

# POSTINGS

*articles for missions mobilizers*



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## Choose Your Missions Lenses

**8 ways North American churches approach missions**

Whenever your church makes missions decisions, you are looking at the options through a particular set of lenses. Those lenses focus on an approach to missions that determines what opportunities you will pursue and when you will say “no.”

You may have deliberately chosen your lenses, or they may just be what you assumed were the ones you were supposed to wear. But are your missions lenses the best for engaging all of your God-given resources for local/global outreach? For that matter, do you even know what glasses you are wearing?

In this *Postings*, we describe eight of the most common missions approaches in roughly the chronological order in which they have appeared on the North American missions scene. Understanding these different approaches can help you more objectively evaluate them and the priorities that they represent. Each has strengths and weaknesses. While it may be possible to use more than one lens, it is not possible to employ all of them, and some combinations are incongruous.

## 1 INDIVIDUAL VISION AND CALLING

The modern Western missions movement is often traced back to 1787 when Englishman William Carey challenged some fellow ministers to take seriously the church's responsibility of proclaiming the gospel to those who had never heard. One respected pastor reportedly responded, "Young man, sit down! When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine!" Undeterred, Carey on his own initiative went to India and urged others to join him.

A century later, Hudson Taylor called for large numbers of volunteers from England and America to join his fledgling China Inland Mission. Other denominational and "faith-based" agencies sprang up whose ranks were filled by Christians also responding individually to a missions call. Another major wave of volunteers caught a missions vision while serving as World War II soldiers and stepped forward for service in response to a personal sense of call.

In most contexts, when these volunteers became missionary appointees, they went on "deputation trips," visiting churches far and wide asking

them to underwrite their personal vision. Churches began organizing annual conferences featuring missionary speakers whose passionate messages called for volunteers to step forward and commit their lives for overseas service.

Using this approach, churches' missions engagement becomes reactive as they merely respond to the initiative of individuals who approach them. This reactive mode also is applied to requests from a denomination, mission agency, or other organization.



**Unique success measure:** Churches using these lenses measure success by the number of missionaries supported (often represented by pins on a global map in the church foyer—the more pins, the more "missions minded") and by the size or percentage of the church budget committed to missions.

## 2 "BANG FOR BUCK"

By the 1970s, a new kind of missions opportunity was emerging. Strong voices were claiming that nationals could do the job cheaper and more effectively than Western missionaries. For example, a very small amount of monthly support would provide a bicycle and salary for an Indian missionary who could reach their

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own people without a language or culture barrier. For the first time, missionary methods began to be measured almost exclusively on a financial cost basis as churches were encouraged to drop support of Western missionaries and instead invest in national evangelists based on return on investment.

 **Unique success measure:** Churches using these lenses measure success by the number of people saved and churches started relative to the cost of supporting the individual worker.

### 3 DISCERNMENT AND SENDING OF OUR OWN

About this same time, other ideas were developing around how churches should approach missions. The Association of Church Missions Committees (ACMC) was formed in 1974 to help churches educate their people about missions and function as proactive “senders” modeled on the example of the Antioch church in Acts 13. Rather than reactively assign support to missionaries who came knocking on their door, churches began proactively looking for people to send from their own congregation. Larger churches hired missions pastors who were tasked with preparing prospective workers, caring for those they had sent to the field, and coordinating short-term teams.

 **Unique success measure:** Churches using these lenses measure success by the number of workers sent out from the church ranks with significant percentages of support, and by the depth of care and relationships provided by the church.

### 4 FOCUS ON UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS (UPGs)

Missiologist Ralph Winter and others began talking about UPGs in the ‘60s and ‘70s, but the definition evolved over time and took on specific dimensions in the ‘90s when the Joshua Project began cataloging unique linguistic/cultural groups with less than 2% evangelicals. The Perspectives on the World Christian Movement course and the Lausanne Movement were crucial in introducing this concept to local churches. As church leaders began analyzing where their missionaries were serving, most recognized that only a minority of those they supported were working among peoples identified as UPGs. Some decided to shift the majority of their involvement toward the unreached, and a few chose to define reaching UPGs as their only true missions task.

 **Unique success measure:** Churches using these lenses measure success by the percentage of the church’s workers and funding dedicated to reaching people groups identified as unreached. They also look for evidence that the percentage of evangelical Christians is growing in UPGs they have targeted.

### 5 ADDRESSING MERCY AND JUSTICE NEEDS

Ministries of compassion and care have always been a part of missions efforts, but in the second half of the 20th century, the growth of Christian organizations focusing exclusively on relief and development needs has outstripped that of the majority of traditional missionary-sending agencies. World Vision, Compassion International, Samaritan’s Purse, and International Justice Mission are some of the largest. These types of organizations are

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particularly attractive when they link the donor directly to the recipient (such as in the “adopt a child” or “buy a goat” programs). The popularity of this set of lenses has also been fueled by discomfort with gospel proclamation, especially on the part of younger generations. And for some, it is exacerbated by the perception that much of missions has been infused with paternalistic/colonialistic attitudes and Western cultural baggage.

 **Unique success measure:** Since the church’s involvement often is outsourced to an external agency, many churches wearing these lenses point to the organization’s success statistics to justify this approach to missions. Many also will measure the number of people sent on short-term teams serving the poor and/or working in local relief organizations.

### 6 ENGAGING ALL SPHERES FOR KINGDOM INFLUENCE

This relatively new missions focus has roots extending back to Abraham Kuyper, an early 20th century Dutch pastor and later prime minister of the Netherlands. Kuyper is best known for his quote, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’” For Kuyper this meant that “Whatever man may

apply his hand to, in agriculture, in commerce, and in industry, or his mind, in the world of art, and science, he is...employed in the service of his God, he has strictly to obey his God, and above all, he has to aim at the glory of his God.”

A new generation of church and mission leaders, especially those with a Reformed theological position, have reacted against the dichotomy between “sacred” and “secular.” Instead, their missions strategy is framed around this concept of challenging every believer to fulfill their missional calling to expand Christ’s Kingdom by exerting their influence in every sphere of society: family, religion, business, politics, education, media, arts. Those with a vision for global marketplace ministry are drawn to this description of missional purpose as they see their professional work as an expression of, not just a pathway to, missions.

 **Unique success measure:** Churches using these lenses try to measure success by how their members demonstrate Kingdom values wherever they live and work, although such is difficult to quantify. For global workers, engaging in an authentic marketplace role for the purpose of life-on-life impact is the measure of success.

### 7 FOCUSED GLOBAL PARTNERING

This concept of partnership began to infiltrate missions discussions approximately 40 years ago, fueled by the explosion of the global church across much of the world. As these churches flourished in many places, mature, godly leaders have been raised up with their own vision for missions and people/resources to invest in fulfilling the Great Commission. At the same time, expanding access to travel and electronic

communication made it much easier for North American churches to pursue partnerships with indigenous leaders, churches, and other entities.

True partnership has not been easy.

Unfortunately, too many have been financially driven, and as a result, have created unhealthy dependency. Fortunately, others have nurtured deep connections between Western and indigenous congregations and ministries.

The best partnerships are led by the on-site partners, and high value is placed on the flow of benefits in both directions as all partners engage their God-given gifts and resources.



**Unique success measure:** Churches using these lenses measure success by the health of their partner relationships and the achievement of shared goals.

## 8 MISSIONAL INTEGRATION OF LOCAL AND GLOBAL OUTREACH

The 21st century has seen an amazing influx of refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, and international students into almost every community in North America. The growing awareness that God has brought these people to their doorstep from all around the world, including countries very closed to the gospel,

has shifted many churches' definition of missions. Facing a North American context that is increasingly post-Christian, local congregations are also focusing more ministry outside their walls in life-on-life missional living, using relationships to open doors for the gospel. Church leaders want to disciple their people to be "on mission" wherever they are and to develop culture-crossing skills "here" to use "there" and vice versa.

Other expressions of this local/global integration approach include a growing number of partnerships between established North American congregations and diaspora churches in their city or community. And as Christian workers from around the world arrive in increasing numbers to serve in the US and Canada, churches in North America are starting to collaborate with this "reverse missions" force.



**Unique success measure:** Churches wearing these lenses measure success by whether an increasing number of their people are pursuing meaningful relationships beyond the walls of the church, especially with cross-cultural newcomers. Church leaders assess whether local, cross-cultural ministry is building vision, skills, and experience that benefit global outreach and vice versa.

Make sure to engage the younger members of your church by valuing what stirs their passions.

## IDENTIFYING YOUR CHURCH'S MISSIONS LENSES

1. Which of these eight missions approaches has your church used in the past, and which are you currently using? If your chosen lens has changed, what precipitated the shift?
2. Many churches find that they can effectively use two, or perhaps even three, different

lenses, but not more. If you are currently using more than one lens, are your lenses complementary or do they present conflicting perspectives? For example, some churches have historically looked through the individual vision and calling lens and now want to focus through the UPG lens but find the majority of their current support does not go toward UPG outreach, causing conflict. But a UPG lens may be very compatible with a global partnership lens as many indigenous workers are highly effective in UPG areas where Westerners are unwelcome.

3. Are some members of your leadership team using different lenses? Which ones? Is this creating conflict? What are the options for resolving this tension?
4. List the strengths and weaknesses of each of the lenses you are currently using to set missions priorities. Don't skip this step. What makes your current approach effective? What weaknesses are holding back your global impact?

## MAKING WISE CHOICES ABOUT YOUR MISSIONS LENSES

Without a clear strategy, churches quickly can be overwhelmed by the vast number of global and local needs. No church can respond to all of them. How can you determine what God is calling your church to do right now? Selecting the most appropriate missions lenses for your church can stretch your impact, rally the congregation around your focus, and make decisions easier. Here are some steps:

1. Your team fairly quickly may be able to eliminate several of the eight lenses as plainly not the best approaches for your church at this time.
2. Consider the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches still left on your list. Do one or two rise to the top as representing your sense of biblical priorities and seeming to have the greatest potential to engage your congregation? Can you prayerfully come to a consensus about your #1 approach?
3. Next, consider whether a second priority could fill in some gaps in your missions engagement not addressed by your #1 set of lenses. Would that second lens use gifts or passions represented in your congregation that aren't likely to be engaged by your #1 priority? For example, if your priority lens is reaching the unreached, you might want to add a mercy and justice lens in order to bolster your UPG church-planting outreach by serving in holistic ministry there. Also, if you have a number of medical people or educators, adding a holistic focus could also utilize more of their expertise locally as well as globally.
4. Make sure to engage the younger members of your church by valuing what stirs their passions. For example, many young adults are eager to use their professional skills in some type of meaningful outreach. How would the focus of engaging all spheres of influence excite them about missions wherever God takes them? At the same time, you may want to expose younger members to firsthand experience with new approaches they may not initially feel drawn to. For instance, their concern for food insecurity for children in your city would have application in a local/



global focus if they are willing to expand the application of their skills into a global context as well.

5. Beware of shifting missions approaches in a way that leads your church to abandon effective work and workers, causing harm to people and ministry. Some work that may not match your new lenses may deserve to be grandfathered. Others you may be able to shift into a new phase that not only better fits your priorities but also increases their long-term impact. Your realignment may encourage them to implement change that was sorely needed anyhow.
6. Be sure that you can clearly explain why you are changing your missions approach. Plan in advance how you will present the shift to (a) your pastor and church leaders, (b) your current missionaries and supported ministries, and (c) your entire congregation. Recognize that not everyone will welcome the new direction, especially if they have an emotional investment in an approach you are replacing. Welcome personal dialog with those who have a loyalty to a missions lens you are moving away from; it may take time for it to be accepted.

When Scripture describes wise management of resources, it sometimes uses the analogy of a vineyard keeper responsible for an abundant production of grapes. Every local church is entrusted with God-given resources— people, finances, influence, and other assets that have the potential to produce an eternal harvest. No serious church missions leader wants to end up with a poor crop.

Do you long to see your vineyard producing at top capacity? A wise choice of approaches can multiply your missions results.

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