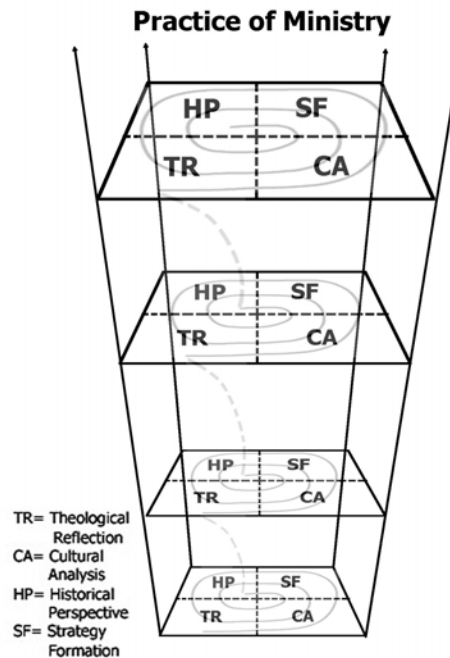


Monthly Missiological Reflection #26

"The Missional Helix: Example of Church Planting"

In the last [missiological reflection](#) I described the Missional Helix and attempted to show the intertwining, inseparable nature of theological reflection, cultural analysis, historical perspective, and strategy formation in the practice of ministry.

Developing practice of ministry was understood as a helix because theology, history, culture, and strategy **build on one another** as the community of faith collectively develops understandings and a vision of God's will within their cultural context. Like a spring, the spiral grows to new heights as ministry understandings and experiences develop.



The Missional Helix

Each of these four elements (theology, history, culture, and strategy) is essential in reflecting on and planning for all types of Christian ministry.

This Monthly Missiological Reflection examines each item of the Missional Helix as it relates to the practice of church planting. Because this is only an overview and application of the process, the material is simplified and reduced to a few reflections which illustrate the process.

Theological Reflection

Theological reflection is the beginning point for ministry formation and the most significant element in the spiral. All missiological decisions must be rooted both implicitly and explicitly in biblical theology in order to mirror the purposes and mind of God.

Too many church planters, while acknowledging the Bible as the Word of God, allow culture rather than scripture to shape their core understandings of the church. The Bible is used to proof-text practice rather than define its essence. Without a biblically-rooted ecclesiology, the teachings and practices of the church are likely to be shaped either *implicitly* by the dominant evangelical culture or *explicitly* by random surveys to ascertain what people want⁴. A biblical understanding of the nature of the church, consequently, enables church planters to develop churches that are rooted in the mission of God rather than presuppositions of popular culture.

The Missional Helix proposes that church planters beginning their ministry must use scripture to form a biblical ecclesiology. For example, in Ephesians 2:19-22 Paul uses multiple metaphors to describe the nature of the church. The church is a *new nation*: Newly converted Christians are "no longer foreigners and aliens" but "fellow citizens" in a community of faith (2:19). The church is a *family*, or "God's household" (2:19). The church is a *holy temple*, well constructed with each part joined together and built around Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone. This fellowship comes into existence through conversion: Those dead in sin (2:1-3) have been made alive with Christ (2:4-7) by God's grace (2:8-10). Paul stacks metaphors one on another to illustrate a redeemed fellowship "brought together under . . . Christ" (1:3-11) and existing "for the praise of his glory" (1:12). These perspectives form an inspired picture of God's divine community.

Theological reflection, however, extends beyond textual study. The church planter must realize that all readers understand and apply Scripture within their historical traditions, based upon their rational systems of thought, and formed by their perspectives of experience. The church planter, therefore, must be cognizant of four different resources that shape theological reflection: Scripture, tradition, reason and experience (Stone and Duke 1996, 43-54). For example, in rural, face-to-face cultures Christians tend to perceive of the church as a "family," in modern, industrial contexts as a "business," and in postmodern, informational cultures as a "network" or sometimes as a "community." Missionaries and ministers, as theological "meaning makers," must theologically reflect upon the connotation of these metaphors using all four resources of theological reflection.

Cultural Analysis

In addition to theological reflection the church planter must undertake an in-depth worldview analysis of the local culture. Much too often this second element of the Missional Helix is excluded. Church planters naively project their worldview upon other contexts and interpret reality in terms of *their* heritage. This intellectual colonialism results in *transplanted theologies*, reflecting the missionaries' heritage, rather than *contextualized theologies*, developed by reflecting on scripture within the context of local languages, thought categories, and ritual patterns. Transplanted theologies are merely uprooted from one context and transferred to a new one with the expectation that the meanings will be the same in both cultures. The beginning point of theologizing in a new culture is always a thorough analysis of the culture on a worldview level. Based on these cultural understandings, trained missionaries are able to be theological brokers to those within the culture and minister alongside them in developing contextualized theology for their own context.

Church planting does not occur in cultural vacuums but in cultural contexts, where rival perspectives of reality vie for human allegiance. Church planters must, therefore, become adept at differentiating worldview types and diagram how these types influence the target culture. These understandings enable them to communicate God's message so that it interacts with the culture's perspective of reality.

At least four different worldview types are present in world cultures. Stated succinctly, a *secular* worldview divides the world into natural and supernatural realms and focuses almost exclusively on the natural realm. God is considered to be either non-existent or irrelevant to human affairs. Secularists tend to be resistant until they realize, usually during times of trauma, that humans are unable to "direct their own steps" (Jere. 10:23), that the divine and the human are interrelated. An *animistic* perspective of reality believes that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs. During

times of disease, death, and drought, they use divination to discover which beings and forces are impacting them in order to ward them off or to employ their power. Animists must learn that creator God is approachable and concerned about human life, and unlike the gods, "majestic in holiness" (Ex. 15:11). Through the death and resurrection of his son God has defeated all the principalities and powers (Col. 2:15). A *pantheistic* worldview perceives that an impersonal, all-pervading essence, sometimes defined as "god," fills the universe. As droplets of water merge to become a stream, then a river, and finally an ocean, so individuals can become one with the essence of the world through meditation, thus achieving a change of consciousness called enlightenment. The pantheist, through living illustrations of Christian meditation, must experience God to be living and personal, full of compassion and having a distinctive holiness. A *theistic* plausibility system presupposes that God created the heavens and the earth and continues to care for that universe. Some theists follow God's distinctive way of salvation through Jesus Christ while others focus on submission to and honoring of Allah.

Based on these typologies, missionaries and ministers can diagram the intertwining influences of secularism, animism, pantheism, and theism within their host culture. While most cultures emphasize one or two of these types, influences from all four types may be syncretized in various configurations. Understanding the various influences in the culture enables missionaries and ministers to encode the gospel in theological metaphors appropriate to the culture.

Worldview analysis is only one of many tools of cultural inquiry. Other tools include study of the epistemological sources forming worldview, types of cognitive processes, a culture's grid/group orientation, levels of technology and the resultant strategies for use of money and media, differing definitions of sin and related conceptions of salvation, and the logico-structural integration of its worldview universals within cultures.

Too frequently church planters analyze bits and pieces of a culture but are unable to make a systematic cultural analysis. Or, they effectively analyze culture in broad, general terms, like the premodern, modern, and postmodern, but are not equipped to make localized cultural analysis.

Historical Perspective

Likewise, church planters must develop ministry based upon historical perspective rather than being oblivious of what has previously occurred. Because of their short national history and focus on practical inclinations, many North Americans "rush into the future without looking back" (Hesselgrave 1994, 7-8). Samuel Escobar believes that North American missiologists tend to negate theory and historical background. In other words, they look at missions as a management task necessitating "a task-oriented sequence of steps to be followed in order to achieve" specified goals. He challenges the North American missions community to expand the horizons of their "managerial missiology" (1992, 13-14; cf. 2000, 109-112).

Historical perspective provides many insights that guide church planters to develop their practice of ministry. For example, the reading of history greatly aids contemporary evangelists to understand syncretism. Ancient Israel, like many people coming out of animism, was tempted to follow both God and the gods of the nations. "They bow[ed] down and [swore] by the Lord and . . . also by Molech" (Zeph. 1:5). Modern Christians have syncretized secularism and theism by negating the Holy Spirit and demythologizing spiritual powers. Postmodern Christians have brought new syncretisms, including pervasive relativism, fascination with spiritual powers, focusing on power and neglecting truth, and interpreting emotions and intuition as the work of the Holy Spirit².

Church planters will find it difficult to understand the nature of syncretism or other issues in church planting without historical perspective.

Strategy Formation

Church planting, by its very nature, necessitates strategic planning. Strategy formation, however, should never stand by itself as a self-contained, "how-to-do-it" prescription. Never should practitioners merely ask the question, "Does it work?" Many strategies that "work" and enable the church to grow for short periods of time do not reflect the qualities and purposes of God. For example, the "health-wealth" gospel produces numerical results, but when God takes away health or wealth as in the case of Job, the faith of those who have come to Christ to receive His "benefits" will likely prove deficient. A question that better reflects the Missional Helix model is: "Does this model of praxis reflect the purposes of God within this historical, cultural context?"

The foundational understandings of theology and the perspectives developed through cultural analysis and historical perspective should, then, lead church planters to critical reflection upon praxis. The missionary or minister should return time and time again to reflect theologically, culturally, historically, and strategically in order to develop ministry models that are appropriate to the local context. The four elements work together and interpenetrate each other. Based on these understandings, I will define "strategy" as *the practice of model formation for ministry shaped by theological reflection, cultural analysis, and historical perspective and by the continued practice of ministry.*

Strategies for church planting currently are undergoing radical transformation as missiologists reflect upon the different social contexts of missions and the need for the church to be God's distinct, called-out people.

Because the social contexts are vastly different, strategies for urban church planting are not appropriate for rural areas. Rural areas are largely homogeneous whereas urban centers are heterogeneous and pluralistic. In rural localities people tend to live in extended families and know everyone within the immediate village; in urban contexts people live in close proximity to thousands of other people but paradoxically are neighbors with few of them. In rural communities kinship is the dominant relationship connecting people; in urban societies associational and occupational webs overlay kinship relationships and frequently are considered more important. Church structures in rural cultures tend to coincide with families who know each other and interact with each other in many aspects of life; in the urban context, however, structures of community must be created in order for the church to function as a body of Christ.

Note, for example, some of Valdir Steuernagal's points in his "map of challenges" for the new decade during the *Iguassu Dialogue* (2000, 128):

- "Is there a friend around? The search for relationship in an environment of loneliness."
- "I am alone, without a 'father or a mother?'" The crisis of the state."
- "The savage urbanization process and the absence of sanctuary. Urbanism is a mindset."

The metaphors of Paul from Ephesians 2:19-22 take on a new meaning within this urban environment. Migrants from various areas are united to become a *new nation*. New community structures are created so that "foreigners and aliens" who have moved from a homogeneous rural environment become a *family* in a heterogeneous city. The church is a *holy temple* that stands as a beacon of light in the midst of the corruption and immorality of the city. The church must not be comprised of spectators who fail to receive nurture to become functioning members of the body of Christ.

The strategic implications of the above three paragraphs are immense. Churches can no longer operate as they have in the past. Because people in impersonal urban churches tend to get lost and slip out the back door, nurturing systems must be developed to incorporate new believers into the body of Christ. Church structures must move from impersonal models, in which Christians are spectators absorbing knowledge, to models that are participatory. Thus newly

planted churches must make allowances for the anonymity of urban culture and develop intentional structures of nurture and incorporation. The house/cell church movement is predicated upon these social and theological considerations.

Conclusion

The Helix Metaphor is useful in at least two ways. First and foremost, it provides the Christian practitioner with a model of decision-making that is both intentional and instinctive. In other words, the missionary or minister should seek theological understandings, cultural analysis, historical perspective, and strategy formation in the process of developing patterns for ministry. Hopefully, this process becomes instinctive to the missional practitioner. Second, the Missional Helix could be used as a model for theological education. Equipping for ministry should not focus on some of the elements and give little consideration to others but form an integrated model of formation.

Finally I would like to include an insight from a reader: Lynn Anderson of Hope Network Ministries, responding to the [missiological reflection](#) introducing the Missional Helix, wrote that he has frequently "felt ping-ponged between theologians and practitioners" and concludes that "theologically impoverished practices are usually proven to be poor practices" and "theology divorced from practice is usually impoverished theology." He speaks of once writing a satirical article in *Wineskins* entitled "Why aeronautic engineers don't make good fighter pilots and vice-versa," which only succeeded in making both poles mad (Anderson, 2002). The Missional Helix thus works to explain the relationship between theology and other aspects of ministry preparation.

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¹ Christian A. Schwarz in *Natural Church Development* (1996) and George Barna at <www.Barna.org> are two examples of church planting models that were devised based upon survey methodologies.

² For a fuller description of syncretism and types of syncretism during modernity and postmodernity read my article entitled "Modern and Postmodern Syncretism in Theology and Missions" (1997, 164-207).