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Navigating 21st-century church mission education

Transforming mission locally and globally

Rev. Marsha Snulligan Haney, PhD

Our global and universal view of the world as Christians calls us to live in it faithfully. Although perceived functions and structures of Christian mission have changed throughout the centuries, the purpose, source, and scope of mission have not.

What transformative role can mission education play in the life of a congregation today? This is an important question at this juncture in history when (1) the global epicenter of Christian growth has changed, (2) the majority of persons in the United States are now ethnic minorities, and (3) the numerical growth of Christianity in the United States (as well as enrollment in theological education) is found among the African American, Asian, Hispanic, and immigrant faith communities. In every congregation there are persons committed to navigating the real world (the world of human diversity) in terms of worldview,

ethnicity, culture, economic class, and sexual, generational, and religious differences.

What tools and skills are useful for these leaders (lay and clergy) of men, women, young adults, youth, and children as they seek daily to live meaningful lives within the world that God so loves? How can Christian leaders shape and evaluate mission education in their congregations?

It is important that congregations assess their own progress toward accomplishing the missional goals they have defined as important ways of “being and doing” given the current complex, diverse, and exciting context in which they are planted. Congregations and leaders are encouraged to do ongoing self-assessment to determine how they are performing as a faithful people participating actively in God’s mission in the 21st century. This is no easy task, yet theological educators are

challenged to measure various attitudes and levels of mission engagement and to improve intercultural competency related to Christian mission involvement.

Two concepts help frame the missiological approach: *glocal* and *story-linking*

Glocal is a word coined by missiologist Robert Schrieter to call attention to the intersection of global and local realities in an effort to demonstrate how the terms are interrelated and connected to God’s mission.

Story-linking refers to the ability to listen, identify, discern, and engage in dynamic and critical thinking, relating dimensions of commonality and disconnections.

When viewed interdependently, these two concepts better enable us to engage in mission in ways that are transforming. This requires that attention be given to six areas of mission education assessment:¹

- **Curriculum:** What is taught, and how? The curriculum must address the broader goals to (1) form church leaders among God’s people, (2) inform them about their faith and its application to modern life, and (3) equip them to become agents of transformation.
- **Collaboration:** Who are our partners? Our various congregations, denominations, theological seminaries, community programs, and global partners should emphasize the need to work together in cooperation and genuine sharing. We must work collaboratively, recognizing a common sense of mission and purpose for doing education for ministry.



Presbyterian mission co-worker to South Sudan and Ghana, Ingrid Reneau, shares a perspective with European mission leaders about the impact of supporting African churches.



Good teaching about mission requires thoughtful preparation.

- *Confession* (spirituality): How do we celebrate and affirm the rich uniqueness of our theological and ecclesiastical history? Spirituality speaks holistically to both the personal and the social dimensions of a Christian's religious journey.
- *Contextualization*: How do we imagine ourselves planted or situated in the context of living out our faith as a congregation? It is crucial to understand that the call to live in authentic relationship with God and with our neighbors is informed by the context of ministry.
- *Constituency*: This addresses the basic questions related to the uniqueness of the men, women, young adults, youth, and children we are educating for mission. It implies the "whole people of God" because it is the whole church that must witness to the whole gospel through word, deed, and lifestyle.

- *Community*: What relationships are important to our church's self-understanding within the diverse cultural, social, and religious ethos in which we live and interact? Community implies educational cooperation with other existing organizations (social, faith-based, and educational) in our common life.

Christian leaders must be willing to create space for intentional, guided periods of theological reflection on important missional issues such as these. Through the lens of missiology (as intercultural studies) these resources speak to our ability to engage as faithful witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" in ways that honor God and God's creation.² Congregations can engage in mission and ministry while examining "faith in the light of experience" and "experience in the light of faith." A four-source model of theological reflection that encourages attention to exploring

the worlds of tradition, personal position, cultural beliefs and assumptions, and implications for action can be extremely helpful. As congregations actively learn to identify God's movement in their neighborhoods and make connections with the larger world, they are often surprised to discover newly found skills they are developing: some related to public theology, innovative faith leadership, community activism, ecumenical global networking, creative education, contextual communication, prophetic justice advocacy, or congregational-based community development.



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FOOTNOTES

1. See Eldin Villafaña, Bruce W. Jackson, Robert A. Evans, and Alice Frazer Evans, *Transforming the City: Reframing Education for Urban Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).
2. "Toward the Development of a New Christian Missiological Identity," in *Teaching Mission in a Global Context*, ed. Patricia Lloyd-Sidle and Bonnie Sue Lewis (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001), 79–92.