

**PHOTOJOURNALISM AND CHURCH PLANTING:
The Strength of Images and Storytelling in Planting Churches**

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Photojournalism might not be the first thing a person thinks about when the topic is church planting. In fact these two subjects, although capable of working together, seem to have different ends in mind. Photojournalism aims to capture a specific moment or several moments through which a story is told. Transcending photography, photojournalism captures images not simply for documentation, but for relating what is happening in a particular moment, for telling a story. At first glance, it may be difficult to connect this form of media to church planting. Though these two fields may seem to be divergent, photojournalism has the potential to empower those involved with church planting to reach new people(s) and access new areas where before it may not have been possible. Ultimately, Christian photojournalists have the opportunity to aid in the work of church planting through its interaction with unreached people(s) and the broad telling of their story in the context of God's overarching grand-narrative of Scripture.

Photojournalism's role in church planting remains to be fully realized in many modern missions movements, but as media outlets keep developing, its role continues to bear more

weight. Projects such as *Along the Silk Road*¹ and *The Last Letter*² have contributed to the furthering of the gospel not only in the regions where they were produced, but also all over the world. Projects such as these provide missionaries with access to communities otherwise inaccessible, allow missionaries to connect the mission field with their home and supporting churches, and allow for follow-up with individuals contacted for the media project. Further, photojournalism projects can empower church planters through the art of storytelling. As stories are captured in one location, they can be used to draw prayer support from believers all over the world. They can encourage national partners in the region through articulating how God is at work among a particular people.

There are many ways photojournalism can be a benefit to and for a church-planting team, but there are also many things to be cautious about when one considers the incorporation of photojournalism with this work. Attention should be given to avoid photo-tourism, the exploitation of people, and a misrepresentation of a situation/context. In spite of these areas of caution, the opportunity to bring together a community of people for the sake of the gospel through photojournalism and storytelling can further the work of church planting in ways otherwise not achievable in our modern context.

The Changing Role of Media in Missions

In many parts of the world, the modern missions movement has embraced the use of media in missions. It is common to find elements of social media, Facebook, Twitter, etc., being incorporated into a missionary's monthly workflow. Photojournalism is no different.

Photography has long had its place in the world of modern evangelical missions, but only in the last 60 years has the use of photojournalism taken root as a means to advance the mission.

¹ <http://alongthesilkroad.org>

² <http://thelastletter.org/>

To best understand photojournalism's role in missions, it is helpful to have a proper understanding of photojournalism and storytelling. It is beneficial to understand that many people and cultures communicate through story and storytelling. Dean Blevins, of Nazarene Theological Seminary, states, "People communicate stories, even stories of the 'self' or personal identity."³ It is human nature to communicate through story; people articulate what is happening in their lives to others and through these stories or narratives, an understanding and communication is achieved. Roger Schank states, "People remember what happens to them, and they tell other people what they remember."⁴ Community is built upon the sharing of information. Janet Stahl further states, "Not only do we learn from our own stories that we experience firsthand, but we can learn from others' real life or fictitious stories, because our imaginations help us see the events of the story unfold in our mind."⁵ Storytelling draws people together as individuals share information with the group. This reinforces the community's interpersonal strength.

Since its inception, photography has been used in missions. Early missionaries used photography to document their ministries, often capturing images of "the savage" among whom they were ministering. Photographs were also used as a way for those in the missionary's home country to remember to pray for the ministries taking place in a distant land. Kathryn Long states, "By the 1920s and 1930s, photographs became even more prominent, used to document evangelistic work, various groups within the church, construction of a new sanctuary, and other

³ Dean Blevins, "Story Telling or Storied Telling? Media's Pedagogical Ability to Shape Narrative as a Form of 'Knowing,'" *Religious Education* 102, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 251.

⁴ Janet Stahl, "Telling Our Stories Well: Creating Memorable Images and Shaping Our Identity," *Missiology* 38, no. 2 (April 2010): 161-162.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

significant events.”⁶ The West was becoming inundated with photographs from missionaries, and this trend has only continued to increase with the furthering of technology.

Despite this increased usage of photography in missions, the role of photography and the shift toward photojournalism in missions began to change in the middle of the 20th century. Cornell Capa, a photojournalist for *Time* magazine was sent to Ecuador to write a story about the tragic deaths of five missionaries reaching out to the unengaged Waodani Indians. Kathryn Long records, “Cornell Capa, both through his own work and his influence on Elisabeth Elliot, was the first to introduce documentary photography, in the form of photo essays that included pictures of both missionaries and indigenous peoples, to tell the story of evangelical missions.”⁷ Capa’s work brought photojournalism into the world of evangelical missions.

Capa is credited for shifting the focus of photography from a “for the record” or documentary approach to storytelling, which communicated what was actually taking place in Ecuador. Prior to Capa’s work, the western world’s view of the Waodani was very negative and poor. Long records, “The majority of Elliot’s photographs portrayed smiling people, living in community and content with their way of life.”⁸ Further, “Yet, in contrast to what Americans, particularly American evangelicals, had come to believe, these were not people who were exceptionally depraved, living in darkness.”⁹ The advent of photojournalism in missions allowed missionaries to present a more robust reality to their supporters.

Despite the honest storytelling presented by Capa’s work of the Waodoni people, it was not well received by American evangelicals. Long states, “Apparently readers wanted to see missionaries portrayed in an empathetic light; they seemed less certain about an empathetic

⁶ Kathryn T. Long, “‘Camera ‘never lie’: The Role of Photography in Telling the Story of American Evangelical Missions,” *Church History* 72, no. 4 (December 2003): 830-831.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 823.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 847.

⁹ *Ibid.*

portrayal of non-Christian tribal people and their culture.”¹⁰ In response to the public’s view against Capa’s work, Elliot raised questions such as, “What do we mean when we speak of one people as being more ‘needy’ than another? What do we mean by ‘savage?’”¹¹ Long further indicates of Elliot’s work in photography of the Waodani, “Her photographs reflected an awareness of the common humanity of missionary and Waodani, of white and brown...”¹² The photojournalistic work done in Ecuador in the 1950s revolutionized the way photography was used in missions.

Connecting Photojournalism and Church Planting

Many challenges to partnering photojournalism and church planting exist, yet this may be far easier now than once perceived. In his book *Telling the Story*, J. Stanley Hargraves states, “The church is called to tell a story. It is not an option; rather, it is part of the identity of being the church.”¹³ This storytelling vision for church planting creates the opportunity for the use of photojournalism.

Hargraves argues the church has become comfortable with the tools it uses to communicate the gospel. He states,

For many years, the church has used certain comfortable tools. We tend to turn to them first, using them with vigor. We can see what these tools once did for the church, and we sometimes wonder why they don’t work as well today. The church often becomes stuck in the memory of its own past, and getting out of that rut is difficult.¹⁴

For many church planters, photojournalism is a new tool—or at least a new use of an old tool—and therefore some have been resistant to its incorporation in their ministry.

¹⁰ Ibid., 824.

¹¹ Ibid., 846-847.

¹² Ibid., 847.

¹³ J. Stanley Hargraves, *Telling the Story: the Gospel in a Technological Age* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2010), 1.

¹⁴ Ibid., 43-44.

The introduction of technology into missions, particularly church planting, has opened many new facets of culture and one's understanding of the people within that culture. The evangelical missionary's understanding of narrative's role within culture has also developed in the last 50 years. Communities communicate through storytelling. It is therefore beneficial for the missionary and church planter to have a grasp on what stories are being told within a given culture or community and photojournalism provides the opportunity for those stories to be told.

Regarding the role of technology in the church and in missions, Hargraves states, "A more meaningful way of looking at technology use in the church is to ask whether technology will help the church better communicate the gospel and invite people into a meaningful relationship with God."¹⁵ If photojournalism is not aiding the missionary and church planter in the task of spreading the gospel to those who do not have it, it is healthy to ask if its use is valuable. At the same time, storytelling through photojournalism has the ability to reach far more people than a church planting strategy in which it is excluded.

Strategic Use of Photojournalism in Church Planting

What then is the strategic role of photojournalism in church planting? Stahl states,

A good story will draw us in and encourage us to ponder the images and what happens in the story. And as we mull over the story and think about how this story intersects with other stories in our lives, we begin labeling this story so that in the future, at just the right time, we will be reminded of what we learned.¹⁶

People are drawn to story, and a good story will draw the hearer deep into its core where meaning can be transferred through communication.

The rise of evangelistic work among oral cultures (those with little to no written language) has led some in the Christian community to think of storytelling as belonging to that

¹⁵ Hargraves, 65.

¹⁶ Stahl, 162.

work. However, storytelling is something that connects with all communities and people in one way or another. As Stahl states, “Part of our legacy as believers is to pass on the tradition of sharing the oral, visual, and participatory message and in so doing to allow the stories to transform our lives and the lives of others.”¹⁷ Church planters have the opportunity to share the story of the gospel with those who have yet to place their faith in Christ and believe.

As church planting seeks to further the gospel among the least reached peoples of the world, so the use of photojournalism is aiding in that work. The documenting of stories of a particular culture and using them to aid in sharing the gospel speaks to almost every culture. The vast expression of photojournalism all over the world is most notably evident through the work of *National Geographic*. *National Geographic* has used photojournalism to tell the stories of people all over the world and has prompted much in the way of social action. Similar to how photojournalism has proven to be a culturally appropriate medium for *National Geographic*, it can also be used in the context of missions and church planting through education and mobilization of concerted efforts prompted by the story behind the images.

Finally, with regards to its reproducibility, it can be argued that the cost of photography equipment or access to media on which the photojournalistic product is expressed will keep this aspect of church planting from being reproducible. Because photojournalism is not a crucial aspect to the church-planting team’s strategy, circumstances, which would prevent it most likely, do not hinder the further advancement of the gospel. At the same time, it seems this argument focuses heavily on a western mindset regarding access to what is needed. Admittedly, this is the hardest part of using photojournalism in church planting, and ultimately it will not be reproducible in every context, but this should not negate its value and use in missions and church planting. Each church-planting team must weigh the value of photojournalism in their ministry

¹⁷ Ibid., 170.

strategy and its ability to be reproducible in their given context. This will maximize the benefits of photojournalism in church-planting efforts.

Ethical Questions of Photojournalism and Church Planting

Photojournalism's ability to capture the raw nature of a moment has raised several ethical questions, especially with regards to its use in missions and church planting. What is the intended use of the images and story? How does this story help those who are being photographed? How is the church-planting team protecting the people they are working with from being victims of photo-tourism? The role of photojournalism in church planting cannot be fully addressed without consideration of the ethical questions posed by its practice.

Photo-tourism has become popular with the ease of travel experienced by much of the western world, along with the advent of the inexpensive digital camera. Many people now take a camera on a mission trip to capture the work being done. This results in a team bringing home images of people who are possibly suffering, poor, starving, or simply less fortunate than the individuals who traveled to that location for the mission trip. Ethical questions have been raised about photo-tourism among both the evangelical and secular community alike. "What is the intended purpose of the images?" or, "What is the intended elicited response for the one who views these images?" A church-planting team must address these questions before they can ethically use photojournalism in its strategy.

Susan Sontag explores these important questions in her controversial book, *On Photography*. She states,

There is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having

knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.¹⁸

Sontag's rightly argues that it is far too easy for someone to photograph an individual, capturing their life in a particular moment, and that image being a reflection of that individual which is not accurate. Further, it captures an aspect of a person they themselves may have never had exposure to—the view from the other side of the lens.

Sontag's argument is well placed in the world of photo-tourism, which often exploits individuals in other cultures for the benefit of those in a western culture. Photojournalism in missions can very easily be used in this way, and has been used to make people aware of situations or conditions in a particular location. There are those, though, who would say this is merely “slum tourism” and has no place in conjunction with church-planting efforts.

Kennedy Odede, a Kenyan national, wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* in 2010 in which he stated, “Slum tourism turns poverty into entertainment, something that can be momentarily experienced and then escaped from.”¹⁹ Odede's concern is a person will view an image and be momentarily moved by it only to forget about it later. This is best reflected in an account described by John O'Keefe, a backpack photojournalism teacher, during a trip to Barlonyo, Uganda. He and his students were documenting the atrocities that occurred in that region from rebel forces waging war against the country. He states,

As part of our visit, we sat down to talk to the people to try and find out about their efforts to recover. Instead they asked us why we had come. They said that there had been other groups who had come, made promises and left, but their lives were unchanged.²⁰

¹⁸ John J. O'Keefe, “God through the Camera Frame: Backpack Journalism and the Catholic Imagination,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 8 (2012): 157.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 159.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

Far too often, photography and photojournalism is used not to share a story but to invoke an emotional response. This is not a healthy use of photojournalism and this type of photojournalism has nothing beneficial to offer a church-planting team.

O’Keefe identifies the need for an ethical approach to photojournalism and its use in missions, and further articulates its role in the spread of the gospel as such,

A photograph of suffering can bring us face to face with this reality. It can force us to ponder the very strange idea that beauty can actually co-exist with suffering. I do not wish to suggest that the suffering of others is somehow good or that its iconic pointing to the paschal mystery somehow diminishes the horror of the suffering: the suffering is real and its horror is real. I wish to suggest only that the suffering and the horror are not the last word and that the image, by adding the layer of the sublime, enables us to see that this is so. It seems then, that what Sontag sees as one of photography’s most serious deficits could be precisely what makes it so rich resource for theological reflection.²¹

O’Keefe’s thoughts on the use of photojournalism in missions does not fail to address the argument raised by Sontag, but rather he challenges the reader to face them head-on and work through them for the sake of the advancement of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Secular photographers have wrestled with this subject as well. David duChemin, an international photojournalist, states, “There is always a moment when I can feel I’ve crossed a line. On one side of that line, a photograph is just a person in a public place; on the other side, it all changes and becomes a personal exchange.”²² duChemin further discusses the idea of getting permission to take a portrait or picture of an individual when they will be the focus of the image, he states, “There are no rules, no formulas, no guarantee that you will get permission to make this portrait...”²³ Capturing an image of an individual carries with it many ethical questions which need to be addressed, as seen both from a Christian and secular photojournalistic standard.

²¹ Ibid., 165.

²² David duChemin, *Within the Frame: the Journey of Photographic Vision* (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2009), 98.

²³ Ibid., 100.

The arguments raised by both Sontag and O’Keefe are weighty and must be attended to if one is to rightly use photojournalism in a missions context, but as duChemin articulates in his work *Within The Frame*, it is possible to ethically capture these images.

Conclusion

The use of photojournalism in missions can be found on all continents and in most, if not all, missional contexts. As technology around the world has advanced and the peoples of the world have been exposed to more technology, the use of photographs to tell a story has crossed cultural boundaries, in most circumstances, with little to no resistance. The world is now filled with amateur “photojournalists” armed with camera phones and internet access ready to document the stories that in times past would have been overlooked. For better or worse, Christian missionaries must wrestle with this reality and discern how they are going to use the images that they capture.

Despite the ability to use this medium in many diverse cultures around the world, it may be stated that it is best received and most utilized in cultures that have extensive exposure to modern technology. The urban context has presented itself as a fruitful place for the work of photojournalists and the use of photojournalism. With the acceptance of photojournalism in urban contexts, it is helpful to have an understanding of church planting in these environments as well so to best pair the two for an effective church-planting work. But, it is important to note when a church-planting team desires to incorporate photojournalism into its ministry, it must be done well, as Dean Blevins states, “Well-told stories are not enough; they must contribute to the lives of those who hear and participate.”²⁴ Photojournalism has the ability to transcend both culture and language. It can present a story in a medium where language is not important for the

²⁴ Blevins, 253.

transmission of the story. Paired with church planting, this can enable missionaries to bring together people from different cultural and language backgrounds to study the gospel.

Photojournalism presents the opportunity for the photographer to connect with his subject on deeper levels, as duChemin states,

I've seen beautiful, compelling photographs of people in some of the darkest places life has to offer, and I'm certain the photographers behind these images have spent time with their subjects, have heard their stories, and no doubt, have shed tears over them.²⁵

When applied to missions and church planting, projects such as *The Last Letter* and *Along the Silk Road* incorporate both language and culture in their storytelling, enabling stories to be told in several cultures and opening doors for gospel proclamation as well as prayer and ministry support.

Church planting is not an easy task, and many views exist as to how churches should be planted. Timothy Keller argues in his work *Church Planting Manual*,

There are two kinds of churches. One kind says to its community: 'You can come to us, learn our language, learn our interests, meet our needs.' The other kind says to its community: 'We will come to you, learn your language, learn your interests, meet your needs.'"²⁶

Missionary photojournalism must find its place in the latter of these two, helping church planters engage the culture through a media outlet that is rapidly expanding the art of storytelling.

Harnessing this cultural shift for the sake of the Kingdom is a work worthy of the King.

²⁵ duChemin, 120.

²⁶ Timothy Keller and J. Allen Thompson, *Church Planter Manual* (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2002), 89.

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