

# MANY VOICES, MANY PLACES

## *A 'polycentric and polyvocal' global missiology for Baptists*

A DRAFT Position Paper for the BWA Commission on Mission v.2.0,

Commission on Mission Steering Group, 2022-07-13

### **MANY VOICES, MANY PLACES**

Consider for a moment these two statements and the way that each of them has been used to describe cross-cultural mission.

*“From the West to the Rest!”*

Three things are worth noting about this statement:

1. It describes the origin and direction of mission for most of the Baptist movement throughout our history as a movement of Baptists in mission.
2. It privileges one part of the globe with the responsibility to evangelise the other parts.
3. It is written in English, as a concise statement of cross-cultural mission.

*“From everywhere to everywhere!”*

Three things are worth noting about this statement:

1. It requires *every* Baptist convention, union, or association, to re-evaluate its calling to mission from today and into the future.
2. It encourages the de-centring of financial, structural, and missiological control.
3. It anticipates non-English ways of describing cross-cultural mission

The time is long overdue for our Baptist movement to embrace better ways of describing the origin and direction of mission; to embrace better ways of thinking and writing about mission, to embrace better ways of directing and resourcing global, cross-cultural mission.

This *Position Paper* is a first contribution to what we prayerfully and hopefully anticipate will become a truly global conversation. We pray it will reflect and inform how every Baptist gives, and is, a witness to the good news about Jesus, Lord and Saviour.

### **POLYCENTRIC AND POLYVOCAL MISSION**

These ideas will possibly be new to many of us! They might be puzzling or confusing. Although the issues involved in re-thinking our inherited mission practices are complex, it's important work and there is a lot at stake.

Things *are* slowly changing, but our default assumptions still seem to reflect those of earlier centuries where Baptist missionaries were commissioned by the mission societies of the West for service in the rest of the non-western

world. This *Position Paper* acknowledges the limitations of that model. It invites Commission members to consider how we might encourage a new understanding and new practices of mission to match. Through these, Baptists will be commissioned to serve *from everywhere to everywhere*. This model proposes a new way of listening to everybody's contribution and seeking equitable representation and shared decision-making at every level.

To talk of polycentric and polyvocal mission is, at its most basic, to welcome the reality that God's Spirit is stimulating a new vision for mission from multiple centres, among diverse followers of Jesus, to every part of the globe. Secondly, the model values the voice of every follower of Jesus. Each of them offers a unique and indispensable contribution to our global conversation about what it means to be Baptists together in the mission of God.

A wide range of factors will shape our reflections, discussions, and eventual decisions. These will engage much of our time through the remainder of the life of this current Commission for Mission. The most obvious of these are listed here:

- a. The biblical texts that shape our understandings of partnership, agency, authority, and geography.
- b. The theological insights that inform and challenge our inherited practices of resource distribution, authority and control, sending and receiving, centres and margins, power and vulnerability, paternalism, etc.
- c. The historical and contemporary examples of polycentric mission within the global Baptist community and elsewhere in the wider Christian community.
- d. The geo-political and economic realities that allow nations and regional alliances to re-imagine their contribution to the global order and which, in turn, encourage Christian ministries from these countries and regions to re-assess their contribution to global mission.
- e. The regulatory and legal frameworks that constrain and/or empower the ability of any one agency to act within its charitable goals and purposes.
- f. The operational and organisational complexities of re-apportioning and re-allocating resource in a more equitable way, including the financial modelling required for making fully informed and responsible decisions.

Our list isn't necessarily exhaustive, and the Steering Group expects it will be improved through our collectively discerning of the mind of Christ together as a Commission. Our list highlights the challenge of transforming the missiological vision of our Baptist community; a challenge that will require reflection and action at multiple levels. Each of these levels impacts on the others. This factor alone should encourage humble reliance upon the grace of God, upon the example of Jesus, and upon the enduring presence of the Holy Spirit.

## **DEFINITIONS OF POLYCENTRIC MISSION**

- ✚ '...takes place in a world where difference and diversity are increasingly recognized and encouraged, where the centre of gravity of the church is no longer in the "West", where the predominance of one culture over others is no longer accepted, and where cultural polycentrism is a fact of our time.' (Balta and Kim, 2010, p255).
- ✚ '... assumes self-regulating centres of influence within a given structure. This occurs when there are many centres of power or importance within a political, cultural, or socio-economic system. The multiple centres may be of leadership, power, authority, ideology, or importance within a larger 'political boundary'. (Kirk Franklin, 2016, p1)
- ✚ Is '...the history of World Christianity in its various epochs. It has to be described at the same time as that of a polycentric movement. In a new way, proper attention has to be paid to the plurality of its regional centers, cultural expressions, indigenous initiatives, and confessional varieties. (Klaus Koschorke, 2014, p18).

- ✚ Is ‘...a new theoretical model for mission leadership. It reviews the idea of polycentrism through mission history, mission and church organizations, movement theory, and governance, identifying themes for polycentric mission leadership.’ (Joseph Handley, 2020, Unpublished PhD thesis, Fuller Seminary)
- ✚ ...is in contrast with *parochialism* (the belief that one’s locality makes one superior) or *ethnocentrism* (the belief that one’s ethnicity is superior).
- ✚ ‘...creates a democratic environment that enables ‘popular participation’, encouraging a diversity of ‘decisions and authority centres’. (Afegbua & Adejuwon 2012:148). (Cited in Franklin 2016, p3)
- ✚ ‘...is the ability to ‘decentre’ oneself as one takes on the ‘perspective of an outsider’ with their different set of beliefs, values, and behaviours’. (Byram et al. 2001, p5). Cited in Franklin 2016, p3

The definitions are offered to provoke a conversation, to which all are welcome to contribute, including in languages other than English. They are not to be read as a final list. Further reflection and discussion is encouraged.

## **POLYCENTRIC, POLYVOCAL MISSION, AND THE SCRIPTURES (a five-minute version!)**

### ***Why ‘polyvocal’?***

What do we mean when we talk about a biblical model for mission? That’s not a bad question to ask, but what do we mean when we talk about a biblical model for a gospel? There’s hardly an argument that the writing of of gospels is central to the biblical witness to Christ – and there are four of them. One of them starts with a genealogy; another omits any reference to the birth of Jesus; a third a third begins with the baptism of Jesus; and so on.

It seems that there is no blueprint for writing a gospel and, if there ever was, then Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all ignored it. It’s hard to overstate the point that if the core element of the NT witness to Jesus as Lord and Saviour comes as four different models, then it’s possible to imagine our contemporary forms of Christian witness being modelled in a variety of ways. In fact, the history of mission suggests that this is precisely what has happened from place to place and from time to time.

John wrote his gospel so that we might believe (John 20:31). John is writing evangelistically and his is one of four ‘voices’ that speaks to slightly different audiences in various locations scattered around the Empire. From the beginning, mission used multiple voices; has always been polyvocal.

Of course, each the four voices is witness to the same Jesus, as messiah and Christ, and in writing their gospels, each of them draws on the life of Jesus, their OT Scriptures, as well as the context into which each of them is writing. They might be speaking to predominantly Jewish followers of Jesus the messiah. They might be speaking to mixed congregations about Jesus the Lord.

### ***Why polycentric?***

Not only is there a diversity of voices that express the Christian witness of the New Testament, but there is also a diversity of places out of which emerges witness to Christ. I intend to mention just three here.

- From *Jerusalem*, persecuted Christians were dispersed (Acts 11:19) and, as they went, they made disciples from among their fellow Jews.
- From *Libya* and *Cyprus* (Acts 11:20) followers of Jesus sailed to Antioch and, after they arrived, they made disciples from among the Gentile and the Jewish residents in Antioch. This was such a radical step that they had no theology to explain this, and Barnabas sent for the learned Paul to help them re-read the OT Scriptures.

- From *Antioch*, Paul and Barnabas (Acts 11:30) made a journey back to Jerusalem, carrying relief and the message of God's grace at work among the Gentiles.

Beyond this, the history of the early church in the first three centuries is the determination of the followers of Jesus to witness from wherever they are – whether dispersed, taken (some were the possession of their masters), free to travel (early Paul), or as captives (the later Paul). The story of Christian mission in the New Testament is the story of mission in and from multiple centres. Within seven centuries, there were notable centres of mission scattered as far as Ireland in the West to Xian, China, in the East. Mission always was and always will be, polycentric.

### ***Finding the centre***

The primary calling remains to serve, to witness, to love, to preach, to teach, to disciple, and so on. This will identify authentically Christian mission from each and every place, but the form these take has always been demonstrated in a variety of practices, frequently informed by the location and the context. Jesus's ministry was that of a Servant (with Isaiah as the main point of reference). The early church also served its neighbours and community (*diakonia* is the form this takes) but they did not serve as Jesus had served; well not identically. Importantly, the church has served its neighbours in each and every place according to prevailing and presenting needs. Mission, where it includes the service of others, is always practiced according to context. If there is any model for mission, in practice it remains polycentric and polyvocal.

### **POLYCENTRIC, POLYVOCAL MISSION, AND OUR BAPTIST HERITAGE (a three-minute version!)**

An important part of our Baptist heritage involves small groups of English believers forming small congregations in the early 1600s. Their first records normally begin with a sacred agreement, or 'covenant', made between each of them and the risen Lord Jesus, as head of the church. Every member signed these covenants, including those who were illiterate. Frequently those who were not able to read or write, would sign with an 'X' to which others might add something like 'Mary Jones, her mark.'

For early Baptists, signing a covenant was an empowering theological innovation, indicating their desire to be free from the external ecclesiastical authority of the Crown and the established Church of England. Every name, every signature, and every 'X' marked in these church books counted. Every voice counted. Nobody was excluded on grounds of wealth, gender, education, or social standing.

That's why, when Baptists read the Bible, it's not surprising that we draw attention to Jerusalem, Libya, Cyprus, and Antioch as examples of the many centres for early Christian mission. Just as importantly, we remember the New Testament gospels through which *four* voices witness to Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

### **GETTING THE DISCUSSION UNDERWAY**

In Panama in 2016, Dr Patrick Fung (General Director, OMF International), introduced polycentric mission models to members of the Mission Commission for the World Evangelical Alliance and asked us to consider several key questions:

- a. Will western agencies and missionaries recognize emerging leaders from the majority world as equal partners and allow them to take on leadership responsibilities?
- b. Will western agencies be willing to adjust and reorganize their basic structures to be relevant to contemporary majority world context and to facilitate the changing roles?
- c. Can Christian leaders from the majority world overcome their inferiority complex and avoid a reactionary attitude and pride?
- d. Will those leaders and missionaries from the majority world be willing to humbly acknowledge with gratitude the contribution from Western missionaries?











- e. Can leaders from the majority world prove themselves to be accountable if funds and resources are entrusted to them?
- f. Is there a trend moving towards inter-dependence rather than independence or dependence?
- g. What are some of the models of Christ-like leaders in the Global North and Global South Context? How is that expressed differently?
- h. What has hurt us deeply from leaders of another cultural context? What might be some of the cultural misunderstandings? Have we been able to talk openly about those issues?
- i. Are we able not only to “eat at the same table” but allow others to decide the “menu” beyond our comfort zone?

## WHAT MIGHT THIS MEAN?

This Position Paper cannot predict what happens next. Our steering group believes that there are examples and instances of mission organisations that are more polycentric and more polyvocal. Some of these might be leading the way and we have much to learn from their pioneering. It’s not too late for us to re-think and re-orient our mission theory and practice as we seek to keep in step with what the Spirit of God is doing around the globe.

Every Baptist Union, Convention, Alliance, and Regional Association is invited to join this conversation. Our Steering Group is working on a process of consultation and expects this to be well underway before we meet again in Norway in 2023. As we attempt to catalyse this conversation, we encourage bold thinking as we ‘expect great things from God’ and ‘attempt great things for God’.

The bold thinking we hope for, will, for example:

-  Ask hard questions about the way we control the allocation of our financial resources.
-  Encourage Baptist mission agencies in the west to ‘plant’ other Baptist mission agencies that are more local, contextual, flexible, and dispersed.
-  Imagine ways that a Baptist mission partnership might mobilise Iranian Christians in Turkey to reach Thai residents in Germany.
-  Understand that ‘everywhere to everywhere’ is not just about nation-state to nation-state.
-  Acknowledge that the majority of mission in the Western world is undertaken by disciples of Jesus who are better characterised as ‘guest’ and ‘foreigner’ rather than ‘host’ or ‘local’, and seek to support and resource this.
-  Support mutual understanding and collaboration between ‘corporate’ western mission agencies and ‘relational family’ non-western mission agencies.
-  Involve co-sending by local congregations in one place and mission movements located elsewhere.
-  Understanding the routine movement of people for employment and migration as a vital aspect of mission in a highly networked world.
-  Trans-regional Mission Structures that ensure equal representation and decision-making in allocating and distributing mission resources (people and other material resources).
-  Encourage the dissemination of mission biographies, case studies, and mission theologies in languages other than English and of individuals from the non-western world.

## STUDY QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION WITHIN OUR BWA COMMUNITY

This Position Paper recommends that the following questions should accompany our Commission on Mission discussion as we move towards a more widely shared and comprehensively understood practice of polyvocal and polycentric mission:

<b>Question</b>	<i>How do we satisfy the requirement of the question?</i>	<i>What is the principle we should reflect in our answer?</i>	<i>What is our recommendation to BWA members?</i>
"Are we being <u>biblical</u> ?"	Careful study of the themes highlighted above. Prepare Study Guides.	FAITHFUL	
"Are we <u>informed</u> ?"	Being theologically astute. Developing geo-political awareness. A local and global vision	WISDOM	
"Are we being good <u>stewards</u> ?"	Newsletters and prayer information sent to our respective supporters and members. Exercising fiscal prudence & regular accountability. Adhering to charitable regulation & legislation	INTEGRITY	
"Are we being <u>equitable</u> ?"	Who determines budgetary decisions? Who sits on our committees? How do we mitigate against the global dominance of English? How do we mitigate against corporate concerns overwhelming relational modes?	FELLOWSHIP IN THE GOSPEL	

The Steering Group believes that the Commission on Mission has clear and widely understood mechanisms to help it ensure that the BWA is being responsible, accountable, and transparent in advocating for this new understanding of polycentric and polyvocal mission.

The Steering Group recommends to the Commission on Mission that further work is needed to communicate, educate, and encourage the wider adoption of Polycentric and Polyvocal mission, from 'many places in many voices'.

'Many places, many voices' is offered as a way of assisting the Commission on Mission to keep these issues and themes close to our hearts as we make decisions about our operations and priorities through the remainder of this quinquennium.

We invite members of the BWA's Commission for Mission to reflect, pray, speak, and undertake this journey in the company of other Baptists in mission.

BWA Commission on Mission Steering Group. 13<sup>th</sup> July 2022  
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