

Making Us Mindful of Our Models of Mission

Missiology presents a rather dense forest of models—models of church, witness, discipleship, and development, just to name a few. Each will be tested on the frontier. Those that normally fly first class may find themselves in the back, while others get an upgrade. The complexity of certain cultural and socio-religious borderlands introduces unforeseen realities, and the authors in this issue of our journal are applying that reality test to our models.

One is tempted to use the term “paradigm” when speaking of models. It became the buzzword in the wake of Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* back in the ’60s, and it’s run a fruitful course. While it has a fluid meaning, a paradigm appears to cover a field of models. It can glue together multiple theories, methodologies, principles, and praxes into a grander shape. This was the genius of David Bosch’s comprehensive assessment of different mission paradigms over the past twenty centuries.¹ Older paradigms of mission can recede, lose their dominance, and yield to new ones. Bosch helped us see the way elements combined into a prevailing paradigm, and the pattern became a “compass” for how new paradigms might emerge. Many suspect a missiological paradigm shift is underway—that the prevailing paradigm may have gotten us to where we are, but it will not solve the problems we now confront.

Paradigm shifts are seldom abrupt, but more likely result from the gradual testing of models across a broad field of endeavor. That’s what the authors in this *IJFM* issue are doing: they’re extending, combining, even inverting certain missiological models. They have seen anomalies from their respective vantage points, and have stepped back to examine the way a certain structure of thought has been framed and perpetuated. They’re challenging the way we’ve assimilated presuppositions that circumscribe our missiological imagination. In each case, each author may be tinkering with a special problem, but take note: they’re addressing blind spots, exposing hidden assumptions, and defying traditional patterns. In so doing, these authors highlight some of the fundamental ways we test missiological models.

They ask dangerous questions. Challenging a model or paradigm is not a safe undertaking. But when our present models fail to bear fruit, someone has to ask the tough questions. Kevin Higgins offers a vivid example in the ground-breaking role of Phil Parshall, a pioneer in contextualization among Muslim populations (p. 117). Back in the ’70s, after a couple of decades of ministry among Muslims, Phil began to ask risky questions. He studied them in his graduate research, formulated hypotheses, then

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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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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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returned to Asia to apply a new model. This excerpt from the forthcoming festschrift on Parshall's ministry, *Connecting with Muslims: Ongoing Effects of Phil Parshall's Life and Ideas* (William Carey Publishing), honors the impact of his writings on a younger generation. Higgins makes it clear that these very models uncovered further persistent problems that call for tough questions once again.

Christopher Flanders also poses difficult questions for what he calls the evangelical "U-shaped conversion model" (p. 121). His questions began in Buddhist Asia where he didn't witness a typical responsiveness in conversion. Flanders and others have built a large fraternity of thought around the cultural understanding of honor/shame (Ad p. 179; Review, p. 186). He uses this biblical theme to probe our assumptions when encountering other religious worlds.

They study threatening contradictions. Over the past two years an inter-agency task force has addressed the contradictory data surrounding "people groups," and Len Bartlott's article (p. 133) is a seminal contribution from their

recently published cache of articles in the *Evangelical Mission Quarterly* (Ad, p. 132).² An ethnic mosaic of people groups used as a mobilization tool is having to confront the intersection of urban and global realities. The matrix appears to contradict any simple notion of bounded cultural groups. The correctives can lead to more mature models, but we first must surrender our reticence to address contradictions.

Chrispin Dambula claims these apparent contradictions can lead to unfortunate silos in our missiology. He contends that the wall between religious and development studies must be breached (p. 141). This historic cleavage emerged around an apparent contradiction—that religions are primarily an obstacle to progress and that development is best left to more secular visions of human flourishing. Dambula builds a case for transcending this polarization.

They respect the voice of the insider. This journal aspires to bring its readership an inside perspective from frontier peoples. Over the past decade, Alan Howell has written with deep sensitivity of the different voices within a particular

African Muslim people. In this article (p. 161), those voices again challenge the Western hermeneutic of our biblical interpretive models. From the other side of the world, Ji and Hale hear a theme of "blessing" from China that could frame a new paradigm of mission (p. 171). Dye and Talman believe the experience of foreignness among indigenous new believers should be the vital index of contextualization, not characteristics observed from the outside. To accomplish this, they suggest we invert the popular C Spectrum (p. 151).

If the paradigms are shifting, we'll more likely see it by testing our models.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

Endnotes

¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series (Orbis, 1991).

² Marvin J. Newell, ed., *Evangelical Missions Quarterly (EMQ)* 56, no. 4 (October–December 2020), available on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

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- ☞ 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.