

Three “parties” to mission understanding and strategy

The Big Picture – the three ‘parties’

All mission engagement requires attention to three foundational factors that should shape mission responses and outcomes. These three components are essential to be understood for existing churches’ mission, but even more important in pioneering mission and planting fresh expressions of church.

First, there is the **mission field**, the context in which inherited churches are set and the sub-culture to which pioneers and fresh expressions have sensed a calling.

Second, there is the **mission force**. At the overall level this involves the national church structure. In inherited church mission this is the leadership and entire congregation. For pioneering and fresh expressions, a leader or leaders must be identified, and they have to share vision and recruit a team.

Lastly, there is the manner in which the mission force is motivated and mobilised to engage with the mission field. This is the evolving **mission strategy**. The goal is that this has a natural ‘fit’, connecting resources to the field and resulting in appropriate missional church outcomes.

Mission engagement - the three parties

The three components in mission

- Field - Context
- Force - Team and sending church
- Fit - Strategy of engagement

Mission “match making”

So, careful attention must be paid to each of three quite distinct components or ‘parties’ to the mission enterprise. Each is important and needs looking at separately and in relation to one another, if we are to arrive at such a good ‘mission fit’.

Now in recovering a right priority on the mission imperative, we rightly emphasise that of utmost importance is attention to the context. But in fact, this vital discerning of the *Mission Field* is only one of three essential elements to be considered in gaining the big picture and enabling appropriate mission engagement to be taken forward.

Just as important is a thorough understanding of the church that is undertaking the mission. No one church is the same and there are all sorts of considerations to be taken into account in

shaping mission responses. They will be unique to the particular faith community that makes up the *Mission Force*. And in the case of pioneering and fresh expressions, there is the chance to identify and select the leader(s) and for them to recruit a team that has particular gifts and life situation suited to the mission task.

Then the third factor is how we discern that God, the Spirit of Mission, is already at work in the context. Then if we follow Him, He will lead to a “marrying up” of the mission resources to the mission context. This then evolves into an appropriate *Mission Strategy* which harnesses the other two parties to release Kingdom outcomes.

Mission “match making”



The three parties to mission

Partial Connection

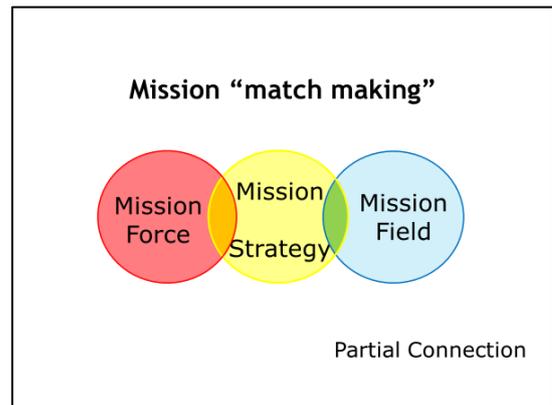
It is often said that “the context is everything”. And this rightly restores a corrective balance since in so much church life we almost exclusively think from within ourselves... so that church shapes everything! Most churches are typically weak at “reading” their context and the demography of the mission field.

In fact, all sorts of insights have now become available around the area of “Mission Audit”; Listening for Mission and “Discernment in Context”, that should help existing churches engagement and direct pioneers on their journey. And to match these insights there are resources to support these processes.

But also, churches are often poor at recognising issues within themselves which help or hinder mission. There are many factors to be considered here that contribute to church being released into mission. There are issues of denominational culture, of church polity and governance which may be less than fully enabling of mission even when the challenge is grasped. Then there are the gifts and passions of their members which are often not fully recognised and released. Similarly, pioneer teams may not pay attention to the gift mix and motivations of those making up the team.

And if we are honest, observation, research and statistics of church trends, shows that we are less than good at mission engagement strategy in the church at large. Often programs of mission we adopt are copied from others that seem to have born good fruit where they are... but are they appropriate for where we are with our resources? And this tendency can also be repeated in our pioneering initiatives of planting and fresh expressions.

The outcome of the incomplete mobilisation and integration of each of these is partial connection. Only weak mission engagement that is represented by the partially overlapping circles. If these circles are each of one of the three primary colours... blue, yellow and red... the resulting partial areas of overlap produce areas of green and orange.



Each "Party" fully integrated

This is the desired destination. It is not easy and, in some senses, is always an ideal to be moving towards. But it needs to be kept in view. The goal of a) so understanding the context and culture, b) so releasing the church to be shaped for mission and to recognise the gifts and passions of pioneers and members within, that c) the “Missio dei” can be discerned and the resources follow His lead to generate a mission strategy appropriate to both context and church.

This matching or “*marrying up*” of the three ‘parties’ in an integrated, wholistic journey, is moving towards the model of Jesus in “Incarnational Mission Engagement”. In the third diagram here, it is represented by the three circles completely overlapping each other. And to stick to our analogy of coloured light... when the three primary colours of blue, yellow and red, are completely mixed, the result... is WHITE LIGHT!

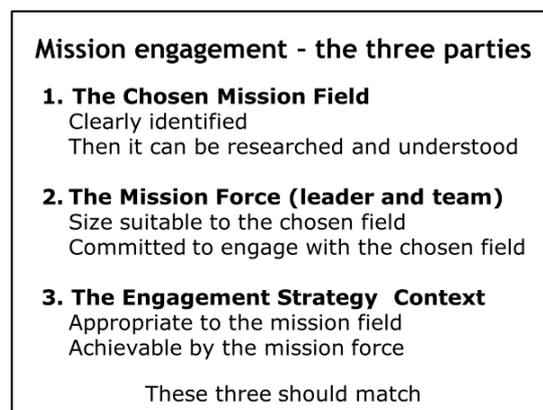
Fresh expressions of church are a response to the inspiration of this pattern of Jesus in his self-emptying and identification with the context, only to challenge it to a transformational journey into the Kingdom and to become like Him.



Moving towards this mission ‘fit’ – Incarnational Mission!

So, let’s look more closely at some important factors in each of the three foundational components if we are to move towards a good mission fit and incarnational mission.

Again, we look first at the chosen **mission field**. It is easy to take for granted that our mission is the sum of the population around wherever we gather. However, whilst Jesus was called to be the saviour of the whole world, the strategy of his earthly mission and ministry involved a clear mission focus... “My calling is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel!” The principle is concentrating on the few to reach the many. In today’s very diverse society with many sub-cultures or milieus around, it is appropriate to prioritise a mission focus. And this is especially true for pioneering and planting fresh expressions of church.



Only when we are clear as to the particular field, can we engage with the process of listening and sensitive discovery. This involves all sorts of research and discernment to fully understand the culture ... recognising the needs and aspirations. And then discovering the gospel connections.

Again, we next look at the component of the **mission force**. In inherited church we noted that this is the leadership and entire congregation. There will be present all sorts of gifts, passions and natural daily connections with parts of the mission field. For pioneering and fresh expressions, a leader or leaders must be identified and sense a clear call. They may be from the culture of the mission field or otherwise will need the gifts and call of cross-cultural mission. Then in sharing the vision and recruiting a team, the connection to the context will similarly have to be worked out and training in cross-cultural mission may be required. Experience has shown that there are many other issues in team building, like the size of the team that is also important. Whilst a large team provides critical mass in engaging with the same culture, in cross-cultural mission a smaller team can more easily leave behind their culture and embrace that of the context.

It is also not enough to have enthusiastic and gifted team members. As well as issues of team building and dynamics, there may often be a challenge of a need for a change of lifestyle and pattern of commitments so that they dedicate significant time to engaging the context.

Lastly, there are all sorts of principles to be accessed around **mission strategy**. These range from responses to the listening and discernment with appropriate initiatives of community engagement. These then lead to contextual evangelism and discipleship. In summary, there needs to be the imagining of lovingly providing pathways for those in the context to discover and explore Jesus and the Kingdom through truth experienced in principles, stories, action, spirituality and community.

But again, if all three components are to 'mary up', then the strategies of engagement need to flow from the life of the team, be geared to their numbers, gifts and passions, and to their availability.

As with many church plants, fresh expressions are seeking to be examples of communities of faith encouraged to reflect the culture and values of their community and where not-yet-Christians are able to relate to and understand Jesus as one who meets them where they are in order to take them where he is.

This is incarnational mission, reflecting the incarnational example of Jesus. As 'The Message' paraphrases from the beginning of John:

The Word became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood.

John 1.14 (The Message)

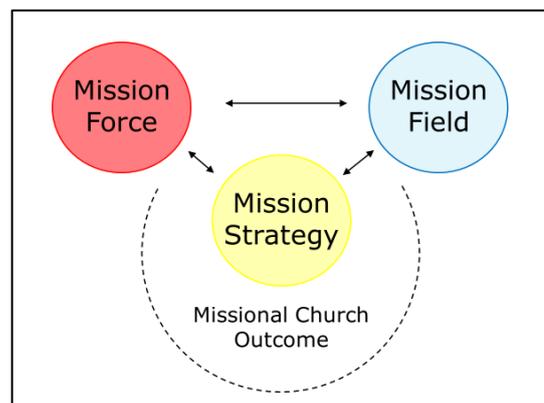
We should emphasise again that this is the biblical ideal that we are called to follow in our mission and pioneering. It should be the understanding that underlies and forms the foundation for all our subsequent exploration of other mission principles.

The Results – Missional Church Outcomes

Such authentic mission engagement where, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, mission force (resources) are mobilised with discernment of the mission field (context) to follow an appropriate mission fit (strategy), will lead to a missional church outcome.

Now, over recent decades, such outcomes have been of great encouragement to others. Sometimes, these missional church outcomes have been presented as models to follow. Presented as missional innovations to inspire is entirely appropriate. However, when understood as "models" there has been an increasing danger. This can become a trap when processed through the lens of:

- a) Our consumer culture with a very strong shaping influence towards "off the shelf" solutions rather than the harder work of following the Spirits' innovative journey in our specific context.
- b) An environment in the West of endemic church decline which creates a pressure to find solutions... someone else's solutions become the end product rather than inspirations to start the journey of exploration.



The right missional mindsets need instead, to rigorously resist these temptations. They will rather build on the inspiration from other pioneers but resist a superficial approach that merely adopts their outcome or 'model'. True pioneers will dig deep to seek the underlying missional principles that made the model successful with those resources (force) and that particular context (field).

We expand more on this, with examples, on the paper entitled "Pioneers and Innovators". Now it is the aim of the whole series of papers that we are developing here, to dig and uncover as many of these foundational mission principles as possible. Our hope being that these may provide the key resources for the mission journey whomever sets out (force) into whatever context (field) to see the Holy Spirit develop incarnational strategy (fit) delivering the outcome of a truly missional church.

Universal implication of the interrelation of these realities

We normally start every Q & A session on our training or seminars with the following warning:

"As you prepare to hear the answers to your questions to us, we need to advise you that the answer to every question that you put will be the same!" The answer is....

"It depends!"

It depends... firstly because there are so many variables in the mission context and in the mission force that the outcomes of their interaction in any individual case are numerous. For example, aspects of the mission context include not only socioeconomics, but ethnic, demographic and religious factors. And the mission force includes qualities and call of the pioneer(s); the size and makeup of any team....and its relationship to the sending (mother) church or agency.

And it depends.... Secondly because the missionary Spirit of God is already at work in the mission field and the mission force....and He is infinitely creative. He is able to come up with answers and outcomes we or others have never come across or imagined. Over our relatively long journey of mission and mission accompaniment, we have thought that some answers, or core principles were pretty universal. But over time we have found that we eventually come up with an exception in most cases. And as we explore, we discover that these are good reasons for the exception.

Now, lest you draw from this that there are no reliable patterns or insights, this is certainly not true. Our experience would be that we need not to focus on models but on mission principles. And that in any given situation, we need to dig to the foundational principles likely to be determinative in each case. The skill is to be able to select among a range of these 'core principles' the one that is most likely to be operative in exploring answers to the question.

Core Principles & Missional "Master Crafts" persons.

So, having set the scene of this wide canvas of the three "parties" to mission, we have identified a range of core principles that form something of a "tool kit". And the missional master craftsperson becomes familiar with these tools and is able to select and apply them to each "field" and "force" combination to arrive at appropriate mission strategies for engagement or mission "fit" and "outcome".

The rest of the papers in this series present the range of core missional principles that we have discovered to be helpful. And some are foundational, whereas others relate more to the mission field, others to the mission force and others the mission strategy. Some in fact, do straddle both field and force but we shall list them in our index under one or other of these headings that seems closest. As we build up this recourse of principles, we shall include examples here and there to illustrate and flesh out the concepts. Some examples may crop up in more than one core mission principle paper as there is inevitable overlap between them.