

In this article we recognise our dependency on God as we participate in God's mission. It is appropriate that this is the first in a new series of reflections on "reimagining missions". Jenny Oliphant, Mission Commission Synergist for Prayer reports on her involvement with international prayer networks over recent months and discerns nine trends related to prayer that will factor in the shape of missions as we move into a new era.

Jesus asks us to read the signs of the times (e.g. Luke 12:56) and elaborates on the end times and signs of his return in Matthew 24, asking us to be watchful and alert. Paul writes that we must walk in dependency on the Holy Spirit (e.g. Galatians 5:25). I participated in many prayer times as 2021 drew to a close, and we consistently asked together, "Lord, now what?" "Lord, where are you at work?" "Lord, what are you seeing and feeling that we might join in your Kingdom work?"

Corporate or group listening times are a powerful way of submitting our hearts and thoughts in unity before the Lord, asking Him to speak to us as a group. Often each person brings a piece of the 'puzzle' and together we are able to discern the bigger picture. It's a time for grace as no one presents their listening piece as the definitive word from heaven, but humbly offers it to the group to weigh together, and test according to Scripture. We all agree that the Holy Spirit speaks today, and that the Father wants to share His heart with those who follow Jesus (see, Amos 3:7 & Ephesians 3:1-5).

As the Mission Commission reflects on what "the future of missions" will involve and require, I share here a few trends or areas that have been repeated in different prayer times with different groups.

1. The Ancient Paths

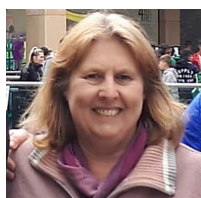
We are to delight in the word of the Lord. Jeremiah 6:10 rebukes the people and says that the word of the Lord is not a delight to them. Then, a few verses later in 6:16, He calls them to stop at the point of decision/change (the crossroads), take a good look around at the situation, and ask for revelation: to be shown the ancient paths. The Lord highlighted the crisis of the hour and their inability to hear God, let alone correctly interpret the season. He notes that their suffering, uncertainty and confusion is due to the fact that they did not delight in His word. In every hour of crisis, God calls people back to a love for the word of the Lord; He calls them to silence the other voices in their lives and cultivate hearing hearts. And though it has been 2,500 years since the Lord cried out to a rebellious generation through Jeremiah, the ancient paths remain the clearest solution to the crisis of our day.

Through the pandemic crisis, and now a global-impacting war, it has been common to see headlines like "Getting Back to Basics; Pruning Off Excess; Going Deeper (into one's purpose etc.)", and so it is for our spiritual wellbeing. We need to return to the core aspects of our faith. In the midst of circumstances frustrating our activity and strategies, there is a call for

us to return to basic spiritual disciplines as the norm for follower of Jesus, for dwelling, abiding, remaining rooted in, and drawing life from Jesus (see, John 15). These are all part of what we have been hearing as a fresh call to get serious and repent of our too frequent "lukewarm" approach to being Jesus' followers (see, Revelation 3:16). The ideal picture is of the roots of a huge tree being so expansive so that the tree can grow to full maturity and reach the height it was designed for came to our minds as an illustration of the benefits of returning to the ancient ways.

2. A New Thing

Doing something new might seem contrary to returning to ancient paths, but verses from Isaiah have echoed through so many times of asking the Lord where and how He is at work today. For example, Isaiah 48:6-7, "From now on I will tell you of new things, of hidden things unknown to you. They are created now, and not long ago; you have not heard of them before today." Together with Isaiah 42:9, "See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you." And 43:19 "See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and



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streams in the wasteland.” The connecting factor is the Lord Himself. He is the Ancient One (see, Daniel 7), and Jesus is the Way to the Father (who is also Truth and Life, John 14:6). The ancient paths lead us to God’s unchanging voice and therein we find new applications for our situations.

The call is to remain dependent on what God is saying to each of us, and all of us, in this moment, and not assume that a word for a previous season is still applicable. No longer able to follow fire and cloud, the leaders of Israel told the people about the new way God was leading them into a new context, “When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before.” (Joshua 3:3-4).

This is a challenge and encouragement from the Lord to dependence on Him in the small decisions and the larger ones. We have much to learn from those involved in church planting movements in sensitive parts of the world who are in need of constant discernment. For their own protection, believers seek the Holy Spirit’s direction on which road to take from their home, or if a particular person they are speaking with is someone who can be trusted. When the stakes are not so high it is easy to rely on what we think we know rather than to depend on the Holy Spirit’s leading (God’s voice) in all that we do. As the wise man said, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6 NRSV).

3. Collaboration

In our missions network ecosystems we keep hearing more and more about the need for greater degrees of partnership and collaboration. Networking is happening across denominations, between churches, mission agencies and mission networks. In the current Ukraine conflict, a sacrificial willingness to collaborate between interconnecting ministries, churches and believers is a wonderful case in point. There is a heightened desire to contribute and accept help from others.

The Lord is calling His Bride to a greater heart connection of unity and mutual support and service together for His Kingdom purposes. There is a tangible increase in multiple “strands” (be it agencies, churches, denominations, ministries, nations, cultures and languages) choosing to stand together and help one another for the Lord’s glory. Sometimes this is around a common goal or vision, like the collaboration we are seeing in Ukraine or in other crisis situations like

Afghanistan, Myanmar or elsewhere. Other times it is simply an agreement that prayer unites us, or as “strands” join together on an ongoing basis to serve and work together, for example the Global Family prayer room (see, <https://globalfamily24-7prayer.org/>).

We are quite right to focus on the Great Commandment and Great Commission, but in recent days Jesus’ prayer for unity in John 17 is also coming into fresh focus as the Holy Spirit seems to be underlining the need for “great collaboration”. It is, after all, by our love for one another others will know that we are Jesus’ disciples (John 13:35).

We are also hearing a call for simplicity in our collaborations. Our efforts to mobilise people and resources need to start with simple, small, and scalable strategies for prayer that connect to missionaries and their activities. There is a temptation to produce in-depth resources or comprehensive prayer guides, but there is a danger that such details can be overwhelming, resulting in fewer people participating. This is further underlined by a desire to be more inclusive of all generations, all peoples and all languages. To have material that is accessible to a wide global audience, simplicity and storytelling are essential, with a wide range of mediums utilised for communication and distribution. For example, through social media, video presentations, podcasts, messenger apps, dedicated apps and, even still, print media.

4. Glocal (Global/Local)

If you are reading this, you have access to the internet, and that means you are globally connected. Whether or not we are actively involved in missions, those of us with global reach have a responsibility to be both ambassadors for Christ globally and obedient praying and witnessing disciples of Jesus locally. We are ‘glocal’ ministers of the gospel.

This trend is not new but is being vocalised and practised in a greater measure. The Global Mobilisation Network (GMN), at their online conference at the beginning of March 2022, underlined this as a trend in missions awareness, recruitment, and sending, which is increasingly being owned by local churches. It was noted that, of course, there is still a very long way to go until all local communities of followers of Jesus increase their commitment to, and involvement in, evangelism, disciple making, and cross-cultural missions; nevertheless, there is still a discernible increase, especially in communities of believers from outside of traditional missionary sending nations (i.e., Western nations).

Another way to describe this is a decentralisation, from agencies or “professional experts in missions and

theology”, to grassroots prayer and missions movements, as reflected in indigenous expressions of church, theology and participation in God’s mission.

5. Children

On a very frequent basis God reminds me, “don’t forget the children”. I confess that I need reminding, but I am convinced that multigenerational prayer and missions engagement is God’s heart. He has put us in families or households (see, Ps 68:6, Gen 18:19, Acts 11:14, Acts 16:5,33 for some examples). Many ministries that are facilitating children in prayer and mission are seeing great fruitfulness. [1] We also know that a large percentage of believers choose to follow Jesus as children and 40% of the population across Africa are under 15 years old. These biblical precedents and contemporary facts alone make discipling and involving children in God’s mission a very strategic emphasis. [2]

6. Falsity & Lawlessness

In Matthew 24, and especially v10, Jesus speaks of siblings betraying each other and of not knowing who can be trusted. He compared the generation of the Lord’s return to “the days of Noah” (v37), where people do whatever they please and what seems right to them. I mention this as it seems to be a trend on the rise. Sin rampant and the love of many growing cold (v12) is a root cause for social unrest, wars, famine, persecution, and offence between ethnic and other social groups. Now more than ever, God’s people need to know who they can trust, where accurate information can be gleaned, and how to be a people who can be trusted. As we enter prayer rooms alone and together, we also need discernment, compassion, and humility, repentance of prejudice, pride, and selfish ambition, so that we can pray for our broken, distressed, and unpredictable world. Prayer releases power that yields wonderful results (see, James 5:16b).

7. Persecution

Persecution goes hand in hand with the trends already mentioned. There seems to be an increased awareness of the need to learn from those who are suffering, and a growing realisation across the Body of Christ that we are “standing in this together” in that suffering. When one part of the body suffers we all suffer.

I have witnessed in the life of a good friend and colleague that by prayer God can work transformative miracles in the hearts of those who acknowledge their fears, prejudices, and weaknesses. The Holy Spirit can transform hearts to become more compassionate, loving, generous, and a witness to neighbours who were previously regarded as enemies. All of this was in the

context of terror attacks, where authorities were watching out for those who confess and follow Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

One intercessor sensed from the Lord that 2022 would be a tumultuous year with increasing fear, and insecurity, and yet also supernatural connectivity. Another felt that it is a year of the Lord’s favour. These things are not mutually exclusive. In the toughest times we find the most unexpected blessings. The Apostle James (3:13-18) reminds us of what true wisdom looks like, “the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:17-18). These are the things we need to cling to as we go through trials and testings. As Jude encourages, we are to pray, encourage each other, and wait, “you, dear friends, must build each other up in your most holy faith, pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, and await the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will bring you eternal life. In this way, you will keep yourselves safe in God’s love” (Jude 1:20). For this affirms Jesus’ instruction to, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you” (Matt 6:33).

8. Harvest

Seasons of harvest in God’s Kingdom often are accompanied by seasons of suffering, discouragement, displacement, and persecution. Jesus said the harvest was ripe while looking at people who were harassed and helpless (Matthew 9:36). Those involved in disciple making movements, where the pattern is to apply the principles that Jesus gave to his disciple in Luke 10 and Matthew 10, are seeing exponential growth and fruitfulness as people from other faith backgrounds turn to follow Jesus. David Garrison’s in his book “Winds in the House of Islam” and the reports from the 24:14 Movement [3] indicate that we are witnessing a global harvest in parts of the world among people groups that have historically had very few believers.

In the intensity of the spiritual battles that we face across the world, we need to remember and be encouraged that God is bringing people to Christ in large numbers. The harvest is happening. This is cause for celebration. After all, it is God’s JOY that will sustain us (Nehemiah 8:10) even as we are in a season of active waiting for the Lord’s return. This joy comes from our rootedness and intimacy in prayer with Him, celebrating the harvest that is happening but also looking ahead to the full victory and freedom we know, by faith, is to come. Our strength is renewed and restored as we wait on the Lord in this way (Isaiah 40:31). For so many of us who are

wearied and heavy laden, we must remember that it is being yoked to the Lord that will lift us (Matthew 11:28) and our zeal will be renewed as we fix our gaze upon Jesus, our beginning and end (Hebrews 12:2).

9. Tech

Since we 'turned the page on 2022,' I have increasingly been aware of the desire and enthusiasm from people from all across the world to use technology, social media and apps for God's mission. Again, this is not new but

there is an increase in pace and greater level of collaboration between those with these abilities. Using online tools to better connect, communicate and engage, particularly with unreached people groups, in prayer, for disciple making, and to encourage disciple making movements, is gaining momentum. Assuming the trend can continue (e.g., that the internet remains in place), we will only see these technologies increase our ability to connect with one another and provide digital resources that result in 'real-world' impact for Christ.

Conclusion

In Summary, the trends that I see emerging as we walk into 2022, trends which will determine the future of missions, are prayer dependent. So, we need to be prayer devoted. Devotion to prayer takes us to a place of humility, vulnerability, soul searching, submission, obedience, and mutual accountability with others and before God. There our hearts are transformed and aligned with God's ancient ways and God's new plans. It is a moment in history to arise, to stand firm in our God-given authority against the strategies of deception, lies, destruction and death, which come from our great enemy, the Devil (1 Peter 5:8). As we stand firm and take our positions in the authority given to us, our light will shine ever brighter in the darkness. Our pace is established by the eternal pacesetter and our power comes from the Lord Almighty who is powerful in battle and will build his Church. All for God's glory.

I began my walk with Jesus more than 40 years ago. Today I find myself taking books off my shelf that laid the foundations of my discipleship. David Watson's book *Discipleship* (1981) reminds us to take God at his word. You will find breath-taking, blockbusting, Bible-based simplicity on every page of this book. Who should read it? "Anyone who wants to be a simple follower of Jesus." [4] I highly recommend the appendix in this book which has a summary from a Lausanne Occasional Paper written in 1980 [5] highlighting the trends of discernment at that moment in history. Also in 1980, Richard Foster's book "The Celebration of Discipline" was a book that marked my journey as I discovered from him the basics of being a Christ-follower through spiritual disciplines (see, Addendum below). In 2022, I take a fresh look in the "mirror" and fall face down in repentance at the lack of basic spiritual disciplines applied in my life, having known them for over 40 years.

As I feel challenged, so I believe the Lord is calling His Body to repent, to go back to our first love (Revelation 2:4), and to get serious about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. To obey Him and be like the One who is gentle and humble in heart (Matthew 11:29). As Leo Tolstoy said "everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing themselves". [6]

Notes

1. <https://www.ipcprayer.org/ipc-connections/item/14731-africa-last-quarter-evangelism-children-s-prayer-covenant.html>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yrV9NoxDAMc> Aim Lower, Think Smaller, Give up and go have a cup of coffee.
3. <https://2414now.net/resources/>
4. Foreword from *Discipleship*- David Watson (1981).
5. <https://lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-20> : 1. Creation, 2. Stewardship, 3. Poverty and Wealth, 4. The New Community, 5. Personal Lifestyle, 6. International Development, 7. Justice and Politics, 8. Evangelism, 9. The Lord's Return, and Our Resolve.
6. Richard Foster "The Celebration of Discipline" (1980) p9

Addendum

What Are Spiritual Disciplines?

The primary requirement is a longing for God (Ps 42: 1,2). Deep calls to Deep (Ps 42:7). They open a door to God's power, love and grace (Gal 6:8). The Spiritual Disciplines are Lord's way of getting us onto the ground; they put us where He can work within us and transform us. By themselves the spiritual disciplines can do nothing. They are a means of God's grace. They bring the abundance of God into our lives.

INWARD	OUTWARD	CORPORATE
Meditation	Simplicity	Confession.
Prayer	Solitude	Worship
Fasting	Submission	Guidance
Study	Service	Celebration