Redirecting the International Church from an Oasis Paradigm to Missional Thought, Community and Practice

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Abstract

The International Church (IC) environment is dynamic—people from dozens of different nations and Christian heritages worship together each week. ICs, often in global cities, can have strategic influence helping diaspora make adjustments, welcoming them and bringing a sense of community, connection, and peace during stressful transitions. As a consequence, ICs often adopt "a home away from home" vision—where the IC believes it fundamentally exists as a temporary oasis to meet the religious and social needs of its members. However, the oasis/nurture paradigm—with its consumer undertone, inward focus on member care, and shepherding is inadequate for making and mobilizing disciples. Third Culture Christians (TCCs), with all their diversity, mobility, and leadership capability, have the opportunity to initiate and participate in missional communities and practices in global cities. This research argues for a significant shift in the IC's understanding of itself, from "oasis paradigm" to "missional mindset", enabling TCCs to adopt a new identity and mobilizing them into missional living. Three things would support this movement within the IC: first, a theologically informed, triperspective philosophy of ministry. Second, a disciple-making framework designed to integrate discipleship, evangelism, and community. And third, ministry praxis that turns contextual challenges into missional capacity, and thereby creates a generative environment for gospel expansion. This dissertation will unpack each of these three elements and conclude with practical insights offering IC pastors a pathway to become missional in thought, community and practice.

Chapter 1 introduces the global scope and diaspora focus of the study, including the problem of consumer orientation towards ministry, outlines the rationale and argument for missional mindset and practice, and describes key terms used throughout the study.

Chapter 2 offers theoretical considerations by reviewing the literature and research regarding diaspora, Third Culture, and the International Church; delineates characteristics for each area to understand the unique ministry context and the tensions that can be leveraged for spiritual growth.

Chapter 3 examines a biblical and theological basis for the International Church with its diaspora focus, its apostolic characteristics, its Trinitarian-influenced disciple making and its purpose of spreading the gospel.

Chapter 4 offers a vision of the IC with a missional architecture and gospel centered culture, with a pattern for TCC spiritual formation and a disciple making design that integrates discipleship, community, and evangelism.
Chapter 5 explores both the sustainability of the missional IC, its liabilities, and a sampling of ministry praxis that transforms its contextual challenges into strategic influence and gospel impact.

The appendices present three practical research studies containing contextual, anecdotal and qualitative data from Third Culture Christians, International Church Pastors, and a site visit to a missional IC in Hanoi, Vietnam.

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A missional community is a group of people who have a common set of neighbors and are intentionally living lives among them together. More Than a Bible Study. To review the definition of a missional community: A community of Christ followers on mission with God in obedience to the Holy Spirit that demonstrates tangibly and declares creatively the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a specific pocket of people. We could probably expand several volumes on on theological, philosophical and practical levels. Often times, our missional communities realize Jesus may ask far more of them than they ever thought. The good news though, is that we are experiencing and knowing Jesus where He is…on mission to the broken and lost.