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FREEING CONGREGATIONAL MISSION

**A PRACTICAL
VISION FOR COMPANIONSHIP,
CULTURAL HUMILITY, AND
CO-DEVELOPMENT**



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ONE

THE CRISIS WE FACE

*It is disgraceful that . . . the impious Galilaeans
[Christians] support not only their own poor but ours
as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.*

ROMAN EMPEROR JULIAN, 362 CE¹

CHRISTIANS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN a generous people. Since the era of the early church, non-Christians and even the opponents of Christianity (like the Roman emperor Julian, above) noticed Jesus' and his followers' exceeding generosity and particular concern for people living under the weight of poverty and oppression. This lifestyle is embodied in the apostle Paul's call to follow in Christ's example of setting aside self-interest and living in service to others: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:3-5).

In the United States, the mission of the church has often been considered one of the highest priorities of Christian congregations,² whether evangelical, Catholic, or mainline Protestant. Many congregations proudly identified themselves as "mission churches" because of the prayer, funding, and time they poured into God's global mission—sometimes 10 percent,

¹"Letter to Arsacius, High-Priest of Galatia" (June 362), in *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright (1913), vol. 3.

²Sometimes called the local church or parish, in this book, *congregation* refers to the basic unit of the Christian church that gathers regularly for worship, study, prayer, and participation in mission.

20 percent, or more of their total congregational budget went to missions, local and foreign. “Mission” was all the activities done *for the people outside the church’s walls* in the name of Jesus Christ, from the “clothes closet” or soup kitchen for our city’s economically disadvantaged to prayer and financial support for overseas missionaries. In obedience to the Great Commandment (“Love your neighbor as yourself”) and the Great Commission (“Go and make disciples of all nations”), mission was about reaching out in love to our neighbors across the street and around the world.

In each of these “mission-minded” congregations were the “mission advocates” who lifted up the cause of God’s local and global mission—and sometimes even battled the finance committee members, resisting the constant pressure to increase the percentage of the annual budget dedicated to staff salaries, member services, special projects like sanctuary carpeting, or a host of other legitimate operating needs. To these advocates, the mission budget was sacrosanct because it represented why the church existed—its very *essence*. “If we can’t support Christ’s mission in the world, we shouldn’t call ourselves a church” was their attitude.

But over the last few decades, an almost imperceptible cultural undertow has been pulling the church off course. Even some of the most dedicated mission leaders haven’t noticed the changes because of the subtle cultural shifts taking place in US society. Somehow, the outward nature of mission, the powerful flow of God’s love and grace through our congregations and parishes out into the world, is being short-circuited. And ironically, *we* have increasingly become the beneficiaries of our own mission work. You don’t believe me? For just one example, let’s take a look at the short-term mission trip phenomenon.

THE ENERGY BEHIND THE SHORT-TERM MISSION TRIP

Just a small blip on the mission radar of most churches fifty years ago, today short-term mission (STM) trips have exploded into a booming industry that *Toxic Charity* author Bob Lupton estimates between \$3.5 and 5 billion a year.³ Nearly two million Americans participate in an STM each year.⁴ One

³Bob Lupton, “Colonialism or Partnership?,” *Focused Community Strategies*, January 22, 2014, www.fcsministries.org/fcs-ministries/blog/colonialism-or-partnership.

⁴Robert Ellis Haynes, “Consuming Mission: Towards a Theology of Short-Term Mission and Pilgrimage” (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018), 116.

of the largest financial contributions that many congregations and their members make toward the global mission of the church is for these trips to both domestic and international destinations. At an average cost of \$1,000 per individual for the typical eight-day trip, a congregation and its members can together spend tens of thousands of dollars to prepare, equip, send, and support one STM group overseas.⁵ Yet an increasing number of books and articles—from scholarly missiological journals to popular books like *When Helping Hurts*—are raising critical questions as to the impact of STM trips on both the travelers and the “host communities.”

Most of us understand intuitively that crossing the seas to build a house in Tegucigalpa, teach a Vacation Bible School class in Bangkok, or feed and hold babies in Kampala is simply not an effective—and probably not very faithful—use of God’s resources. Even the members of the congregation’s finance committee are questioning the impact of these expenses! Some critics maintain that this significant investment in our own international travel to distant lands may be decreasing the funds contributed to support long-term mission workers and the work of global partners,⁶ yet we continue to invest in this most attractive of congregational mission strategies.

These critiques of STM are not new. But neither scholars nor practitioners seem to be asking the *why* question. How *do* we explain the energy behind the North American church’s fascination with short-term mission trips? What is it that keeps the North American church—embedded as we are in a culture that so highly values efficiency and measurable impact—pouring money into a mission strategy that research indicates simply doesn’t generate lasting positive impact for the “host community”? If this most popular of US congregational mission strategies isn’t helping the neighbors we’re called to serve, then why do we keep doing it?

A common answer is because the trips are said to be *transformative* for our congregations. Could it be that the outward mission focus we received from previous generations is being eclipsed by a more modern, inward focus that is “all about us”? Through our research, we’ve heard from the mission leaders of African American, White, Latinx, and multiracial churches who

⁵Haynes, “Consuming Mission,” 117.

⁶Scott Moreau, “Short-Term Missions in the Context of Missions, Inc.,” in *Effective Engagement in Short-Term Missions: Doing It Right!*, ed. Robert Priest (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2008), 15-16.

feel uneasy about some elements of their short-term mission trips and yearn for the insights and tools they need to channel the transformational energy of STM into strategies that actually deepen trust and relationship and enable diverse Christians to participate in Jesus Christ's transformation of the world.

This transformational energy is the focus of *Freeing Congregational Mission*: the book will challenge our congregations' current repertoire of mission activities and offer case studies, strategies, illustrations for your teaching, and a seven-count toolkit, created by coauthor Balajiedlang Khyllap through our work with Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's World Mission Initiative for congregational mission leaders like you to use to strengthen the faithfulness and effectiveness of your congregation's participation in God's mission.

MISSION STRATEGIES MADE IN OUR OWN IMAGE

It is not just the short-term mission trip phenomenon that reveals this massive shift in focus. Our research with congregational mission leaders reveals several large and growing industries that US local congregations use to engage in mission.

Orphanages are expensive, unsustainable, and abuse-prone institutions that were largely discredited in North America and Europe years ago, yet they represent a major benevolence for about a third of Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical congregations surveyed.⁷ In numerous contexts in the Majority World, orphanages often ignore the very people most suited to respond to the child's needs—the child's parent(s). Most "orphans" in fact have at least one living parent.⁸ The child's parent(s) and extended family may need only a temporary helping hand to provide for their child, but supporting an orphanage is so satisfying to donors that it has made orphanages a growth industry in numerous Majority World nations, with churches providing financial support and STM volunteers.

More than \$3 billion is given annually to *child-sponsorship programs*.⁹ Forty-six percent of the Presbyterian Church (USA) congregational mission

⁷World Mission Initiative, "Survey of Congregational Mission Leaders," January 2019 (a survey of 649 mission leaders of Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical congregations).

⁸Kathryn E. Van Doore, "Paper Orphans: Exploring Child Trafficking for the Purpose of Orphanages," *International Journal of Children's Rights* 24 (2016): 378-407.

⁹Emily Buchanan, "Is Child Sponsorship Ethical?" BBC, May 9, 2013, www.bbc.com/news/uk-22472455.

leaders I surveyed in 2014 personally sponsored a child.¹⁰ Sponsors report finding deep satisfaction in a personalized relationship with a vulnerable child despite the ethical questions that have been raised and the fact that sponsorship is by nature inefficient due to the added administrative costs of “donor care”: managing sponsor-child relationships, letter writing and translation, donor gifts and visits, and other activities that one child-sponsorship agency described as “the only way to capture the donors’ attention.”¹¹ Are there better ways to care for vulnerable children?

Prepared meal-packaging projects have exploded in popularity among US Christians, especially among mission conference attendees and youth and college groups, as evidenced by the growth in both the number of institutions providing this service and the volume of their operations. Since 2005, Rise Against Hunger (formerly Stop Hunger Now) has mobilized more than 350,000 volunteers annually to package more than 415 million meals in 74 countries “with a mission to end hunger in our lifetime.”¹² But packaged meals will never end world hunger. They can save a life when delivered to a disaster zone but ignore the root causes of hunger and can even depress market prices in communities that aren’t experiencing a disaster, discouraging local farmers from planting next season’s crop and reducing *food sovereignty*.¹³

Rather than understanding mission as joining God in the spreading circle of relationships transformed by God’s unconditional love and forgiveness, is our consumer culture twisting our view of the *missio Dei* into a mission marketplace—a “buyers’ market” that places decision-making power in the hands of the person paying for the mission program? Our congregations’ choices to support these and other mission strategies point to the twin challenges we face as mission leaders.

¹⁰“Re-memembering Missiology: An Invitation to an Activist Agenda,” *Missiology: An International Review* 46, no. 1 (2018): 44. Article references a survey of 664 Presbyterian Church (USA) mission leaders the author conducted in April 2014: “Congregational Mission Leaders Activities Survey.”

¹¹Kevin Lewis O’Neill, “Left Behind: Security, Salvation and the Subject of Prevention,” *Current Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (2013): 209.

¹²Rise Against Hunger, “How We Work,” www.riseagainsthunger.org/our-impact/.

¹³Food sovereignty is a term originally coined by members of the Via Campesina movement to mean that the people who produce, distribute, and consume food should control the mechanisms and policies of food production and distribution, that is, outsiders should not determine that a particular community must grow cash crops for export, rather than the foods that can nourish their community. This concept places farmers and consumers at the center of the food system. Nyéléni Forum, “Synthesis Report,” March 31, 2007, <https://nyeleni.org/spip.php?article334>.

THE AGE OF “SELFIE MISSION”

How many of us haven’t “liked” a friend’s Facebook or Instagram post of a photo that portrays them engaged in some benevolent activity—serving a meal, building a school, or traveling on an STM trip? How many of us haven’t posted this kind of image ourselves? I know I have. Social media provide us with powerful tools to portray ourselves instantly to all of our friends in particular ways.

Somehow the symbol of mission in our era has become a “selfie”—a self-portrait instantly “shareable” and “likeable” by our friends on social media that helps us frame ourselves in a benevolent posture helping the “less fortunate” around the world. Although I don’t consider myself wealthy by any measure, my awareness of my bank account, my modest investment portfolio, and my pension fund make me feel a bit uneasy when I engage with economically disadvantaged neighbors, both in my city and globally. Somehow I feel better about my relative wealth when I’m portrayed as helping others. How easy it can be for me to engage in mission-like activities but in actuality do less to advance Christ’s mission in the world and more to lessen the feelings of guilt I experience when I see news reports of most of the world struggling for survival. Perhaps you’ve seen this response in your own church—or felt this way yourself.

If the primary beneficiaries of our most popular mission strategies are not economically disadvantaged communities but *us*—we who are among the wealthiest and most comfortable Christians in the world—what has happened to our understanding of God’s mission? Would our ancestors in the faith who sent career missionaries to a hundred countries and built hospitals, schools, and churches around the world and in the United States *even recognize* the strategies we call “the mission of Jesus Christ” today? Why is this important contradiction in US congregational mission practice an “elephant in the room” that no one seems to be talking about?

Perhaps as a mission leader you’ve been aware of this trend in US culture in general—the shift toward self-centeredness. Experts describe it as an “epidemic of narcissism.” According to national studies, traits related to narcissism are increasing across our society: more superficial values, greater materialism and self-centeredness, less concern for others or interest in

helping the environment, and lower empathy.¹⁴ Though the “millennial generation” is often blamed for possessing a sense of entitlement and self-centeredness, the cultural shift is not limited to young adults. One of the most frequently repeated concerns I have heard from congregational mission leaders is their uphill battle for the attention and participation of their church members in an age of distraction—Netflix, the Food Channel, and online shopping. Can it be that “selfie mission” is quietly replacing mission in the way of Jesus Christ, who “though he was rich, for [our] sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty [we] might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9)?

Because these subtle changes are cultural—not doctrinal—*selfie mission* can be seen in evangelical and mainline Protestant congregations and in Catholic parishes across the country—the cultural undertow is pulling us *all* off course. It can be seen in the impact of our mission work in communities around the world. In fact, it is such a part of church culture in this country that it has become *normalized*. Rather than understanding mission as our joining with what God is already doing in the world (the *missio Dei*, or mission of God), we often frame mission as all we do to respond to a world in need. Mission can become our task list—a set of problems to be solved, needs to be fulfilled, and checks to be written—rather than the spreading circle of relationships rooted in Jesus Christ.

At the heart of this crisis in our understanding of mission is the question, *Whose mission is it, anyway?* As long as “mission” is merely the sum of *our* benevolent activities, we will never enter into the kind of mutually healing relationships exemplified in Scripture: from Jesus, the teacher who calls his disciples “friends,” to Paul’s surprisingly mutual relationship with those to whom he was sent as an apostle. When *selfie mission* serves more our own interests and not the world that God so loves or when we begin to think of it as *our* mission rather than God’s, *it* is antithetical to the self-giving mission of Jesus Christ that consistently points to God. I have talked with many congregational mission leaders who have long sensed these significant yet subtle changes in mission and have struggled to steer their church toward strategies that transform both mission partners and themselves. This tendency toward *selfie mission* is the first, more obvious element of the crisis

¹⁴Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissistic Epidemic: Living in an Age of Entitlement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 99.

confronting us as mission leaders. The second element of the crisis is deeper and comes from our mission history. If selfe mission is the more visible tip of the iceberg of the crisis confronting our congregations today, the more substantive challenge is what lies below it.

FREING MISSION FROM ITS COLONIAL PAST

The current crisis in our US congregations' understanding and practice of mission requires a hard look at the historical underpinnings of the modern European missionary movement. As we assess that beautiful and troubling history, we see that our congregations' contemporary understanding of mission is built on the theological and cultural assumptions of European colonialism. Let me start with a full disclosure: having spent three decades of my life either serving as a missionary in Africa and Latin America or supervising hundreds of missionaries around the world, you won't find me throwing stones at the missionary enterprise. I've visited too many missionary cemeteries in Korea and West Africa to not appreciate the lives offered up by our missionaries, from whatever nation or Christian tradition.

It is clear that the modern missionary movement significantly advanced the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church was planted on five continents and grew to the point that today there are more believers in the former "mission fields" (Africa, Asia, and Latin America) than in the traditionally "churched" Global North (Europe and North America). The Bible was translated into hundreds of languages that were preserved through tireless literacy work over many years. Missionary-founded schools, teachers' colleges, technical institutes, and universities educated millions. Clinics, hospitals, and medical schools were built and made a massive contribution to global health. Human rights, including women's rights, were advanced. The positive impacts generated by the modern European missionary movement are difficult to overstate.

But there is also an underside to our mission history. Beginning in the late fifteenth century and continuing to the 1960s, European (and, later, American) missionaries made the fateful decision to board colonial ships and fully participate in the colonial enterprise—an economic and political system that subjugated entire continents, stole land and natural resources, exterminated millions of Native Americans, enslaved millions of Africans,

and imposed European languages and ways of thinking on nations around the world. By doing so, they unintentionally dealt a blow to Christ's mission that has had enduring, negative consequences for the church's engagement in God's mission. There were notable exceptions: for example, Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas in the West Indies, African American Episcopal missionary Alexander Crummell in Liberia, and the three Methodist missionaries who were imprisoned in Angola in the 1960s for their anticolonial work there provide examples of missionaries who challenged the colonial system.¹⁵ But modern mission history is filled with examples of missionaries blessing the colonial enterprise with its Eurocentric assumptions of White racial superiority. These assumptions were constructed on what social scientists call "unilinear cultural evolution"—the widely accepted theory that there is only one road that leads from "savagery" to "barbarism" to "civilization," and that is *our way*.¹⁶ For that reason, any reference to "culture" in modern American parlance can be misconstrued to refer to the ballet, opera, or symphony—powerful symbols of supposedly superior European cultures.

Having served in missions for almost three decades, I am intimately acquainted with the "missionary halo" that has been placed on my head by many American Christians due to our culture's profound respect for missionary sacrifice and dedication. In my experience, few people are more trusted or revered in many US churches than a missionary. Yet in some ways, the missionary halo can be so shiny that it blinds us from seeing that for more than four centuries, the church's mission provided the theological justification for brutal colonial policies: genocide, enslavement, and the exploitation of other nations' resources, generally along lines of racial difference.¹⁷ The propagation of the Doctrine of Discovery by Pope Nicholas V in a series of papal bulls beginning in 1452 stated that, because our missionary activity was necessary to save those we perceived to be "savages," European Christians were justified "to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and

¹⁵Sandra I. Sousa, "Now We Don't Have Anything': Remembering Angola Through the Lens of American Missionaries," *Configurações: Revista de Ciências Sociais* 17 (2016): 119-37, <http://journals.openedition.org/configuracoes/3286>.

¹⁶See "unilinear cultural evolution," Oxford Reference, www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803110706530.

¹⁷I am grateful to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary student Tony Igwe for this insight during a February 2020 class discussion.

subdue all Saracens [Muslims] and pagans whatsoever . . . and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery and to convert them to [the European rulers'] use and profit.”¹⁸ This proclamation represents the church itself drawing what would become a nearly indelible line between “White” Europe and a colonized world of people of color. It is a troubling vision filled with assumptions of White superiority and violent ethnocentrism that remain with us to this day and that we will examine in more detail in chapter two—and one reason that our mission history prevents us from seeing African American, Asian American, Latinx missionaries or any missionaries of color. As a White/Euro-American, middle class, educated American, I seemed to “fit the bill” of this cultural expectation almost perfectly: people who looked like me were the ones portrayed as missionaries in Sunday School materials and story books, while missionaries of color—or even the thousands of new immigrants to the United States who work as missionaries in this country—have been invisibilized by the racist lens through which the church has looked at mission for more than five hundred years.

Before leaving this section, it should be noted that the enduring colonial assumptions of White superiority impact nearly all of us in the American church—Black, White, Brown, and multiracial—but in differentiated ways. These assumptions of “mission from a position of power” produced patterns of paternalism in mission: assumptions about the perceived superiority of the European missionary’s beliefs and capacities over the person who welcomed the missionary—and powerful reactions against the assumptions. These patterns of paternalism can be present in any church that has been formed by these historical forces, whether you have been privileged or exploited by them. One purpose of this book is to describe the impact of these assumptions on the ways our congregations engage in mission and propose a more faithful way. Churches of all racial/ethnic groups are invited to appropriate the insights about our shared, racialized mission history and will need to apply the insights to their own context.

In summary, this is the twin challenge we face as Christ’s church in a broken and hurting world: a self-glorifying, “selfie” mission that places us, rather than God, in the center of mission and the enduring assumptions of

¹⁸Nicholas V, “Romanus Pontifex,” Papal Encyclicals Online, www.papalencyclicals.net/nichol05/romanus-pontifex.htm, originally published January 8, 1455.

a colonial mission based on power. These, I will argue, are at the root of the crisis that our US congregations face. It's not our fault, of course—culture and history shape us in unseen ways. But God has given us minds and hearts so that we can critically reflect on the ideas presented in this book like the Bereans described in Acts 17:11, who “examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so.” I have been brutally honest with you in these opening pages, and I'm grateful you are still reading. Because, despite the massive challenge before us, *you* are a vital part of why I feel so hopeful about our shared future.

REASONS FOR HOPE

In thirty years of learning from and working with US congregational mission leaders, I remain deeply hopeful about our current predicament for two reasons. In the first place, the last century has seen a significant shift in leadership: a century ago, mission leadership was the exclusive purview of “mission elites” who strategized, prioritized, and allocated resources. They were the faith mission agency leaders, Protestant denominational executives, the superiors of Catholic missionary orders, and the leaders of the ecumenical movements. Today, the landscape of mission has been “flattened”: mission leadership has been decentralized to the point where every local congregation can serve as a mission agency, and its lay and clergy mission leaders have become the primary mission decision-makers. This change has triggered an explosion in the diversity of skills, perspectives, and insights available to God's mission: increasingly, Christians see themselves as “missionary disciples,” to use the words of Pope Francis, “sent ones” who carry their missionary vocation to school, work, community life, and even the public sphere. While the networking and coordination of so many dispersed decision-makers remains a major challenge of this emerging missionscape, the massive potential energy of thousands of congregations in the Global South and Global North working to address the root causes of hunger, disease, conflict, injustice, and human suffering and to share their faith in Christ is deeply encouraging and is already manifesting itself in the congregational experiences that will be highlighted throughout the book.

A second reason for hope is the quality and commitment of so many US congregational mission leaders themselves. While some leaders have not

given much thought to the crisis we face, many have expressed their deep misgivings about current congregational practices and are open to rethinking the foundations of how congregations engage in God’s mission. In the vast majority of conversations I’ve had with congregational mission leaders, I often encounter an initial defensiveness as I inquire about current mission practices. But this is often followed by a Spirit-filled moment when the conversation shifts and the mission leader expresses a desire to take the congregation deeper into more faithful and effective mission practice. This vulnerability—a willingness to critically assess current practice and to invest time and work in improving the ways we engage in God’s mission—fills me with great hope.

For these reasons, this book is designed for *congregational mission leaders*: the people who lead their congregation into mission. Nationally, the vast majority are lay leaders—often unpaid—although some larger congregations employ a professional missions pastor or director. Congregational mission leaders can also include youth and women’s leaders who deeply desire to get their people out of the pews and into the community and the world, the members of a congregation’s mission or outreach committee who make decisions about where to allocate funding, and pastors and priests in small and medium congregations who understand that it is the space of mission that transforms people and congregations. These are the leaders for whom this book is designed.

A WAY FORWARD

In response to the twin challenges, this book calls for a reformation in the way US congregations understand and engage in God’s mission. In the Kasai region of south central Democratic Republic of Congo, the Luba and Lulua peoples understand that “three stones make home”; that is, three selected, carefully positioned foundational stones create the *diku*, the hearth or cooking fire, that is the center of family life in that region and in thousands of communities across the Majority World. The Congolese hearth provides food for the family and serves as the symbol of home: the family gathers, stories are retold, values are passed down to the next generation, visitors are welcomed, food is shared and hospitality practiced. In fact, in the Tshiluba language of the region, the term for “family” is *bena diku*, “the people of the hearth”—that is, the people who share food from the same cooking fire.

Different from my own Euro-American, individualistic cultural orientation,¹⁹ many Luba and Lulua see a world in which family is the primary lens of identity: “I am because we are” as South African bishop Desmond Tutu famously summarized African ways of thinking, referring to it as “Ubuntu theology.”²⁰ Congolese worldviews focus on “we”: community, connection, and relationship. If Western culture is tempted to understand mission as a house we build, as evidenced in our emphasis on short-term mission construction projects, Luba and Lulua Christians might envision mission as “the gathering place”—the *diku*. Mission is the place where God’s self-offering in Jesus Christ becomes the Eucharistic meal that gathers the people of every community to be fed and sent out to share both their resources and their brokenness in service to God’s mission to the world.

With the power of connection that this circle of three stones embodies, we will argue that much of our struggle as mission leaders is caused by poorly placed foundational stones: a mission theology that is more narcissistic and colonial than it is shaped around Jesus’ model of “mission from a position of weakness,” an insufficient understanding of cultural differences and how to navigate them, and a lack of awareness regarding critically important learnings from development studies.

In section one of the book, we will lay out this critique and propose, identify, and describe the three foundational stones on which a more faithful and effective understanding of mission can be built. Acknowledging both the vestiges of an empire-serving model of the colonial era and the self-serving model currently in vogue in our culture, the book will challenge leaders to consider instead a *theology of companionship*—the “sharing-bread-with” relational nature of the Trinity that puts us on the road with Jesus and his followers in every time and place.

The second stone is especially needed in our world of increasing cultural diversity: instead of allowing our congregations to default to their own

¹⁹Which Dutch social researcher Geert Hofstede found to be the most individualistic culture in the world in an exhaustive series of studies in seventy countries.

²⁰Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 31: “Ubuntu . . . speaks of the very essence of being human. [We] say . . . ‘Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu.’ Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours.’ We belong in a bundle of life. We say, ‘A person is a person through other persons.’”

cultural assumptions (perhaps “time is money,” “rugged individualism,” or “it’s all about the bottom line,” etc.), we can offer our congregations the power of *cultural humility* required to understand our neighbors and to communicate God’s love with greater respect and clarity. To Jesus of Nazareth, context mattered greatly. He went to great pains to translate the power, mystery, and tenderness of God’s love into the everyday gestures and rituals and words so that the people of first-century Palestine could understand this love and share it with their neighbors. The second stone challenges us to grow in cultural humility so that God’s mission becomes a space where the learnings generated by cultural difference open the door to a new rhythm of prayer and praise, a deeper understanding of Scripture, and the personal transformation and congregational renewal we seek.

The third stone invites us to incorporate into our mission work the principles of development studies that can reframe the mission encounter from “modernization” or “social improvement” to *empowering co-development*. Giving a hungry person a fish is a good thing. Charity and benevolence are faithful responses to people in need. But most mission leaders innately sense that there is more to Christ’s mission than mere giving. Teaching others to fish, as the Chinese proverb reminds us, is a much more powerful gift than merely giving a fish because it empowers them to face their future. But a quick inventory of our churches’ mission activities reveals the unsettling truth that much of our mission work is limited to charity. One mission leader confided to me that he believed his church was “addicted to fish giving”: Is it possible that our congregations struggle to see mission as more than mere charity work simply because charity feels so good? While generous giving is biblical and good, giving too much or for too long can hurt a community as surely as overwatering a plant. Yet when congregational mission leaders engage in the difficult, but important, work of opening their people’s eyes to powerful, sustainable co-development, communities living in poverty and injustice are allowed to “own” the change process itself, become agents of their own development, and grow into all God created them to be. The results can be earth-shaking!

A cooking fire requires three selected, well-placed stones to serve as a foundation for the meal God is preparing for us. If the stones are poorly selected or placed, our shared meal could end up on the ground! But with these three foundational stones in place, we are ready to gather with God’s

family around the hearth and share in God's mission: the world change movement built on relationship, respect, and mutual empowerment. This is the spreading circle of relationships in Jesus Christ that is the *missio Dei*.

In section two, we will apply the learnings of the three foundational stones to some of US congregations' most popular mission activities, according to our research: leading short-term mission trips, caring for children at risk, and reforming congregational mission programs from a committee that allocates funds to a movement. We will reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of these popular mission strategies and present ways that mission leaders can engage in missional jiu-jitsu, "flipping" the legitimate desires of our people to connect with others and to make a difference in the world toward more faithful and effective mission strategies. We will include illustrations of what mission companionship, cultural humility, and co-development look like in the mission practice of innovative leaders. Throughout the book, we will offer a number of tools for mission leaders, designed by coauthor Balajiedlang Khylllep, who works with Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's World Mission Initiative. Bala brings a big heart for God's mission and years of intercultural and church experiences from Northeast India, the plains of South Dakota, and western Pennsylvania. The toolkit includes a short-term mission orientation curriculum and daily reflection guide, a training exercise in planning development projects, and a guide to navigating crosscultural differences, among other tools.

WHY THIS BOOK?

This call for a reformation in congregational mission is, for me, the result of thirty-five years of work in intercultural mission. Working first with the Latinx community in downtown Washington, DC, then in Democratic Republic of Congo and Peru for fourteen years, and, later, as the director of Presbyterian World Mission for a decade gave me opportunities to hear how the Christians of the Global South (our global partners) understood God's call to mission—and how our US churches' efforts could help or harm them. Some US congregations engage in faithful and effective work, but my experience is that most of us could do much better. Many congregations, building on faulty foundations, engage in God's mission in ways that can be perceived as demeaning and paternalistic to local and global communities and that are

counterproductive to the congregation's own stated goals. Yet they appear to be unaware of it, and the practices continue year after year—often in a new locale. “No one ever told us this!” is the most common response when they are enabled to hear from mission companions in a more direct and meaningful way.

But my research and experience suggest that many congregational mission leaders see the contradictions inherent in their congregation's mission program and long to free their congregations of an understanding and practice of mission that fails to make the difference in the world that God intends. My heart broke as I listened to the mission director of a large congregation speak of her role as more closely akin to that of a “social director on a cruise ship” than that of a leader of Christians committed to sharing faith and to addressing the root causes of poverty, human trafficking, and migration: “I spend more time entertaining mission enthusiasts than challenging or teaching them and am evaluated [by the congregation's senior leadership] by how much the members enjoy their mission activities, rather than how effective our mission work is.”²¹

At its worst, mission can become a commodity to be bought and consumed. Robert Haynes's *Consuming Mission* shows how STM participants “spend” their time, money, service, and sacrifice to purchase personal growth experiences in a highly transactional way that results in the commodification of Christ's mission.²² This central contradiction is perhaps the greatest challenge facing congregational mission leaders in this country today. How can mission leaders help their people swim against the tide of the colonial mission's legacy and current US culture to discover that *our* “life in Christ” is intrinsically bound together with that of our neighbors near and far? This book will attempt to both describe the problem and provide concrete tools for congregational mission leaders to lead with integrity and impact.

It is hard to take an honest look at how our mission practices impact other communities—and ourselves—but we stand arm in arm with Christian mission leaders from around the world, and many of them deeply desire to walk with us on this path. The mere possibility that different members of the

²¹Mission director (anonymous), personal interview, October 22, 2009.

²²Robert Ellis Haynes, *Consuming Mission: Toward a Theology of Short-Term Mission and Pilgrimage* (Portland: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

body of Christ could work together across geographic, cultural, and theological differences to address the root causes of injustice, poverty, and broken relationships moves me to gather these stories of contrition, confession, and powerful transformation. These stories show what the church of Jesus Christ can be and do when we carefully reflect on the foundational stones we place around the fire God has kindled. As we gather together around the fire like Jesus' followers on the road to Emmaus, we will break bread as companions ("bread sharers") and our eyes will be opened to see Jesus among us—and in each one.

None of us can reach the destination by ourselves. The work of leadership in a time and place where there are no maps is exceedingly difficult. But you play a key role in how your congregation understands and engages in God's mission, and, by reflecting together, we can make the journey together as companions. Are you willing to take your place in the spreading circle of relationships rooted in Jesus Christ and lead your people on this life-giving journey?

FOR REFLECTION

1. Have you seen examples of the kind of "selfie" or colonial mission that we suggest creates the "crisis in mission" facing US congregations today?
2. The mission of the church used to be one of the highest priorities of Christian churches across the country—evangelical, Catholic, and mainline Protestant. How have you seen your congregation's engagement in mission change over the past years? What reasons would you give for this change?
3. Can you recall a mission experience that left you wondering who the primary "beneficiary" was?
4. As you consider your own congregation and your leadership role, what are the opportunities you have to shape the ways your congregation understands and engages in mission? Teaching? One-on-one conversations? Mission funding—allocation conversations? Accompanying your church members into missional experiences and reflecting on those experiences?

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