DOES HOLISTIC MISSION GUARANTEE HOLISTIC CHURCHES?

Jean Johnson

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Abstract

The majority of the mission and development community agree that the aim of every local church worldwide should be to have the DNA and ability to both evangelize (in word) and care (in deed) within their communities. The reality is that many local churches throughout the world, birthed through holistic mission practices, are unable to achieve this aim because they are trapped in unhealthy dependency. The reason for this is that cross-cultural Christian workers wrap their holistic approaches in a Western package and deliver it in a cross-cultural setting. Patron-driven and worldview-ethnocentric missions are two major contributing factors to the above dilemma. The objective of this paper is to explore the above issues and suggest that cross-cultural Christian workers level off partnerships through vulnerability to avoid unhealthy dependency.

My stimulus for writing this article was a blog written by Heather Holt via *WCIU Developmental Journal* (2013). The essence of her blog is captured in the title, "The Local Church as the Long-term Presence, Catalyst and Sustainer of Holistic Ministry." Holt quotes the Archbishop of York and Bryant Myers in her blog:

Archbishop of York
The church does not drive into places of strife in the morning and leave before the lights go down. The church remains as part of the community and where there is hurt, the church shares that hurt, is part of it and is hence uniquely placed to be part of the solution.

Bryant Myers
A church full of life and love, working for the good of the community in which God has placed it, is the proper end of mission. Transformational development that does not work towards such a church is neither sustainable nor Christian . . . Any vision of a better human future that is Christian must include a vibrant, growing, living Christian community that is eagerly and joyfully serving God and the community. It is impossible to imagine a transforming community without a transforming church in its midst.

I personally agree that disciples of Jesus Christ, who drink the same water as their community members, have a responsibility to show love in action to their neighbors and beyond. Alan Johnson, who has served as a missionary for twenty-seven years in Thailand and has written much about the Buddhist worldview, suggests that local churches are uniquely placed to implement ministry as word and deed within their communities:

> Local churches have "family" type characteristics, work primarily within their own sociocultural sphere, have a multiplicity of giftings, and their members are embedded in relationships within the community. To evangelize and care in Jesus' name should be the DNA of all local churches, and it's critical they develop structures or mechanisms to both evangelize and care as widely as possible. (2011:67–73)

But is this holistic mindset and subsequent social action more rare or common among local churches? Pull up a mat, have a seat, and listen to evening conversations taking place throughout Cambodia:

Conversation 1

New Church Member: Pastor Borey, do you think that you could get some free schooling for my cousin's kids, too? And when do you think another medical team will come from America?
Pastor Borey: Veasna, I will have to e-mail George and check when they plan to send another medical team. As far as the school, I don't know where they draw the line as far as accepting what students from what districts.

Conversation 2

Husband: Chantha, if we send your nephew to the orphanage, he will receive a free education and medical care.
Wife: Chakara, I feel like it is our responsibility to care for my sister's child, but it would lighten our load immensely. We will really need to make a case that we are too poor to care for him.

Conversation 3

Wife: Samnang, what is the point of going to Bible college?
Husband: Mother of My Children, if I graduate with a Bible certificate, I can easily get a job with an NGO, and they pay decent salaries.
Wife: I just hope it was worth quitting your job as a schoolteacher and farmer in our community. You had such an influence with people here. Now that you leave every Monday to study in the city, people seem indifferent to us. They always ask me how you support yourself. What if you don't get a job with an NGO?
Husband: Well, I expect the mission will somehow support me as they do now if I do church work.

Conversation 4

Pastor Pheakdei: Every time I train a capable leader from the congregation, and the congregation does their best to support that leader, an NGO comes along and offers him a salary way above and beyond what we can offer. The leader promises he will be just as readily available to us and the community as usual. But in reality he spends less and less quality time in our community and gives us a cursory greeting once in awhile. A missionary told me that at least his salary might increase the church's offerings.
House Church Elder: Pastor Sovann, I know what you mean. Volunteerism is difficult to cultivate these days in my situation.

According to these hypothetical but realistic conversations, I am convinced that the Veasna(s), Borey(s), Chantha(s), Chakara(s), Samnang(s), Pheakedi(s), and Sovann(s) of Cambodia won't be transforming their communities anytime soon. After sixteen years of missionary service in post-genocide Cambodia and subsequent experience in other countries, I am concerned that far too many churches do not have the DNA or the ability to develop their own structures or mechanisms to either evangelize or care as widely as possible. In other words, local churches that are a result of Western foreign mission efforts transforming their own communities through holistic measures is more rare than common.

Contemporary holistic missions (integrating the gospel and social action) often loses its way when cross-cultural workers move from theory to practice. The crux of the problem is that Westerners tend to deliver holistic missions wrapped in a Western package to a non-Western world. To a large extent, Western missions have stunted the development of many indigenous churches by trapping them in unhealthy dependency on the missionaries' culture and resources (Taylor, 2012:123–128). While there are many actions contributing to this problem, two main practices that result in unhealthy dependency are patron-client approaches and worldview ethnocentrism.

The Patron-Client Missions: Delivering Word and Deed Through Status and Money

There is a sociological and anthropological term called a "patron-client relationship." This term refers to how each person structures a social exchange from either end of the relationship. A patron-client relationship is "a mutually obligatory arrangement between an individual who has authority, social status, wealth, or some other personal resource (the patron) and another person who benefits from his or her support or influence (the client)" (webref.org). In this article, I am not addressing patron-client structures within existing societies, but rather how patron-client *missions* plays out—and more specifically, the consequences of such an approach.

The process often unfolds something like this: The cross-cultural Christian workers desire to operate holistically and create eager listeners for the gospel. Thus, they leverage their socioeconomic status and the donor resources they can access in order to implement a benevolence-development project, program, institution, campaign, etc. Putting this in action, cross-cultural workers sit down with local community leaders, promising schools, clinics, orphanages, wells, and betterment projects—practically before they even know the culture or

worldview they are dealing with. As soon as that first conversation happens between community leaders and missionaries about social action efforts, the patron-client mentality is set in motion: *You, who have the expertise, status and unlimited means, will solve our local problems, and we will in turn comply to whatever we think you want.* And so the relationship goes and the work proceeds.

Somewhere along the way, churches are born, and subsidy seeps into the development of the church to pay for salaries, buildings, equipment, programs, etc. But then something goes awry. First, the nonbelievers within the community perceive the church as a patron—a place to go and get their needs met. Second, the church members view the leadership of their church as their patrons, who should make sure the benefits from *their* Western-mission patrons trickle down. Third, those who don't jump onto the patron-client bandwagon perceive the whole operation as their own people chasing after a foreigner's religion for the benefits to be gained.

Furthermore, when local people try to take their turn in holistic approaches, they come up empty-handed. They cannot proclaim the gospel by becoming the next community's patrons, providing goods and services. Thus, they are driven into an inferiority complex and/or become dependent on foreign patrons to perpetuate the type of holistic ministry that was modeled to them. At the end of the day, how can local churches sincerely transform their communities if we have modeled holistic mission approaches that are a "gross mismatch with the context being targeted" (Harries, 2012)?

In India, a local church-planting team shared with me about how they were unwelcome in communities where the missionaries had come and gone because everything they did to show love in deed paled compared to the work of the foreigners. Those of us with socioeconomic status or access to seemingly unlimited resources basically outdo and outdeed the local people in their own context, thus modeling a disempowering example of holistic ministry.

Unhealthy dependency has shoved many local churches around the world into a place of not wanting to make a difference or feeling that they can't make a difference. I hope we haven't crossed the line and made the Great Commission utterly dependent on the patrons of the North and West. *Churches that are locked into patron-client dependency struggle to muster up initiative, sacrificial living, and local giving on behalf of their communities.*

Worldview Ethnocentrism: Sidetracked by Observable Phenomena and a Dualistic-Naturalistic Propensity

Another term for patron-client missions is *financial paternalism.* Financial paternalism leads to an equally troublesome issue: Westernization of the gospel. Dr. William Kornfield states that "the greater the funding from Western agencies and individuals, the greater the danger of our spreading 'another gospel'—i.e., a Western gospel—whose form is often irrelevant and out of the context of the people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America" (1997:4).

Worldview ethnocentrism occurs when communicators mostly operate out of their own worldview and/or impose their own worldview in a cross-cultural context. No matter how noble we are about enculturation, we have a hard time reining in our own desires and values that seep into our "biblical" worldview, such as task orientation, quick results, instant conversions, self-fulfillment, dualism, secularization, and more. When we try to hold out the word aspect and deed aspect of our spread of the gospel equally, we quickly get lost in the aspects that produce the most observable and instantaneous results, which usually relate to physical and economic facets of life. In these cases, we end up spending the majority of our attention on maintaining, problem-solving, and developing those results.

When cross-cultural communicators get sidetracked by observable phenomena, they often take minimal time to understand and communicate within the local worldview. Simply put,

learning the worldview gets left behind. The meetings, campaigning, evaluating, ensuring accountability, and record keeping prevent us from drinking tea, chatting while resting in hammocks, talking about the hard issues at home, hanging out with the family that lost a mother, and listening to Grandpa tell a story about the war—all authentic ways to learn a people's worldview. Worldview drives people's perception of reality and how to interact with all aspects of life; thus worldview is absolutely vital to true holistic approaches. Yet, worldview learning seems to get pushed aside due to all the other busywork. "It is dolefully insufficient, and fundamentally disrespectful for people, to do ministry with a focus only on observable phenomena" (Strauss and Steffen, 2009).

Sadly, worldview neglect on our part leads to outward modification on the part of local people. I have seen it again and again: a need eventually goes unmet, and the supposedly Christian person goes back to spending money to secure a loan from a loan shark so he or she can pay the traditional healer for amulets and sacrifices to appease the spirits. In this case, our approach and outcome defeat the whole purpose of trying to reconcile people to God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation. Somehow social needs are being met, but people's haunting questions and concerns about everyday life are left unaddressed. Additionally, local people often neglect their own "counting the cost" at a worldview level because of the instant gratification of immediate needs. Robert Strauss and Tom Steffen (2009) speak into this tendency toward outward modification and resulting syncretism by highlighting other key experts:

> If Christian ministry results only in the modification of the exterior behavior, true transformation has not taken place. The ministry of Christ on earth confirms that the starting point for change is internal rather than external (Matt. 23:24–27; Luke 11:38–42). . . . While starting points may differ, true and lasting change is possible only if we go deeper and further, addressing core worldview assumptions and values. According to Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Christian conversion without worldview change in reality is syncretism" (1991:89).

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As Westerners, we often do not go deep enough in regards to worldview. Our initial overemphasis on observable needs and outcomes does not allow for the other important aspects of holism to catch up. *Churches that are full of people who have merely conformed to Christianity outwardly don't do much toward transforming people in their communities.*

The problems of superficial change and syncretism don't merely stem from ignoring the local worldview, but also from imposing our own worldview. If we determine that the cause of an effect is scientific, do we expect people to arrive at the same conclusion and thus solve the problem in the same manner? What if someone interprets the cause of an illness as malevolent spirits—do we make sure they come around to conclude the cause is bacteria? As Christian Westerners, no matter how much we try to underplay our tendency toward naturalism and dualism (a two-tiered view of reality, natural versus supernatural), when operating among people who hold a traditional worldview (supernatural and natural interrelate), we flounder.

I remember reading an account of a Cambodian man telling a cross-cultural Christian worker that his communication was falling on deaf ears because he both worked and spoke from his own view of how life worked on a daily basis. Thus, the Cambodian told him to talk about ghosts, which caught him off guard. Sure enough, when the cross-cultural communicator talked about ghosts, he had an attentive audience. As cross-cultural communicators, we often bring a two-pronged, flat-pin plug for an outlet that takes a three-pronged, round-pin plug. If we don't learn the local worldview, we bring and try to use that which works for us, expecting locals to adjust their context to our methods (put in new outlets) or reshape our prototype to fit their context (remake our plugs).

Dr. Ravi Jayakaran, who has thirty-four years of experience in development work, challenged my thinking while he was in Cambodia. Dr. Ravi taught that every community has a survival strategy—a way to survive and control their environment. However, for everything they

deem outside of their control, they turn to powers beyond themselves (gods or spirits), which is often evident through shrines, altars, spirit houses, etc. What Westerners tend to do is use development measures to increasingly bring those areas that the community considers dependent on supernatural control more and more under human control. In this case, there are three significant concerns. First, the community may actually increasingly resist because we are ignoring and threatening their traditional spirits and deities. Second, they may become more humanistic and self-reliant as the community's need for powers beyond themselves (such as Jesus) become less and less relevant or necessary, which defeats the purpose of Christian development. Third, they may mix it all together in one pot (their Spiritism, Christianity, and science), which equals syncretism. In these scenarios, we are no closer to holism in the gospel than when we started.

Our ability to control nature and solve human problems with technology, medicine, money, etc. can be good, or bad, or a combination of both. I am just like the next person: I want my friend to get better from malaria expediently through medication rather than waiting on some spirit to remove a curse. On the other hand, do I want people to be so accustomed to being able to control the majority of their life problems with science and empirical means that spiritual sensitivity to God and the spirit world dissipate? Do I want Ephesians 6:11–12 ("Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.") to lose its meaning for the rest of the world like it has among Western Christians? When I talk about God, the devil, spiritual warfare, or miracles to my fellow Americans, they wonder what planet I fell off of.

We need to be cautious that we don't turn people around the world into secularists who don't need God, or into people who just exchange their worldview for someone else's worldview

and therefore come no closer to a biblical worldview than before they meet us. *Churches that are full of people who have lost their edge of spiritual sensitivity within themselves and toward their everyday folk-animistic friends, or who have syncretized their faith, won't go far in reaching the whole person.*

There are several experts who draw from the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper's thinking that churches "are not designed to impact all spheres of society, thus primary social influence and development impact would take place through government agencies, specialized NGOs, and private enterprise" (Slimbach, 2). Richard Slimbach further emphasizes this thinking in his essay:

> The vast majority of "institutional" churches, especially within poor communities, simply do not have the theological breadth, specialized knowledge and skill, whole-community organizing experience, and broader connections to create anything more than "service for/to" projects, oftentimes dependent on foreign monies.

At this point in my writing, it may seem that I have proven Keller and Slimbach's point. However, I am not trying to make an argument for or against this line of Kuyper-thinking. The argument I am trying to make is this: rather than resolving that local churches cannot "create anything more than 'service for/to' projects, oftentimes dependent on foreign monies," cross-cultural communicators need to recognize their part in locking churches into this condition and do something different than business as usual.

Leveling Off International Partnerships

I suggest that the different approach we should explore is to level off the playing field. "A metaphorical playing field is said to be level if no external interference affects the ability of the players to compete fairly" (Wikipedia). Patron-client mission approaches and worldview ethnocentrism act as external interference to the local people's ability to holistically transform their communities for Christ. David Taylor, who works with the non-Western missions

movement, suggests how Western cross-cultural Christian workers should level off the playing field:

> Our missionaries enter cultures more like economic powerbrokers than they do mystics, faith-healers, and intercessors. Such a missionary paradigm and practice is a lost art. But what if we sent missionaries whose first question is not, "Where can we best spend our money here?" but rather "What can I ask my God for on your behalf?" What if our missionaries were known more for their prayers, their intimacy with God, and their spiritual wisdom than their programs and their resources? Some are calling this the return to the apostolic way of mission, by which they mean the simplicity and the power of the early missionaries of the first century. This was mission from a position of vulnerability (and yet was it not more effective?), mission that had to prove its value to the community over time, not buy its way into acceptance as quickly as possible. (Taylor, 2012)

At the least, I recommend that those of us who serve as cross-cultural workers promote the usage of local resources and learn to work at a worldview level to diminish external interference and the consequences thereof (it is important to note that language goes hand in hand with worldview as well). Why do local resources and worldview-specific approaches level off the field?

Use Local Resources

The minute we bring foreign resources into a local context, we cast ourselves as the hero in the play. The patron-client maneuvering (whether conscious or unconscious) comes right on the heels of the promise, offer, or anticipation of those resources. On the client's end, the feeling that they will always be someone's client enters the psychological bloodstream. Meanwhile, the ample resources at the fingertips of the foreign Christian worker cause him or her to implement and model forms and structures that are a "gross mismatch with the context" (Harries, 2012).

On the other hand, opening the way for local people to use their own God-given resources or "work with what they have to create what they need" (Wheatly and Frieze, 2011:3) empowers instead of interferes. Using local resources puts the power and the responsibility back into the hands of the local people, and with that comes dependency on God, interdependency on

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neighbors, vision, dignity, ownership, reproducibility, sustainability, cultural relevancy, and the list goes on.

Be Worldview Intentional

The first step to correcting worldview neglect is to admit that Westerners are both by-products and purveyors of our own culture (Little, 2007). Realizing that we operate out of our own worldview by default, we need to commit to learning the local worldview and working within it, otherwise holism will escape us.

Learning another worldview is an act of humility and removes us from the know-it-all position. Additionally, worldview is learned through day-in-and-day-out authentic relationships rather than through implementing ready-made programs, projects, and protocols. Understanding a worldview moves us beyond flattery, superficiality, guesswork, and ethnocentrism to the ability to truly minister to the whole person and discover holistic approaches that aren't unduly influenced by Western pat answers, systems, power, and resources.

Conclusion

I believe Veasna, Borey, Chantha, Chakara, Samnang, Pheakedi, and Sovann could have much more meaningful conversations about loving and transforming their communities if we could learn to be more vulnerable as missionaries. Whether holistic development or holistic missions, we all need to assess what external interference we are bringing to the global community. I think we can all use an ample dose of the apostle Paul's thinking:

> And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power. (1 Corinthians 2:2–5, NIV)

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