

Mission Amid Global Crises makes an important and uniquely Canadian contribution to understanding the mission of the church in a time of multiple crises that impact our nation. The authors are drawn from church congregations, the senior leadership of mission organizations, and the seminary academy. The editors have brought together a valuable collection that combines theological thought, knowledge of the impact of global crises, and research from those engaged in missions. The book will be useful for mission practitioners, church leaders and seminary students.

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Mission Amid Global Crises

Santos & Naylor

MISSION AMID GLOBAL CRISES

Academy, Agency, and Assembly,
Perspectives from Canada



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Mark Naylor



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Edited by: Narry F. Santos and Mark Naylor



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CHAPTER 1

THE MISSION OF GOD AND THE ROLE OF
CHRISTIAN HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES
IN RESPONDING TO THE GLOBAL CRISIS*Rupen Das***Introduction**

In the past few decades, the role of Christian humanitarian agencies has changed and there is no proper understanding yet of how they fit into the mission of God. In a chaotic world, there is an increasing concern to respond to human need, yet within significant sections of western evangelical Christianity, there is still confusion as to how to prioritize this within Christian missions and how to integrate it with proclamation.

Migration, displacement, and the resulting diaspora communities are not a new phenomenon. However, humanitarian emergencies resulting in forced displacement and migration are the new normal in the global community. Displacement and migration originate in contexts of poverty, hardship, and chaos—often rooted in conflict, economic, and environmental catastrophes. Because of the sheer volume of refugees and migrants, the destination countries are struggling with existential issues of integration and identity. These countries wonder how the displaced people relate to the former's long-held values of freedom of religion, cultural diversity, individual rights, and the concept of citizenship and who belongs. The United Nations' Global Humanitarian Review of 2018 identified conflict as the main driver for humanitarian need over the long term, while natural disasters continue to affect people for periods of time. The report stated that out of 135.3 million people requiring aid,

assistance was provided to only 97.9 million. In order to provide this aid, US\$ 25.2 billion was required (UNOCHA, 2018).

Whether through conflict or natural disaster, the consequences are the same. People are displaced. In 2018 the United Nations reported that the number of people forcibly displaced had reached 74.8 million (UNHCR, 2018). This included refugees, those internally displaced, and the stateless. It is the highest global number since World War II.

Christian agencies have been at the forefront of humanitarian responses. According to a 1953 study, 90% of all post-World War II relief was provided by religiously affiliated agencies (Ferris, 2005, p. 315). However, in the decades that followed, the religious motivations for humanitarianism were replaced by a secular worldview (Barnett & Stein, 2015, p. 5), as religion came to be seen as a hindrance to progress (Jones & Petersen, 2011, p. 1292). The suspicion (sometimes overtly stated) is that local religious institutions, because of their communal and evangelistic nature, would not be able to adhere to the humanitarian principles of impartiality and non-conditionality (Kraft, 2015, pp. 2–3). As a result, there was a significant rise in secular non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that were motivated by and operated on humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law. In order to be relevant and respected in a changing professional context and to be able to access bilateral and multilateral funding, most Christian humanitarian agencies separated the spiritual dimensions of ministry from temporal assistance. As a result, there is not much that differentiates them from their secular counterparts.

The challenge for Christian humanitarian agencies is highlighted in the “The Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief” (Geneva, 1994), which articulates the fundamental assumptions of humanitarian assistance (i.e., being non-political and impartial in terms of religion, creed, race, and nationality). The emphasis is on aid being unconditional and based only on need. The only driver for the assistance should be the humanitarian imperative.

Yet, this needs to be balanced with a respect for local culture and customs, which invariably includes religion, religious values and worldviews, and religious institutions in society.

Aid should never be conditional on religious activity or involvement. However, the mandate and operations of Christian humanitarian agencies based on the Red Cross Code of Conduct raises some significant questions about the understanding of Christian missions.

- What is the relationship between evangelism and providing humanitarian aid? The 2001 Micah Declaration explained the relationship between the Great Commission (Matt 28.19–20) and the Great Commandment (Matt 22.37–40) this way:

Integral mission or holistic transformation is the proclamation and demonstration of the Gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ (Micah Network, 2001, p. 1).

The Micah Declaration finally provided the right balance between the verbal proclamation of the Gospel and the demonstration of its reality. Neither operates independently and each has significant implications for the other. While acknowledging that proclamation and acts of compassion are integrally linked, it did not clarify how both can be operationalized without perceptions of manipulation or conditionality.

- Is humanitarian assistance or other acts of compassion by themselves valid ministry and part of the mission of God, even if there is no proclamation and evangelism? Here are other related questions: What are the biblical and theological

foundations for such ministries? What is the difference between secular humanitarian agencies and their Christian counterparts that are involved in similar work and that also do not do any evangelism or any sort of spiritual ministry?

- If disaster relief, community development, and other ministries of compassion are separated from other aspects of spiritual ministry, what are the objectives of these ministries? Is socio-economic transformation, what Christian NGOs aim for, a biblical concept? How different is it from the social Gospel and its roots in liberal theology?
- Finally, what is the relationship between Christian humanitarian agencies and the local church? This has raised questions about ecclesiology and accountability.

These are not new questions, but for each generation, they assume a fresh sense of urgency. There is a need to answer these questions again, as the culture, contexts, and times change (Das, 2016a.; Das and Hamoud, 2017).

In trying to understand the relevance and place of humanitarian agencies in the midst of global crises and Christian mission, there are new lessons and insights emerging that are enabling evangelical missiologists to understand the mission of God—*missio Dei*—at this time in history. To regain an effective place within the mission of God, what are some concepts that humanitarian agencies need to grapple with?

The Role of the Local Church as Partners in Mission and the Global Crisis

A few decades ago, I observed that a good number of Christian NGOs walked away from partnering with local churches, because they felt that the latter did not have the capacity to manage projects and had questions about manipulation and conditionality when churches did evangelism and recruited members in the midst of humanitarian crises or poverty alleviation projects. Recently, I noticed that while local churches acknowledge the

necessity of legal and operational independence of Christian NGOs, these churches are recognizing more the critical role that they can play in humanitarian crises and in long term community development. This role is most relevant when those who have been displaced, affected by disasters, or marginalized from society need a community to help in their rehabilitation in the aftermath of a crisis or need integration into the mainstreams of society.

Social scientists acknowledge religious institutions such as churches, mosques, and temples are an integral part of communities. As social institutions in the community, they have obligations to that community. They not only address matters of spirituality but also provide and build social capital, besides being venues through which social services are provided (Bodenhamer, 1996, p. 1). Plamen Sivov, writing from the context of post-Soviet Bulgarian society, asks whether institutions such as churches can have a role as agents of community development, when previously the welfare state provided services and managed change. While affirming that the local church, as an institutional service provider, has no distinct advantage compared to other NGOs or the government, Sivov describes the local church as a distinct community. He writes, “Whenever a communal spirit, high level of personal motivation or a personal approach to the sometimes dehumanized ‘target groups’ is needed, the church has a lot to offer. The church cannot compete on the grounds of quantity, but it has no match on the grounds of quality or holistic personalized approach, when it comes to provision of different kinds of care for the vulnerable groups” (Sivov, 2008, pp. 214–215). It is this communal spirit and holistic approach to human beings, if churches were properly trained, could prove vital in addressing the needs of dehumanized and marginalized groups.

This communal spirit was evident in the response of local churches in Lebanon and in many countries of Europe to the Syrian refugee crisis. An indigenous Lebanese Christian NGO (Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development [LSESD]) with international funding, developed and implemented

an extensive response to the needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and those internally displaced inside Syria, all through local churches (Das, 2015, pp. 43-50). This provided a local identity to the humanitarian response rather than that of an international agency and strengthened the credibility of the local church. It enabled a local faith community to demonstrate compassion. It empowered the local church to expand its understanding of ministry. And finally, it ensured a long-term ministry to the refugees after the initial needs were met.

Such approach forged a new type of relationship between agencies and the local church. While LSESD provided the back-office functions of program design, proposal writing, accessing funds, procurement of supplies, monitoring, and reporting, the local church could be a church and do what a church does—show compassion, evangelize, teach, preach, disciple, equip, and pray, without any manipulation or conditionality to the aid that they provided. Humanitarian agencies are able to do what the local church is often unable to do—provide the technical expertise needed in specific humanitarian sectors (water, food aid and food security, shelter, nutrition, economic development) and provide an awareness of the complexity of migration issues and international refugee law. Yet, these agencies need local faith communities where those in need can feel safe and have a sense of belonging. These local churches, because of their knowledge of the local community and volunteer base, are effective implementing partners for the agencies (Das, 2016).

There is now a greater understanding of how humanitarian agencies can partner with local churches. Each partner brings its strengths and expertise in working together to maximize impact.

The Need for Humanitarian Agencies to Understand the Global Dimensions of the *Missio Dei*

I notice that Christian humanitarian agencies have the tendency to focus on responding to immediate needs and working towards long term socio-economic change, just as their secular

counterparts do. They see this as ministry, since it demonstrates the love of Christ. Those involved in community development use terms like “Kingdom work” or see their ministry as “building the Kingdom of God.” Their motivation is encapsulated in Micah 6:8. “And what does the LORD REQUIRE OF YOU? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Beyond that, there is limited understanding of eschatology, minimal awareness of historical theology and the struggles between the social Gospel and liberal theology versus the fundamentalists, and little acknowledgement of the mission of God and what He is doing at this point in history. What they can miss is the understanding of the context within which they operate—namely, God’s purposes being worked out in the midst of both man-made and natural disasters. They may not consider themselves as mission agencies but identify themselves as Christian humanitarian agencies, and in some vague way believing they are doing “Kingdom work.”

As mentioned earlier, displacement and migration because of disasters and persecution are not a new phenomenon. The movement of people (both forced and voluntary) resulting in diaspora communities permeates biblical history, not as a background to the main narrative, but as fundamental to God’s purposes. Old Testament scholar and missiologist Christopher Wright observes:

Migration runs like a thread through the whole Bible narrative. People on the move (for all kinds of reasons) are so much part of the fabric of the story that we hardly notice it as a major feature. Indeed, when the text actually points out that YHWH, God of Israel, has been involved in the migrations of peoples other than Israel, some Bible translations put that affirmation in parentheses—as though to separate it off from the main story, even though it is an integral part of the theological context of the story. YHWH is the God of all nations and all their historical migrations and settlements (Deut. 2:10–12, 20–23) (Wright, 2016, p. 1).

The present global refugee crisis and migration is being used by God, as He has throughout history, for the Great Commission and for renewing the Church. Unlike historical missions where western missionaries went out and ministered to the unreached and the fledgling church in the global south, today Christian immigrants and refugees from Asia, Africa, and Latin America are revitalizing the church in the west¹. Church historian Phillip Jenkins writes about the impact of immigrants on traditional Christianity in Europe, UK, and North America with these words:

Southern influence grows through two distinct but related phenomena. In some areas, Third World churches undertake actual mission work in secularized North America and especially Europe. Commonly, though, evangelism is an incidental by-product of the activities of immigrant churches, an important phenomenon given the large African and Asian communities domiciled in Europe.... When we measure the declining strength of Christianity in Europe, we must remember how much leaner the statistics would be if not for the recent immigrants and their children (Jenkins, 2007, pp. 113, 115).

Migration and displacement are also presenting new opportunities for evangelism and proclamation among previously hard-to-reach people. Migrants and refugees, foreigners who are away from all that is familiar to them—lost and alone in their new country—seem to be much more open to God in their desperation than they were in their home countries. Missiological researcher Jenny McGill writes,

Migration blesses insofar as it enables the person to experience God and thus experience a change of self-understanding

1 I have numerous first-hand examples of Burmese Baptists being integrated into churches in Finland, Syrians in Sweden, Iranian and Afghan refugees in Germany and Austria, Ghanaian, Caribbean, and Nigerian immigrants in the UK.

(Gen. 32:22–32; Ex. 3). The nearness of God is perhaps no more acutely felt than during an experience of physical displacement (McGill, 2016, pp. 204-205).

Today, this is most evident in the openness to the Gospel among the Iranian diaspora globally, and Syrian and Afghan refugees in Lebanon and across Europe.

Within the mission of God, there is a unique role for Christian humanitarian agencies to demonstrate the love and compassion of Christ to people devastated by conflicts and disasters or trapped in poverty, regardless of whether there is proclamation. However, the impact would be so much greater if they partnered with local churches or mission agencies to provide a more holistic response. By separating the humanitarian and compassionate dimensions of ministry from proclamation and other spiritual ministries, they are missing how God is using disasters and human displacement to strengthen His Church and draw hard-to-reach people to Himself.

A Different Worldview When Faced with Disaster, Suffering, and Marginalization

The historical struggle in modern Christian mission between the primacy of proclamation and a more holistic model, which also includes ministries of compassion and social justice, is rooted in Plato's dualistic understanding of reality—separating the physical (the material) from the spiritual (the immaterial). While the various Lausanne documents and the Micah Declaration have sought to integrate both dimensions, much of Christian mission still operates on this distinction. Many mission agencies focus on evangelism, church planting, discipleship, and only provide material assistance when absolutely necessary, such as in a major disaster. On one hand, Christian humanitarian agencies can operate independently of local churches and mission agencies, ensuring that there is no proselytism during the humanitarian aid that they provide or the community development work that they do.

On the other hand, mission agencies that do address proclamation, church planting, and ministries of compassion can usually separate these activities into different departments that operate independently.

The majority of man-made and natural disasters today are in the global south, where people have a different worldview from western Platonic dualism. Missionary and missiologist Paul Hiebert distinguishes between a modern scientific world view with its primary focus on the material and physical world, and a traditional and holistic religious worldview—with the spiritual and material worlds interwoven seamlessly (Hiebert, 2011). When people in the global south experience disasters and suffering, they are grateful for the help and aid that is provided, but because of their holistic worldview, they interpret their experience through a religious framework. Many times, their traditional religious worldviews do not adequately answer the deeper existential questions about suffering and God, and they are looking for alternatives and answers. Because of their choice to separate compassion and aid from proclamation, most Christian humanitarian agencies are unable or unwilling to respond to these deep felt needs.

The western Christian agencies that try to respond usually bring an evangelist who preaches a standardized gospel message focusing on sin, forgiveness, and repentance. Recent research on conversion among the poor in the global south shows that what attracts the majority of the poor is a God who is responsive, understands their suffering, and is with them—a God who identifies Himself as Immanuel. It was only later that they began to understand the issues of sin and forgiveness (Garrison, 2014; Hilderbrand, 2016; Iyadurai, 2015). Their faith is based on a lived reality of the living God revealed in Jesus Christ rather than on an intellectual kind of Christianity based on a platonic separation of the spiritual from the physical. For the non-westerner, spiritual experience is followed by understanding, while for the westerner, it is the reverse. Rather than presenting a God who is compassionate in the midst of people's suffering, the evangelists start

with human failure and a God who is judge, yet willing to forgive—a message that does not necessarily resonate with those who are suffering. Their focus is on God who is Saviour rather than on God who is Immanuel.

If western Christian humanitarian agencies choose to operate holistically, they face a two-fold challenge. First, an exclusive focus on the cognitive, the individual, and a logical systematization of theology in North American evangelical soteriology has resulted in what American sociologist James Davison Hunter at the University of Virginia refers to as the methodization and standardization of spirituality within the evangelical tradition. He states that evangelicalism built on a propensity for the “rationalization of spirituality” in 18th and 19th century Protestantism (Hunter, 1983, pp.74–75). Matthew Bates (2011) writes that this rationalization of spirituality is the result of the impact of the Enlightenment on not only the Christian faith but also on mission. This rationalization does not consider the influence of context on a people’s perception and understanding of their spiritual issues or needs. It is in the midst of these needs that in their desperation God meets them.

This type of methodization and standardization of the gospel and spirituality limits how ministry can be done with people affected by disasters, trapped in poverty, or are marginalized by society. It limits the understanding of the Gospel (i.e., the gospel presented as forgiveness of sins rather than the Gospel as the coming of the Kingdom and reign of God, and the forgiveness of sins being the way to enter the Kingdom) and the way it can be communicated. If humanitarian agencies choose to be holistic in their approach, they need to understand that Christian spirituality in much of the global south is very different than that of western evangelicalism. They do not want to hear a standardized message but wish to encounter the living God and His love and concern in the midst of the struggles of daily life.

The second challenge is understanding the contexts and the political frameworks out of which humanitarian and mission

agencies operate. These contexts and frameworks are very different from those of the people they minister to in the majority world. Western evangelical and Protestant Christianity is very Constantinian, based on a Christianized culture and access to power and an abundance of resources, rather than based on models from the New Testament and the early church, which was often a persecuted minority. Christians in many parts of the majority world are a minority, where the dominant culture is not Christian or Christianized and the government is often not sympathetic to Christians. The question they grapple with is this: What does it mean to be followers of Christ and citizens of the Kingdom in the midst of powerful nations, just as the early Christians struggled to follow Christ in the context of a brutal and unyielding Roman Empire.

The two foundational pillars of western evangelical missions are “reaching the world for Christ” (evangelism and proclamation) and “transforming communities and society” (social justice). The assumption is that there is freedom to choose whom they worship and that they have a choice to determine what kind of society they want. In societies where Christians are minorities, and in many cases marginalized, they may not have the luxury of these options. However, the western models of how proclamation and social justice are to be done are programs or projects that require considerable resources and time-bound planning and implementation.

The models from the very early church are instructive for marginalized and minority communities on how to address the issues of social justice and proclamation. Church historian Peter Brown (2002) refers to the Christians in the Roman empire (300–600 A.D.) providing for the needs of the poor as a revolution that impacted the social imagination of the times. In the 4th and 5th centuries, as poverty increased in the eastern provinces of the Roman empire, the cities were unable to absorb the poor who were not citizens. Brown writes, “The existing structures of the city and the civic model that had been associated with them collapsed under

the sheer weight of a desolate human surplus, as the cities filled with persons who were palpably ‘poor’” (p. 8). It was the Christians who responded to the needs of the poor. Brown writes about these Christians, “They were themselves, agents of change” (pp. 8–9).

This ministry of compassion and charity as demonstrated by the lay people and the church leadership in the Roman empire had a significant influence on the social value of the society. Old Testament scholar and theologian, Walter Brueggemann (2003) highlights the growing appreciation of the “legitimacy of the cry of the poor [that] created a social awareness that the powerful were obligated to provide justice and protection for the poor” (p. 30).

Church historian Alan Kreider (2016) writes about how the early church grew in the midst of the persecution and oppression. At times, it was so severe that they had to meet in secret. Yet, in the midst of that, Kreider writes: “Rumors that God was present in Christian gatherings may have also attracted outsiders to investigate Christianity” (p. 109; cf. Fox, 1996). What attracted pagans to Christianity was the reality of the living God, revealed in Jesus Christ and evident in the midst of Christian communities.

There are significant differences in the theological frameworks western humanitarian agencies operate from and the people affected by poverty and disasters. Western evangelicalism focuses on a triumphant God who has conquered sin and now enables His people to “end poverty” and “reach the world for Christ.” A triumphalist theology rings hollow to people who are confronted daily with the reality of evil and human sin and are often times trapped by them. Instead, they intuitively understand the “in-between times” that we live in, when the Kingdom of God has come but is not yet manifested in all its fullness. They can relate to the darkness and disillusionment that the disciples experienced on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday (Moltmann, 1974; Hall, 2003; Lewis, 2001). Humanitarian and mission agencies need to understand how to minister in such contexts.

Conclusion

Humanitarian agencies do have a place in the *missio Dei*. In His compassion, God shows grace and mercy to people who are suffering, and He does that through both Christian and secular agencies. Christian humanitarian agencies could have a significantly greater impact if they were to partner with local churches. This requires an understanding of how God is using both man-made and natural disasters to build and renew His Church and speak to hard-to-reach people and people groups. Most humanitarian agencies are western in their orientation and operations, even if they have national branches in the global south. If they choose to minister holistically, they need to engage in self-reflection on the theological, philosophical, and political frameworks from which they operate and realize that much of the rest of the world operates differently.

Reflection Questions

1. The chapter states that the local church can be a partner in helping refugees. What can a church do to help refugees feel at home in the new country?
2. Humanitarian agencies respond to the material and psychological needs of people who are displaced either due to conflicts or disasters. In what practical ways can these agencies respond to the spiritual needs of the people?
3. If you were a refugee who had been displaced from your home due to war and had lost everything, what would you ask from God? Why would you seek God in the first place?

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