



central conference of the evangelical covenant church

Global Perspective and Engagement

I am a boomer. I grew up in the post war (World War 2) era of American evangelical triumphalism. My worldview was fixed in a time when military prowess translated into a certainty that we possessed the “God given” responsibility to lead the rest of the world. Our ideologies were the ideal. And our personal faith was at the center of this ideology.

The first Sunday of each month our church celebrated “Missionary Sunday”. Like clockwork we would find someone in our circle of evangelical friends who would come and share about work in a foreign mission. I looked forward to this Sunday more than any other. The Missionary would preach in the morning. They would usually set up a table display of artifacts from the country they served in. Then most Sunday evenings a slide show would accompany the presentation. Missionary doctors from Africa and South America were the best. Their slides were downright scary with the corresponding stories of animal attacks and exotic diseases.

These presentations never captured my imagination enough to consider a call to foreign missions. More often than not they left me with gratitude for living in the good old USA.

The world has changed. Christian triumphalism is no longer a given. Missiologist, Leslie Newbigin, in his classic treatise, “The Gospel in Pluralistic Society” has helped us understand that Christian faith is not the pure source of reason in the competitive religious narratives of the world. In our post-Christian society we now see that we must function in a complex world of isms, helping to explain intersecting world views. For the last three decades the shift in approach has been a challenge to our missions which had thrived under Christendom.

Since the post-war days of my “missionary Sundays” one doesn’t have to travel across the world to engage with other ideologies. Those “others” are right here in our communities. I live next door to an extended family of Vietnamese immigrants, only a couple who speak any English at all. In their living room is a shrine. It combines a picture of the virgin Mary situated right next to a statue of the Buddha. I was told that this is an accommodation of ancient tribalism and French colonial influences.

I am pleased to see many of our multi-cultural churches, both established and recent plants, who are discussing ways of engaging missions in this new context. Make no mistake; the commission to the church to go to the “uttermost” parts of the earth is still significant. In these days this calling is taking on a new form. Now it has more in common with the world the early church found than with the post-war triumphalism our parents knew.

In Ephesians, Paul specifically relates the “mystery” of the gospel as the invitation to all, not only the Jewish cultural context the church was birthed in. He states that this was so the “multi-faceted wisdom of God might now be revealed through the church”. Could it be that God doesn’t want to be locked in any single worldly cultural context? What ways do other cultures exhibit a knowledge of God?

Healthy Missional Churches are churches that are involved at some level in that mystery, seeking to engage with what God is doing throughout the world. Our loyalty is to Christ’s gospel throughout the world beyond our own cultural trappings.

Shalom

By: Peter Sjoblom, Director of Congregational Vitality