

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES FOR GOD'S MISSION

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If we think of the Bible as a manual from God on how to participate in his mission, and we look at history as a master collection of instructive missions case studies, then we should be able to identify proven principles and practices for God's mission. What principles consistently rise to the top of the list for effective missions work? Which practices do we see throughout the biblical and historical accounts?

Before beginning, we should give credit to the anonymous missionaries and missiologists who developed these strategies through the years. In the world of missions, trainers often adopt and adapt each other's best practices and "give them away" to anyone who wants to use them. It confounds copyright administrators, but the fact is we have all inherited "lessons learned" from each other and especially those who have gone before us. In my first years of teaching after 12 years on the field, I was frustrated when I tried to track down the sources of our training materials. I wanted to do the right thing academically and give credit where it was due. Yet no one seemed willing or able to assign credit. Missionaries simply do not claim credit. They simply pass it on.

WATCH YOUR AIM!

The first principle to remember as you participate in God's mission is to "watch your aim." There is something about the way we are designed that increases our chances of achieving a goal that we clearly see. God made us that way. That is why God himself is the master vision caster (Gen 12:2-3, 13:14-17, 15:5, 17:5-7, and on and on). He was

the first leadership guru. The corporate world has borrowed best practices from him—not the other way around. He created us in such a way that we are better able to hit a target that we can clearly see.

<Insert Figure 1>

Athletes know this. Baseball coaches tell their players to watch the ball so they can hit it well. Basketball coaches tell their players to concentrate on the back rim of the basket in order to shoot a higher percentage of free throws. In Harvey Penick’s *Little Red Book*,¹ the master golf coach talks about taking “dead aim” at the hole before swinging. Indeed, you can see it in the eyes of Tiger Woods when he lines up his shots. Even from hundreds of yards away, Tiger seems to “dial in” on the exact spot on the green where he wants the ball to land.

It’s the same with a church staff, a short-term missions team, or a church-planting team. Aim is vital. You might ask, how could we not be watching our aim? It happens all the time. We take our eye off the target and begin aiming for a similar target. Perhaps it’s a worthy target but it’s not the best one. This often happens at the local church level. Churches rely on voluntary human resources. They are a developing community of believers, so it is understandable that they sometimes become the sum of many parts, programs, and projects over many years. The church might have a concise vision or mission statement, but often the work of the church is a conglomerate of ministries

¹ Harvey Penick with Bud Shrake, *Harvey Penick’s Little Red Book: Lessons and Teachings from a Lifetime in Golf* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

without a singular focus. In fact, frequently the church finds itself involved in peripheral ministries that are not directly related to their God-given vision and mission—their aim.

The renowned Willow Creek Community Church, near Chicago, is a classic. In their “groundbreaking” self-study *Reveal: Where Are You?*, published in 2007, they report that though the church had been highly successful in reaching tens of thousands of new believers in Christ during the past 25 years, they basically failed to disciple these new members.² Perhaps it was their success at seeker sensitivity that took their eye off their original aim of growing mature followers of Christ. To their credit, they were willing to ask the hard questions and then “reveal” their “lessons learned” to the broader Church. Thank you Willow Creek for teaching us to watch our aim.

In Central Asia in the early 1990s, a team of young two-year missionaries went to the capital city of a former Soviet republic with the mission—the aim—of planting a church among the indigenous people group. After several months reports came back that they had started a church among minority Russians living in the city. We celebrated their success but what about their aim? Their mission had been to start a church among the indigenous people. It had been natural to establish witnessing relationships with English-speaking Russians who were hungry for contact with the West. But at that time there existed Russian evangelical churches capable of reaching Russians. On the other hand, it was a challenge to connect with the indigenous peoples—different language, different culture, Muslim backgrounds. There were no known believers and only a few outside missionaries among them. This was the aim of the team of two-year workers. They missed their target and hit another one. Fortunately, a simple mid-course correction of

² Greg L. Hawkins, Cally Parkinson, Eric Arnson, and Bill Hybels, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007).

passing the baton of leadership to the Russians and re-focusing on their first aim resulted in healthy seed-sowing that later grew into many church plants and thousands of new believers among the indigenous people.

Don't be surprised if you lose your aim. A tactic for watching your aim is sometimes called "purposing."³ This involves developing the habit of continually re-visiting your vision, mission, and purpose—asking whether what you are doing is still strategic to your mission. At its core, purposing increases activities that hit your target and limits everything else. A team that practices "purposing" will be less likely to stray from its aim. Team members will focus on their role in the mission of God. This does not prevent you from changing your aim in the middle of the journey (e.g. Paul's Macedonian call in Acts 16), however it keeps your focus on the mission and task at hand.

Staying focused on your God-given aim is the best practice for avoiding a world of peripheral and often destructive distractions that can preoccupy a team. So, our first strategic principle for the mission of God is, "Watch your aim!"

The rest of this chapter focuses on principles and practices primarily used by international and non-Western missionaries who aim to reach entire populations or "nations" of unbelievers with the gospel of Jesus Christ through multiplication movements of disciples and churches. Keep that aim in mind as you read further. If you are one of those missionaries, these are your best practices. If you are called to a different aim in God's mission, these lessons may not apply precisely. On the other hand . . . they may be more relevant than you think!

³ Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High Performance Organization* (NY: Harper Business, 1999), 50.

THE WORLD IS A WAFFLE

This principle has been around for decades. Perhaps it originated from the late twentieth-century emphasis on engaging the hidden peoples or nations on earth with the gospel. The concept is: The world is not a pancake, it's a waffle. That is, when we pour the syrup of the gospel on the world, the syrup does not uniformly cover the waffle as it would a pancake. If you have ever eaten a real Belgian waffle with distinct, deep squares, you know that pouring the syrup in the middle does not result in a thoroughly covered waffle. Likewise, the world requires a precise aim of the gospel syrup into each individual square.

When missions strategists begin thinking about reaching a specific people group or population with the gospel, they basically ask the question, "Is this a separate square in the world waffle?" Or is this part of a broader square that does not require a specific strategy? They find answers to questions such as: Does this people group speak a distinct language? Do they have a different worldview about creation, religion, social systems, or life after death? Is their history distinct? Have they been enemies with nearby peoples or the majority people group of their land? Do they consider themselves a separate, distinct people? If the answers to these questions are positive, then we probably are aiming for a distinct square in the waffle and can assume it will take a specific plan or strategy to reach them with the gospel.

We use the same syrup—the same gospel—but we deliver it in a distinct way. One classic example of how this works is found in the story of Cameron Townsend. As a young missionary in 1917, "Cam" found himself selling Spanish Bibles in Guatemala.

His dilemma was that he was tasked with selling Spanish Bibles in a region inhabited by Cakchiquel Indians who didn't speak Spanish. One day he was challenged by an Indian, "Why, if your God is so smart . . . hasn't he learned our language?"⁴ This challenge inspired Townsend to commit the next 13 years of his life to learn and record the dialect of the Cakchiquel and eventually translate the scriptures into their heart language. Ultimately Townsend founded the Wycliffe Bible Translators, the premier Bible translation organization on the planet. His first lesson from the Cakchiquel Indians was about the waffle. To pour the gospel into the Cakchiquel required a distinct strategy regarding language, and the Cakchiquel represented one square in the waffle, requiring a different approach than that for Spanish-speaking Guatemalans.

So, as you craft your plan for your mission among a specific people group or population segment, don't assume a business-as-usual posture. If your group represents a different language, custom, culture, or worldview, it may take a special strategy to pour God's gospel into their world.

IYKDWYBDYKGWYBG!

This one is fairly simple. We borrowed it from one of Albert Einstein's basic principles of physics. If you keep doing what you've been doing, you keep getting what you've been getting! A couple of logical conclusions follow. First, if you are satisfied with the results you are currently getting—that is, if you are succeeding in your mission—then keep doing what you've been doing. However, if you are not seeing the

⁴ Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1983), 352.

progress that fits your vision from God and the specific mission you are trying to accomplish for him, then you need to change what you are doing.

<Insert Figure 2>

No offense to Einstein, but this is not rocket science. It is basic common sense. However, it is remarkable how our minds play tricks on us. We rationalize that our vision may have been a bit optimistic. After all, we are seeing *some* progress, aren't we? Maybe we need to adjust our missions goals a bit to fit the reality in which we live. Perhaps we simply misinterpreted this "vision from God" thing? Besides, change is painful. We're getting too old for this kind of change, aren't we? When people, places, roles, and situations change we are thrown into the unknown again. We have "been there, done that," and don't really want to do it again.

Regardless of our natural aversion to change, we must evaluate our life and work with God's mission in mind. If we are not on track, if we are not seeing the progress he has inspired us to see, then we must be willing to change. If we keep doing what we've been doing, we'll keep getting what we've been getting.

THE RESOURCES ARE IN THE HARVEST

This is one of my favorite principles for God's mission. Jesus was teaching, preaching, and healing throughout the villages of the Galilee. The Bible says that when he saw the crowds he had compassion for them and he said to his disciples, "The harvest is abundant but the workers are few. Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest" (Matt 9:37-39; Luke 10:2).

This is a well-known text that we often hear preached on world missions day in our local church. The preacher focuses on a call from Christ to send international missionaries from among us, to cross language and cultural barriers and take the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth. It is a clear call from Jesus. But is it exclusively about calling people to a foreign land?

Jesus was in his “Jerusalem”—his homeland. He had compassion for his neighbors who desperately needed the gospel. What exactly was he calling the disciples to pray for? Was he saying they needed to pray that God would raise up believers from far away Rome or Spain to come to Israel and preach, teach, and heal among the Galileans? I don’t think so. Who, after all, were his disciples? Were they from foreign lands? No, they were from those very same villages. So, where were these “workers” for the harvest going to come from? From those very same villages. The resources are in the harvest.

The principle is so simple that we miss it over and over again. Our first thought about resources—missionaries, money, Bibles, methodologies, programs, and even prayer—is that we have to raise them and provide them from the outside in. Our task becomes one of raising up an army of outsiders to bless the insiders. The challenge is that we simply do not have enough outsiders to reach all nations for Christ. In fact, outsiders, no matter how compassionate and culturally sensitive they are to the peoples and cultures they engage, will always be outsiders. The most effective communicators of the gospel will always be insiders. Donald McGavran called insiders “living contacts” versus

outsiders or “casual contacts.”⁵ The key to reaching an entire nation or people group for Christ is to tap those resources that are already in the harvest.

Missionaries who are aiming for a movement of disciples and churches through an entire people group maximize local resources. We need to watch our aim and focus on national disciplers, pastors, evangelists, and missionaries who can multiply all aspects of God’s mission among their own people. If we are aiming for indigenous (home grown) movements, then we must utilize local resources more than outside resources.

Paul understood this principle. In his great list of co-workers (Romans 16) we see few international or expatriate workers. In Colossians 4:11 he acknowledged that only three of his dozens of co-workers were from Israel. Paul equipped locals to reach their neighbors and near-neighbors more than internationals. He looked for living contacts more than causal ones. He understood that the best, most effective resources for the gospel were to be found in the harvest.

In the 1990s we saw a shift in international missions practices from a few large missions or teams of international missionaries focusing on reaching an entire country to numerous teams of a few international missionaries equipping and enabling large numbers of national or local missionaries to reach their own peoples. The resources are in the harvest.

The same can be said about our local ministries at home. Youth pastors, if you really want to reach the youth in your community with the good news of Jesus, look for the resources in the harvest. There is no one better qualified and capable to reach youth than your youth. Think about it. The resources are in the harvest.

⁵ Donald Anderson McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (NY: Friendship Press, 1955), 44.

DISCIPLESHIP CHAINS

One of the most sensible practices for multiplication of disciplers and churches is the de-centralization of leadership. Businesses understand how this works. Best business practices must be reproduced and incorporated into the ethos or work culture of an entire company. Viral movements are released to spread throughout a given organization or industry. When bottlenecks are broken, free-flowing streams of innovation and creativity open. At the same time, there is no compromise in the distinctiveness of the message or product.

I first learned this simple diagram of reproducible discipleship chains from The Navigators ministry in the 1970s. It still holds true today.

<Insert Figure 3>

In the diagram we see two discipleship chains. An original discipler started each chain by equipping two other disciples and so on until each chain or group had 15 links or disciples. But the chains are very different. In the chain on the left, each new disciple equipped two new disciples until a total of 15 were reached. In the chain on the right, the original discipler continued to equip new disciples until a total of 15 were reached. What difference does this make in the sustainability and reproducibility of the chain?

If the original discipler in the chain on the right has to leave the ministry, what happens to the chain? It comes apart—disconnected and no longer a chain. What about

the chain on the left? If the original discipler has to leave this work, we end up with two chains instead of one—each fully sustainable and capable of continued reproduction.

Whatever your aim in the mission of God, always think in terms of reproduction. Build chains that can reproduce on their own and are not dependent on a single link. True, this often runs counter intuitive to the “bigger is better” mentality. Ultimately it goes back to the question of what is the aim of the mission. Biblically and historically we’ve seen God expand his kingdom to the nations most effectively through reproducible chains of disciplers and churches.

MAWL

We call this next practice our training “cycle.” “MAWL” stands for model, assist, watch, and leave. Again, we can’t trace its origins, and you may find variations on this tactic, but MAWL has been around the world of international missions for at least 20 years. No matter what kind of training—church planting, discipling, prayer walking, fund raising, evangelizing, strategizing, or administrating—you always model, assist, watch, and leave.

Imagine teaching a child to ride a bicycle. How do you do it? When our two kids were toddlers, we strapped each of them into a bicycle seat and took them on neighborhood rides. We were modeling bicycle riding for them before they could talk. When they were about 6 years old, we started assisting them. Each got his or her own bicycle and we walked alongside and coached them on how to ride. We started them out with training wheels to keep them from falling and we taught them how to stop (very important), steer, accelerate, watch out for cars and people, and so on. Finally the day

came when they were ready to go it on their own. We cheered them on as they launched out without the training wheels. We watched them as they went. When they crashed, we dusted them off, loved on them, put bandages on their scraped knees and cheered them on again. Ultimately, we left them—or they left us—alone to ride on their own . . . and they are still out there riding and driving successfully today.

If our aim is reproduction of Christ-followers and the expansion of God's kingdom, then in everything we do on mission with God, we should model, assist, watch, and leave. Unfortunately, it's not that easy. Of the four aspects of MAWL we seem to have the most difficulty in leaving when we are done. My students regularly challenge me on this point. But we're not supposed to just hop around from one ministry to another are we? Aren't we supposed to persevere through thick and thin? It depends on your aim. Watch your aim! If God has called you to be an equipper of the saints for the work of the church (Eph 4:11-12), then equip them and move on. Paul did this. So did Jesus.

If you are about enabling others to serve in the mission of God then remember to MAWL—always!

HORSE OR MULE CHURCHES?

There are so many principles and practices to share. A good one to remember is that “it is important how you begin.” We talk about beginning with the end in mind and we practice “endvisioning” exercises in order to prayerfully see in our mind's eye the end result of God's leading. We also train our church planters in “reverse problem solving,” an age-old practice of the engineering industry. We conceptualize the end “product” and

then work backwards to solve the problem of how to build it. All of these skills enhance our ability to begin with the end in mind.

<Insert Figure 4>

So, if we are aiming for a multiplication movement of churches throughout an entire population, what kinds of churches do we envision? Are we aiming for horse churches or mule churches? What is the difference in horses and mules? I'm not an agriculturalist but I am from Texas and I know that mules are incapable of reproduction in and of themselves. Mules result from mating a male donkey with a female horse. Their DNA does not allow for reproduction. On the other hand, healthy horses can reproduce annually, almost without fail.

If our aim is multiplication, then we are looking for horse churches, not mule churches. We want to start churches with reproducible DNA. We envision a church that understands its purpose is to reproduce itself regularly in a way that leads to discipling all nations on earth. If it is a horse cell church, its members know from day one that reproducing cells is a part of their aim, and they will be less likely to get stuck in a comfort zone of established, familiar institutionalized cells. If it is a horse house church, it is aware that networks of reproducing house churches are necessary. If it is a mega-church, and it is a horse, it continually inspires and enables church reproduction, often in self-sacrificing ways that inspire alternative missional models. No matter what model of church and cultural context, healthy horse churches always reproduce.

We like to remind ourselves to celebrate all churches that worship Jesus Christ. Mule churches are a part of the bride of Christ as well. So we celebrate them, but we aim for horses if our mission from God is a multiplication movement among all peoples on earth.

WHAT DO WE DO WITH NEW BELIEVERS?

This practice is closely related to the former principle. If we are aiming for the multiplication of churches, then we must answer the question, “What do we do with new believers?” Well . . . what do we usually do with new believers? We incorporate them into the existing church. This is how I learned to do evangelism in the “attractional” model of the 1970s.⁶ We obtained lists of new “move-ins” in our emerging suburb and quickly contacted them by phone or mail to invite them to attend our church on Sunday. At church they heard the gospel and received an invitation to come forward at the end of the worship service and profess their new-found faith in Jesus Christ and be voted into church membership. The next step was to attend a new member’s class, usually taught by the senior pastor, and thereby be fully incorporated into our existing church. The result was “church growth,” or at least church increase, and this was often the sole aim of our church—greater numbers in attendance.

But what if our mission is not so much about increasing the numbers attending our church but increasing the number of churches throughout our city or community. If that is our aim, what then do we do with new believers? The answer: “We start new churches with them.”

⁶ Much is being written these days about “missional” versus “attractional” models of doing church. Alan Hirsch’s *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006) is a great starting point for further study.

<Insert Figure 5>

For those who've never thought in terms of movements or multiplication of churches, this raises many questions. Who will lead these new churches made of new believers? Where will they meet? Who will play in their worship band? Where will their budget come from? And so on. Space does not allow us to address these issues but suffice it to say that church multiplication may take us back to a simpler, more basic approach to "doing" church than we are accustomed to. In fact, it may result in a model that resembles that of the early, New Testament church. Notice that this doesn't mean it is a better church, just a better church for modeling multiplication. It all goes back to your aim.

So, if our mission is to start a movement of new churches, then we start new churches with new believers.

THERE IS NO SILVER BULLET

One final principle, that we must always remember, is "there is no silver bullet." That is, there is no one method or model for success in God's mission. Surely throughout this volume we've seen a variety of ways that God accomplishes his mission. There is no magic key or best practice that provides all the answers. We are on a journey of discovery in this mission of God. The Holy Spirit will coach us, if we let him. We can look back at the biblical and historical principles and practices of the past and apply them to our given situation in a fresh way that connects with those we are equipping. We do not

institutionalize missions methods. Our faith remains in Christ alone, our commitment to the mission of God among all peoples.

CONCLUSION

This brief survey has covered some of the better-known principles and practices for the mission of God. They've been passed down through generations of cross-cultural missionaries with the general aim of fulfilling the great commission of Christ to disciple all peoples on earth. They apply specifically to those whose aim is a multiplication movement of disciples and churches sweeping through an entire population or people. Yet, they can be applied to a variety of ministry settings.

Many of these principles are simply common sense. Watch your aim or you may miss your target. Different missions settings require specific strategies. If you aren't accomplishing your mission then change what you are doing. Look for resources in the middle of the community you are equipping—avoid the outside-in mentality that creates dependencies. Create discipling structures that are reproducible and multipliable—not dependent on a single leader. In everything you do: model, assist, watch, and leave. With the end in mind, start churches that have reproductive DNA. Start new churches with new believers. Always remember, there is no single method that always works, no magic key or silver bullet.

Use these lessons, modify them, re-dress them, and innovate with them. Remember, it is his endvision for all peoples on earth that compels us. We all fit somewhere in that master plan of his glory. Constantly seek the leadership of the Holy

Spirit—your mission-of-God coach. Discover his principles and practices, and then share them with the rest of us. That’s the way it works in the mission of God.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Have you ever lost your God-given aim? How were you able to get back on track?
Share your story.
2. What do we mean when we say “the world is a waffle?” Does this principle only apply to the ends of the earth? What about in your own local community? Are there waffle squares that require precise attention? Give examples.
3. List the resources that are in the middle of the harvest of Christ where you live and work. Who is ready to be harvested for Jesus in your midst? What resources do they bring to the table for increasing that harvest?
4. Have you learned other principles and practices for God’s mission? Share these with a friend or colleague in God’s mission.

FURTHER READING:

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