

The Complexity of Mission in Contexts of Conflict

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Introduction: The World Is a Conflict Zone

Today, in early June 2018, I was en route to Ramallah from the village of Jifna on the West Bank—which, with East Jerusalem and Gaza, comprises the Palestinian Territories¹—about nine kilometers away. I had decided to take the shorter route that wended its way past an Israeli settlement rather than the longer route through a few Palestinian villages. Cresting the hill near the settlement, the road was blocked by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Military action was underway nearby, a common occurrence as the Palestinian Territories have been under Israeli military occupation since the 1967 war.² The drivers ahead of me turned right onto a dirt road. Alone in my car and

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1 Since 2012, the Palestinian Authority—the governing body over the Palestinian people—refers to these areas as the geographical expression of the “State of Palestine.”

2 Israel disputes the designation of being an occupying power, arguing that the Palestinian Territories are not a sovereign state and so cannot be occupied. Rather, Israel argues, the Palestinian Territories are a disputed territory over which Israel has as much claim as the Palestinian people. Israel often refers to the West Bank as “Judea and Samaria.” The United States recently dropped the term “occupied” in referring to the Palestinian Territories; see Gerard Horton, “How the U.S. State Department Deleted the Occupied Territories,” Haaretz online, May 8, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/premium-the-u-s-state-department-deletes-the-occupation-1.6069726>.

Regardless of what term one uses, Israel exerts paralyzing control over Palestinian life, including movement on roads to work, schools, and hospitals; control over natural resources; annexation of Palestinian-owned land; etc. This is elaborated by Jeff Halper, an Israeli, in his description of Israel’s “matrix of control” over Palestinian Society. See “The Key to Peace: Dismantling the Matrix of Control,” accessed January 10, 2019, <https://icahd.org/get-the-facts/matrix-control/>.

not knowing what else to do, I followed their lead. Trailing them through a cluster of Palestinian homes and fields, our motley caravan progressed until it reached an intersection of sorts where the road divided into three smaller routes. Our convoy splintered into different directions. I had no idea which road to take. Guessing, I veered left. After ten minutes of bumping along, I merged with the paved road to Ramallah. Yes!

I was glad the road had been blocked. Too many times during the past twenty years of living and working on the West Bank, my family had been caught in sudden clashes between the IDF and Palestinians. These kinds of clashes could flare up without warning because of, for example, an incursion by the IDF into a Palestinian neighborhood or rock throwing by Palestinian youth at IDF checkpoints.³

The conflict is a result of the ongoing occupation by Israel of the Palestinian Territories. This occupation negates the realization of a sovereign Palestinian state.⁴ The violence that arises from the conflict is difficult to avoid. It takes many forms, including unpredictable lethal clashes between the IDF and Palestinian militants; disproportionate force used by the IDF against non-violent Palestinian protestors; the psychological terror suffered by Palestinians from the destruction of their homes for various reasons; the traumatizing search of Palestinians homes; the destruction of agricultural lands; etcetera. On the other hand, Palestinian militants have not helped the cause of their community internationally by their sporadic terroristic activities—such as the random acts in recent years of stabbing Israeli civilians and soldiers—acts which, regrettably, are widely published and become for many the face of Palestinian society.⁵

3 See descriptions of such clashes in my book *Learning from the Least: Reflections on a Journey in Mission with Palestinian Christians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), passim.

4 An elaboration of the history of this conflict is beyond the scope of this discussion. An important source for understanding the Israeli/Palestinian conflict is *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006) by Israeli historian Ilan Pappé. Many other Palestinian Christians have described their life under Israeli occupation, such as Lutheran cleric Mitri Raheb in his book *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014).

5 For example, see Isabel Kershner, “Israeli Dies as Palestinian Attackers Stage Assaults in Jerusalem,” *New York Times*, June 16, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/16/world/middleeast/israel-palestinians-attack-jerusalem.html>. Sadly, even Palestinian civilians mistaken to be Israelis suffer such attacks by their fellow Palestinians. This occurred to Nashat Filemon, who suffered a severe stab wound to his thigh while sitting in his parked car in Jerusalem with the window open. His car bore Israeli license plates.

Our family—especially through the years of the Second Intifada—was threatened by violent actions of both sides.⁶ For example, because we drove a car with Israeli license plates, when we drove from Ramallah to church in Jerusalem, we lived in fear that we would be injured by Palestinian snipers firing upon Israeli vehicles. (A Palestinian member of the Palestinian Bible Society was, in fact, wounded in his car by such action.) We also experienced the trauma of IDF soldiers searching our building with the threat that the door of our apartment might be blown off by explosives; the verbal threat by the IDF at a checkpoint that we would be permanently separated from our children; and more.

In this paper, violence refers to human destructive physical or psychological force intended to hurt or kill someone. The prevalence of such violence in all human societies is a conundrum to secular anthropologists but explained by Christianity as the outworking of the corruption of human nature that began with humanity's fall into sin. Shortly after this fall Cain murdered Abel (Gn 4). Violence lurks in the corrupted human heart. In seeking peace and justice, it is insufficient for a society to claim that their violence is justified, or that by murdering less than their antagonists they are more just. Rather, what is required is deep national repentance. Such repentance seems chimerical, but we find it in the unlikely example of Assyria's response to hearing the warning of the reluctant prophet Jonah (Jon 3).

The incident described above—on the road to Ramallah—is an apt metaphor for mission in conflict areas. Mission in contexts of violent conflict poses unexpected risks and unpleasant surprises. The cross-cultural missionary as an agent of the mission of God in such a context may very well experience isolation from customary support systems. To find a road to relevant and meaningful ministry, Christian workers may need to leave the path of popularly held assumptions concerning the context in which they serve. In fact, as this brief discussion of the experiences of missionaries in contexts of conflict underscores, mission in such contexts brings unexpected complexity to every dimension of the mission task: the preparation and ongoing care of mission workers, the formation and delivery of relevant and effective contextual witness, and the complications that arise for the missionary when the conflict affects the home church.

⁶ The Second Intifada—in Arabic, the “shaking off” or “uprising”—which occurred from approximately October 2000 to late 2004, was an often-violent reaction by Palestinian society against the ongoing occupation of the Palestinian Territories and loss of their human rights, including freedom of travel and access to medical care and education. In addition, the land they had intended would be part of the future State of Palestine they lost to the expansion of Israeli settlements.

Important questions to explore that arise from the effect of conflicts on missions include: What should be components in the training of missionaries who intend to serve in conflict zones? What resources do they need to prepare for the spiritual, cultural, theological, and strategic dimensions of their service in conflict zones? What are the factors that must be considered in developing a contextual witness? What are the implications for the missionary if their home churches become entangled with a distant conflict to the extent that the mission worker experiences some degree of alienation? How should a missionary and sending agency measure the success of their efforts?

In discussing these large questions as concisely as possible, I will draw upon important missiological writing as well as the experiences of the following persons: my wife, Karen, and myself in the Palestinian Territories; veteran missionaries Luke and Dorothy “Dot” Beidler, former Mennonite missionaries in Vietnam and Indonesia; and Barbara Rowe, a long-time missionary in El Salvador, first with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and now with Christ for the City International.

As these are American missionaries reflecting on their *own* experiences, their comments necessarily reflect a Western perspective. However, each missionary also draws attention to the critical steps taken by their national co-workers to support them. Such steps were steps of faith and grace by those co-workers, since the missionaries in each context could be associated with the nation—the United States—that was a source of, or a contributing factor to, the conflict that oppressed their lives.

Facing Up to a World in Conflict

The pervasive violence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is but one example of the conflict and upheaval that is ubiquitous in the world, such as the bloodshed of the apparently unwarranted shooting deaths of African Americans by police officers; the expulsion of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar; the abduction of female Christian students by Islamic extremists in northern Nigeria; and the ongoing wars in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq that have drained the US military and cost thousands of American lives. Conflicts may be driven by economic disparity and social stagnation, gender oppression, ethnic tensions, religious intolerance, and national rivalries, among other forces.⁷

Some conflicts are obvious and widely known; others are more hidden and insidious. The former is exemplified by the Palestinian and Israeli conflict today

⁷ Peter Maurer, “What are the triggers for global conflicts, and what can we do about them?” Speech given by the president of the International Committee for the Red Cross, at the 19th Annual Asian Investment Conference in Hong Kong, April 8, 2016, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/what-are-triggers-global-conflicts-and-what-can-we-do-about-them>, accessed December 16, 2018.

and the Vietnam War (1955–75); the latter by social and economic structures that engender brutal poverty such as in the Philippines and Gaza.⁸

Agents of the mission of God—wherever they are geographically located in mission service and regardless of the primary focus of their ministry—will most likely find themselves encountering significant conflict, and, to one extent or another, be obliged by necessity or conscience to respond to it. Fully considering and responding to the realities of mission in conflict areas is critical for missionaries and sending churches if they are to be effective.

Awareness of conflict and its implications for missions is not important just for mission to be effective; such awareness also is vital in equipping the North American church for a more meaningful engagement with North American society. Both locally and denominationally, a church’s “wokeness” to conflict and conviction to be on the “right” side in the conflict establishes its authenticity for many—and especially for millennials.⁹ From this perspective, a heightened awareness of social injustice, and particularly oppression of the weak, is a mark of the real Christian life. Christians should do what they can to bring reconciliation and peace in places of conflict, even if this means merely posting information on social media to inform others.

Mennonite communities have long worked for social justice, peace, and reconciliation and are well positioned to respond to a world of heightened conflict and to millennial Christians seeking Christian communities that are living out their faith. MCC has indeed maintained a ministry in the Palestinian Territories that has drawn attention to the effects of the occupation.¹⁰ Such an effort to promote social justice is an important witness to the Palestinian Muslim community, which often associates local Palestinian Christian ministry—especially Protestant ministry—with American Christian Zionism.

8 Working within these two conflicts has occupied the majority of the adult lives of my wife and myself. We resided in the Philippines from 1987 to 1998 and on the West Bank from 1998 to 2005. We are now “non-residential missionaries” based in the United States and traveling several times annually to both of the ongoing ministries in which we have served.

9 This I have discussed in-depth in *Millennials and the Mission of God: A Prophetic Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017) with my co-author, Carolyn C. Wason, a millennial.

10 See “Palestine and Israel,” MCC, accessed January 12, 2019, <https://mcc.org/learn/where/middle-east/palestine-israel>.

Conflict and the Missionary Experience: A Spirituality for Mission

Missionaries share the frailties of their brothers and sisters in Christ in their home or host churches. The missiologist David J. Bosch quotes mission historian Stephen Neill:

What [Stephen] Neill says about missionaries has been true of missionaries of all times, from the great apostle who boasted in his weakness to those who still call themselves “missionaries”:

“They have on the whole been a feeble folk, not very wise, not very holy, not very patient. They have broken most of the commandments and fallen into every conceivable mistake.”¹¹

When ordinary people serve in extraordinary circumstances, they will necessarily be stretched in their spiritual lives. Spirituality for mission has unfortunately been one of the neglected areas of missiology in recent decades. As I wrote in *Learning from the Least*, a concern for strategy, cross-cultural skills, and contextualization has instead been given priority.¹² It has been assumed that missionaries would simply be good Christians. This simplistic assumption has left missionaries ill-prepared to face the unique spiritual challenges of serving in the midst of violence in which they will experience vulnerability and fearfulness; the temptation to be caught in the riptides of hatred that fuel the conflict; and, for some, the unpleasant experience of their home church’s rejection—to some degree—of the views they have gained in their mission service.

My wife and I were shaken by the violence we encountered as new missionaries in the Palestinian West Bank. In October 2000, Palestinians lashed out violently, venting their frustrations with the oppressive occupation by Israel of the Palestinian Territories and the continual loss of the land that Palestinians expected would be part of a future sovereign state. The four-year conflict known as the Second Intifada (Uprising) pitted militant Palestinian groups against the Israeli Defense Forces. Clashes were deadly and pervasive. Every village was affected. Living on the West Bank in the Palestinian village of Bir Zeit north of Ramallah, my wife and I with our youngest daughter experienced the distancing effect that the violence of the conflict had on our relationship with our friends in the United States. When we most needed spiritual support, such as words of encouragement and prayers, we found it least forthcoming. We found ourselves increasingly isolated after the terrorist attacks in New York City on September 11, 2001. At that time, not only did a

11 Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin, 1966), 222, quoted in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 365.

12 Bush, *Learning from the Least*, 27.

wave of Islamophobia sweep the United States in the aftermath of the attacks, the label of terrorist was also widely applied to Palestinians and other Arab peoples.

Jesus promised, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (Jn 14:27).¹³ That peace, though, was not so easy to realize. Crossing military checkpoints was always an uncertain experience. When the Israeli military searched our apartment building, we were deeply fearful. Would a clash break out right on our doorstep? After two years of the Intifada, we decided our daughter had been exposed to too much violence, and she transferred to a Quaker boarding school near Philadelphia for her final two years of high school. My wife and I persevered for two more years of the Intifada to its end in 2005.

During those years, we were pressed into a deeper relationship with Christ that transformed our spiritual lives. As Evangelicals, much of our spirituality had been formed around external practices of lively worship, fellowship, evangelism, and such. In the conflict, we were stripped of support for this externally driven spirituality. Travel was dangerous from Jerusalem, and even at times into Ramallah, so we were limited in our ability to access Protestant congregations that would have reinforced our external spirituality. Our identity as Evangelicals meant nothing to our friends in the local Roman Catholic and Orthodox congregations. Increasingly, we were reduced to a quieter, more internal spirituality as we worshipped in liturgical churches and learned to embrace an identity as merely Christians, encouraged by the persistence in hope of our Christian neighbors.

This journey was unsettling. Were we backsliding, we wondered? As we reflected on our experience, we concluded that far from losing our grip, we were pressing deeper into fellowship with Christ Jesus. This conclusion was supported by the encouragement of the example of our Christian neighbors, co-workers in the Palestinian Bible Society, and even converts from Islam, who demonstrated a life of servanthood in love to us. As I describe in *Learning from the Least*, the spirituality of non-Western Christians—and specifically, for us, that of Palestinian Christians—gave us fresh insights into the crucifixion of Christ Jesus.

13 All Scripture references are taken from the New International Version.

As we were experiencing a stripping away of sources of spiritual support—friends in the States, even some family, and access to other Christians in Jerusalem—I was drawn to the apostle Paul’s account in Philippians 2:5–10 of the stripping away of all things from Jesus:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth . . .*

Whereas we were experiencing an involuntary emptying of superficial securities, Christ was voluntarily emptying himself of the prerogatives of glory, even the prerogatives of position and personal safety. In the crucifixion, Christ embraced the vulnerability of the human experience. My idea of spirituality had formerly embraced an ethereality formed by the apparent unworldliness of the Spirit of God. The incarnation, however, makes clear that true spirituality does not shun the human experience in this world; on the contrary, it is defined by it.

The incarnation of Christ—unto death on the cross, no less—affirms the value of humanity to God. From this perspective, to be spiritual is to enter into the joys and sufferings of the human experience of one’s neighbors. War dehumanizes: I often heard in the conflict either that Palestinians or Israelis were—euphemistically speaking—less than human. The spirituality of Christ does the opposite; it affirms people’s humanity. Love is saying to one’s enemy: You are human; you are my sister; you are my brother.

It is well that the biblical story begins with creation. In the midst of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, we began to realize that the gospel begins not with the proclamation that “God loves you” but rather with “You are a human,

created in the image of God.” This journey to a transformed spirituality proved to be vital for us as we sought to develop a meaningful contextual ministry.

Mennonite Missionaries in Vietnam and El Salvador

Luke and Dot Beidler were Mennonite missionaries in Vietnam with Eastern Mennonite Missions from 1966 to 1975 and are well acquainted with the complexities of missions in areas of conflict. During their years of service, they taught English to Vietnamese students in their home as well as in universities in Saigon and Can Tho, about an hour south of Saigon. The Beidlers with their children persevered in their service through the height of the Vietnam War and all of its uncertainties. By volunteering as caregivers on a flight evacuating Vietnamese children, they were able to depart on one of the last flights out of the country before the fall of Saigon. Luke says:

Just our daily living among the people and hearing the stories of the war made us feel very vulnerable. We had a young man who was in the ARVN military. He was in the army. On leave, he would come to Can Tho where we lived and stay overnight with us. His stories were out of the ordinary. He wanted to stay overnight in our home. We didn't know if we should stay awake to guard our home. We didn't know whom to trust.¹⁴

Dot adds that in spite of the vulnerability they felt, they enjoyed a certain spiritual assurance. At the same time, however, they had to contend with family in the United States who questioned their decision to stay in Vietnam during the war:

Our parents worried that we stayed there with our kids. We were not plagued with concern for our physical well-being, because so many other people had no choice in being there; we were identifying with them. We felt whatever happened to them we would experience it too as part of a bigger story, as part of God's purpose.

Barbara Rowe has been a missionary in El Salvador periodically during a period of thirty-four years.¹⁵ She served with Mennonite Central Committee during the Salvadoran Civil War in the years 1984, 1987, and 1990 to 1995. During these years, she was seeking to support Christians in El Salvador,

¹⁴ Luke and Dorothy Beidler, personal interviews, June 25 and July 2, 2018. These interviews occurred in the Beidlers' home in Norristown, Pennsylvania, and at Methacton Mennonite Church near Norristown. All quotations from the Beidlers are taken from these two interviews with their permission.

¹⁵ Barbara Rowe, personal interview via social media, July 11, 2018; during the interview, I was in Pennsylvania, and Barbara Rowe was in El Salvador. All quotations from Rowe are taken from this interview with her permission. Their father was the noted late Mennonite missiological anthropologist Paul G. Hiebert, who is cited in this essay.

who were working to protect human rights against the oppressive Salvadoran government. Rowe returned to El Salvador in 2013. Since then, she has served with Christ for the City International, trying to protect young people from joining street gangs, and working in the youth detention centers to evangelize active gang members.¹⁶ During the Salvadoran Civil War (1980–1992),¹⁷ she said:

I was in several dangerous situations. Mainly I felt threatened from the Salvadoran government, who spied on Americans who were against the United States' support of the Salvadoran government and its repressive policies. At the time, there were paramilitary forces who were called death squads. They were paid by military and government officials. There had been pastors who had been picked up and murdered by these death squads.

Conflict and the Missionary Experience: Resisting the Riptides of Hatred

Cast into the cauldron of hatred and conflict, missionaries may yield to the temptation to hate the oppressor—and in so doing become part of the problem. My wife and I were subject to some of the same ill-treatment by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) as was directed toward our Palestinian neighbors and friends. It was difficult to watch them being bullied and hurt. Even with our attempt to grow in a spirituality that affirmed the humanity of the “other,” it was difficult not to be reactive. It was our Palestinian Christian friends who, by their honesty and courage to forgive, led us out of the dangerous temptation of bitterness and resentment. Labib Madnanat, a leader in the Palestinian Bible Society, helped us with this honest confession about his own journey: “As a typical Arab Christian, I grew up hating Muslims and Jews. I needed two more conversions: to love Muslims and to love Jews.”¹⁸ His daily life demonstrated that he had received such conversions: he was a rare Palestinian Christian who would pick up Israeli settler hitchhikers on the West Bank and greet

16 For more information on Christ for the City International, see <https://cfci.org/about/aboutus>, accessed July 12, 2018.

17 The Salvadoran Civil War was a conflict between the military controlled government of El Salvador and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a coalition, or “umbrella organization,” of several left-wing groups. The coalition was characterized as being communist by the US government. See “Salvadoran Civil War,” Wikipedia, accessed July 12, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvadoran_Civil_War.

18 Personal interview recorded in the author’s *Learning from the Least*, 98.

the Muslim elders of Palestinian villages as long-lost uncles. We needed to be converted from hatred again and again to such a love without boundaries.

Dot Beidler acknowledges how unprepared she and Luke were to face the realities of life in the violence of Vietnam:

We were naïve as young missionaries. We were recruited in 1966 by Eastern Mennonite Missions during our last year at Eastern Mennonite College [now University]. At that time, the civil rights movement was getting started. We understood a bit about war protest. We wanted to have a peace presence. Prejudices were pretty high in Vietnam against the American effort. All these young American men were being sent to war. We saw our going as a counter-effort, to go and bring a loving and compassionate presence.

Concerning their spiritual frailty and tendency to fall into hate during the intense violence and abuse of the Vietnam War, Luke Beidler also says:

We had personal experiences of questioning who could be trusted. We often felt anger at the American effort. For example, once we were on a scooter following a truck of American soldiers. When it stopped, we saw them pushing motorbikes of Vietnamese off the road into the water. Seeing Americans acting like this was hurtful. We also pitied young Americans sent to do fighting in Vietnam.

Sometimes we laughed so we wouldn't start to hate. With teammates on the mission team, we got together and talked to help each other. Sometimes we sent articles back to our mission board. We made statements of protest at different times in the war. We had to ask forgiveness when we were not justified in our rash judgments. We just couldn't control anything in Vietnam. It was easy to criticize and blame somebody, but many people were contributing to the problem.

The greatest spiritual resource for us was the missionary team of five or six couples. To be able to get together with them, to pray together, to play games, to talk, and share what we were experiencing supported us.

During the Salvadoran War, one of Barbara Rowe's responsibilities was to translate the reports of human rights abuses perpetrated by the Salvadoran government. Describing that task, she reports:

I actually became physically sick reading them. It was very sickening to read what people could do to other people. The government did not have a personal face, so I was not tempted to hate, but anger toward the situation? Yes, I would be very angry.

Recently with the work with gangs there has been a person whom I knew who intended to do harm to me and my household. It involved a direct threat. I definitely felt hatred toward this specific person. I asked God to remove this hatred from me. I believe that God has answered my prayers.

Asked what she did to try to maintain her spiritual health—her peace of mind and love toward others—Rowe states:

Prayer and fasting. I have become a great believer in fasting. I was drawn to Jesus's statement to his disciples after their failure to exorcise a demon, that "this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting" (Mt 17:21).¹⁹ Why? I don't know. But it is something I have learned. I asked God to replace hatred with His presence. God cannot be present where there is hatred.

Mission in conflict zones has an intense emotional and spiritual impact on the missionary. The harmful effect of the conflict may be with the missionaries and their children for years after they have left their mission assignment.²⁰ Sent to be peacemakers, missionaries are in great danger of being pulled into

¹⁹ Since the NIV is the source of the Bible quotations in this article, it should be noted that this verse is placed in the footnotes with the explanation, "Some manuscripts include here words similar to Mark 9:29."

²⁰ Discretion dictates confidentiality about the effects of my family's living in a traumatic context; suffice it to say that we have firsthand experience with the reality of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

partisan biases and prejudices. Somehow the missionary must find a way to be renewed in the love of Jesus for all the peoples in the conflict. This task is made more difficult by both the worry—or indifference or hostility—of extended family at home.

Sources of spiritual strength may be found in people who have been victims in the conflict and in colleagues who are close at hand and experiencing the conflict with you, as well as through the direct influence of the Word and Spirit of God. In any event, the spiritual struggles of the conflict will certainly heighten the challenge of developing and implementing meaningful and effective contextual ministry.

Conflict and the Missionary Experience: As Unexpected Prophets at Home

A certain romanticism colors the global Christian mission enterprise. It is expressed most frequently and succinctly with the use of the term “mission field,” in such phrases as “The Lord has called me to the mission field,” or, “There are many challenges living on the mission field.” This term is no longer used in missiological writing, because it has long been recognized that the West—America . . . yes, even Pennsylvania!—is deeply broken spiritually and in need of the redemption and healing that is the goal of the mission of God. In short, the mission field is not “over there.”

Nevertheless, the term and its attendant worldview persists. Consequently, important and timely discussions concerning mission in conflict zones may be colored by this perspective. Conflict zones are reckoned as “over there”; they are tied to a specific, remote context. As Christians, we may incorrectly calculate that because we are outside that (distant) context we are not connected to it. This sense of discontinuity has the illusory effect of reducing the conflict to a manageable scale, like a jigsaw puzzle of the image of the globe that we can handle, shift on the table, and find the missing pieces to it; in other words, the conflict may be objectively analyzed, plans made, solutions dispatched as if selling cars.²¹ From this perspective, missionaries go into the conflict zone, give a witness for Christ pertinent to that context, and return home where they can rest, disentangled from the conflict. It is popularly understood that

²¹ This approach, especially in American and European missions, is what the missiologist Samuel Escobar characterizes as “managerial missiology”—the application of corporate management principles to the mission task, which ignores the complexity of mission, not to mention the role of the Spirit of God, who does not work according to our strategies (*The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003], 167).

their witness as missionaries concerning this conflict is limited to the remote context.

This false sense of discontinuity from conflict areas is generally undelineated—a long-held perspective, a holdover from an era in which the world was divided into the Christian West and the heathen rest. This was also an era in which it was understood that witness was primarily evangelistic. Although the tidal wave of globalization has reduced the world to a global village in all areas of our life—my phone has parts manufactured in China, Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea, and Singapore—the culture and worldview of many local churches are still formed by an era of great cultural divide between peoples.

For the missionary, this persistent erroneous perspective that the conflicts to which they are called are limited to the “mission field” is contradicted by the reality that distant conflicts may well entangle the missionaries’ home communities. This was certainly true of the Vietnam War—which polarized Americans—and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict especially after the 9/11 attacks. The deep firsthand experiences the missionary may have of injustices in the remote conflict may place them in a difficult situation, as their home communities may have a very different perspective of who is the oppressor in the conflict. On a return visit to the United States, in front of a five-thousand-member congregation, I was introduced as ministering to “Philistines,” with the pejorative connotation fully intended. And while I was delivering the Sunday sermon in a large congregation in Denver, a man stood up and started yelling that I was promulgating propaganda.

Luke Beidler describes similar painful encounters:

When we came home and told people like how we saw the situation, people were shocked. We tried to give a straightforward witness, but we had ugly confrontations with people who merged God and country. We shared that all Vietnamese want peace; communism is not the big concern. One stood up and said, “If you talk like that, you are against God.”

With tears in his eyes, Beidler advises congregations concerning their missionaries:

Listen to them. Listen to what they are experiencing firsthand. Pay attention to what they are advocating and calling for and asking you to pray about. Trust your missionaries. They should have insights that politicians don’t always get.

Concerning mission agencies, he adds:

There were churches here that listened to us, but sometimes the mission agency heard something (from the missionary) and then they passed it on slightly differently because they were trying to protect the level of support. Mission agencies should listen to the boots on the ground and tell as much

truth as they can.

Barbara Rowe had been involved in the Sanctuary movement in her church in Seattle, Washington, before her first mission trips to El Salvador. The Sanctuary movement gave refuge to Salvadorans who were coming to the United States illegally to escape the violence of the civil war in their country. This movement was controversial in the United States, so Barbara was accustomed to opposition before her mission involvement in El Salvador. What she found most painful was when Salvadoran refugees were opposed by some American Christians:

One woman, a Salvadoran refugee who had endured horrible torture, spoke in a church that we visited. She described being tortured, having her fingernails pulled out, and being left for dead. One of the people in the audience during the question-and-answer time after her talk asked why, if her nails had been pulled out, did she now have nails? He was essentially saying, “I don’t believe you.” It was very cruel. The refugee was really hurt by this response to her open vulnerability in sharing.

When the mission worker is willing to speak honestly from her or his experience, even though there may be some rejection, other hearts will be open to receive new insights not only of the conflict but also of the vastness of the love of Jesus. Once, after I described how a Muslim who had been part of former Palestinian president Yasser Arafat’s personal guard, had come to faith in Christ, a pro-Israeli Texas farmer shook my hand and said that he could listen all day long to such witnesses of Christ’s faithfulness to reach by the Spirit of God beyond the limits of our love to the “other.”

Conflict and the Missionary Experience: Contextualization—Making the Gospel Relevant

The complexity of a conflict is often a surprise to missionaries. As a cross-cultural worker lives in a context of violence, they will soon see that though one side may appear to be the worst actor in conflict, evil is perpetrated by both sides. Also, conflicts are not stagnant. Those caught up in the conflict may take new positions and develop new alliances. The mission worker must constantly be an anthropologist, studying the cultural shifts in the conflict. I was surprised to learn, for instance, that even in the worst days of the Intifada, a strong percentage of Palestinians stated they were willing to be citizens of Israel if they could then have a normal life.²² Cultural stereotypes must continually be

²² David Pollock, “Half of Jerusalem’s Residents Would Prefer Israeli to Palestinian Citizenship,” The Washington Institute, August 21, 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/half-of-jerusalem-palestinians-would-prefer-israeli-to-palestinian-citizen>.

debunked in one's thinking in order to appreciate the subtleties involved in a conflict. To be a student of the cultural context and the contributing factors of a conflict is also critical if we are to bring meaningful, relevant ministry—a process known as contextualization.

Luke and Dot Beidler had to work through the complexity of living and serving in the Vietnam War in order to bring effective ministry. Luke states:

I think our expectations were typical missionary—that we were going to be part of the mission of God in some way. We weren't well prepared, but trusting that God would use us in some small way as a part of a much larger mission of God.

The difficulty of our assignment became much more apparent as we began learning the language. The missionary work was more complicated than just taking what we knew of the Lord and his word and sharing it. Cross-culturally we had to do the homework. Where had Vietnamese culture come from?

The war was even more difficult. As Americans, we were entering an old culture, a much more refined culture than the American dream. The American presence militarily complicated everything for us as American missionaries. We were identified by the local Vietnamese as being with the American effort in ways that we didn't want to be. We came thinking of ourselves as gospel bearers—"good news people." But there was so much bad news going on. The Vietnamese people were being divided. Their culture was being attacked by the United States. Teaching students who had different loyalties had the effect of showing us that both sides had to be served. The relationships we established—sometimes with both sides—were very stretching. To stay with it and hear both sides is what we had to do.

We were often tested and baffled by how to share the biblical message, to share the gospel in a different culture in a time of war. We read the Bible through new eyes because we sensed the cultural situation was very different. Our interpretations of many things changed. Rather than preaching a lot—although the mission team did end up establishing a Mennonite church—we sought to bring a witness through presence, through our service by teaching English. We struggled with that. Was it right? Wrong? Was it faithfully representing the gospel? Each of us missionaries struggled with this question. We struggled with how to approach the Vietnamese culture and the history we were living through.

Dot Beidler adds:

The Vietnamese thought that all Americans were Christians, and so they associated the US military's actions with Christianity. So, we felt it was important to demonstrate the love of Jesus through service.

In order to respond meaningfully to their context, the Beidlers met a need and desire of the Vietnamese people to learn the English language. Barbara Rowe makes the important point that the activities of their mission during the Salvadoran Civil War were decided by the Salvadoran Christians:

During the war, there was a lot of crisis management. The ministry was accompanying the local church. So, we let them determine what the ministry should be, because it was their context. They were the ones to suffer the consequences.

For my wife and myself serving with the Palestinian Bible Society, our task was to establish a coffee house that would reach out to students of Bir Zeit University. As the Intifada raged, the question we faced was, What would possibly make the gospel meaningful in a context of hatred and violence, where religion had become hijacked by ethnic and political loyalties? We felt that the student center could bring a meaningful witness of Christ if we were willing to empty ourselves of superfluous religiosity—including our predilection toward overt evangelism. Our spiritual journey led us to become convicted of the need to reaffirm the basic humanity of all who came into Living Stones Student Center in Bir Zeit.

With this emphasis, Muslim students, who comprised ninety percent of the university student population, felt especially comfortable. The local Christians had difficulty understanding the lack of overt Christian symbolism and the presence of so many Muslims. “Are you a Muslim center,” they asked?

Trying to forge a neutral ground in a conflict is a challenge. It can be easily misunderstood or resented as minimizing the concerns of one community or the other. The long-term fruit, though, is worth the effort. Last night in Living Stones, the Christian students cooked a sumptuous meal for the Muslim students to break their daily Ramadan fast. Christians and Muslims having fellowship together, affirming the value of one another’s humanity . . .

Conflict and the Missionary Experience: Developing a Theology of the Mission of God

A mission worker will be severely limited if she or he approaches mission service in a conflict zone without developing a robust theology of the nature of Christian mission, of contextualization, and of culture. Christian mission is the participation of the church in the mission of God; understanding the mission of God, therefore, is fundamental to all mission activity, especially for those serving in contexts of conflict.

The mission of God is God’s full-orbed redemptive and restorative work in the world. As I often comment to university students, the goal of the mission of God is to fix everything that is broken in the world: our inner spiritual lives, communities, national societies, the natural environment, etcetera. David

Bosch emphasizes in *Transforming Mission* that mission involves “the whole church bringing the whole gospel to the whole world.” There is no area of life that escapes the mission of God. We cannot divide the world and service into “spiritual” versus “secular.”²³ The cosmic and holistic scope of the mission of God is reflected in Paul’s description of God’s redemptive work through Christ:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col 1:19–20)

Jesus taught that God’s transformative work should be so broad and deep that the earth and all that is in it will reflect the glory of God’s heavenly kingdom: “So then, this is how you should pray: . . . Your kingdom come; your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10).

It is fortunate that the mission of God is so wide and deep and high, affecting every sphere of life, because everything needs fixing. As Bob Dylan sang, everything is broken, from bottles to dishes, to words.²⁴

As intense conflict will wound society in a multitude of ways; consequently, mission in places of conflict must take many forms, bringing the restoration of God to every broken aspect of a society. For example, a conflict may entangle political forces on a national level, restrict the humane treatment of the weaker “other,” intensify the plight of the sick or the homeless, or hinder access to food, clean water, etcetera. Mission agencies may focus on specific areas of brokenness and need such as the International Justice Mission, which addresses social injustices and related legal issues;²⁵ Mennonite Central Committee, which concentrates on relief and development; or Youth with a Mission, which is more evangelistic in its focus.²⁶ Ultimately, a missional response to intense conflict must be holistic, bringing the fullness of the mission of God. Such fullness, in turn, necessitates the inclusion in mission of a wide range of personal gifts, callings, and mission organizations across denominations.

It is worth noting that when evangelical Christians encounter a description of the mission of God that includes the social dimension, they often refer to it pejoratively as the “social gospel,” non-conversionist mission that emphasizes social justice *instead of* evangelism.²⁷ From this perspective, evangelism and

23 Bosch, *Transforming*, 423–24.

24 Bob Dylan, “Everything is Broken,” 1989 Special Rider Music.

25 See <http://www.ijm.org/>, accessed on July 7, 2018.

26 See <https://www.ywam.org>, accessed July 9, 2018.

27 Kayla Kolotshy, “John MacArthur Claims Social Justice is Threat to Gospel, Russel Moore Responds,” *Christian Headlines*, September 14 2018, <https://www.christianheadlines.com/blog/john-macarthur-social-justice-threat-gospel-russel-moore-responds.html>, accessed February 23, 2019.

social justice are mutually exclusive pursuits. For example, the journalist Cal Thomas recently wrote, “Religious liberals long ago stopped preaching a gospel of personal salvation in favor of a social gospel that is more social than gospel.”²⁸ Conversely, Christians more oriented to social action as mission often regard evangelism of the adherents of other religions as nothing more than present-day colonialism that seeks to privilege the Western person, ministry, etcetera at the cost of non-Western people.

In response, it is important to emphasize that pitting evangelism against social action—contending which has priority—is an erroneous dichotomy. The verbal message of Jesus was intertwined organically with his acts of mercy. Whether Jesus emphasized one or the other, or both in particular contexts, he ministered *life* (Mt 14:13–21, Jn 4)! So, ministry in contexts of violence must allow for both social action and the message of God’s salvation in Christ. In a context of violence, there may indeed be an even greater urgency for evangelism while not neglecting social action, in view of the drastic needs of people in contexts of violence where access to education, medical care, transportation, and so on may be blocked.

Conflict and the Missionary Experience: Developing a Theology of Contextualization

Just as developing a theology of the mission of God is vital, so is cultivating a theology of contextualization—the process of making the message and ministry of Jesus culturally relevant in a particular context. Aspects of contextualization continue to engender extensive missiological research. A critical question in doing contextualization is where the first decisions should be made. Should they begin *outside* of the mission context or from *within* it? What should be the primary sources for developing meaningful contextual mission? Should contextualization begin with the study of biblical scripture, or should it take its cues from the culture of the conflict?

The missiologist Stephen B. Bevans in his important *Models of Contextual Theology* articulates five paradigms in developing contextual mission.²⁹ These paradigms are characterized by the degree to which authority is given to scripture and tradition or to culture and experience as sources of information in contextualization. Bevans suggests that the “synthetic model” is the most successful paradigm of contextualization.³⁰ It attempts to synthesize the input of the Bible, personal experience, the local culture, and insights from

²⁸ Cal Thomas, “The Corruption of Faith,” *The Washington Times*, November 13, 2017.

²⁹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), *passim*.

³⁰ Bevans, *Models*, 89.

action for justice in doing contextualization. This is a tall order that demands a high tolerance for holding different ideas in tension. Paul Hiebert in his *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* refers to such an effort as “critical contextualization,” in which the local culture is neither accepted uncritically nor rejected out of hand when it seems to contradict our interpretation of biblical principles.³¹

Another important direction for theological enquiry in contextualization is developing a clear theology of culture. One cannot give authority to a local culture as a source of information in contextualization if one has an intractable opposition to a given culture, considering it to be only sinful. Similarly, if we deem a culture to be perfectly in harmony with the kingdom of God—that God is just like us—this will be problematic.

From more than thirty years of mission experience, I’ve observed that most missionaries, and even mission agencies, have done very little work to understand their theology of culture. The classic discussion of this topic is H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*.³² Niebuhr also develops five paradigms of how Christians have answered the “enduring problem” of how a Christian should relate to culture if they are faithful to Christ. Without some basic agreement concerning a theology of culture, significant divisions may occur between sending churches, mission agencies, and mission workers.

Similarly, it is important to understand the ethics of a particular culture. Although certain values may be shared with other cultures, how those values are expressed may be very different in each culture. In a situation of conflict, this difference in how values are enfolded, so to speak, may cause tremendous confusion. The peace that we envision may look very different from what the participants may have in mind in a conflict in a cultural setting other than the United States. And reconciliation also may be expressed entirely differently. Bernard T. Adeney in *Strange Virtues: Ethics in a Multicultural World* says:

Christians believe that what is good is determined by the will of God, not by culture. The goal of ethics is not cultural conformity but transformation into the likeness of Christ. All Christians in every culture are invited to have the mind of Christ, to humble themselves and be servants to others (Phil 2).

But how virtues are expressed and how they are prioritized may be very different in different cultures.³³

31 Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1985), 171.

32 H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), *passim*.

33 Bernard T. Adeney, *Strange Virtues: Ethics in a Multicultural World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 15. In chapter 10 of this book, Adeney provides a com-

In this matter, again, the agent of mission must be a student of the culture in which they serve. Luke S. Martin, a Mennonite missionary in Vietnam contemporaneous to the Beidlers, subsequently wrote the invaluable book *A Vietnam Presence: Mennonites in Vietnam during the American War*, in which he describes his experience of learning cultural ethics from the Vietnamese:

While we missionaries sensed our calling to guide the believers in the way of Jesus, we were also learning from them. In a letter home, I told how Tranh had been summoned home to Nha Trang because his eleven-year-old daughter was at the point of death. Some relative had given her medicine, which caused severe hemorrhaging. She fortunately recovered. When we asked Tranh what medicine had been given, he said he did not ask because he did not want to make the woman feel badly. Such forgiveness! The deed was done and could not be undone, so why probe and further hurt the relative who was already feeling badly about it.³⁴

Cultural studies are important for understanding the values of a culture. After the Beidlers' first three years as associate missionaries, they returned to the United States for one year, during which time Luke pursued graduate studies in cultural anthropology. The Beidlers said the studies proved most helpful when they returned for five more years of service as full missionaries.

Another vitally important aspect of developing a relevant and meaningful mission in a conflict zone is to have an historical perspective not only of the conflict but also of the history of Christian mission. Centuries ago, Christians encountered the same difficulties in mission as today and developed unique contextual responses—the fourth-century Desert Fathers in their Egyptian desert hermitages, the vital missions of Celtic Christianity from the fifth century onward, the contextualization of Francis Xavier in China in the sixteenth century, Ludwig von Zinzendorf and the Moravians in the eighteenth century, the first aggressive Protestant mission, the Quaker John Woolman and his efforts to abolish slavery in the nineteenth century, and the living veteran missionaries today, who carry decades of experience and insight collectively in their memories.³⁵

So, studying models of contextualization, theologies of Christ and culture, multicultural ethics, and mission history will provide the mission worker invaluable resources with which to enter a conflict zone for the sake of Christ.

elling illustration of the relationship between personal ethics and social action.

34 Luke S. Martin, *A Vietnam Presence: Mennonites in Vietnam during the American War* (Morgantown, PA: Masthof, 2016), 179.

35 There are negative examples of mission in conflict zones as well, which are also instructive in their failure. Such would include the militarized mission of the western and eastern Crusades in the 11th through 15th centuries, and missions that became entangled with colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries.

My wife formerly attended a Bible study in New Mexico with Billy Graham's sister-in-law, Rosa Montgomery. Rosa had been raised as a missionary child in China. One of her favorite adages was that whereas it is often said God doesn't need our education . . . he doesn't need our ignorance either!

After all our study, all our preparation, all our efforts to be contextually sensitive, we finally, though, must stand on our convictions of truth forged in the fires of personal spiritual journey fueled by the Word of God, the Christian community, the mysterious revelation brought by the Spirit of God, and experiences of human life. Luke Beidler declares:

Some students who wanted Vietnam to be unified had sympathies for the liberation of the south. Some were supportive of the South Vietnamese government. Everybody was trying to figure everybody out. We were not in favor of the war effort. We believed that Vietnamese overall wanted peace more than anything else. We spoke the truth as we saw it. If we were going to be shot, we wanted to be shot for the right reason.

Conflict and the Missionary Experience: Is There a Measure for Success?

When a contextual ministry is developed, when familiar patterns of ministry are abandoned through faith—as the Beidlers did in letting go of their evangelistic impulses to focus on teaching English—it is difficult to avoid the question of how to measure success in one's mission. Just as a context of conflict affects methods of mission and the spirituality of the missionary, so it also affects how one's efficacy is evaluated. Luke and Dot Beidler describe their concept of success as not being measured by numbers of Vietnamese converted to Christ—though they rejoiced when this occurred—but in the quality of the relationships they developed. Luke says:

We were all tempted to think our efforts were too small. But we were more concerned about doing what was right than if it was successful. We measured our success by our relationships with Vietnamese, with those we were doing Bible study with. Not necessarily with the numbers of persons who became Christians. But more whether they were able to feel and hear the good news in our times together, singing peace songs and sometimes gospel songs. We rejoiced when there was in-gathering, when there was a change of attitudes on the part of our students. Occasionally someone said because of what you said we will become Christians. We could count the people who made authentic choices to become Jesus followers to about ten in nine years. But hopefully lots of people became closer to the possibility of believing the good news about Jesus. Jesus was a hero to many people who were Buddhists or traditional Vietnamese. The person of Jesus was always attractive because of the life he lived and the truth of the gospel.

Similarly, on the West Bank we could not count the number of converts as significant, but during the years of the Intifada hundreds of students took copies of the New Testament, desiring to know more about the teachings of Jesus. Also, Living Stones Student Center became a resource for all sectors of the society. We launched summer camps for youth in remote villages, developed arts programs for the local schools, conducted conferences that brought together government leaders to discuss religion and peace efforts, and more. Perhaps the best statement of the value of these efforts to share the hope of Jesus was a parent of a Muslim child in one of our summer camps who said, “Thank you for keeping our children from activism [throwing stones at Israeli soldiers, which could result in imprisonment and a permanent mark on their record].”

In the violence of the Second Intifada, though, these efforts seemed so small. Hatred and violence raged on. Ultimately, mission in contexts of violence has a prophetic quality. Such mission points by its demonstration, however feebly, of God’s righteousness to the future reign of the kingdom of God—that the peace and righteousness of God, so slightly seen in society today, will one day fill the earth “as the waters cover the sea” (Hb 2:14). Christian mission declares by faith that evil will not reign, that violence will bow its knee before the Prince of Peace. Such mission takes its stand by faith. The apostle Paul declared, “For we live by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). The missionary is therefore by necessity a prophet in conflict.

Conflict and the Missionary Experience: Do You Ever Return Home?

The missionary’s final departure from service in a place of conflict does not necessarily bring relief from the vulnerability they encountered there, the temptation to bear ill-will toward perpetrators of violence, or the isolation they may experience in their home communities. The suffering of the people they leave behind may be the heaviest load they carry. As Dot Beidler states:

We came home in 1975; and spent a year very broken emotionally. Leaving our Vietnamese friends behind was very difficult, even though they urged us to leave. Four Mennonite personnel stayed after the fall of Saigon, leaving only after they were asked to do so by the new government.

For some, a final departure never occurs. My wife and I have remained deeply involved with ministry on the West Bank and in Manila, the Philippines, traveling to both several times a year. Barbara Rowe returned to El Salvador in 2013, where she continues her service to the Salvadoran people. Friends of the Beidlers who were also missionaries during the Vietnam War have recently returned to Vietnam for three years to work on a specific project with the Mennonite Central Committee.

Whether one leaves their place of service completely or returns intermittently, the impact of becoming deeply immersed in another culture—especially in a place of conflict that intensifies the experience—will leave the mission person deeply impacted for life. As I advise university students, deep cross-cultural service is like Alice stepping through the looking glass: the cross-cultural worker in a conflict area will never return as they once were, never see the world with the same naive eyes as they did before.

Conflict and the Missionary Experience: The Importance of the Call of God

A continuous thread in the Beidlers' account, as with Barbara Rowe, is the importance of the call of God on one's life to the mission of God. It is the certainty of that call that enables the believer to stand and persevere in even the most difficult of circumstances. Paul stated without apology, "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God . . ." (Rom 1:1). Dot Beidler states emphatically, "We never questioned God's call."

For those who have such a call to mission in a place of conflict, Luke Beidler advises:

If you feel called, certainly go. Trust God to take care of your physical being. By all means, try to be a peacemaker. Stay as neutral as you can. Love your enemy because you respect the image of God in every person.

Barbara Rowe adds:

Be wise as serpents and gentle as doves. Find the people you can trust—it's not everybody. In the US, we are a very open society. Put that aside. Find the people you can trust, and listen to what they have to say.

My wife and I also have been encouraged that in spite of the brokenness of the world, Jesus said:

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Mt 5:14–16)