Gethsemane and Beyond:
Mission Disruption as Mission Advancement[1]

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Abstract

The current disruption of mission activities and structures by COVID-19 is comparable in many ways to Gethsemane, where Jesus faced massive disruption of his normal mission activities of proclaiming the kingdom, healing, and training the disciples. It was a soul-searching time, the crucible from which a new identity emerged, and that identity took him where his previous mission activity never could have. By looking at Gethsemane through the lens of our current crisis and vice versa, we may discover a new identity and strategy for evangelical mission during and after the pandemic. Surprisingly, this new identity is well aligned with several missiological principles that are already widely accepted, though their implementation was always difficult during the era we used to consider normal.

Key Words: contextualization, COVID-19, crisis, Gethsemane, innovation, mission, theology

Note: Unusual for *Global Missiology* articles, the perspective here is of one North American talking primarily to the North American missiological community. This was the context for the development of the original version of the article. Hopefully the global community will be grateful to hear that such discussion is going on in North American missiological circles and will help us pursue it.

Introduction

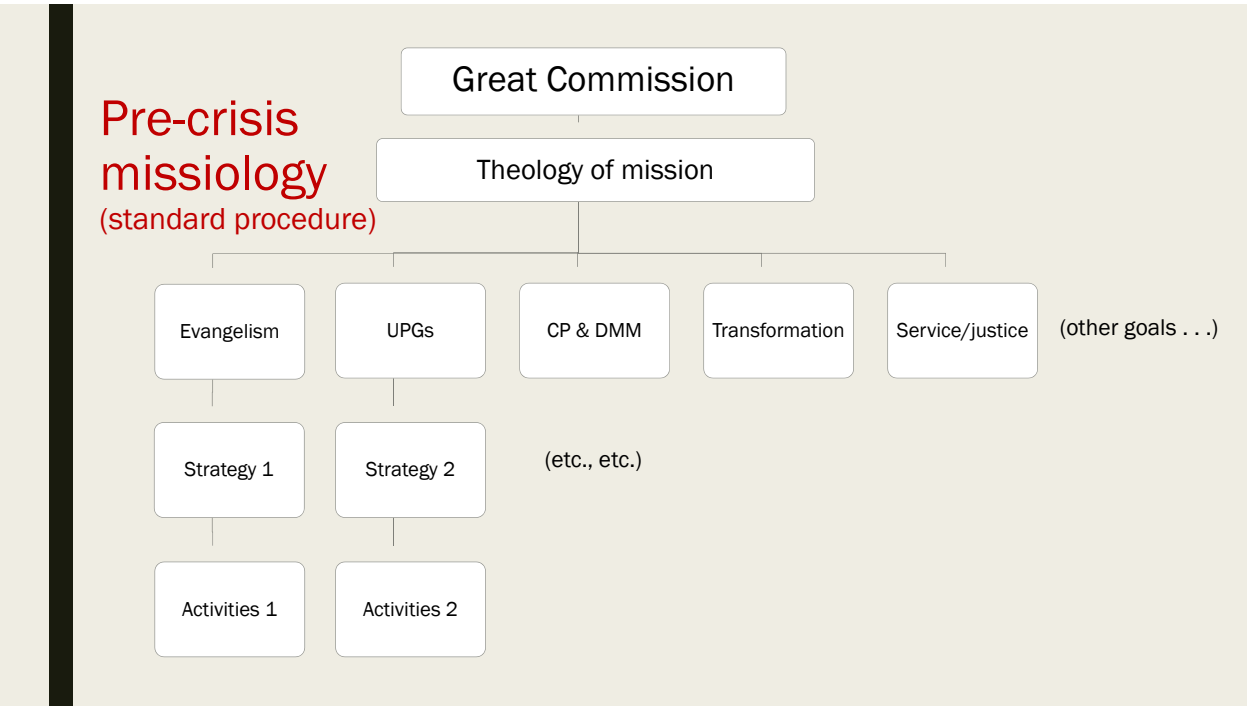
As all of life is increasingly disrupted by COVID-19, we may feel too distracted to give any time to missiological reflection about the disruption of mission by COVID-19. But let us not miss the golden opportunity of Maundy Thursday, "Gethsemane Day," the day Jesus faced massive disruption of his normal mission activities of proclaiming the kingdom, healing, and training the disciples.

Gethsemane is not merely an example of a missional skill (crisis coping) that we should improve by looking at Jesus's example, as we might improve our leadership style or our teaching methods by looking at his. Gethsemane deals with the core of Jesus's missional identity. Even more importantly, *it shifts that identity in exactly the way we need to shift ours this very month as the pandemic batters us.*

As we learn and live out our new identity, we gradually realize how this very disruption of Jesus's "normal" ministry activities became the decisive point in his victory over the kingdom of darkness. We usually think of the cross as that decisive point (Colossians 2.15), but the cross was primarily the *external* struggle with the powers. Gethsemane was the *internal* struggle with Jesus's own will. It is not an exaggeration to consider the internal struggle "decisive" and to call Gethsemane Day, "G-Day." We may celebrate it with the additional knowledge that COVID-19, the biggest disrupter of mission activity in our lifetime, may also turn out to be the biggest boost we and our mission have ever had!

We will look briefly at our default mission strategy and practice, how they are being disrupted, and how Gethsemane, missiologically understood and embraced, turns the disruption into an advancement. We end up surfing the waves of crisis instead of getting pounded into the reef by them. Surprisingly the drastic change in our view of our mission is not difficult to grasp because it dovetails so well with at least six missiological principles that are already widely accepted.

Disruption of Our Normal Mission Strategy

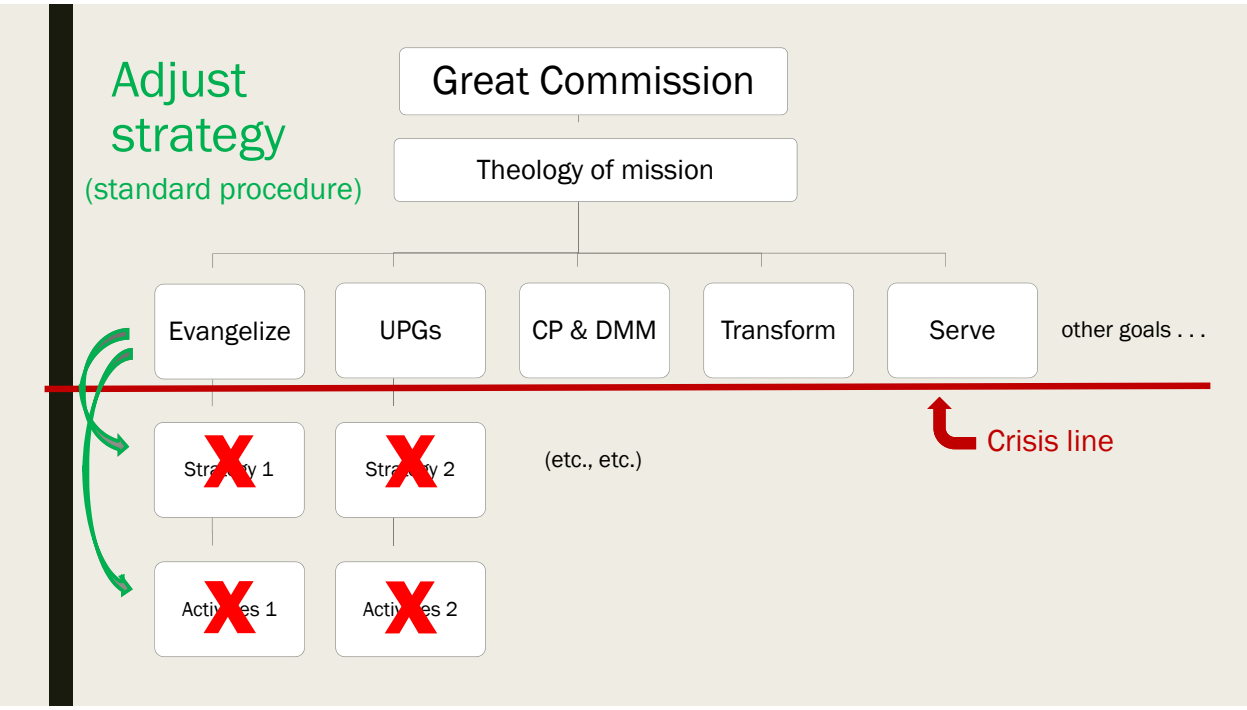


Normal, pre-crisis missiology in this diagram could also be called "strategic missiology." It follows an ordered, familiar progression:

1) define a theology of mission
2) derive a goal (or goals) of mission from that theology
3) develop a strategy to reach the goal(s)
4) implement the activities in that strategy

Though not shown in the diagram, we then normally go on to measure the impact of those activities in order to refine the strategy.

Global crises, wars, natural disasters, epidemics, and persecution massively disrupt mission strategies and activities such as deployment of workers, operation of programs, communication flow, and funding. Our goals are unchanged by the crises, but what we are doing to reach those goals is interrupted. This is true no matter which way we define our mission goal, since crises are an equal opportunity strategy wrecker.



In a crisis time, our missiology normally attempts to circumvent the crisis line somehow, as shown by the arrows at the left of the diagram. This approach means damage control in the short term plus strategy adjustment in the medium term.

For example, we stop sending Westerners and send Asian workers or employ more local people to do what foreigners were doing in the pre-crisis strategy. We may also look for new mission activities to add to our strategies, such as, in the case of the pandemic, using church buildings as emergency quarantine locations or providing Christian volunteers to take the risks involved in non-medical services for people in nursing homes where current staff become overwhelmed.

What "Gethsemane Mode" Involves

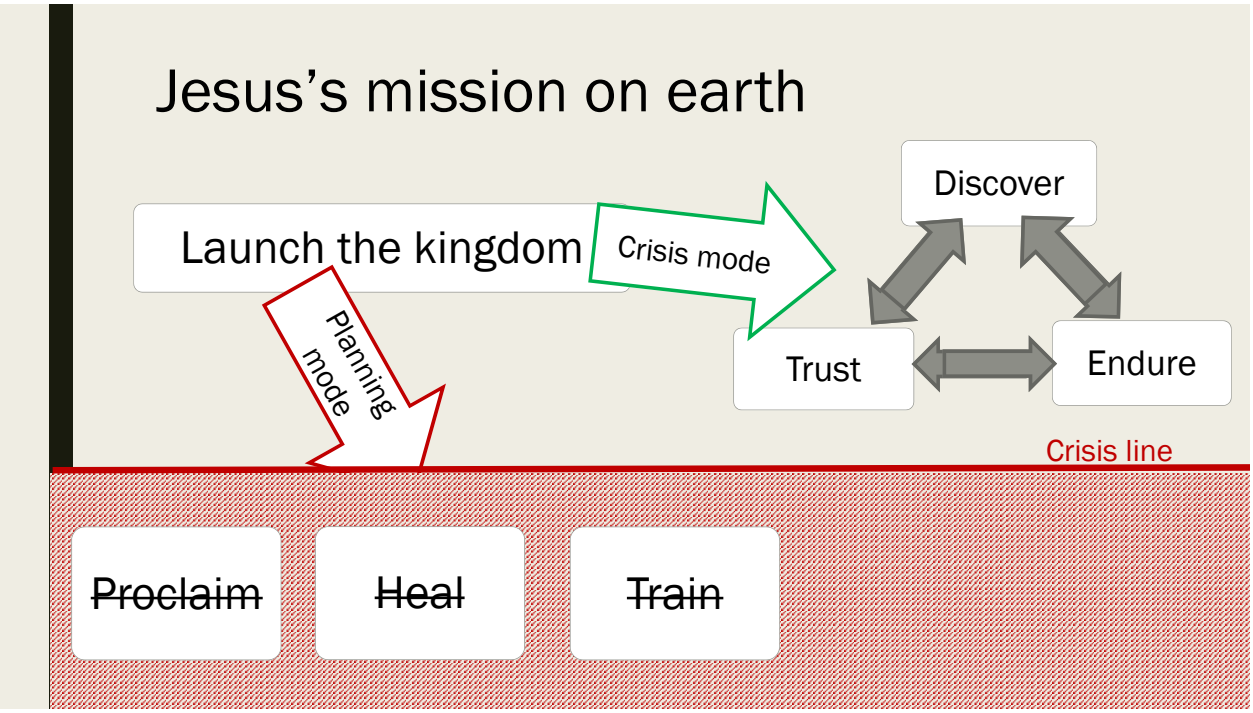
In this article, I am proposing something much more drastic than strategy adjustment. We need to place a second mode for doing mission alongside our normal strategic mode or planning mode. I call this other mode "Gethsemane mode" or "crisis mode." *Mission in Gethsemane mode is crisis-proof*, and I do mean crisis-proof, not because it has an adequate contingency plan for every possible crisis but because it has no strategy or activity below the "crisis line" in the diagram below, and as we shall see, it does have clear guidance for action above the crisis line.

Planning mode is about the kind of mission we intend and would prefer. Crisis mode is for mission that we really wish did not have to happen. Planning mode is strategic mission; crisis mode is "non-strategic mission," that is, we do not have a strategy to initiate action that will bring us closer to our goals.

When the crisis is happening so fast that we cannot understand it, planning mode stalls but crisis mode keeps us going full speed ahead in our mission because it does not depend on our understanding. When we suppose that everything seemed logical to Jesus in Gethsemane, that he "understood" in the sense that he had the whole cross event calculated, and that he was willing to

do it because of his love for us who would later benefit from it, we miss its relevance for our time. The point is that when our understanding is overwhelmed, *we do not have to execute any plan; instead we only have to react to the situation, trusting God to make sense of it eventually*. As we react, we discover and show who we are. That is our witness, our "mission activity."

Let's explore what this reacting mode meant for Jesus in Gethsemane, without imagining that in the crisis moment he became a "reactionary"!



Jesus had been working at his mission assignment, launching the kingdom, by three main mission activities the Father had assigned to him—*proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom, healing many people, and training his inner circle of followers*. Gethsemane is the crisis moment when all three are about to be disrupted by his arrest and replaced by three other activities.

1. Discover

In that moment Jesus "discovers" his missional identity by crisis experience, that is, he "learns" what it means to obey God through the suffering that is integral to his assignment (Hebrews 5.8). He discovers by experience that he is both the person with the pro-active, three-part strategic mission and the one who still trusts the Father when all his assigned strategic activity is blocked by a crisis. In other words, Jesus has two modes of mission—one he prefers ("my will") and one he dreads enough to sweat blood over it—but in Gethsemane he wrestles through the issue and sets his preference aside.

That Jesus shifted into discovery-in-crisis does not mean that, when in planning mode, Jesus had simply been following his own preference. Even then he had been listening for the Father's guidance day by day, sensing when it was or was not his time. Neither does he moan in Gethsemane that all his previous mission activity was a mistake, a failed strategy. It was right at the time, but now it is wrong to persist in that mode. It is God's time for a different mode.

Gethsemane mode is always *a voyage of discovery*—finding out who we really are in Christ and what we are made of when his Spirit lives his life in us. We discover and build our personal, corporate, and missional identity as we practice mission in Gethsemane mode.

2. Trust

Note the arrows at the upper right of the diagram. They tell us that Gethsemane mode is not a tidy deductive system like strategic mode (proclaim, heal, and train are in a neat row in the organizational chart). In Gethsemane mode everything is flying around influencing everything else. Discovery, trust, and endurance have a dynamic, complex relationship, both integrated and differentiated.

The importance of trust is undermined if we adopt the pious fiction mentioned earlier—that we and our salvation were uppermost in Jesus's mind as he decided to do the Father's will and pay the necessary price for us. If the compelling logic of atonement theology was the key factor in the Gethsemane decision, it is incredible that none of the biblical versions of the Gethsemane story contain the slightest hint of it.

Matthew 26.39 and 42 show that Jesus's first time of prayer implies some hope for an alternative path, but the second and third times acknowledge there is none. However, there is no hint that his anguish was counter-acted by rational thought about all the good that his sacrifice would do for future generations. It seems that in Gethsemane he made a switch from desperation to trust without any description of the reason, the same kind of unexplained switch we see in Psalm 22.21-22, the psalm he twice quoted from on the cross.

What does Gethsemane look like to Jesus in the moment? He is agreeing that it is his Father's will for him to lay down the weapons he has been using to fight the powers of darkness, that is, his normal mission activities of proclaiming, healing, and training. He agrees to suspend his attacks with those weapons. That leaves him vulnerable to the arrest and execution that he had repeatedly predicted. His time has come. In the moment he must trust his Father also to fulfill the rest of the prediction, raising him from death on the third day.

In normal times we do trust God, but we also trust our plans quite a bit. In chaotic crisis times we lose all faith in our plans, and we trust God because we have no other options except panic, which is never missional.

Planning mode fit the modern era. Gethsemane mode fits the post-postmodern era much better. When a whole generation has an eight-second attention span (Patel 2017), how far will it ever trust a five-year-plan? But it can trust the Messiah of Gethsemane—totally authentic and therefore able to be his authentic self at any moment in any circumstance.

3. Endure

Gethsemane Day, G-Day, is not the day for Jesus to attack or even to prepare a counter-attack. His assignment is no longer to press the battle but to endure as the enemy presses it.

Why is this change of strategy so important? Because it wins the war! The enemy is waging the war in order to prove that Jesus is not the Messiah. It attacks him in order to shame him and crush the messianic hopes of all who believed in him. But with hindsight we see that Gethsemane is actually a judo move using the attacker's momentum to achieve the "victim's" purpose.

The attack destroys only the false messianic identity—messiah as conqueror. It reveals and strengthens Jesus's true messianic identity, that is, his willingness to move toward the messianic throne via trust and endurance rather than conquest. Jesus's composure during the intimidating process of arrest, trial, beating, private discussion with Pilate, and execution shows that he is not a defeated messianic pretender. No one is taking his life from him. He is laying it down (John 10.18).

As Jesus's activity was the key to his normal mission strategy, his authentic identity is the key to his crisis strategy. His composure on Good Friday comes from his sense of identity hardened the night before in Gethsemane.

Paul also knew the close connection between mission and endurance. "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4.8-9). Newbigin (1987:24) cites Paul's testimony here as "the classic definition of mission," though its focus is entirely reaction and not proactive work toward a mission goal.

Though Gethsemane mode is interwoven with pain, it also has a beautiful aspect that takes away much frustration and anxiety. Gethsemane mode simplifies everything by restricting our activity. The person in jail does not have to prepare the sermon he won't get to preach. We don't have to figure anything out, prepare anything, influence anything, achieve anything, or evaluate anything. All we have to do is be who we are—be trusting, be enduring. We take a Sabbath break from our normal mission activities, and we thank God for that aspect of the process.

How Gethsemane Mode Thrives on Disruption

In Gethsemane mode, our one missional "activity" is not an activity; it is only to live out our identity. When that is our only "goal," our resources for mission never run short because *we always have time to be who we are, and we can always afford it*. In fact, the crisis itself is more a resource than a threat! A crisis is what hardens "battle-hardened troops."

Our Gethsemane moments *drive us to soul-searching prayer*. They help us discover who we really are, what we are made of, and how God gets his mission done through us even when it seems we can't do anything. In Gethsemane Jesus is facing arrest, trial, humiliation, and execution—all roadblocks to his normal, productive mission activities. All he can do is pray that the Father will somehow turn this genuine disaster into genuine mission fulfillment.

Our Gethsemane moments *force a change from our normal "strategic mode" to crisis mode* ("non-strategic," Gethsemane mode). In our Gethsemane moments we suspend work on our mission plan, and we just call out to the Father. We quit pressing the battle, we lay down our weapons, and somehow in our suffering God saves the day and all our mission goals get met.

We thus discover that "non-strategic" mission is actually "super-strategic"! In other words, *the worse things get for mission, the better they get*. As Paul put it, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12.10). Just as with Jesus on the cross, God gets his mission done no matter what strategy the enemy uses to prevent it, and he frequently uses the enemy's efforts against him.

Take this one recent example from China: "Ironically, the brutal persecution launched by President Xi over the last few years has helped prepare the house churches for the current

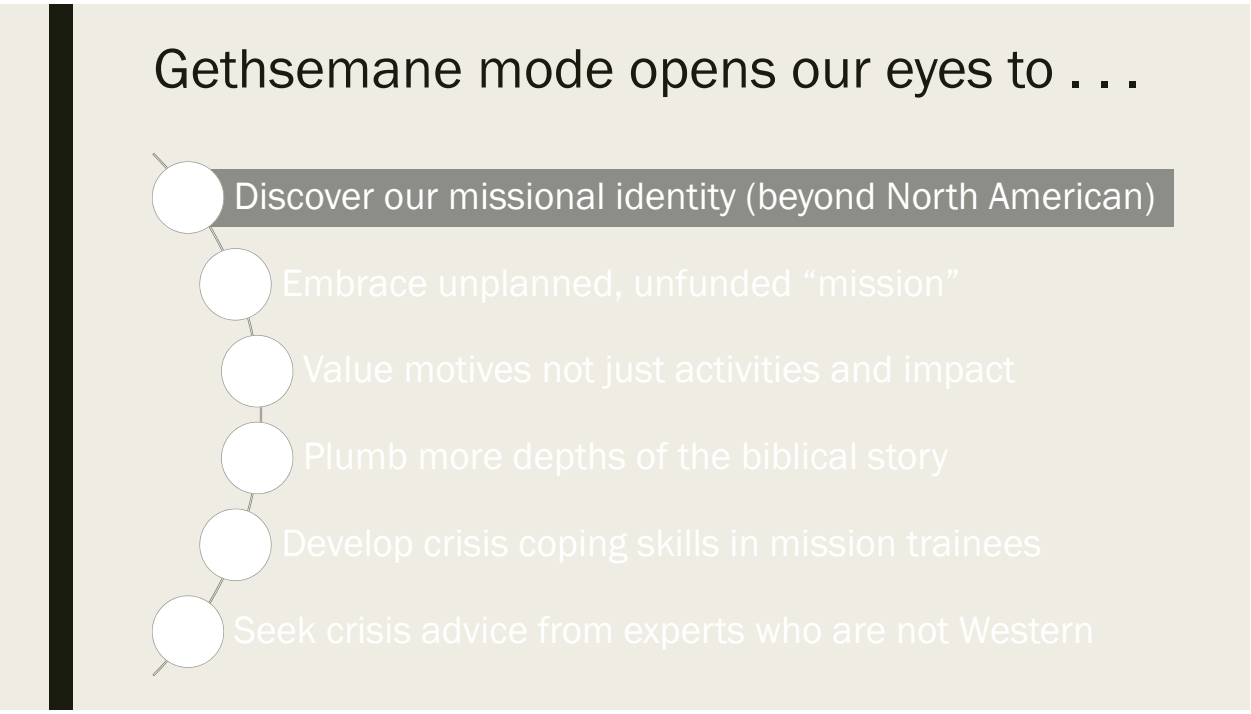
situation [the virus lockdown]. Thousands of large congregations were broken down into small groups of 5 or 6 believers, who have been meeting together for prayer and Bible study in their homes" (Hattaway 2020).

The crisis that can thwart the *Missio Dei* has never been invented, and it never will be.

Our Gethsemane moments *lead to the exposure of the world's misconceptions and the dawn of truth.* The misconception that the Messiah would arrive to crush his enemies came about by misreading some messianic prophecies and overlooking others. Jesus explained the truth about the prophecies to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus. But the even bigger misconception was that death would be the end of Jesus as anything more than a moral force. The permanent, game-changing truth is the resurrection—Jesus as a living force to be reckoned with, and nothing can stop him.

How "Gethsemane Mode" Dovetails with Six Current Missiological Emphases

Since Gethsemane mode (crisis) is radically different than "strategic mode" (planning), we may expect it to clash with the strategic missiology that was developed to plan and promote normal mission in normal times. But the opposite is the case! Gethsemane missiology actually dovetails nicely with at least six missiological principles that are already widely believed and taught by evangelical missiologists. A shift to Gethsemane mode would lead us into several prime areas for missiological exploration and improvement.

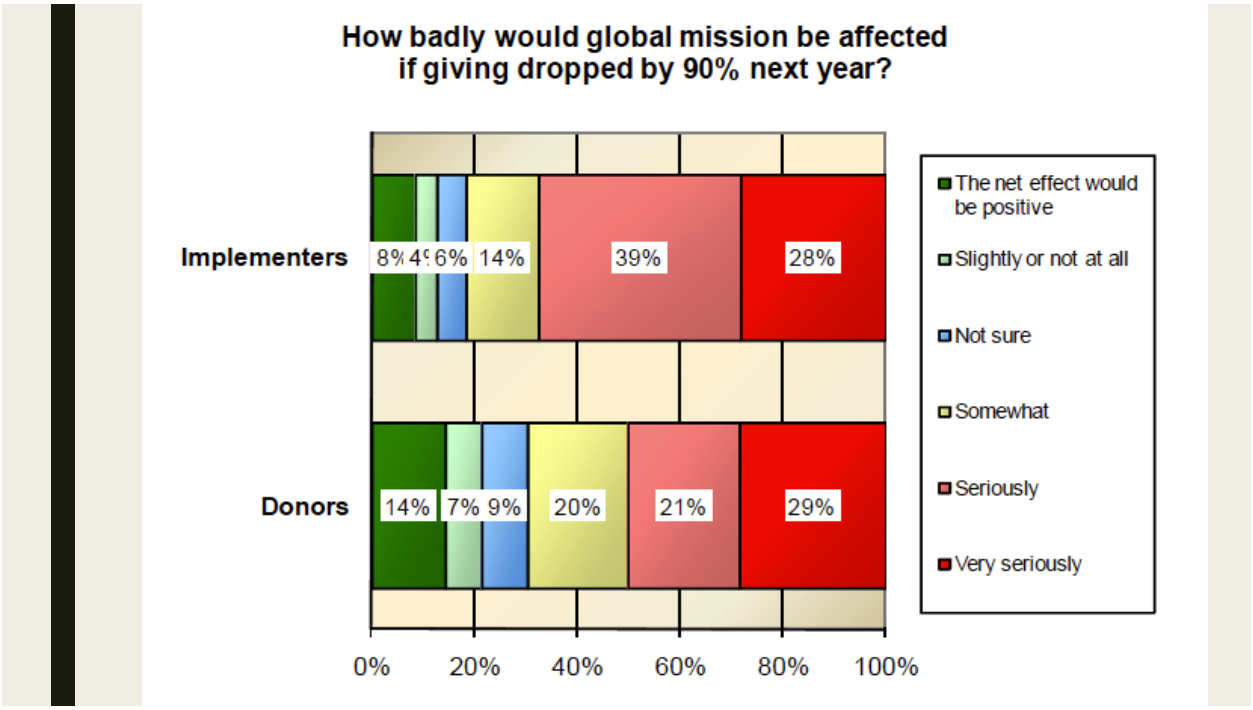


1. Discover our true missional identity (beyond North American)

A strength of Western culture is its ability to plan, organize, and implement. We have tried mightily in mission history, and we are still trying, to promote planning skills in cultures that seem to woefully lack them. But how much of our push to Westernize others' planning, budgeting, evaluation, and reporting is only an attempt to put Saul's armor onto David?

When a crisis hits, it forces us out of God's left-hand mode (planning) straight into his right-hand mode (crisis). Five-year plans are out the window, five-day plans are considered "long-range," and five-minute plans become normal. But the end of the five-year plan is not the end of the mission. God is ready for anything, and if we are in him, we are too. He switches us from our North American planning mode into crisis mode like a truck switching to 4-wheel drive, and we keep going. We discover that we have another gear we have never had to use before, and we can venture into previously inaccessible areas of mission service.

2. Embrace unplanned, unfunded "mission"



During my years as staff missiologist for Global Mapping International (GMI), we once conducted a global survey about mission funding which included this question, "How badly would global mission be affected if giving dropped by 90% next year?" That is, what if a global financial crisis hit and all mission activities went into crisis mode? We were going to run our scale from "very seriously" to "not at all," but then almost tongue in cheek we threw in, "The net effect would be positive," just to see whether any respondents would actually believe that. To our surprise, 14% of the "Donors" sub-set of respondents and 8% of the "Implementers" sub-set did (Global Mapping International 2008:6). They were thinking in Gethsemane mode.

A political crisis in Cambodia in 1997 caused the sudden exit of all missionaries, including my friend, Jean Johnson. On her return to Cambodia, she realized that the crisis had halted many common mission activities. She saw the limitations of what I call planning mode, and she shifted to something akin to crisis mode - even though the crisis was past. A major feature of crisis mode is that planning and funding are much less important than in strategic missiology. Her very readable book, *We Are not the Hero* (Johnson 2012), explains many of the implications.

Now that COVID-19 has halted short-term mission trips for an indefinite period and the stock market drop has hit the older generation that heavily supports mission activity, resources

like Johnson's book take on greatly expanded importance. These resources, sadly neglected during the past days of mission-as-usual, will help us answer new questions already being posed in blogs, such as, "When charitable giving dries up with the collapse of economies, what will happen with our current model of support-raising missionaries?" (Farah 2020).

3. Value motives not just activities and impact

A major transition is taking place in the donor community, Christian or otherwise. Reports to donors used to focus on *both activities and outputs*—"we held this training event"; "35 pastors came." Now, "More and more nonprofits, grantmakers, and government partners, are focusing on outcomes, rather than 'outputs'" (National Council of Nonprofits n.d.). The new requirement is to report *outcomes*—how the 35 pastors were changed, and how you know they were. Notice how directly this pervasive trend in the donor community is locked into strategic thinking and planning.

Gethsemane mode does not even attempt to answer questions about outcomes because it only takes over when planned activities get disrupted and all bets are off about outcomes. The essence of Gethsemane mode is to abandon the previous plan in favor of God's newly revealed will without knowing how or whether that abandonment will lead to the desired impact. As Bosch puts it in the final paragraph of *Transforming Mission*, in mission we are "wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie" (Bosch 1991:519).

During the intensity and profound uncertainty of mission in Gethsemane mode, evaluation must focus less on planned outcomes and more on motives and nimble, faithful endurance. If Jesus had been writing a ministry report to donors when Judas arrived, the report would not have been about outcomes and impact. Yet what donor could have said a week later that the impact of Gethsemane was disappointing? The point is moot, of course, since Jesus did not have to appeal to a donor to fund his cross!

4. Plumb more depths of the biblical story

Once we start thinking of crisis mode, we realize how prominent it is in Scripture, but we have mostly missed it because up until COVID-19, most of us have never had to cope in a radical way, just make strategy adjustments in our mission. We are foreigners to the persecution and endurance themes that are so prominent in the New Testament, and they lose their clarity and force as they enter our heads, if indeed they enter our heads at all.

Both a sin-transaction gospel (20th century, Billy Graham, Bill Bright) and a transformation gospel or kingdom gospel (21st century, N.T. Wright, Scot McKnight) tend to put the emphasis on planned action. Those two approaches differ primarily in what we are planning and trying to bring about—a religious conversion or a better world or both. But what if we shifted from planning mode to crisis mode?

What would a "crisis" gospel look like—a Gethsemane gospel alongside our Calvary gospel? It would definitely involve willingness to suffer apparent failure, and it would probably revolve around the theme of shame. Shame is prominent in the New Testament but deafeningly muted in evangelical missiology until recently (Honor-Shame Network 2020). To stimulate thought about the gospel from this "shame" perspective, I offer a panoramic version of the biblical story and the gospel, "No Shame in That" (Nussbaum 2020), and welcome robust discussion about it.

5. Develop crisis coping skills in mission trainees

When we prepare PhD students for strategic missiology we strain out a gnat. When we prepare mission students for crisis, we swallow a camel. It is as if we consider Gethsemane a future prospect, a bridge we will cross if/when we get to it.

Last year when I first presented this paper to the Evangelical Missiological Society, I proposed that mission professors consider adding a crisis preparation assignment to some of their syllabi along the following lines:

- *Assignment 4. Development of crisis-coping skills*
  In order to prepare class members for sudden unforeseen crises they will inevitably face in mission work, your professor will create one, two, or three crises during the term by suddenly changing an assignment's instructions, grade value, and/or deadline, or by adding/deleting an entire assignment. The Dean has authorized this creative learning activity and will hear no appeals.

For the current academic term, the COVID-19 virus is providing so much genuine disruption that the professors do not need to add any artificial disruption for practice. How well will mission students and professors handle it? And how much will their crisis-coping skills improve through this experience, considering that there may be several more waves of disruption behind the current one?

6. Seek crisis advice from experts who are not Western

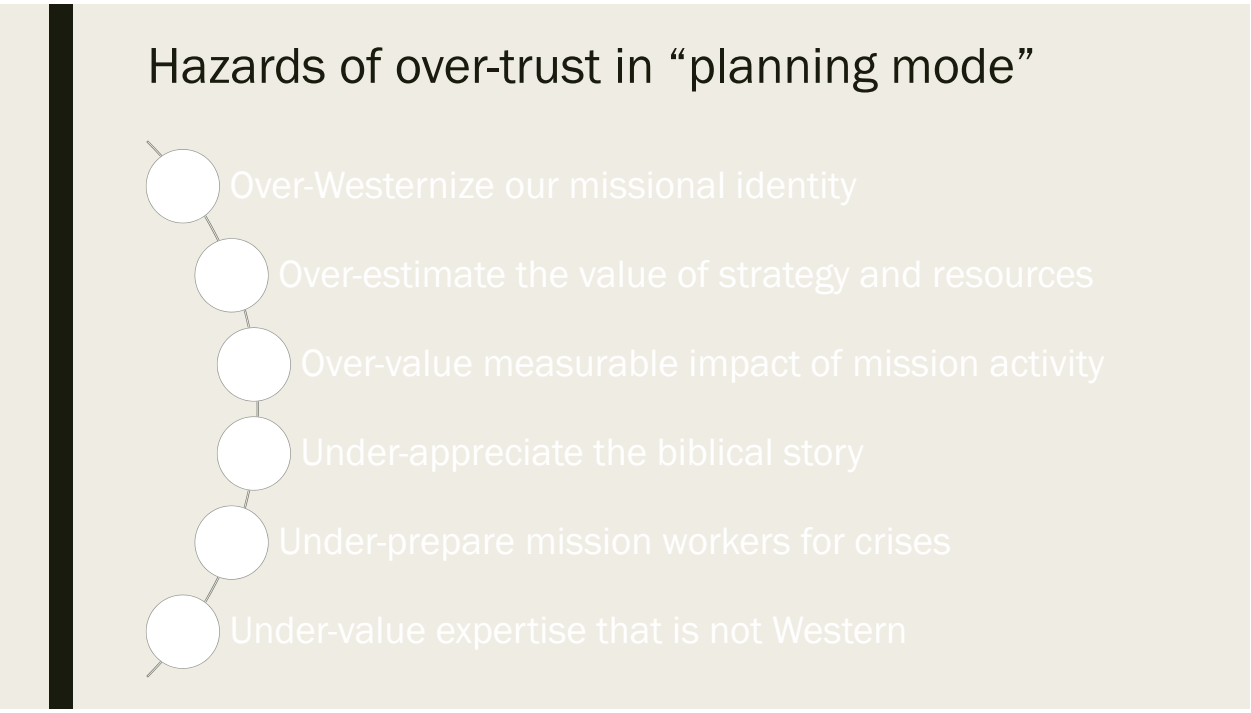
The poor are the world experts in resilience during crises. The strong plan while the weak cope, so in a crisis the last shall become first—the "weak" become the "strong," because they have so much more experience in dealing with crises. As for the "strong," who by their strength have managed to miss most previous crises, they become the "weak" who are just starting to learn how to deal with a crisis.

> Fundamentally, the factors and considerations that framed the Western missionary movement—including the idea of Christendom, imperial expansion, political and economic dominance, and technological supremacy—are strikingly absent from the emerging non-Western movement. Where enlightenment certitudes (including the universal relevance of Western ideas and ideals), militarist triumphalism, and *a rather secular emphasis on means and human calculations* [my italics] framed the Western movement, it is the experience of colonial domination, marginalization, and an intensely spiritual worldview that will provide the defining elements in the non-Western movement. . . The New Testament emphasis on 'weak things of the world' (1 Corinthians 1:27) will inform the thinking and outlook of non-Western missionaries (Hanciles 2008: 389-390).

The Christendom mindset assumes that we are holding power and can live our whole lives in planning mode. The next time we wish our "weaker" partners were better at planning and implementing, let us remember that we are as culturally crippled in coping as they are in planning. We have been exporting our planning expertise for a long time. Real partnership would mean that we, in our desperation, import some of their crisis-coping expertise.

Conclusion

Looking back at the six proposed adjustments, we recognize that the current COVID-19 crisis presents us with a golden opportunity to overcome six corresponding weaknesses in our mission practice. These are widely acknowledged bad habits, deeply ingrained by two centuries of assuming we have more power to plan and control mission than we actually do. If we seize the day, we can at last get free from the hazards in the diagram below.



I am proposing that the key question for missiology in an age of crisis is an identity question: *"Who are we, the global Church in its mission? Are we strategy implementers locked into planning mode and paralyzed without it, or are we people who will prayerfully discern when God wants us to switch into Gethsemane mode?"*

A similarly important question is, "How much of our current difficulty in mission partnerships is about the difference between planning and coping? How will partnerships be affected by the different ways that the 'strong' and the 'weak' deal with the current crisis?"

Last year I included the following as a discussion question in the workshop where I presented the paper. "How urgent is Gethsemane missiology? Is this a marginal issue for missiology or *is a tsunami coming that will change the whole mission world unrecognizably?*" Now we know. But we should have known all along that if we are going to "follow Jesus," we are going to end up following him to Gethsemane and beyond.

The journey beyond starts in Gethsemane itself. Knowing who he is and knowing that his suffering is a necessary part of the Father's will for him and his mission, Jesus says to Judas, *"Friend, do what you came to do"* (Matthew 26.50). If we adopt Gethsemane missiology, that is exactly what we will say to COVID-19.

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