Radical Mission in a Post-9/11 World: Creative Dissonances

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Will mission in the twenty-first century be “business as usual”? Will the tried-and-true models for mission of the late twentieth century provide sufficient creativity and vitality for the new century now dawning? Respected missiologists answer No. “The missionary movement is now in its old age,” declares Andrew Walls. “What is changing is not the task [of world evangelization] but the means and the mode.” Wilbert Shenk, in the final chapter of his Changing Frontiers of Mission, probes deeper: “Christendom as a historical reality is finished,” he concludes. “The conditions that made it possible in the past no longer exist.” Instead, we should expect creative dissonances.

Radical Changes “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6)

When did the twenty-first century begin? According to the Gregorian calendar it began January 1, 2001. Historians may give a different answer. How about September 11, 2001? Now into the fifth year of the new century, is it possible that more than the Twin Towers fell on 9/11? Are we now in a permanent state of war against terrorism that will define this century?

What about the church and its mission? Do we also face a world with radical changes from the past? Wilbert Shenk, a respected missiologist teaching at Fuller Seminary, says, Yes. He writes, “Renewal will not come by way of incremental revisions of structures and liturgies inherited from the past.” Lyle Schaller, a noted North American church consultant, concurs. In Twenty-one Bridges to the Twenty-first Century, Schaller contrasts the relatively modest degree of change of a century ago with the increasingly sudden and discontinuous changes that the church now faces in the new millennium.

Doug Nichols, international director of Action International Ministries in Bothell, Washington, warns of the folly of a “business as usual” approach to missions. “If missions are not careful,” he writes, “they may become like the old empty cathedrals in Europe.” He feels that putting first the care of missionaries (salaries, retirement benefits, insurance, housing, etc.) could detract from the primary mission of taking the Gospel to the masses. The consequence, he fears, would be that missions will become “a shell, possibly with lots of activity, but no life.”

What a contrast with Paul’s model for mission! When synagogues barred their doors, house churches were formed. Jails were no longer places of confinement but of witness. Women took their place as early leaders. So transforming was the first Christian missionaries’ witness, by word and deed, that in Thessalonica they were known as “people who have been turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6).

My thesis is that creative twenty-first-century mission will require a radical response to the creative dissonances of our age. The term “radical” is pregnant with meaning. I am interested here, not so much in its common usage (referring to something extreme), but in the sense closer to its derivation from the Latin radix, “root,” referring to what is fundamental or basic. In mission what is radical in this sense points us toward the mission models of the apostolic church.

Effective mission in the twenty-first century will require creative approaches to the dissonances in our world. Here I consider five of the most sobering dissonances currently facing us in this new century.

Reconciliation vs. New Forms of Violence “God . . . entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor. 5:19)

“The road to hell” is the way Robert Rotberg, director of Harvard University’s Program on Intrastate Conflict, describes the escalating levels of violence in today’s world. Wars since the early 1990s in and among failed nation-states have killed close to eight million people and made refugees of an additional four million. Hundreds of millions have been left impoverished, malnourished, and deprived of fundamental needs for security, health care, and education. Some violence, especially in Rwanda and western Sudan, involved the genocide of whole ethnic groups. Failed states, including Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, and Somalia, have been not only “breeding grounds of instability, mass migration, and murder” but also reservoirs and exporters of terror.

How shall churches in mission respond to such escalations of violence? Humanitarian aid to the victims is one ongoing response—from the refugee camps of the Congo to the violated women of Kosovo and the Sudan. Another is the World Council of Churches’ Decade to Overcome Violence (2001–10), an effort, through the use of nonviolent tactics, “to overcome the violence of division in our societies and to respond to the yearning for peace and a life of dignity for future generations.” Another is the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Originally a secular response to the scars of apartheid, the commission became a Christian effort against injustice under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

One growing form of violence is religious persecution, with martyrdom as a frequent outcome. Barrett and Johnson estimated that there would be 167,000 Christian martyrs in 2004, with an increase to 210,000 per year by 2025. In their encyclopedic survey of world Christianity, they judged martyrdom to be “the most significant and far-reaching of all the modes and methodologies of evangelization.” Martyrdom in Christian witness is not victimization. International missiologists have judged it to be “the experience of being uncompromising in the choice of mission, including the mission of the people of the Church. Witness in martyrdom is incumbent on both the individual and the community. It is a choice for the God of justice and righteousness and it rejects the God of exploitation and oppression.”

Reconciliation will be a missionary task amid the violence of this century. Robert Schreiter develops five understandings of the Christian message of reconciliation. First, it is God who initiates and brings about reconciliation. We, both victims and oppressors, are invited by God to cooperate in God’s reconciling ways. Second, reconciliation is more a spirituality than a strategy. It needs to become one’s vocation or way of life, not just a set of discrete tasks to be performed and completed. Third, reconciliation makes of both victim and oppressor a new creation. It is not just righting wrongs or restoring a past state. Fourth, it is the...
Contextualization vs. Fear of Syncretism

“What is distinctive about Ghana Methodism?” I asked Brew Riverson, then a student at Yale Divinity School but more recently president of the Ghana Methodist Church. Without hesitation he replied: “Our churches have organs, and our pastors wear clerical collars with tabs like John Wesley.” Ten years later, in 1987, I stood outside a Lutheran church in Tirupati in the Andhra Pradesh state of India. My guide said with pride: “Our church is an exact replica of a Lutheran church in the Black Forest of Germany.” From Ghana to India came examples of the previously dominant mission approach to Third World cultures—that Christianity should be dressed in Western garb.

Syncretism has been a subject of vigorous debate. In 1978 the Lausanne Committee’s Theology and Education Group invited thirty-three mission leaders and anthropologists from six continents to study “Gospel and culture.” Their Willowbank Report warned of the danger of syncretism, or “harmful carry-overs from the old way of life.” It declared that “elements which are intrinsically false or evil clearly cannot be assimilated into Christianity without a lapse into syncretism.”

Eighteen years later in Salvador, Brazil, 574 participants in the WCC’s eleventh ecumenical conference on world mission and evangelism (1996) grappled with the same issue under the theme “Called to One Hope—the Gospel in Diverse Cultures.” The subsection on syncretism in the conference report begins: “Dynamical interactions between the gospel and cultures inevitably raise the question of syncretism. From one perspective, syncretism is merely a mixture of elements from different sources. In that respect, any cultural expression of the gospel is syncretic.”

Since the term “contextualization” was first coined in 1972, missiologists and Third World theologians have deepened our understanding of the new paradigm. Indigenization of clerical dress or church architecture or music will not suffice. The very heart of a culture needs to be embraced and transformed by the Gospel. Such radical contextualization is similar to that of the apostle Paul, who wrote, “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews” (1 Cor. 9:20).

Thomas Thangaraj of India has had an odyssey from cultural dissonance to radical contextualization. Two hundred years ago his ancestors converted from Hinduism to the Christian faith. Upon doing so, they destroyed the Hindu shrine in their village and built a Christian church in its place. Thangaraj himself grew up in two worlds—those of Tamil culture and of Western culture. In the multireligious urban settings of Madras and Calcutta as a theological student and later a teacher, he discovered how bicultural he was, and how his theology was informed by both Hindu and Christian traditions. For thirty years he has been writing hymns in the Tamil language. His reformulation of the idea of the uniqueness of Christ employs the Hindu concept of guru as a Christological model. Thangaraj relates that Hindus have come with new receptivity as the Christian Gospel is conveyed in language familiar to them.

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Radical contextualization in twenty-first-century mission will be affirmed as “mission in Christ’s way.” Christopher Duraisingh believes that such a mission “does not seek the disappearance of another culture or religion” and does not “do away with differences,” but rather holds them together in a “community of communities.” In the resulting dialogue “Christians may give an unequivocal witness to God’s love in Jesus Christ.”

In a chapter entitled “Culture and Coherence in Christian History,” Andrew Walls concludes, “The faith of Christ is infinitely translatable; it creates ‘a place to feel at home.’” In the challenge for twenty-first-century mission is for each church to embody this truth—and feeling—in its own changing cultural context.

Radical Dialogue vs. Exclusivism

“In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” (John 1:4)

David Bosch, in his magnum opus Transforming Mission, identified witness to people of other faiths as one of the “largest unsolved problems for the Christian church.” Since publication of this work in 1991, the debate has intensified. On the one hand, claims of Christian exclusivism have intensified, as has the ascendancy of fundamentalisms in other faiths. On the other hand, walls of division between Christians and persons of other faiths have been broken down through mutual searches both for peace and justice and for salvation across traditional confessional lines. The result is creative dissonances.

Philip Jenkins’s prediction of the “next Christianity” includes the clash of fundamentalisms, especially in the Southern Hemisphere. Recent violence between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria raises the prospect that Nigerian society “might be brought to ruin by the clash of jihad and crusade.” Similar religious conflicts cloud the future of Indonesia, the Philippines, Sudan, and a growing number of other African nations. Hindu extremists persecute Christians in India.

By contrast, partnership by persons of diverse faiths is increasing in work for justice and the integrity of creation. The Peace Council, for example, an offshoot of the World Parliament of Religions, unites religious leaders of varied faiths to work for nonviolent and just resolution of conflicts. “Acting, struggling, and suffering together for the cause of peace or justice make for special friendships,” Paul Knitter reports. Similar interfaith partnerships have addressed the HIV/AIDS pandemic and hunger issues.

Radical dialogue in the twenty-first century will continue to take two paths. Theologians will continue to push the frontiers of Christian theology toward greater Christian appreciation of God’s work among persons of living faiths. Meanwhile a dialogue of life will intensify as persons increasingly embrace Christ while continuing to affirm their cultural heritages. Aloysius Pieris, a Sri Lankan Jesuit, believes that the uniqueness of Christ—in whom God became poor, a victim, and one of the oppressed—can be shared best as Christians stand for justice with those who have been victimized, exploited, and powerless.

Roman Catholics find in the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) important milestones in the church’s theology of the religions. They include the affirmations that major world faiths represent what is “true and holy” and “reflect a ray of the Truth that enlightens all people,” and that “whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel” (Nostra aetate; Lumen gentium 16).

Ecumenical Protestants draw upon the World Council of Churches’ affirmation that “God . . . has not left himself without a witness at any time or any place” (1982), and that “we cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God” (1989). The council continues to recognize the tension between those two statements—a tension which has not yet been resolved.” Christians were encouraged to practice a dialogue of life. Faithfulness in love of one’s neighbor—even one’s enemy—may be the best form of witness through “a humble, kenotic style of mission, following Christ’s vulnerable life in service, not domination.”

Can such a dialogue take place with the so-called hidden Christians? In 2000 the World Christian Encyclopedia reported that there were 13,676,310 nonbaptized believers in Christ. They are members of non-Christian religions who have been converted to faith in Christ as Lord and Savior but who choose to remain in their religions as witnesses to Christ. The largest numbers are Hindus, primarily in India, followed by Buddhists, primarily in China. Projections are that their numbers will grow to 23,480,000 by the year 2025.

Ralph Winter has called this estimate in the WCE “potentially the most explosive revelation in the entire work.” As corroborating evidence he cites the careful study of over ten million people in the city of Chennai (Madras) in India, where there are four times as many Hindus who are devout followers of Christ as there are believers affiliated with the official Christian churches. Significant numbers of persons remain culturally Hindu but embrace Christ, reading the Bible and worshipping him daily. What is the potential for a dialogue of life among these persons?

Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, after surveying historical theologies of mission, propose “mission as prophetic dialogue” as a synthesis of the theology of mission needed for the twenty-first century. It is multidimensional, including witness and proclamation, liturgy, prayer and contemplation, justice, peace and the integrity of creation, interreligious dialogue, inculturation, and reconciliation. It is a lived-out theology—open to people of other faith perspectives and to the contexts in which people live. As Christ embodied the reign of God in his preaching, serving, and witnessing, so also the church is called to work for justice among humans and in creation with openness, determination, sensitivity, and courage.

Cybermission vs. Conventional Communication

“I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.” (1 Cor. 9:22)

“Electronic media is to the Reformation of the twenty-first century what Gutenberg’s press was to the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.” This is the conviction of Michael Slaughter, pastor of one of the fastest growing churches in North America today. He argues: “No wonder the Church isn’t making sense for most people in North American culture. We are speaking a different language. We are still using the language of a literate culture in a post-literate visual age.”
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Nor is this just a First World discontinuity. Basil A. Rebera writes: “When I think of the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka, with a population larger than China’s, to say that TV and video is all the rage is not a journalistic banality. That medium is creating social and cultural transformations more rapid and more profound than centuries of earlier colonial rule.”

Scholars tell us that a radical discontinuity is taking place, not simply the replacement of one technology by another. “The media are no longer screens we watch, or a radio we listen to,” wrote Cardinal Martini of Milan. “They are an atmosphere, a milieu in which we are immersed. They surround us and penetrate us from every side. We live in this world of sounds, images, colors, impulses, and vibrations as primitive men and women were immersed in the forest, as a fish is in water. It is our environment, and the media are a new way of being alive.”

No technology has grown faster than the World Wide Web. In 1969 there were but four Web sites in the entire world. By 1990 there were 333,000. By the end of 1997 Web sites had increased to almost 20 million. By 2004 Google, the most widely used search engine worldwide for English speakers, surpassed 6 billion Internet items. Compare this transformation with earlier media technologies. It took 40 years for radio to attract 50 million users in the United States; it took television 14 years; but it took the Internet just 4 years.

The Internet is no longer used predominantly by English speakers. Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans are major Internet users, as well as Europeans in various languages. It was projected that between 709 and 945 million people would use the Internet in 2004.

Sarang Presbyterian Church in Seoul, Korea, is an effective congregation in its use of multimedia. It began its digital ministry in 2000. By 2003 its seeker-sensitive approach increased average Sunday worship attendance to over 20,000. Sarang Church sponsors separate Web sites in English, Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, and Russian. They feature inquiries about what Christianity is and also provide worship in each language. Their goal is to present Christ to as much of the unchurched new generation as they can.

Cybermission works best in active synergy with other forms of mission. The ongoing challenge is to bring persons out of individual isolation into online groups, and eventually into face-to-face communities of faith. The new structure may involve hundreds of volunteers in different time zones coordinated by a central team of permanent staff. Ministries may include evangelism (with Web pages “What is Christianity?” or “How to become a Christian”), chat rooms for inquirers, mentoring for missionaries and pastors, TEE courses, online counseling, and prayer ministries.

The apostolic church was creative in mission as it used the traditional oral culture (e.g., the parables of Jesus) while embracing the emerging literate culture. Paul symbolized that creativity both as preacher and writer, saying, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). Those in twenty-first-century mission who embrace the new multimedia technology have a similar potential to meld modes of communication. Expressive elements (storytelling, preaching, music, dance, painting, sculpture, etc.) can continue to evoke faith alongside video, film, CD, and sound-card technologies.

Radical Leadership vs. Creeping Clericalism

“Is our goal to send missionaries or to reach the unreached?” Alex Araujo posed this question to evangelicals planning for mission in the twenty-first century. If it is the latter, what will be the most effective method? In one case it may be to send North Americans. In another it may be more effective to assist local Christians. In yet another it may be better to form a partnership with Christians of a similar culture nearer the unreached people. Then, reflecting on the dominant paradigm of the twentieth century, that of the salaried cross-cultural missionary, Araujo continued: “If our goal is to send missionaries, we may find ourselves sending hundreds of them very efficiently, while failing to reach the lost.” He concluded: “If our methods are wrong in relation to our ultimate goal, efficient implementation cannot prevent failure.”

In the last 100 years almost 90 percent of the world’s full-time foreign missionaries came from Europe and North America. At the close of the century, by contrast, an increasing number came from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Present estimates suggest that by 2025 as many as half the world’s full-time Christian missionaries will be sent by churches of the Two-Thirds World.

Joseph Healey, with abundant examples of East African Catholics in mission, details how African missionaries are called forth by their local churches and sent to other parts of the world. Jehu Hanciles documents the dynamism of African Christian leaders who have migrated to Birmingham, New York, and Moscow, ministering not only to immigrants but also to unchurched Westerners.

The second radical shift in leadership will be from clergy to laity and from salaried to volunteer persons in mission. It is a return to an apostolic church paradigm in which God’s gifts were believed to have been given, not exclusively to a set-apart professional leadership, but rather to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:11–12).

“A core characteristic of the twenty-first-century church is the mobilization of the laity,” declared a church leadership training team. Now there is “a high value placed on mobilization with each person seen as having a gift, role and place to serve. There is a systematic approach to the process of identifying gifts and talents, equipping/coaching and placement for service. Mobilization is implemented by a leadership team with a designated point person for lay mobilization.” The fastest growing stream of Christianity—that of Pentecostals and charismatics, who worldwide claim the loyalty of some 534 million adherents—has empowered laity at the grassroots to affirm their ministries through the gifts of the Spirit.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, mission planners face the daunting challenge of countries resistant to the Gospel and denying entry to foreign missionaries. In hope, we have confidence that the Spirit will raise up new witnesses as in the past. In 1993 C. Duh Kam of the Chin Baptist Convention in Myanmar (Burma) gave this testimony: All foreign funds and personnel had been cut off for more than thirty years, but still mission was the center of the church’s life. Local churches supported 150 young people who were serving as missionaries. By 1995 there were 225 in service. The goal of their 250,000-
member convention was to win a million Chins for Christ by the year 2000.

What will be the paradigm for mission leadership in the twenty-first century? First, we can predict that it will be pluraliform as Christians engage in mission on six continents. Mutuality in mission will be facilitated by international mission agencies. Cross-cultural persons in mission not only will share their special gifts in service but also will be catalysts for change and servants in ministry. We can also anticipate that local, shared, and most often voluntary leaders in mission will be the normative model in this new century.41

**Conclusion**

Creative dissonance was the defining experience of the prophet Elijah. Amid political violence he fled for his life to the wilderness of Horeb and hid in a cave. There God spoke to him, but not in a tornado that split mountains or in an earthquake or fire, but in “a sound of sheer silence” (NRSV), or “a gentle whisper” (NIV). In the calm after the storm Elijah received both the summons and the invitation.

This article is an introduction to five creative dissonances facing mission in the twenty-first century. A fuller study would have included others: evangelization versus humanization as the primary mission of the church, Pentecostal/charismatic vitality versus routinization of the Spirit, the struggle for justice of the poor versus the forces of globalization, and radical unity versus ecclesial competition.

“This is the time to be bold and creative,” Michael Amaladoss concluded in “The Future of Mission in the Third Millennium.” He continued: “We are living in an age of transition—a liminal period.” He called upon Christians in mission to return to their apostolic stance as a counterculture. “The need of mission today is not numbers,” Amaladoss emphasized, “but quality of Christian life in community. Such communities will be free, creative, committed to a faith that does justice, open to all people of good will with whom it will build up human communities as a foretaste of the Kingdom, and sensitive to the mystery of God to whose mission in the world we are but humble servants.”42

The five creative dissonances in mission presented here presume that radical change is ahead in mission. Radical reconciliation, contextualization, dialogue, communication, and leadership will be needed. Mission in the twenty-first century must be rooted firmly in the biblical mandate, trusting in the one who promised his followers: “In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world” (John 16:33).

**Notes**

16. Duraisingh, Called to One Hope, pp. 204–5.
17. Walls, Missionary Movement, p. 25.
29. In Fidelity and Translation: Communicating the Bible in New Media, ed.
Paul A. Soukup and Robert Hodgson (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed & Ward, 1999), p. ix.


