

ISFM 2019 and the “Reimagining of Frontier Mission”

Mission is being sifted these days. Not only are global conditions requiring an institutional make-over, but the weight of history is calling “mission” to new account. The apparent complicity of our missionary enterprise with the power and abuses of Western civilization is casting a dark shadow over all its advances. The very totality of this narrative makes it suspect, and we’re wary of a cultural agenda that too easily indicts anything evangelical. But in a day of such global transformations, the mission enterprise must not balk at sifting and rethinking its own premises. It’s the necessary first step in reimagining God’s mission today.

ISFM 2019 opened its sessions with this “sifting of mission,” and three articles and two responses under the theme, “Reimagining Frontier Mission,” are included in this issue (others are forthcoming). We invited Mike Stroope to present the thesis of his recent book, *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (p. 163). When I first read Mike’s book in preparation, I could feel my inner brake lights go on. I was reluctant to accept his verdict on the modern mission paradigm. The historiography was selective, his narrative seemed too grand. I resisted. But gradually I stopped picking at his historical hermeneutic and began to see how it goaded me to reexamine my own mission narrative. You can also read Martin Accad’s response from his context in the Middle East (p. 169). It’s quite apparent that Mike has struck a nerve and allowed a global critique to be heard.

Both Stroope and Accad call for a brutal pruning of modern mission. Their radical assessment reminds me of the roadside trees I used to see on the route between Casablanca and Marrakech in Morocco. Occasionally the branches of these trees would be cut back to their trunks. Total decapitation. It was brutal, ugly, a row of posts sticking into the sky, seemingly unnecessary. One wondered if they could ever recover. A few months later when I would make the same trip, I’d be surprised to see those same trees with their leaves and branches flourishing. One thinks of the Divine Vinedresser whose pruning can cut us back in similar ways, a “cleaning” (John 15:3) that can bring fruit ever so quickly.

A re-interpretation of mission history can threaten to do the same brutal pruning. One feels a tension. We’re aware of another positive narrative, one that assures us that mission witness and mission institutions have had astounding impact for good in the modern age.¹ Yet, our imaginations must hold these different assessments simultaneously, for in a rapidly shrinking world we often live and work next

Editorial *continued on p. 162*

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Editor

Brad Gill

Consulting Editors

Rick Brown, Darrell Dorr, Gavriel Gefen, Herbert Hoefler, R. W. Lewis, H. L. Richard

Copy Editing and Layout

Elizabeth Gill, Marjorie Clark

Subscriptions

Lois Carey, Laurie Rosema

Publisher

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2019 ISFM Executive Committee

Len Barlotti, Larry Caldwell, Dave Datema, Darrell Dorr, Brad Gill, Steve Hawthorne, David Lewis, R. W. Lewis, Greg Parsons

Web Site

www.ijfm.org

Editorial Correspondence

1605 E Elizabeth Street
Pasadena, CA 91104
(734) 765-0368, editors@ijfm.org

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to those who believe an anti-Christian narrative. We must reimagine witness with that perspective in mind.

So, ISFM 2019 indicated some early directions in our reimaging frontier mission.

Language and terminology must be examined. Both Stroope and Accad agree that any “transcending” of an outdated mission paradigm should taper us back to biblical metaphor—to pictures, not propositions. As I indicated in my ISFM presentation,² our language can lock us into models that desperately need review. Accad suggests that a return to biblical images might help us reimagine an approach more appropriate to the interreligious sensibilities of the Middle East (p. 173). Paul Pennington’s ISFM 2019 presentation on our indiscriminate use of New Testament language will be published in a future issue.

New missiological theory will be introduced. The review of Henning Wrogemann’s comprehensive theory of interreligious relations is a foretaste of new perspectives (p. 202). Too often our mission strategies have been derived from intuitive pragmatism

rather than from a thoughtful biblical theology. In his ISFM plenary, Martin Accad condensed insights from his new book, *Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching Across the Christian-Muslim Divide*, and called for the development of a biblical theology of Islam (p. 173).

Darren Duerksen also presented a short case study from South Asia, one he lifted from chapter 4 of his recent book, *Seeking Church: Emerging Witnesses to the Kingdom* co-authored with William Dyrness, reviewed on (p. 206). By exploring the tool of “emergence theory,” these two authors offer greater discernment on how the church arises in frontier contexts.

Expect a reformation of the mission agency. Boone Aldridge helped our ISFM imagine the organizational tensions in the strategic transformation of mission agencies. He offered insights from his recent history of Cameron Townsend and the radical reframing of the faith mission paradigm for Bible translation in unreached tribes (p. 181).

Innovation will become more collaborative. In my opening address I encouraged a reimaging that would spotlight the terms and metaphors selected by

those who initially respond to the gospel.³ At the tail end of our sessions, Kevin Higgins and Steven Spicer began to address how innovation in mission will require a process of listening to indigenous voices (articles forthcoming). One of our ISFM colleagues, Bradford Greer, addressed this same incarnational sensitivity to innovation in his presentation to a prominent evangelical seminary this past fall (p. 189).

Reimagining frontier mission begins with sifting, and brutal pruning is sometimes necessary for fruitfulness.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

Endnotes

¹ Robert D. Woodberry, “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* vol. 106, no. 2 (May 2012): 244–274, pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5622/1233367af2dc7ab8186817553c6ae03a3fe9.pdf.

² Brad Gill, “Reimagining Frontier Mission,” *IJFM* 36:3 (Fall 2019): 111, ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/36_3_PDFs/IJFM_36_3-Gill.pdf.

³ Gill, “Reimagining Frontier Mission,” 112–114.

The **IJFM** is published in the name of the International Student Leaders Coalition for Frontier Missions, a fellowship of younger leaders committed to the purposes of the twin consultations of Edinburgh 1980: The World Consultation on Frontier Missions and the International Student Consultation on Frontier Missions. As an expression of the ongoing concerns of Edinburgh 1980, the **IJFM** seeks to:

- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate “A Church for Every People.”

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go, yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, “to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.” (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.