) and the new (of forgiveness and life; *e.g.* Ephesians 1:21; Hebrews 4:9–11; 12:18–25; 1 Peter 1:3–7, 13). We must live in a world where we see some of God’s blessings already poured out, and yet we know that a thoroughly renewed created order is still to come.

Knowing where history is headed, how then should we live? It is to this question that we will turn in Unit 2.

### **Reflection**

If we view the world’s history as primarily a salvation-history, how does that affect the way we view life? Think about how it could affect your view of ‘large-scale’ events like political corruption in Zimbabwe, or ‘small-scale’ events like being caught in traffic.

How does it affect the decisions we make about the shape of our life now — our career, our parenting, our footwear?



# Unit 6.

## From global mission agencies to local churches

### Reflection

Does your church have any 'link missionaries'? Do you know what struggles they are facing at the moment? Do you know what they're rejoicing over at the moment?

We move now to consider how the principles surveyed in this module might be applied in churches today. The tendency at this point might be to despair at the gap between the principles and the current reality, and to feel paralysed. We can feel either that we need to scrap the whole system and start again, or that it is too difficult to change things, so we should simply not bother. The better path to tread, however, is that of principled pragmatism. Principles alone may not be that useful



— we can end up just imagining our ideal world instead of living in the one we have. Pragmatism by itself is ruthless: we choose our goal and just go for it by whatever means works, regardless of what principles it violates — we end up evangelizing at sword-point, to take an extreme example. Principled pragmatism teaches us to keep the ideal situation in view, and just to take the first step towards it. This seems to be how God deals with us: he does not wait for us to be perfect before he starts using us! Given the range of possible church situations, these units will propose a variety of concrete applications that should apply in diverse circumstances.<sup>68</sup> It is worth giving this caveat: some of what is suggested in these units looks a lot like the bulk of contemporary practice, and some will look very different. This is simply a function of revisiting the biblical principles and thinking through global mission with those in mind. If the principles are radically different, then some of the applications will be as well. Furthermore, let me stress that this should in no way be seen as a wholesale dismissal of the methods of the majority of mission agencies. (Of course, some people within traditional agencies do operate according to the principles and methods outlined in this module — though they would appear to be the exceptions.) Some friends I respect and love deeply are working for these agencies. More broadly, these agencies are filled with Christians of faith, courage, wisdom, and godliness which dwarf mine. And God has mightily blessed their initiatives. The proposals in these units, then, spring from principled convictions, and from the observations of my missionary

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<sup>68</sup> Many of the examples in these units are drawn from conversations with seasoned practitioners who generously gave time to speak to me. Let me acknowledge in particular my gratitude to Brian Jose and Samuel McWhirter.



friends' frustrations: no one will pretend that current practice is perfect.

### Exercise

You may wish to review quickly the principles laid out in Unit 3. Planting and partnership in the New Testament.

## No lone rangers

This is not the place to present a thorough theology and philosophy of church and ministry, but the following discussion will benefit from rehearsing a few principles which will serve as the backdrop onto which the details of engaging globally can be painted.<sup>69</sup> The main principle to reiterate here is that no Christians are lone rangers. God has called us not just as individuals, but into a community of his people. It is true that all believers are united and gathered around Christ in the heavenlies (Ephesians 2:6), but our union in Christ must be expressed in our earthly existence — real unity with other believers in a local church (Ephesians 4:1–6; *cf.* 2:11–22). Local churches' activities belong to two linked but distinguishable spheres: members encourage *one another* to maturity in Christ, and they present Christ *together* to a hostile world. So 'ministry' is not the responsibility of the dog-collared few: we are all 'ministers' (that is, servants) of Christ and of one another. Therefore there is not a special class of Christians who care for others: each Christian will be in relationships of mutual care.

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<sup>69</sup> For a fuller discussion of church and ministry, see the Advanced Year Porterbrook module *Missional Church and Church-Planting*, or *Total Church*, especially chapters 1 and 2.



Certain church cultures have created a class of ‘pastors’ — people who have the responsibility to look after the ‘regular Christians’. In many churches, this responsibility is placed on the shoulders of one paid person. Clearly this presents an impossible task, because good pastoring requires relatively close relationships, and one person can only manage so many of those. We need to know people so that we can meet their material needs and intelligently speak the gospel into their lives for the purposes of teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. Rather than crushing a few people with the load, we must all be ready to bear one another’s burdens. And this will include caring for our leaders. They, too, have material needs, and they, too, will need the light of the gospel brought to bear on their lives so that they might grow more like Jesus. Furthermore, Christians should not think of ‘evangelism’ as a solo activity: we should naturally look to introduce non-Christians into our Christian community. This does not mean inviting non-Christians to a Sunday meeting. Rather, it means sharing lives together, and will often involve going *out* to the world to meet people where they are comfortable, rather than bringing the world *in* to where we feel comfortable.

I raise all of this because even if we hold to these principles in the local context, we seem all too ready to abandon them in our practice of sending off lone ranger missionaries. There is a common pattern of individualism in the way many missionaries go abroad: a Christian has an interest in going to another country; they approach a range of mission agencies to find out which one has opportunities to serve in that country; the mission agency helps to gather some level of support from sending churches; the missionary goes. I attended a missionary Bible college, and some of my classmates complained of the



difficulty of getting their home churches onboard with their mission. This itself indicates a certain individualism: how did these students develop a plan for their mission and training if not with the support of their local church? Had the church counted the cost of losing these students' local ministry, but decided to back them because the need was greater elsewhere? Or had the students merely announced their plans as a *fait accompli*? It might be difficult in such circumstances to garner support!

If we acknowledge the local church as the primary context of ministry, we can only think of missionaries being sent by a body of believers who know them and love them and support them in their mission. And we cannot conceive of sending them alone. If anyone is going to do pioneering work, then we will follow Paul's example and send not an individual but a whole church — a team of people committed to one another and to a common mission. If we are sending people to a place where local churches already exist, then we will at the very least require that our missionaries be received into a local church community. Ideally, they should be not just be *received*, but *invited*. For imagine if a Chinese missionary arrived unannounced in our church — we would be bemused at best and may well even be indignant. This is perhaps the key element missing from the practice of many major mission agencies: even where the agency has made efforts to develop some level of partnership with the missionary's home church, there is rarely the expectation of developing relationship with a *receiving* church. Perhaps this betrays an imperialistic mindset that we have something to give and teach but nothing to receive and learn. What follows is based on the belief that the



best way for local churches to get involved in 'global mission' is to look to partner with other local churches somewhere else in the world.

## Global mission is local mission, elsewhere

There is an important sense in which all mission is *local* — it just depends on where you are. So the same principles that we use to do mission in our local context can be applied in the global context. On one level, this observation seems too obvious to make, but our culture's tendency to lionize missionaries abroad shows that many of us think of them as somehow a cut above 'regular' Christians. Consider also our tendency to outsource global mission: it is hard to imagine that we would outsource our local ministry in quite the same way. For example, mission agencies are often given control of the assessment and training of missionaries. That is, they carry out psychological testing to see if candidates are suitable, they check candidates' theology, and they provide 'field training' — for example, they teach missionaries how to contextualize the gospel in the culture where they are going. Often this is done in a college or missionary hall — *outside* the context of the local church which is notionally sending the people. Agencies also organize missionaries' salaries, insurance, and prayer requests. They claim to provide pastoral oversight and care for the missionaries while they are away. In many cases, the agencies regulate how long each term and furlough should be (for example, three years abroad followed by six months at home). If a local church were seeking to raise up a leader from within its own ranks, it is inconceivable that it hand all these



responsibilities on to a third party. The effect of this outsourcing is that the mission agency becomes the ‘sending body’ — true ownership of the missionary’s work is removed from the local congregation. In the worst cases, this becomes a kind of ‘mission by proxy’: the local church ends up sending a cheque to the mission agency and putting a photo of the missionary up on the notice board, but there is no real partnership with the missionary, let alone the church where that missionary has gone to serve.

Controversial though it be, let me contend that almost all the functions of the mission agency can be carried out by the local church in a way that sidesteps some common problems missionaries face. That is, we trust the local church to train and care for local leaders; the same principles might be applied for global missionaries. The key difference here is that there are *two* local churches involved — the sending and the receiving church.

## *Training*

Missionaries require the character and skills of any other Christian leader, and these are ordinarily acquired in the local church. It is the believers in my local church who will encourage me in godliness, helping to apply the Bible to my life in a pointed way. Likewise, most of us learn how to understand and teach the Bible in a range of contexts (preaching, Bible studies, biblical counselling, and so on) within the setting of our local church. Our local churches assess our suitability for various ministries in our church context, because they are best placed to do so. We should not imagine that this



changes in a global context, that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ theological degree will be apt and adequate training. Without wishing to stray too far into the broader discussion of theological education, teaching the Bible and cultural analysis — the skills needed to teach God’s word in a cross-cultural context — are not principal foci for most Bible colleges. Mission agencies therefore tend to focus on equipping missionaries in cultural anthropology, cross-cultural communication, and the practicalities of living in another culture — relationships, schooling, health, security, transport, housing, food, and so on.<sup>70</sup> These are important skills, and not every church will be able to equip its people adequately without some form of external help (like Porterbrook, for example). But such training should never be divorced from the local church, and ideally the skills should be developed within the local church so that it can grow in its capacity to be a blessing to both its own members and to those outside. For these ‘mission-related’ competencies primarily fall into the category of gospel contextualization — a skill required by every church.

## ***Contextualization***

We would expect a local church to train its members in how to contextualize the gospel. That is, each church should know how to interpret its surrounding culture in the light of the

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<sup>70</sup> This observation has been synthesized from a range of sources. For more detail, see the website of any major mission agency (e.g. <http://www.cms.org.au/go/training>), or articles such as William D. Taylor’s ‘Comprehensive Overview of Missionary Training’, or the ‘Missionaries’ Competencies Profile’ by The First Southern Cone Consultation of Mission Trainers which met in 1991 in Cordoba, Argentina, cited in *Training* (Vol. 91:2, Sep 1991). Both of these are available online at <http://www.wearsources.org/>. Retrieved 4/2/09.



gospel, and how to bring the gospel to bear there. Christians should be ready to be flexible on the external aspects of culture for the sake of winning people to Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). If a person is considering proclaiming Christ in a thoroughly foreign context, how much more should they benefit from a local church training them in contextualization? Local people will have good insights into how the gospel cuts against their culture, and talking at length with them in planning any mission endeavours will reveal unhelpful subconscious Western assumptions. Locals ‘at the coal-face’ are also the experts in how to present the gospel in culturally insightful ways which might escape outsiders. For example, believers in some high-context cultures<sup>71</sup> have noticed that it is not unusual to see the pattern of conversion that we see several times in the New Testament — namely, if the head of a household turns to Christ, the whole household is converted and can form the basis of an indigenous church. This will influence the way they strategize and pray for mission! (Of course, each church culture also has its blind spots, which an outsider can help to point out.)

The process of learning to contextualize the gospel can often begin long before someone moves his or her entire life abroad. For example, a couple in Sheffield are thinking about helping with church-planting in Kurdistan. Kurdish church culture (like English church culture) is defined by both the gospel and wider

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<sup>71</sup> Whether a culture is ‘high context’ or ‘low context’ has tremendous implications for expectations of how to communicate and how relationships will form. If you are interested in finding out more about this basic cultural divide (which will certainly help you as you meet people of other cultures, even in your own neighbourhood), you could start with a brief introductory article such as this: <http://www.culture-at-work.com/highlow.html>



Kurdish cultural norms (language, food, dress, literature, worldview, ways of greeting and talking and so on). The local church in England has got help from a local church in Northern Iraq to learn about some Kurdish cultural specificities. The Kurdish church's insights have helped the English church to build relationships and share the gospel among Kurdish people in Sheffield. And thus, without even changing postcode, the English would-be missionaries have started to learn how to contextualize the gospel from a local church in Kurdistan. Short-term visits to the region will allow them to glean more language and culture, as well as developing the relationship between the two churches who will together prayerfully forge the shape of the mission in Kurdistan.

## *Finances*<sup>72</sup>

For the issue of finances, a sending church can help decide on and organize salaries, pensions, and insurance. This would need to be carried out in consultation with the receiving church, and would doubtless benefit from the advice of an accountant or other financial adviser. If money is exchanged from church to church, rather than from individual givers to a mission agency, it might also free up the missionary on the ground. That is, many missionaries feel the pressure of justifying themselves to their financial supporters. This inevitably creates mixed loyalties: in making decisions about the most useful way to serve, does the missionary listen to the local church or the financial backers? The conflict does not arise where the local church is the financial backer. Further, strong relationships between local churches might lead to better management of resources. While

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<sup>72</sup> For further discussion of finances, see Unit 8.



there might be more Christian *people* in the Two Thirds World, there is a lot more *money* in the banks of Western Christians. Traditionally, one reason to send missionaries from wealthy countries is the paternalistic view that only they can be trusted. However, say a wealthy Australian church is in partnership with a poor Thai church. Some money is earmarked to help plant some new churches in Thailand. The Australian church also has a number of theologically trained young people whom it could send to head the new work. But there are some mature Thai believers who have already begun to build relationships in a neighbouring village, and could do more if they had some time freed up from their jobs. Because of the trust built up through the existing partnership, the Australian church agrees to help fund the Thai nationals to continue the work they have already begun.

### ***Pastoral care and oversight***

The websites of large mission agencies often list pastoral care and oversight for their missionaries as chief concerns. As they endeavour to recruit new missionaries, it is often in this domain that they seek to demonstrate their superiority over other mission agencies. Common solutions involve: having someone in the home office of the mission agency available as a kind of counsellor; calling missionaries a ‘team’ just because they were recruited by the same agency (but actually have no common life or ministry), and; holding missionary conferences — bringing together missionaries from all over the world to share their experiences and to receive peer support. In all of these cases, however, there is no involvement of the Christians who are closest to the missionaries. It should be clear that the



sending and receiving churches can provide far better pastoral care. For example, I receive the prayer letter of a missionary family working among students in a large European city. They were sent by a denominational mission agency, which pays missionaries with money collected from its churches. While on home assignment, the father wrote that he realized he had been ‘burnt out’ during his last term. A follow-up conversation revealed that they were not very well integrated into the life of their local church in Europe. Their church was not involved in the student work; there was no relationship between the church and the mission agency, let alone the agency’s denominational churches. He said he had tried to put some things in place ‘at home’ (with the mission agency) to help him avoid re-entering the same destructive cycle of overwork, but he had no one in Europe outside his family who was sharing life with him and so could properly pastor him. Praying for him with tears, I longed for better circumstances. Imagine if he had been sent in the context of a partnership between local churches, where members of those churches who knew him well were able to trade notes about how best to care for him and his family, how to pray for them lovingly and intelligently, and how to encourage them forward in Christ as they shared in their mission.

### *What place, then, does the mission agency have?*

I was reading an article arguing for the importance of building strong teams of missionaries, and the writer described one such team:



If our whole agency dissolved, this [missionary] team would quickly regenerate the necessary infrastructure and continue with its work, hardly missing a beat.<sup>73</sup>

The line made me ask the question: what if the agency *did* dissolve?

Clearly this unit (and indeed this module) has focused on the relationship between local churches and global mission. As I've outlined above, I think there are some important benefits of local churches forming partnerships for the sake of mission. However, local church isn't the only kind of Christian organization that exists, nor the only kind that *should* exist. Let me make a brief detour to describe three spheres in which our Christian discipleship is played out — one individual, and two corporate.

1. *Gospel persons*. In the first instance, we are called as individual disciples. God comes to dwell in each of us by his Spirit; it is right for us to say, "Christ died for *me*. He paid the penalty for *my* sin." Further, I have a range of responsibilities that are peculiar to me: for example, no other Christian or group of Christians is called to be a husband to my wife, a father to my children, or a teacher in my classroom. While the Christian community can and should mould me and support me in fulfilling these roles, I alone am ultimately answerable for how I act in them.
2. *Gospel communities*. However, we are not just called to follow Christ as individuals; we are also called to follow him *together*. God places us in a church, a body, a household of

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<sup>73</sup> Richardson, Steve, 'Third Dimension Teams'. Online at <http://www.pioneers.org.au/articles/general-mission/third-dimension-teams.html>. Retrieved 3/2/09.



believers (1 Corinthians 12; 1 Timothy 3:15). This is a Christian community of mutual love: we get to speak the truth to one another in love, to meet one another's physical needs, to be friends who rejoice together and mourn together. This is a heterogeneous group: we are bound together not by age, race, gender, or socio-economic background; we are bound together in Christ by the Spirit of God (Ephesians 4:1–6; Galatians 3:26–29). It's a place where we learn to follow Jesus both as we follow the example of other Christians (Titus 2:1–6) and as we are 'forced' to bear with other Christians (and they with us!). In addition, as we live out our discipleship together, we get to love those who don't know Jesus. Our very unity is a display of God's power to reconcile, and so our common life together promotes the gospel of reconciliation (Ephesians 3:3–11; cf. John 13:34–35).

3. *Gospel ventures*. But there are also other ways that Christians might collaborate, outside their churches. I've called these broadly 'gospel ventures': what I mean is any project where Christians band together to achieve something they couldn't do alone or in a church. These might include such things as setting up a theological college, a boarding house, a university campus ministry, or (of particular interest in this module) a 'mission agency'. Gospel ventures often allow us to use some of our gifts which aren't needed in the church context, but which might of use to the wider Christian community or society at large. They may therefore tend to be more homogeneous. For example, I teach English to speakers of other languages, but there's no immediate use for this in my church context. At the same time, there are a number of students at language schools who would like to learn about Jesus, but



who can't or won't seek out churches where there's someone equipped to read the Bible with them either in their own language or in easy English. It makes sense, then, for a group of Christian English teachers to run some Bible studies near the language school. This isn't church, and it can't replicate or replace the life-on-life discipleship of the Christian community. Obviously we would encourage such students to be involved also in church. But an easy-English Bible study is a 'gospel venture': it's (a) a specialist service that not all churches could provide, and (b) a place where Christians from different churches can use their gifts for the glory of God.

There's much more to say about the interaction between these three spheres,<sup>74</sup> but for the purposes of this unit, I simply want to say that I think of mission agencies as gospel ventures. They can have an important place in facilitating global mission, and they may help with training, finances, and pastoral care and oversight, but they cannot replace local churches. Like theological colleges, they should be a servant of local churches, rather than an end in themselves. My call here is not to get rid of mission agencies, but simply to challenge the instinct which thinks of global mission primarily as the activity of individual missionaries and their sending agencies.

If missionaries are sent in the context of relationships between local churches, then many of the agency's 'traditional' functions are fulfilled. One outstanding need is facilitating relationships between local churches. The agency could act as networker, bringing together churches with different resources to share

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<sup>74</sup> See the Groundwork Core subject *Living as Christ's People* (forthcoming).



and different needs. That is, one church might be able to give money, but not have any suitable people to share. Another church might have some people who are equipped and keen to serve, but have no existing links with any churches abroad. An agency could make the necessary introductions.

In the past couple of decades, there has been a shift which has seen many mission agencies seek to increase the involvement of local churches in supporting missionaries on the field. Some have been more successful than others, but many will still consider themselves the 'sending agency', a necessary mediator between the missionary and the churches. Nevertheless, this shift is welcome and may in some cases serve as the starting point in a conversation about how your local church can become more involved in global mission. Some organizations (like Radstock)<sup>75</sup> are committed to building strong partnerships between local churches; some agencies might not have it as an overarching value but are willing to explore the options; others will insist that only big mission agencies and professional missionaries can do big things for God. The next unit will explore how to get started on partnerships, but your particular circumstances may make the task more or less difficult!

## Reflection

Does your church already have links with a church abroad? If so, how can you strengthen them? If not, can you see any natural opportunities to develop some? What is the first step? Whom can you recruit to help?

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<sup>75</sup> <http://radstock.org/>

