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This article is about **Vocation as Missions**, not Business as Missions

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The Next Wave of Missions: Church Planting on the Wings of Business – Are Southern Baptist Churches and the IMB in a Position to Capitalize on It?

Executive Summary

We believe that many of the next generation of missionaries (at least those coming from the Western World) will ride on the wings of business. While they won't replace traditional missionaries, they will complement them and be fully integrated with missionary teams. Implementing a "portfolio" strategy in missions—utilizing both business professionals and church planters—requires forward thinking, visionary leadership, and re-tooling our churches and sending organizations to catalyze this next wave of missions. Mission organizations will need new structures that empower these integrated business/church planting teams.

We know that churches and mission boards will likely agree, in principle, with what we are presenting here. We believe, however, the moment to engage the evangelical business community has arrived, and that a change in strategy, not simply an agreement in principle, is warranted.

Business as Access

“Business as Mission” has a strong biblical and historical precedent. Luke seems to go out of his way to show that the gospel travelled certain places in the ancient world faster via the hands of Christian merchants than the Apostles. He notes that the first time the church left Jerusalem and “went everywhere preaching the word,” the Apostles were not included (Acts 8:1). When Paul finally arrives in Rome with the gospel, Luke notes that he was greeted by “the brothers,” who seem to have been there for quite some time (Acts 28:15). As Steven Neill notes in his classic *History of Christian Missions*, none of the major church planting centers (Antioch, Alexander, and Rome) was founded by an Apostle. All came into being, apparently, through the witness of “ordinary” Christians who carried the gospel with them as they went about their “business.” Neill says,

But in point of fact few, if any, of the great Churches were really founded by apostles. Nothing is more notable than the anonymity of these early missionaries... Luke does not turn aside to mention the name of a single one of those pioneers who laid the foundation. Peter and Paul may have organized the Church in Rome. They certainly did not found it...

Throughout church history we see that in many cases the church spread because regular lay-people, merchants and businessmen and women shared the gospel as they moved into new geographies. Notable examples include the Moravians and William Carey, who understood the “both... and” approach.¹

In the same way, Christians in the marketplace today are able to gain access more easily to many strategic, unreached places than can traditional church planters. Globalization, great advancements in technology and urbanization have given the business community nearly unrestricted access to the world.

The most recent wave of “Business as Mission” began as an effort by primarily seminary-trained missionaries to use business as a platform to access closed countries. While somewhat successful in the short term, weaknesses in this model have become apparent over time. Very few of these businesses even cover their expenses, much less turn a profit. This becomes quickly evident not only to local government officials, but also to the community around the missionary. This has also caused quite a bit of stress for the church planting teams as they struggle with more “false” identities as businesspeople, or, as they stress about running a business that they do not know how to run. We hasten to point out, however, that these pioneering works have taken us many huge strides forward, and many have come to faith through their efforts.

Thus, in spite of the venerable history of “business as mission,” (and it’s probably more accurate to say “vocation as mission” as those who are skilled in other areas such as the arts, the sciences, education, medicine, and sports can also carry the gospel) few churches and evangelical church planting organizations have capitalized on the viability of mobilizing trained and experienced business professionals as an avenue for 21st century mission. Only a very few sustainable, efficient, effective, and reproducible platforms in unreached areas have been created, and most churches and sending organizations remain unsure how to call out and equip evangelical businesspeople. They continue to remain a massive, and largely untapped, resource.

We believe that a “portfolio” strategy to team building that includes some combination of at least three different types of people will be effective in this movement. The purpose of this paper is to identify these types, and to encourage churches and mission boards to give significant attention to calling out these persons and to train them up for the mission.

¹ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, p. 22.

We believe that churches and mission boards will benefit from this new direction for at least four reasons. First, Scripture leads us to believe that all Christians are called to be disciple-making disciples (Matthew 28:16-20) and we should be challenging and training all with this goal in mind. The “calling” to participate in the mission of God is not a special assignment for a privileged few but the responsibility of all disciples of Christ. All are to leverage their gifts for the mission of God. Second, while God calls some into full-time gospel proclamation, He also calls others engage in the mission on a self-funded basis (see the examples noted above, as well as the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila in Acts and other notable individuals in Paul’s letters). Third, this type of flexible and self-sustaining team structure will allow churches and agencies to increase the number of missionaries they send. Fourth, such an effort will move our mission agencies and churches into a closer and more healthy partnership. Mission agencies will be forced to build a more comprehensive and catalytic approach to mission. Churches will receive the onus to identify, equip, and send these types of people.

Churches should encourage their people toward a two-part vision: *Whatever you are good at (a) do it well, for the glory of God;² and (b) do it somewhere strategic, for the mission of God. Mission agencies should help equip those called out to these ends.*

Thus, mission agencies should turn their eyes toward (1) building strategic relationships with churches in order to identify the next generation of “missionaries” who will ride on the wings of business and vocation; and (2) putting in place the infrastructure that will be able to facilitate this type of movement.

The Profile of the Individuals Who Make Up the Next Wave of Missions

1. Entrepreneurs

The gifted entrepreneur would be the man or woman with extraordinary gifting and/or a proven track record of starting new, profit-making companies in the United States and the ability to leverage this skill in an unreached area.

We do not have in mind here simply seminary graduates who want to start a coffee shop or an English corner. Starting a successful business is extremely difficult even in your “home” culture! Conducting business overseas multiplies this difficulty exponentially! Well-intentioned but untrained and un-gifted vocational missionaries often end up being more of a drain on church finances than even traditional missionary approaches. They also may lose the respect of the people they work among because they are not able to do their work with excellence. We are encouraged by the work of Access Partners, a consulting firm that is experimenting with various early-stage company models that can profitably support mission teams. We are also excited at the launch of investment funds devoted to identifying good profit-generating businesses that advance the gospel while they do excellent business. Both are attempting different paths to the same goal: creating businesses that will carry the gospel into unreached places.

This category includes Kingdom-minded business owners as well. Unlike the entrepreneur, this person has an existing business they can expand into unreached areas. Evangelical churches have many such businesspeople in their congregations. They need to be given the vision to do this. They will need a support network of other people attempting this, help in identifying competent operatives, and investors who will seed their ideas.

² Proverbs 22:29

Existing efforts to this end are as of yet independent of a church planting strategy of church planting personnel. Thus, a network that these business owners can tap into that empowers them to support the expansion of church planting efforts in a strategic way is needed. The potential of this resource is enormous. One businessman at the Summit Church has expanded his business into 80 places in India, each led by a believing manager who uses the business to teach kingdom business principles and to disciple Hindu workers.

2. Kingdom-minded Professionals

Evangelical churches also are filled with professionals who work for large, multi-national companies (e.g., Sara Lee, IBM, Google, and Coca-Cola) and are able to pursue overseas transfer for the purpose of living missionally in an unreached area. I think of my (J.D.) own father as someone in this category. Upon his retirement he was immediately re-hired to lead an expansion project for his company in China. From that position he was able to present the gospel (and lead some to Christ) that traditional missionaries would likely never have been able to get close to.

These do not need outside funding. What they need is vision and training about how effectively and ethically to pursue kingdom interests while under the employment of their company.

This category would also include those whose skill sets transfer fairly easily to any part of the world, even if they are not part of multi-national company (e.g., CPAs, attorneys, doctors, PhDs, consultants, graphic designers, teachers, computer programmers, nurses, etc.) In addition to vision and training, this group needs practical help in obtaining the necessary licenses, getting their practices set-up, and plugging in to the right opportunities. Multiple secular organizations exist to help people with these skill sets obtain jobs overseas.

This category would also include college graduates who are open to seeking their first jobs in an unreached place. Since college graduates have to look for a job somewhere, why not encourage this next generation of evangelical students to put the kingdom of God first (Matthew 6:33), and to find a job in a place where a mission is most needed? At the Summit Church, we tell all of our students, “You have to get a job somewhere; why not prioritize the mission in your job selection?” In the past year, 80 college graduates from our church with ‘secular’ skills have sought and found jobs in places where we were planting a new church. We encourage them not to see this as a gap in their career, but rather as an investment of it. They will do their jobs well to the glory of God and somewhere strategic for the mission of God.

Why not encourage all students to give the “firstfruits” of their career to the global mission of God? We encourage all of our college students to give (unless providentially hindered) the first two years after they graduate to serve somewhere strategic.

This category would also include those who may not have the entrepreneurial gift set to start a company (as described in #1), but can nonetheless run the operations of a company once started effectively. God is moving a large number of career professionals to ask how they can use their skills in advancing the gospel. Effective stateside business-apprenticeship programs are needed to equip these people with the ministry and business skills necessary to work in such a business. For such people, going to seminary for three years is an unnatural and unhelpful break in their career; and, frankly, an ineffective stewardship of their talents. With the help of sending agencies, these people can obtain their theological and ministry training in the context of a local church while they complement their business (or vocational) skill development in the local community. This can be accomplished through a joint effort of local churches, seminaries, and kingdom-minded stateside professionals.

3. Church Planters

Church planters may be an obvious group to mention, but it is important to note that those with more “apostolic” gifts maintain a vital role in any business-as-mission strategies. God’s method for completing the Great Commission is still the planting of local churches in strategic communities (Acts 2:42–47). Businessmen and women who lead others to faith in Christ need to do so in conjunction with a local church or as part of a larger church planting strategy. Thus, the cross-cultural and evangelistic skill of our vocational church planters is crucial. They can help organize believers into new churches and train local leaders. Ideally, most teams will include both business people (let’s call them “Types 1–2”) and church planters (Type 3’s).

To sum up, we see future mission teams comprised of a mix of business people and church planters. How this plays out will, of course, vary according to the situation on the field. Various questions remain: How is strategy coordinated? How can those working for a secular company participate in a church planting strategy? How can those not employed by an official mission organization be cared for, spiritually? The answers to these questions will likely lead to different (more catalytic and cooperative) structures and strategies.

Implications for Local Churches and Evangelical Missions Organizations

Local Churches

Local churches must preach this vision and work to create the type of training structures described above. They must help their people overcome the assumption that mission is what only what a few people do. They must encourage their people to reject the secular-sacred divide, and to do what they do well for the glory of God and somewhere strategic for the mission of God.

At the Summit Church, several such training and apprenticeship programs are in process. Some of our members who own businesses have hired recent college graduates to apprentice them in the skills necessary to develop business overseas. Some are considering how they can expand their business into unreached people groups. A few have already done so. One Summit church member has developed an investment fund, the “Sovereign’s Wealth Fund”, to help fund these for-profit business ventures. We have not yet developed a good structure to disciple and empower existing businessmen in multi-national corporations.

We also preach the vision of “do what you do well and do it somewhere strategic” repeatedly to our students and young professionals. We ask our high school seniors to give us two summers during their college career to serve on one of 5 mission projects we have developed. We present this same vision to all incoming freshman college students, asking them to give us two summers to expose them to what God is doing around the world. We challenge graduating seniors to get a job in a location where we are beginning a mission work, either domestic or abroad. We have experienced an initial measure of success in this, which we hope is a foretaste of things to come: This year we sent out a team of 8 college graduates to an unreached people group. They were trained, though not funded, by the IMB. Seven of the 8 were not Christians when they came to college. They have been won, disciplined, and sent in the 4 years they spent at the Summit Church.

Mission Organizations

The current strategy of the IMB is to send “teams” of church planters into an area. This has two primary limitations. A. it is expensive; and B. it is difficult to get a critical mass of believers into a society, and

particularly into places where they have exposure with a society's key decision makers. Empowering the business community addresses both of these issues.

There are, of course, organizational risks that result from the IMB engaging in business partnerships with for-profit businesses. Legally, it might be required that a separate organization or set of organizations be set up (although some of these structures perhaps could be set up in-house). Our hope is that the IMB and other sending organizations will expand their role, seeking to create the best set of structures for mobilizing the resources of free enterprise and professionals for the advancement of the gospel. In other words, we see the IMB expanding its capacity significantly by devoting its resources to:

- **Establishing a strategy think tank:** Sending agencies might form the “head” of the movement, providing strategic direction and coaching for the entities cooperating in the task. It would include identifying strategic areas for Christian work; understanding and researching the opportunities for “Types 1–2” in a particular area; networking with and knowing the resources these types need; and working with cooperating churches to recruit and train those in the business community.
- **Branding a movement:** In order to fully mobilize the resources and talents of the professionals in our churches, we will need to coordinate our message and clearly articulate what it means to use one's career strategically. “Do it well and do it strategically”—or some similar call—needs to be clear and compelling. Branding a movement will help local churches communicate clearly with their members and will also help people see that they are a part of a greater movement. This will increase awareness and create a pipeline of Types 1–2.
- **Incubating the incubators:** Sending agencies ought to recognize, encourage and expand nascent but growing local incubator networks. There are limitations to what any church or sending organization can (and should) do. Some, having recognized this gap, already have begun to organize and mobilize their business communities to use their time, talent and treasures to raise up future Types 1–2 with a vision for “doing it well and doing it strategically.” Ecosystems of gospel-focused entrepreneurs, business owners and even business enterprises are forming in Raleigh-Durham, Birmingham, Phoenix, New York City and Washington, DC. These networks are still in their infancy, but each has a vision—though often different in strategy—to raise up and empower businesses and professionals. As a first step, the IMB can help “incubate the incubators” who are doing this work in the trenches. The IMB might join the conversations to help these groups think biblically and theologically. They might also provide training in missiology, cross-cultural evangelism, and even language and customs to these groups. Many have no idea how to engage these unknown cultures.
- **Leveraging church planters:** Sending agencies could be of great value in facilitating the connection of kingdom-minded businessmen with local church planting works (both expatriate and national). This will probably require some restructuring of IMB strategic teams. At this point, if a kingdom-minded business expands into South Africa, Kenya, and India, it is up to the businessperson to identify and develop relationships with existing church planting work, and then to decide how their business might helpfully participate in the work. If he calls the IMB and asks to connect with the group focused on business as mission, he will likely have a conversation about logistics rather than strategy. We need a revamped structure that allows for business professionals to partner strategically and easily with the organization while also allowing the IMB to maintain its missional integrity. Both the freedom of empowerment and the discipline of objective are important and will need to be balanced. This will require both spiritual insight and business acumen.

We are not supposing that this approach is ideal for every area of the world, or proposing that this is a new “one-size-fits-all.” While this approach might currently be suitable for places like Dubai and Istanbul, it may be less so—at least in the near term—for places like Misrata in Libya, Allahabad in India, or South Tangerang in Indonesia.

We do believe the business community is an under-utilized, if not completely untapped, resource. In places where this works, instead of 1 team consisting of maybe 3–4 church planters (at a cost of ~\$200-250k per year and with few natural inroads into the community), you now have a team of 15–20 people with one church planter (at a cost of about \$60k per year) and several inroads. Thus, rather than spending \$300MM per year to support 2,000 teams and 5,500 church planters, the IMB could support 100,000 Christians working alongside those 5,500.

Conclusions

In short, we believe the future of missions involves the empowerment of the evangelical business community to leverage their careers for the Great Commission.

We applaud the efforts of those who are making evolutionary changes in the way we approach missions by encouraging business people to get involved and by helping church planters be more business-minded. That said, we wonder if a more aggressive paradigm-shift is appropriate at this time. Can we bend our missions paradigm to tap into what is arguably the greatest potential missionary force in the world?

Is this our generation’s “kairos” moment?

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