

# BACK TO THE FUTURE:

## Where everything and nothing changes

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I was watching an old movie last weekend. Well, when I say old, it was one of the teenage classics from the 80's, so while only from late last century... it felt ancient! When the lead character had an emergency, there was no quick dial on the smartphone in their pocket or Siri request. Instead they struggled with the coins in their pocket as they ran to the nearest pay phone and used the old rotary dial to call 911. (If you're not sure what I'm talking about, Google it or ask your mum). The special effects, well they weren't that special and the lead character spent a fair bit of time waiting beside the mail box for the latest message from a friend.

Watching this movie, it struck me how much has changed in a relatively short space of time. You know what I'm talking about, because we seem to talk about it a lot. The rapid pace of change, the impact of technology on the speed in which we communicate and function, and our ever-increasing addiction to the 'next'. The next smart phone release, the next Netflix season premier, the next post, the next Instagram, the next... There are research papers, studies, articles and podcasts all taking an intricate look at the impact of continual change on our ability to adapt and cope.

It got me wondering, what if we put mission under the spotlight? Has the way we approach cross-cultural service been effected by the pace of the world's rapid change? And what are the ramifications, both the good and the bad, for the future of sharing the message of Jesus?



### THE PAST

In generations gone by, it was a given that mission was a life-time commitment. There are the stories of missionaries who packed their belongings in a coffin and loaded them onto the boat, knowing that they would serve in a foreign country until they died.

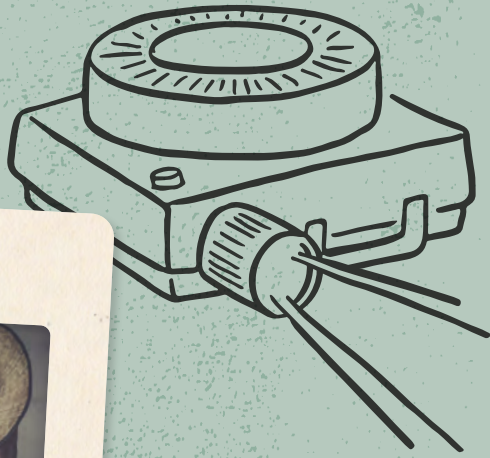
Only one generation ago, the conversation around serving as a cross-cultural worker didn't include timelines or end dates. As Mark Holt, Global Interaction's Director of Ministry recalls, "When I applied for missionary service back in 1975, the length of service wasn't discussed as there was a pretty big assumption from all involved that this was it – all we would do for the rest of our lives." In fact, it was the job of the mission agency to discern where you would go, what you do and how long you would be there.



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## THE PRESENT

Over the last 30 years our

expectations about serving cross-culturally have changed almost as rapidly as the world around us. There has been much written about the phenomenal shift in Western mission. We seemed to have moved from a long-term approach to sharing the message of Jesus to a short, time-limited method that suits our skills. Back to Mark Holt, "It's unusual for Aussies to think long-term, particularly when it comes to mission. We want to make an impact now, see results quickly and can become easily discouraged when the process seems slow."

In this shift to a short-term focus, intentions have been good as many organisations and churches have endeavoured to make mission more accessible to a wider group. People who might never have had the opportunity for a mission experience have been able to dip their toe in the water, using their hard-earned skills around the world. However, this short-term emphasis has seen a large drop in the number of people who are willing to dedicate their lives to cross-cultural mission. This means that we can be in danger of adopting an approach that is light on relationships and heavy with expectations of outcomes.



## THE FUTURE

While we know the future doesn't rest in our hands, there are some trends emerging that may give us a sneak peek into the next big shift on the mission scene. The church in Asia, Africa and South America is also undergoing rapid change. They are growing exponentially as people meet Jesus through friends, families, dreams and local church communities. Countries and regions who were once labelled as 'receiving' countries for missionaries from the West, are now reorientating as 'sending' countries as they send out their own missionaries to places like Europe, Asia and Australia.

A final thought from Mark Holt as we look to the future, "If the rapid growth of faith in developing countries continues (which we pray it does), then the role of the traditional Western mission agency is going to have to change. Partnerships between different cultural communities will become paramount and multicultural teams will be the norm as people from all nations respond to the call of Jesus."

It's an exciting future. But what might it signal for people who are discerning their part in cross-cultural mission?

**Despite all the change over the last few decades in mission, the need has remained constant. In the past, present and future, the need has and will always be for people willing to share their life and faith with**

**others who have not yet heard the message of Jesus. People who can commit to give their all to building authentic relationships with a deep commitment to sharing their faith through being, doing and saying.**

At the risk of sounding unbelievably cliché, it would seem the more things change, the more things stay the same.

So, while we may have begun our conversation looking back at a not-so-great 80's movie, we end by looking forward to a future of mission that we know God continues to weave and craft. A future of mission that each of us can truly be part of.