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## **The New Mission Worker**

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What is the new mission worker?

In some ways the new mission worker is anything but new. Many innovative missionaries have graced the church since its inception. St. Patrick, Methodius and Cyril, Bartholome de las Casas and scores of others illustrate a sensitivity to context that spawned innovative mission work. In more recent times, William Sheppard, Dorothy Day, Billy Graham, and Mother Teresa stand as witnesses to the creative energy for mission that addresses the particularities of context with a universal gospel.

Each of those missionaries saw the situation around them with new eyes. They pushed against traditional mission methods because they perceived the situation differently than their peers. They devised new frameworks for understanding mission and implemented creative strategies that suited their context. Sometimes their presence and actions led to a more positive attitude toward Christianity in their setting. Sometimes their methods nudged the church toward a new paradigm for Christian mission. Usually tensions developed with those supporting traditional mission forms and theologies.

### A Paradigm Theory

Thomas Kuhn, in his groundbreaking work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, developed a theory about how the very frameworks we use to understand the world around us shift, fermenting fundamentally new theories about how the world works. Those “paradigm shifts” occur when increasing contradictions in current theories give way to a reorganization of how we believe the universe holds together. Such seismic shifts in scientific theory produced tensions, and then resolved them through amassing new data that fit the new theory better than the old. In a similar way, theological shifts have occurred through the centuries in understandings of the form and content of Christian mission. New mission workers—innovators—recognized the anomalies of old paradigms and devised new ways of doing mission. They were new mission workers because they perceived the world differently, they saw the contradictions of current mission models, and they developed innovative ways of interacting with their world.

The new mission worker today does just that. First they perceive the world differently. Second, they see the contradictions of current mission models and why they are not working, and third, they develop new ways of interacting with their context—new methods that bring the gospel alive in their setting.

An example of this shift from models that don’t fit the context to those that do can be seen in Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *The Poisonwood Bible*. In this close- to-autobiographical

novel Rev. Prentice, a traditional missionary, brings his American understandings into his mission context. He plants his crops just as he would plant them in Georgia. Year after year, he plants them in the same way. Local people try to help him switch to agricultural methods that work in the Belgian Congo but he doesn't listen. Instead he universalizes his theory of agriculture and insists on doing it the way he has always done it. Failure results.

The same failure follows him in his attempts to spread the gospel using a model of evangelism that does not fit his context. He preaches the gospel just as he would at home. His daughter, by contrast, not only survives her dysfunctional family upbringing, but goes on to develop innovative ways of interacting with the Congolese context. The book shows the anomalies in the old mission paradigm and describes a new model. Granted, Kingsolver would not call the political work for justice that she describes as "mission work" because she is tied to an older distorted paradigm of Christian mission. But she learns from her context and develops understandings and methods of addressing that context that work to bring good news—the good news of peace that always comes with the gospel.

### The Spiral of Knowledge Acquisition

Some missionaries are contextually sensitive because they intuit what is appropriate in a particular situation. Such intuition might be described as a spiritual gift. But even without that talent, one can learn to understand the mission context and develop insights and strategies that relevantly address it. In this lecture I will outline a way of understanding that results in the new mission worker—the mission worker that interacts positively with the surrounding culture and religion and brings the good news of the Christian gospel to bear on that situation. How does this happen? An outline of what follows can be found in your program. One acquires knowledge that leads to appropriate action by applying a hermeneutic of life—a way of acquiring knowledge that results in meaningful action in a particular setting.

That knowledge breaks through stereotypes, sees the situation in fresh ways, evaluates the context with a critical standard of God's truth, and forms new understandings that lead to actions that heal and renew. The new mission worker changes the surrounding context and is changed by that context. The knowledge acquired by opening up to the wisdom in the strange situation leads to an interaction that revolutionizes both the missionary and the people in that setting. The *Missio Dei*, God's mission, breaks into the situation and the good news is right there—in our face—to be apprehended by all, strangers and locals alike.

### An Example from Acts

Something like that happened in Acts 10 when Peter received a vision from God about eating food that was considered, in his local context of the Jewish religion, as unclean. That vision led him to receive the messengers from the Gentile Cornelius. Cornelius had a vision at about the same time—a vision that Peter would come to his home and instruct him more perfectly in the ways of God. Cornelius, a Roman that probably worshiped the Emperor, was, nonetheless, according to the text, a God fearing and righteous person. Peter received the messengers, enjoyed the hospitality of Cornelius, ate unclean food, and watched as the Holy Spirit descended on all in that place. Gentiles were baptized and a whole new era began—the beginnings of a church that would span the globe. Peter was open to the strange culture of the Roman household of Cornelius. God had prepared him to be open. He was changed by that encounter and by the good news that God accepts all that fear God and do right. Peter's

boundaries of inclusion broke through significant barriers that day. God and Cornelius rocked Peter's world and the world itself was forever changed.

### Step 1: Acknowledging Experience

Peter's innovative mission work was possible because he opened himself to the strangeness of Roman culture. He stood in the Jewish tradition. All of his experience up to that point had been in the secure world of the synagogue. The Jewish world was his world—the only world that he knew. Presumably, he had not been unhappy in that world. He did not seek a different path. Even his interaction with Jesus confirmed his beliefs and worldview. Jesus' death had, of course, been a shock. It presented a huge anomaly in his secure paradigm. Other anomalies had been building up as Peter followed Jesus--when he called Zaccheus the tax collector down from the tree and went to his house for dinner, when he allowed a woman to come straight into his dinner party from the street and anoint his feet with perfume, when he touched the child Tabitha lying on her death bed, when he talked theology in the heat of the day with a Samaritan woman at the well. But now—suddenly--Peter was thrown into a situation that he couldn't possibly comprehend with his old paradigm. A situation that demanded personal action. His vision shattered his old paradigm by instructing him to be open—open enough to receive the unclean.

### Step 2: Bracketing Convictions

So Peter set aside a lifetime of experience, defied the rules of etiquette and holiness codes he had so long embraced, and on the thin evidence of a dream, went forward. Peter bracketed his convictions and opened the door to Cornelius' messengers. He knew that his behavior went against centuries of tradition that instructed Jews not to associate with Gentiles(Acts 10f). But walking with Jesus, witnessing a resurrected Christ, and associating with a community of Jesus' followers had prepared him for new encounters. Anomalies to his old paradigm were building up. His vision was further evidence that a new way of interacting with Gentiles was part of God's plan for the world. Peter bracketed his convictions. (Pause) He opened the door.

Peter's story shows us the first two steps for the new mission worker: Number one, recognizing that our own experience is contextual and predisposes us to see things in a particular way. Our beliefs in universal truths are expressed in cultural/religious forms. For Peter, the rules about avoiding unclean food were particular forms that enabled the Jews to preserve their culture, carrying God's truth through the centuries in a pluralistic world. Understanding the particularity of our life experience is the first step for the new mission worker. Accepting that we are Western post-enlightenment people practicing our beliefs in the universal truths of Christianity in particular ways is our first step. Number two, bracketing those convictions so that we can open ourselves up to wisdom from other sources is the next step. Peter's vision gave him the courage to set aside his convictions about unclean food and unclean people, and open the door to Cornelius.

### A Contemporary Example

Mission workers today also receive messages from God about how to interact with others. Paula Tibbs, one of our graduates, worked with the Presbyterian Church in the Democratic Republic of Congo during a recent Field Education experience. She felt embarrassed every time she received the greeting "Muoyo Mutoke" "Hello White Woman." Rather than

react by withdrawing or criticizing, Paula bracketed her discomfort which was based on her experiences as a Caucasian American. She also set aside her convictions about how a missionary “should” interact with the Congolese. She began seeking understanding of how the Congolese interpreted that greeting. Through conversations with the Christians there, she concluded that the greeting carried racist overtones for both the local people and the mission workers. Through her work and the work of other new mission workers, a new paradigm of interaction between mission workers and local church people is developing. This new paradigm moves beyond the superiority/inferiority assumptions of the old Western missionary paradigm. Bracketing one’s convictions makes way for attention to intuition, Scripture, counsel from local Christians, and nudges by the Holy Spirit.

### Step 3: Encountering the Strange Situation with Openness

Recognizing the particularity of our life experience and bracketing the convictions that we have developed over the course of that experience prepares us for the third step in becoming a new mission worker--encountering the new situation with openness. Missionaries leave the security of their home, their church, and their cultural context embarking on a journey to encounter the strangeness of another culture. That can happen by traveling to another country or by walking down the street to a mosque, a temple, or a community center in one’s own neighborhood. Strange customs offend one’s sense of etiquette, strange sights and odors assault the senses, strange religions confuse the mind. Odd practices and ideas confront the mission worker. Interacting with that new situation presents multiple challenges.

#### An Example of Struggling to be Open

The mission worker can respond by using the frameworks of a lifetime of experience, planting gardens in the same old way. Or, one can respond with openness, exploring strange customs with childlike openness. Curiosity, fear, or delight are a few of the responses that openness generates.

The first Advent season I spent in Java, Indonesia sent me into a whirlwind of confusion. I couldn’t wait, I couldn’t worship, I felt disconnected. Then I realized that all of my usual cues for worship during Advent were missing. Instead of the crisp cold air of December, I was drenched in perspiration in the wet heat of the tropics. Instead of the scent of evergreen boughs and the sight of Christmas lights in the sanctuary, I was appalled to see plastic red roses adorning a huge white cross above the altar at my church. Instead of going Christmas caroling and drinking hot chocolate, we sang songs in the Bahasa Indonesian language and drank leichee juice in the church recreation hall. How humbled I was to realize that my worship was so culturally conditioned that I felt lost without my usual cues.

#### Barriers to Openness

The process of opening myself to Indonesian culture presented barriers. The cultural cues from my own experience were a major barrier. Another barrier was a sense of beauty that valued different materials, color schemes, and kinds of hymn. A third barrier was the religious milieu in Java. The church there is a minority, struggling to maintain a strong presence and a theological depth in an Islamic society that is layered with Hindu and Buddhist cultural forms. Consequently the church emphasizes basic Christian doctrines, especially a theology of the cross. The idea of waiting for Christ to break into one’s life during Advent wasn’t nearly as important as a strong sense of the depth of love that Jesus showed the world in dying on the cross. The

strong presence of other religions in the society influences the whole process of teaching and worship during Advent in the church.

Encountering the cultural situation with openness helped me to identify those barriers and move beyond them. I could not hang on to my own sense of Advent worship. I had to let it go. I was helped with that letting go by developing respect for the values and habits of the local people. Bracketing my negative attitude toward plastic flowers, I listened attentively to the admiring comments of congregants about the Advent sanctuary decorations. Laying aside my own sense of the church year and what was appropriate for meditation at Advent, I opened my heart to the messages of God's love in sending Jesus into the world, not just to be born, but to die for our sins. Rather than hold onto a feeling that cold weather and Christmas go together, I tried to embrace the life-giving sun and heat and the lush greenery of the mountains of Java.

These actions may sound trivial to someone that has never been away from the comfortable cues of their own milieu at Advent. To those who have, you will recognize the deep impact of cultural forms on our worship and attitudes towards others. Encountering the strangeness of a new place, different people, and alien cultural forms with openness is a difficult and central step in acquiring knowledge that will enable the new mission worker to become loving and effective in their new setting.

#### Understanding and Change Through Openness

As I continued to interact with the strangeness of the new situation, more and better reasons for the behavior of the people became clear. I began to understand why villagers don't like to go out alone at night, why drums or gamelons are not used in Christian worship, and why it is unseemly for women to rush to class, arriving drenched with perspiration. Those were some of the lessons I learned in Java through understanding the particularity of my own former experience, bracketing my convictions, and encountering the strange culture of Java with openness.

As I went along that path, I learned much. I also discovered that I was becoming more and more like the people that I lived with. I became more indirect in the ways that I communicated with people, mirroring the Javanese style of communication. I began to wear dresses when I went shopping, instead of sauntering to the store in jeans and a tee shirt. I walked more slowly to class, avoiding embarrassing my students by arriving wet with perspiration. I forgot about the waiting focus in Advent worship. And I didn't long for cold weather quite as much.

#### The Danger of Over-identification

I was becoming like the people around me. But what was happening to me? Where were my convictions, my cues for worship, my sense of beauty, my communication style, my love for strenuous exercise? In opening oneself to a new culture and different forms of life, one runs the danger of becoming a chameleon. Quite the opposite danger to holding on tightly to one's past experience, here the danger is forgetting one's roots and convictions. In opening oneself to the strangeness of another culture and bracketing one's own convictions, one gains tremendous new knowledge. Embracing new ideas, taking new perspectives, absorbing new frameworks, and engaging in new practices expands the horizons of the mission worker. One is able to gain understandings of others and of oneself that would be impossible without such openness, But the

new knowledge one gains influences behavior. And one's behaviors become part of one's sense of self. The danger of over-identification now confronts the mission worker.

Anthony J. Gittins claims that one of the best gifts the missionary brings to a new culture is their very strangeness, their difference. People see themselves in distinction to others. Their uniqueness is highlighted by the strangeness of someone from another culture. To simply adopt all of the views and behaviors of the community one enters denies those that welcome the missionary the very difference that can produce positive change. Although one must be open to the new culture to acquire the knowledge necessary for a giving and receiving of the gifts of the gospel, one also needs to evaluate the new culture and offer insights that may allow the gospel to become more fully present in that place.

#### Step 4: Evaluating the Strange Culture

The fourth step in the spiral of knowledge acquisition then, is to evaluate the cultural forms one has encountered. Now that some understanding of the new culture has been acquired, the new mission worker re-engages their past experience and their cultural and theological convictions.

That critical re-engagement is crucial for two reasons. First, by simply accepting everything in the new culture--embracing the ideas and practicing all of the cultural forms—one's own values and beliefs become muted and begin to disappear. Second, by not re-engaging one's Christian convictions, the message of love and peace inherent in the gospel story also becomes lost.

For example, if a missionary to China one hundred years ago simply adopted all of the cultural forms of Chinese society, they would have to affirm the practice of footbinding among upper class families. What would happen to a mission worker that believed that footbinding is wrong because it cripples a healthy body made in God's image? Which is more important—sensitivity to culture or the value of unhindered growth of a child? How can this difference in values be navigated between the missionaries and the local people? Missionaries faced this real dilemma in the last century. The China Inland Mission required missionaries to adopt Chinese dress and practice Chinese customs. One day, a girl with an infection in one of her bound feet came to a missionary for help. The missionary unbound the foot of the child, salved it with ointment and instructed the mother to leave the foot unbound until it healed. When that treatment cured the child, the mother brought her back for further examination. The missionary examined the foot and without comment unbound the other foot. The mother seemed surprised but went away without objecting. In the weeks that followed many other mothers brought their baby girls to the missionary, asking her to unbind the feet of their children. What they could not do themselves due to cultural prohibitions, they could receive from the hand of the foreigner. When done with sensitivity and care, re-engaging one's convictions can have a powerful effect on a community.

It is also critical for the missionary who is interacting with customs that are not only strange but sometimes abhorrent. The impact of "living with" practices that go against deep theological or moral convictions can have a devastating effect. Paying attention to those convictions fosters acceptance of others without disparaging one's dearly-held Christian beliefs.

## Step 5: Integrating Horizons

At the same time, one's openness to another culture or religion changes one's convictions. One's former experience becomes integrated with the new impressions gained from experiencing another way of life. Horizons of knowledge begin to fuse and overlap.

My attitudes toward Islam is one example. Through learning about Islam, through hearing and responding openly to the call to prayer, through making friends with Islamic teachers from Pakistan, through participating in Ramadan, the month of fasting, and celebrating Idul Fitri, the end of fasting with Islamic friends and neighbors, my own thinking and behavior toward Islam changed. My past experience and the new experiences I had in Indonesia with Muslims came together. My understanding of Islam deepened. My horizons broadened. I changed.

Openness to Muslim culture didn't turn me into a Muslim though. Through re-engaging my convictions about Jesus Christ as the Son of God and redeemer of the world, I remained wholeheartedly committed to Christianity. But my attitudes towards Islam changed greatly.

The new mission worker changes in that way. The barriers between the mission worker and the culture encountered fall away as openness brings understanding and evaluating the culture brings clarity to the mission worker's identity and broadens their horizon of knowledge. Mission workers and people in the culture find, at this point, a great deal of mutuality and care for one another. Differences no longer threaten but enrich relationships. Gifts of care and respect are given and received. Knowledge of the other's culture changes both the mission worker and the local people. The good news is heard and received by both.

## Step 6: New Praxis

Such encounters set the stage for new praxis for both the mission worker and the local people. A new platform of understanding has been built through the process of openness and evaluation. Consequently, the actions of the mission worker change. Rather than do mission in the ways they had thought would be their modus operandi when they arrived, mission workers find themselves ready to work with the people in different ways. Those ways are more sensitive to the needs and aspirations of the people since time has been spent in learning to understand them and their ways. The new mission worker doesn't go ahead of the people but walks with them. Plans are developed together. A give and take arises that springs from deeper understanding on both sides. What shape those plans take differs from context to context.

In a recent issue of the New York Times Magazine, a Southern Baptist missionary in Africa recounts her own surprise when she found herself working with women for basic human rights. She hadn't come to Africa to do that. But through acquiring knowledge of her setting and the people there, she found herself working with the women on their issues, rather than staying with her own agenda.

Andrew Walls tells a similar story of a Baptist missionary to China, Timothy Richard went to China to preach the gospel to all that he could. Over the course of many years he witnessed the devastating effects of cyclical famines in Northern China. People that periodically faced starvation weren't able to hear the gospel and respond to it. So Timothy Richard returned to the U.S., studied agriculture and went back to China as a journalist. He surveyed trends in production and wrote articles about new techniques in agriculture that could help the region avoid the cyclical famines of the past.

Were those two missionaries “new mission workers” because they worked on human rights and agriculture? Not at all. They were new mission workers because they learned from the society they encountered, identified the problems faced by the people, and developed with them innovative ways to address those needs. Each of them took the path of recognizing the limitedness of their own experience, setting aside their convictions in order to listen openly to the people, learning from those encounters, evaluating the culture and fusing their interests and ultimately their knowledge with those of the local people. And “voila”—their praxis changed. They became innovators.

## Obstacles

So why isn't the new mission worker a common phenomenon? We still encounter rigidity, power-over tactics, non-responsiveness to local cultural forms, unhealthy clashes with people of other religions, and narrow views of what it means to share the gospel. What prevents us from moving confidently into a new mission worker lifestyle: understanding our own experience, setting aside our convictions, engaging others with openness, evaluating new cultural forms on the basis of Christianity, allowing new cultural wisdom to change our perspective leading to new and more accepting practices? It all sounds so easy and so good.

I will mention just two obstacles. The first is personality. Each one of us has a distinct way of approaching the world. Some easily open up to new experience and more easily change their viewpoints. Others depend more heavily on structures to inform and guide their behavior. Over the centuries in Western societies, distinctions among personality types have been outlined. The sanguine personality, the melancholic type and other older models have been replaced today with Myers-Brigs thinking-and-feeling, judging-and-perceiving and other personality distinctions. Some people will find it more difficult to walk through the amorphous phase of bracketing their convictions. They will be tempted to judge the other culture's practices at every point. Others will have difficulty evaluating the new culture from their Christian standpoint. Their openness to the strange culture may instead lead them to such an appreciation for that culture that they lose ability to critically assess it. Still others may find that an appreciation for another culture doesn't lead them into creative interaction with the religion or practices of that group. They find it difficult to allow their horizon to expand with knowledge of the new culture. Instead, it is kept forever in the realm of the exotic.

Thankfully, no mission worker is an island! The church community, both the sending church and the receiving church can help broaden perceptions and open up attitudes of individual missionaries. One personality type can learn from another. One individual's perceptions can be explored in community. Certain rigidities can give way in the face of acceptance by the stranger. And love can show a more excellent way.

A second obstacle is the human need for a feeling of safety. We enter a strange society or community with trepidation. We look for ways to feel safe.

Sometimes mission workers find safety in a view of law that has developed into a holiness code. Jesus gave many lectures about the law, teaching different aspects of this complex phenomenon. He showed that human well being trumps the law when he healed the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath. He ate grain with his disciples on the Sabbath, demonstrating that when the law grows into a rigid code of holiness, it prevents human flourishing. At other times, Jesus stressed that he didn't come to overcome but to fulfill the law. The limits on

behavior set by the Ten Commandments and reinforced by society provide a structure that keeps order in society.

When a Christian's view of law becomes a holiness code, however, it can interfere with opening up to another culture's norms. If I cannot temporarily let go of my feminist views, or my political correctness, I will be stymied in my attempts to understand another culture or religion. Many cultures do not share our views of women's equality, our notions of how our nation should operate in international relations, or even the role that missionaries should take in another society.

Missionaries are often guilty of taking the latest views on mission and imposing them on churches that learned a now "outmoded" view of mission. When I saw a Thai Christian preaching with a megaphone on the streets of a small town in Eastern Thailand, I was appalled. The very act grated on my sense of what is appropriate among the gentle Buddhist villagers. But this relatively new apprehension of cultural sensitivity is not practiced by the Christians in that town because missionaries taught them to preach in this way. They have adopted a Western style of evangelistic proclamation that now offends Western missionaries. Should the new missionary now "correct" the Thai congregation's outreach strategy? Doesn't this smack of the same old cultural imperialism Christians have been practicing since the eighteenth century?

A new holiness code for Western Christians has replaced the old code of no drinking, no dancing and no playing cards. But should we impose these new insights on our sisters and brothers in Thailand? Things are not so easy. Of course I feel "safer" if I can get others to practice holiness the way I think it should be done. And I have many sound reasons for thinking that megaphone preaching is not helping the spread of Christianity in Thailand. But the new missionary will lay aside her need for safety and openly dialogue with Thai Christian reasons for practicing evangelism in this manner.

Another path to feeling safe and secure lies in being sure that one is right. If the missionary insists on being right, the wisdom of the Thai Christian ways remain opaque. I can be right or I can bracket my convictions and be open. I can't do both at the same time. How does the new missionary deal with that dilemma?

Sociologist Peter Berger claims that doubt is an integral part of Christian faith in the modern world. Everyone experiences doubt that we are right, that Christianity is all that we believe it to be. Berger outlines three ways to deal with that doubt.

The first is to re-entrench ourselves in dogmatic views that protect our sense of being right. If the mission worker does this, we end up with a Poisonwood Bible type of situation. Christian practices are carried out exactly as they would be in the home church. Both appreciation for the other culture and the communication of the good news are thwarted.

Another way to deal with doubt is to give up our convictions altogether. The bracketing phase now becomes permanent. For example, I may be so enamored with the beautiful Balinese offerings of flowers on my doorstep and fruit offerings carried in procession to the temple, that I never re-engage my convictions and evaluate those practices theologically. Instead I become a kind of new age Hindu. And the good news of the gospel falters on the huge expanse of openness that engulfs me.

A third way to deal with doubt is to hold doubt and faith in tension. Openness to the new culture's religion can be held in tension with one's Christian faith. A Wesleyan view of God's

grace permeating every culture is helpful here. God's wisdom is not displayed only in Christian societies. In fact, God goes ahead of the mission worker, showering other cultures with grace and wisdom. Vincent Donovan, a Catholic missionary to Africa, found resonances of truth in the African notion of a high god. Thomas Merton found the practice of Buddhist mindfulness leading him into a deeper Christian contemplative prayer life. Mother Teresa found in the grateful eyes of the dying in Calcutta, the face of a loving Christ.

The new mission worker does not have all of the answers. We miss the mark when we try to shore up an illusion of safety by re-entrenching our dogmatic convictions or depending on a holiness code of our own culture's making. We truncate the gospel when we uncritically embrace every facet of another religion and culture.

But a spiral doesn't end. So the mission worker begins again, with new experience and traverses the spiral from a brand new starting point. The road to a graceful and giftive mission is not a simple and straightforward path. But it is one that can lead to a more attentive and compassionate Christian mission—a fitting paradigm for our contemporary world.

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