

The Power of Integrated Vision

Bill and Amy Stearns

We are all familiar with Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” This verse is often misquoted, changing its meaning. The first misquote goes something like this: “You will be my witnesses *either* in Jerusalem, or Judea, or Samaria, or to the ends of the earth.” Thinking that the text reads that way, many say, “I think I’ll choose to witness in Jerusalem. Yep. Sounds good to me. Okay, God, use me here.”

A second misquote goes something like this: “...and you will be my witnesses *first* in Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, *then* to the ends of the earth.” Thinking of Jesus’ command as a progression allows many people to think that they have to become proficient at sharing their faith in their “Jerusalem” first; then, having mastered that, they can move on to the Judeas, Samarias, and finally the ends of the earth. Few ever make it beyond their “Jerusalem.”

The idea behind this text isn’t “either/or” or “first/then” but “both/and,” as in “...you will be my witnesses *both* in Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

That helps us to clarify the impact our lives are to make here on this earth. What our Heavenly Father wants us to realize is that no matter what we do individually or corporately as a church, our impact is to be both local (where you are) and international (to the nations). It’s not an either/or option or a progressive one. It’s simultaneous.

Put another way, whatever ministry God wants you to focus on—again, individually or as a church—whether reaching unwed mothers in downtown Singapore, or being a Christian mechanic witnessing in an auto shop, or being a full-time mom, your ministry isn’t an end in itself. It is instead to be a means toward God’s goal of reaching the nations!

Too often, those who have caught a vision for the global world are ineffective (or even blinded) in reaching out to the world in their own backyards, often damaging their day-to-day ministry effectiveness because they lack balance in their overall life perspective.

So, too, becoming a healthy World Christian is a process. Your vision must be on the global world, while being effective and passionate for those in your local world—not becoming so globally minded that you’re of no local good.



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God’s work and how churches can be more strategically involved in the Great Commission.

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The biblical theme of God blessing His people to bless every people provides an inspired structure for our overall mission as the Church. Understanding and acting on this principle results in an integrated personal and corporate ministry, and encompasses reaching the unreached nations of the earth.

The psalmist wrote:

May God be gracious to us and bless us
 And cause His face to shine upon us
 That Your way may be known on the earth,
 Your salvation among all nations.
 ...God blesses us, that all the ends of the
 earth may fear him (Ps 67:1-2, 7).

God blesses His people with His relationship and health and talents and finances and spiritual gifts and skills. And, in the biblical pattern of “blessed is the nation [the people group] whose God is the Lord,” we can joyfully receive God’s blessings. It’s part of what He has promised to do in His plan to demonstrate His character to all the peoples of the world.

How does this twofold program—being blessed to be a blessing—form a structure for integrating ministries? Consider the following illustration as descriptive of the overall mission of a church. This illustration is inherently limited, but for now consider the parallels: The local church is like a four-stage rocket!

Each of the four dynamics illustrated is present in a healthy, growing local church. Consider each as part of an integrated whole:

**The First Dynamic:
 God blesses His people
 to strengthen the Church.**

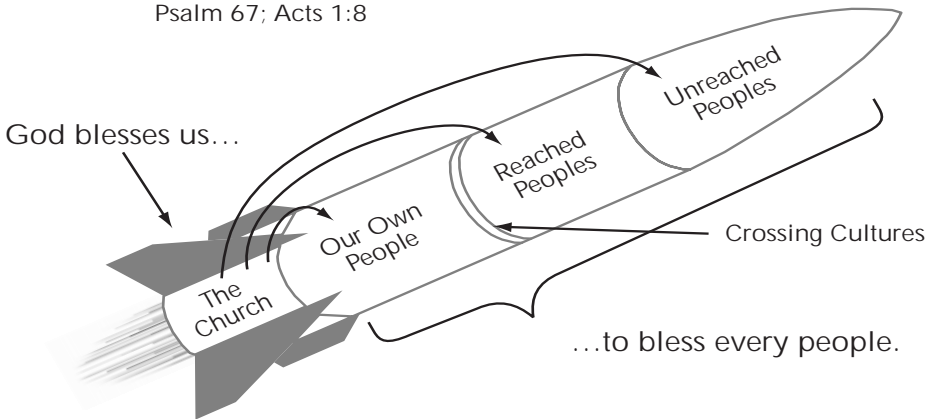
If the Church is to be a channel of God’s blessing to every people, the Church itself must first be strengthened. Children need nurture in the admonition of the Lord, families need encouragement and equipping in everything from communication skills to financial management, couples must be counseled, youth disciplined, offerings collected, prayers offered in behalf of the fellowship, bodies exercised, sermons preached, walls painted, fellowship enjoyed, and buildings built. All the gifts, skills and ministries that go on within the Church itself can be affirmed and encouraged because the Church needs to be strong for its world-level purpose. This is the power dynamic, the “booster stage” of the rocket.

**The Second Dynamic:
 The church is to bless every people
 group—including its own.**

Here’s where the church begins impacting the world outside its walls while at the same time praying for the nations. Going to every people includes going to our own! The easiest people group to offer God’s blessing is, of course, that fellowship’s own people group. As part of its overall mission to the world, the local church becomes salt and light to its own community:

The Integrated, Overall Mission of the Church

Psalm 67; Acts 1:8



- ***In evangelism.*** As a church movement is established in a people group, it is that church's obligation to evangelize its own culture. Mass and personal evangelism aren't just compartments of a local church's ministry; sharing the Good News with neighbors is crucial to the global scope of the Great Commission. This is because the goal is not merely to reach out and save those who are lost, but to see those who are brought into the Kingdom blessed by God to become tomorrow's laborers for the nations.
- ***In ministering to community needs.*** Ministering goodness within a fellowship's own culture isn't just being nice. Caring for the homeless, visiting the sick, ministering to those in prison, tending suicide hot-lines, giving to the poor, sponsoring an unwed mothers' home, cleaning up trash on the highway, offering free baby-sitting for mothers' days off, raising money for medical research, or singing Christmas carols in the mall for the enjoyment of shoppers are all ways of blessing one's own culture by simply "going about doing good" (see Acts 10:38).
- ***In standing up for righteousness in one's own people group.*** A church must often bless its own culture the hard way, by standing for God's character on social issues. When Christians fight pornography, battle drug abuse, child abuse, crime, corruption and injustice, they help bless their own culture.

The Third Dynamic: The church is to bless every people group—including reached peoples.

Here the church begins to cross cultural barriers into "reached peoples," those distinct ethnic groups with a viable church movement capable of evangelizing its own culture. About half of the world's people groups are in this category.

A fellowship's ministries in this third stage bridge language, social, or other cultural barriers. Blessing other reached peoples entails:

- serving their churches
- empowering them to bless their own culture (their own Stage Two) and to

equip other reached peoples (their own Stage Three)

- partnering with them to offer Christ's redemption to unreached peoples.

When a church crosses language, social, or other cultural barriers and comes alongside the local churches in a reached culture, it should come not to take over, but to serve. The result of this partnering can be a strengthened local church, better able to fulfill its role in God's global purpose: to bless its own people through evangelism, doing good, and standing up for righteousness in its society.

The Fourth Dynamic: The church is to bless every people group, including the remaining unreached peoples of the world.

This dynamic of a church is to see that the blessing of redemption is offered to every remaining unreached people group. This has been God's goal from the beginning of Genesis, and it needs to be the end goal of all we do as a church. It is an essential element of an integrated church's structure.

This is the realm of frontier, pioneer missions, where the believers worldwide can join together as partners to focus their resources. What happens in this stage of the "rocket" of the church?

- ***Pre-Evangelism.*** Relief efforts, Christians winning favor in political, educational or business realms, medical work, etc. This prepares the way, establishing the reputation of the character of God in Christ among an unreached people.
- ***Church-Planting.*** Unbelievers come to faith in Christ and churches are planted. Those newborn congregations must be disciplined to be strengthened, reaching out into their own people and crossing cultural barriers in their own history of being blessed to be a blessing to every people.

An Integrated Vision

The whole church, with its varying parts, functions, giftings and ministries working in unity, goes about the Father's business. We're not just a Family—we're a Family Business. God pours His blessings upon us in order to make us a blessing to the world. We're working toward the fulfillment of God's purpose—that those



from “every tribe and tongue and people and nation” would be blessed and believe so as to worship Him and give Him His due.

It’s essential that the different portions of your life-mission, and the mission of your church be integrated. An integrated vision is:

- **Specific.** Rather than just a vague, open-ended hope of things going well, it is a measurable, thoughtful approach to reaching the goal. It can consist of a step-by-step plan to build on the resources and strengths of the Body, with specific targets in mind.
- **Noncompetitive.** Those whose interests and ministries emphasize the spearhead of bringing the gospel to the unreached do not allow that spearhead to become a wedge that divides the body. Instead, the true mission visionary thinks through how the various home-front ministries fit into the overall mission of the church, and seeks to encourage and promote those other ministries toward the fulfilling of God’s purpose.
- **Liberating.** An integrated, single vision in a local church frees up the resources of a congregation. As a fellowship identifies its assets in manpower, prayer power, finances, and talents, it will also recognize its limitations, and respond accordingly. For example, when those zealous for unreached peoples see that their local church is not ready to sustain a concerted thrust toward the unreached, energy can still be applied to foster and encourage what the church is capable of sustaining. This might consist of regular prayer for the unreached, information gathering, strengthening of the other ministries of the fellowship, etc. Reliance on God’s faithfulness to accomplish His purposes will bring freedom from anxiety.

Malfunctions in the Mission

How can this desire to be used by God among the nations backfire? It can be divisive. Among all the competing interest groups in a church, the little “unreached peoples club” can whine for more bulletin space, more budget allotments, more volunteers. These frontier mission fanatics can point long, bony fingers in judgment at other

believers in the fellowship and announce that if a Christian doesn’t have a personal involvement in reaching an unreached people, he or she isn’t in the will of God.

This “us-them” mentality can do more to destroy unity in the church than anything else. In fact, focusing on an unreached people and touting oneself as one of those rare, noble disciples called World Christians can be one of the most obnoxious steps mission-minded believers can take in a local fellowship. They are rarely appreciated and hence are given little time or resources.

The image of the rocket representing the mission of the church can, of course, be faulty for various reasons. But the image may help identify two of the main malfunctions of mission zeal in the church:

- Focusing on Stage One, while ignoring Stages Three and Four

A church that concentrates only on Stage One is like the powerful booster stage of a rocket with no place to go. The first stage blasts into action and careens in every direction like a deflating balloon. A church with no clear direction but lots of activity diffuses its resources; the people tire of activity and suffer burnout. Ministry activity—virtually all of it taking place within the fellowship—can proceed at a furious pace, but the fruit of ministry is sparse.

- Focusing on Stage Four, while ignoring Stages One and Two

Another malfunction of our single-vision mission is neglect of Stage One. A fellowship might concentrate on blessing an unreached people but neglect strengthening its base. That congregation might be like a needle-nosed rocket nose cone drifting through space with no thrust.

Often, mission activist groups feel a clear sense of purpose and direction but are frustrated by lack of prayer power, financial power, and people power. In frustration, these folks point fingers at the lack of vision of the pastor or elders, or at the rest of the congregation for their obvious selfishness.

If your overriding problem as a mission task force or mission mobilizer is the lack of resources, slow down somehow: You need to reconnect in new ways with the booster stage—with a strengthened church. You need



to affirm and encourage the various ministries of the church, to work at integrating a vision of frontier mission within every God-given ministry in the church.

A church with a vision of its mission to reach the uttermost parts of the earth must have a strong Stage Two. Fulfilling your obligation to bless your own culture gives the credibility that missionary enterprises too often lack in offering God's blessing to an unreached people.

The Church With a Unifying Vision

What happens when a church catches a vision of God's heart for every people, and works to integrate that direction into its overall mission?

"I've never seen such ownership of a project by our congregation," says senior pastor Ron Mahurin of Cedar Crest Bible Fellowship Church in Allentown, Pennsylvania. "We started in 1987 with a vision of reaching one people group. Since then we have had many families prepared and sent out, our missions and building giving doubled, then tripled. Our congregation has grown, and our people have a heart for God's heart for all peoples!"

It all began when the church teamed up with AIM (formerly Africa Inland Mission) to focus on the Sandawe people of Tanzania. Later a three-way partnership was created between the church, AIM, and the Tanzanian national church. Cliff Boone, the church's youth pastor, together with his wife, soon went to work as part of a team serving among the Sandawe.

The integration of the church's total mission was evident in the Wednesday night prayer meetings. Cliff Boone and his wife, Becky, still rave about their home church prayer meetings: "With all the many serious prayer concerns of that large church body, the people never fail to mention the Sandawe. There they are, old and young, from all walks of life, bowed before the Father, pleading on behalf of the Sandawe people whom they have never seen but whom they committed themselves to reaching with the gospel."

The people have learned that their prayers really matter. One hot Thursday morning in Kwamtoro, Tanzania—just a few hours after

the Allentown church Wednesday night prayer-warriors had risen from their knees, a middle-aged Sandawe man called to the Boones from outside their shack. He pulled out three tattered Swahili tracts that the Boones had given him months before.

"I have stayed with these little books for two months," he said. "I have read them and read them. I have talked with my wife about them. Now I have come here to be saved."

After serving refreshments, Cliff opened his Bible and carefully explained the gospel message. After a long discussion and lots of questions, the man said, "This is what I want. I want to believe in Jesus."

Every Wednesday night prayer meeting doesn't produce this kind of report, but with this kind of solid ownership by the home church, the Boones can say, "We have seen God do more than we could have imagined." Recently Cliff reported 20 believers among the nearly 40,000 Sandawe. Furthermore, the Africa Inland Church, mostly Swahili-speaking nationals from the majority tribe, had trained and sent their first missionary couple to the Sandawe!

But what has happened to the home church with this focus on an unreached people? Has the missionary zeal drained local ministry? According to Pastor Ron, since 1987:

- Two major church building projects have been undertaken
- Missions giving has grown from \$40,000 in 1987 to over \$125,000 in 1992
- The congregation has nearly doubled from about 275 members to its present size of 500 members

The original concentration on one people group has expanded to a mission vision that seems to encompass all peoples, and has served to spearhead the entire mission program of the church. It also led to partnering between eight different churches in three states who have worked together in reaching the Sandawe.

What is your part in the overall mission of the Body of Christ? And how can you help others find their niche in God's plan? Consider the dynamic of an integrated vision for the work of God in the church, at home and across cultural barriers, as we walk in His blessing to be a blessing to every people.

