

Guest Editorial

Disruption of Cross-cultural Mission: A Call to Lean into the Liminality

Wanjiru M. Gitau

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When the GM editorial team first imagined the current issue of *Global Missiology* focused on “Socio-Political Disruptions and Missions Praxis,” we, like everyone else, had no idea that a crisis of pandemic proportions, the coronavirus, was around the corner.

At the time, we were looking at broad patterns of events that we sensed were disrupting cross-cultural mission. One of these patterns is the apparent diminution of frontier kind of foreign mission. Generally, Protestant and particularly evangelical frontier foreign mission has had a long, and fruitful history lasting almost 230 years since William Carey left his *Particular Baptist* pastorate in England and sailed out to India in 1793. Catholic frontier mission history has a much longer track record than Protestant mission. The nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century constituted the peak epoch of cross-cultural frontier work. Featured were cultural encounter, epitomized by translation of the Bible, the creation of grammars, the writing of catechisms and other material that enabled the transmission of the gospel to cultures and societies that had little to no prior contact with the gospel, and subsequent planting of churches, ultimately the growth of world Christianity.

The early modern missionary frontier crossing was inadvertently linked with the imperialist project. At the end of colonialism, the missionary movement needed to redefine itself. It morphed into relief, development, and educational formation. In a world that was emerging from confusions of global and regional wars, unstable governments, and inadequate social infrastructure, the socially oriented mission work filled an important gap demonstrating the good news of Christ as attending to actual material needs. In these spaces, many missionaries became bridge builders—towards religious communities and societies that could sustain and drive their own indigenous destinies. As with the frontier crossing, the bridge building has been so successful that by and large leaders, churches, and local institutions have been successfully raised to a point where they hardly need external help. Churches mentor their own leaders. Theological institutions now have their locally trained instructors. Significant to this equation is how a number of national governments have restricted visa access for mission workers by making them more expensive and increasing scrutiny of mission-themed work. Expatriate missionaries can no longer count on a lengthy tenure that they once enjoyed in foreign countries.

Another kind of disruption to cross-cultural mission work is the increase in plural options. This increase includes an ideological pluralism, not merely social encounter and coexistence of different religious groups or societies. This fact of plurality in itself is its own issue, but it is not a matter of disruption because religious plurality has been a constant feature within cross-cultural Christian encounter. Rather, the disruptive pluralism consists of the diffusion of ideas from multiple worldview options, religious and other. The plurality of worldview categories,

particularly disseminated through social media, has resulted in a polarization of those worldview categories that scaffold the substratum of faith. This process has not necessarily turned the world secular as largely feared, rather it has desacralized religious sensibilities that make Christian faith, and spreading it, and working in the name of faith, self-evident. Part of the problem of course is the plurality of Christian expression and Christian differences before a watching world. Another effect is that much humanitarian, relief, and development work, once the forte of Christian mission, is now carried out by agents who have little interest in the faith, even though there might be a convenient veneer of it. Scandal and rumor precede what would be genuine mission work. When it comes to social advocacy, whether of justice or of a material nature, where people were once driven by deep faith commitments, even when they differed with other dominant faith commitments, advocacy across the world now comes with multiple motivations. Recipient local communities do not necessarily trust such work for its Christian persuasions, even when it comes under a Christian banner. Besides, local political agents have learnt to co-opt a variety of external agents. Leading social functionaries have been calling out relief, development, and humanitarian work as a fig leaf covering the naked ambition of neoliberal global capital interests. Christian missionaries can no longer be naïve about any of these realities.

The summary above paints broad strokes of deeply complex issues. The articles in this issue are illustrative of select disruptions. One article emerges from contemporary socio-political events in Hong Kong: “When The Cross Is About To Be Wrapped In The Red Flag, How Should Churches Under The Hong Kong National Security Law Resist?” China has indeed taken an unexpected turn as it seeks to forge a certain political pathway. The church is considered part of the civil society, and its educational institutions are under sharp scrutiny. At the risk of being considered subversive, religious leaders are compelled to declare their political stance and support legislation which may involve making compromises on religious activity, including foreign involvement (mission work). It is obvious that the church in its role as part of the civil society is actively wrestling with the issue. The tendency of outsider (western) Christians is to spiritualize such matters and to assign categories that lessen the complexity so that mission work can seem to continue. But it is clear from the other article from the region, by Brent Fulton and entitled “Four Decades, Four Narratives: Political Disruption and Contemporary Missionary Discourse on China,” that reductive categorization of what is happening in Hong Kong, or even China, does not simplify or ease matters. Presently, Christians outside of the situation could not intervene if they tried, and in fact if they do their attempts put local Christians at odds against their own societies, which does not help the cause of evangelization. The narratives of *the needy church*, *the persecuted church*, *the Christian Church*, and *the missionary church* that have figured prominently in foreign missionary discourse about China since the late 1970s are unhelpful and inadequate. The whole situation is the kind of disruption for which there is no easy answer.

The subject of “Urbanisation, Change and Christian Mission in the Indian Context among Educated Middle-Class Hindus” addresses perhaps the most complex and unresolved issue in the long centuries of evangelization in India: the question of inculturation of the gospel into the traditional Hindu worldview. Caste consciousness within the urbanized, highly consumerist Indian society disrupts both tradition and taken-for-granted assumptions of modernity. This

situation creates new disruptive questions for the Christian gospel itself, questions that will require broader discourse beyond India itself. Even in other parts of the world, the correlation between the Christian gospel and modernity is quite confusing. Thus, the present disruption as perceived in modernizing Hindu consumer society presents opportunity for mission studies to address the theological gaps in the transitions from purist, traditionalist worldviews into the sensibilities of modernity.

Another instructive article is derived from the experience of the Spokane Indian Tribe within the United States of America. There is no shortage of irony here in that this industrially advanced nation, with its capacity to drive mission work and engage in relief and development abroad, has not addressed the crises of its first peoples within its borders. The other irony is how the economic activities that make the US wealthy and advanced are the very same ones that disenfranchise the marginalized, and that the gospel preached in the US has little or nothing to say about these shadows of wealth and advance. In Costa Rica, disruption takes on yet a different form when we are brought face-to-face with a case study of the refugee crisis exacerbated by economic failure and political violence in the larger Central American region. After years of a great deal of learning best practices of humanitarian work within the matrix of the social complexity, limitations imposed by US foreign policy and national insularity come in the way of one ministry organization's community accomplishments.

In this issue of *Global Missiology* we are confronted with the reality that crossing frontiers and crossing cultures in order to take the gospel to others is not what it once was. The disruptive reckoning has been going on for several generations, but it is the global coronavirus that seals this disruption and serves as a major wake up call.

The coronavirus has disrupted the most significant aspect of mission: travel and human contact in meetings, conferences, church activities, and generally busy work. Of necessity, many events have shifted to online activities. Christian mission was meant to consist of human-to-human contact conveying the love and care of God and inviting a personalized response. This interaction was personified through the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Along that same vein, one particular episode of Jesus's life on earth represents the best response to our contemporary disruption. For the moment, what matters is not his great commissions. Not his teachings or his many miracles. Not the disciples' mission in Acts.

Rather, what particularly instructs us now is the 18 long years of Jesus's silence, during which we know little about what he was doing. After the episode of a 12-year-old Jesus traveling with his parents to and from Jerusalem for their annual pilgrimage, there comes a time of utter silence about his life. But we can imagine. Luke 4 can help us recreate his teen and young adulthood years.

When we meet Jesus in Luke 4 (and also Matthew 4), his responses to the devil's temptations are deeply steeped in awareness of scripture. When we meet him at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, where he had been brought up, a scroll is handed to him by an attendant. He unrolls a specific scripture, one that replays the suffering, poverty, and injustices of his day. His exegesis of that text, although we are not told the content of his sermon, demonstrates

people's condition in the entire region. What is notable behind this text reading is that Jesus had lived in this world, and though he had not activated his mission all these long years he had become thoroughly educated, both formally and informally. When we later encounter the immense suffering of ordinary people, including through the injustice meted out by the Romans and the burdens imposed by religious leaders, we cannot help wonder why Jesus did not engage sooner to change the situations. We wonder until we realize that Jesus took time to learn, to study, to understand, in fact to interact with his people at a very human level, in a context of working as a carpenter himself. He is so ordinary that the people do a double-take: "Isn't this the carpenter's son?"

And that is the point. While he was young and unknown, Jesus existed in what anthropologist Victor Turner refers to as a liminal space. Early on he knew that he must be about his father's business. But the business must await the fullness of God's set time. So he lives in this in-between place. A liminal condition is that place of contingency, "between and betwixt," aware and yet so limited, disordered, even disintegrated and troubled because one is pained by one's own limitations and the pains of others. Like the hero in the making, one starts to see new possibilities, but they must await the proper moment, the crowning rite of passage. To otherwise force change through immature action is to short-circuit the real work of transformation that must take place in a person, and that later in the world he is going to face. So he humbles himself and endures an invisible, ambiguous existence, so ambiguous that even powers that be later have a hard time tracing his roots. He is a *persona non grata*. But that is what an important mission takes. Liminal existence.

Lately, as Christians have grappled with the loss of fellowship over the virus shutdowns, there has been a great deal of talk about revival of all things church and mission. But we really are not ready for renewal of any kind, unless, like a good bag of tea, we are soaked and steeped in this space where we are almost useless to the world. Liminality precedes renewal and transformation. A great deal of angst is generated in this status, and nothing of consequence seems to be happening, but yet a lot is happening! Yes, like the cocoon metamorphosing into a butterfly. It's like the baby growing in the mother's womb. It is a space even of doubt. For some, it's a dark passage where they must reinvent themselves. And, no, it's not exile, because exile entails expulsion and exclusion. Neither is it suffering and persecution, because the whole world is forced into this space together. It is just that Christians are invited intentionally to engage the apparent obscurity of this uncertain space. Just as Jesus in his 18 years, and then his 40 days of wilderness inaugurating experience. When we finally meet him, we meet a man very well aware of his world. A man who does not engage in confrontation with the Roman occupiers, although he could have called a legion of angels at his command. Even the crowds he fed could have formed his army. He resists pragmatic shortcuts to fulfilling his mission. He goes about deliberately, almost inefficiently forming the community that must carry on his mission. But that intentionality is exactly what forms a different mission than anything the world has ever seen.

Scholars like to fish for paradigm shifts. Social activists want to change and want it now. Evangelists want conversions and as many as possible so they can preempt hell. And church plants want multiple lights on a hill, lots of church communities on the landscape. There is a time

for such. But if our time of disruption, enforced by a disease, shuts all that down, let participants in the overall cross-cultural mission movement, in its many expressions — evangelism, church planting, social care — set aside the frenetic activity, and lean into this *Selah* moment. We have heard it said that the word *Selah* means something like, “stop and listen,” as with a musical interlude. Let's stop and listen. The time for action will come soon enough.