



The Seamless Garment of Christian Mission

The tension in the air can feel thick enough to cut with a knife. It escalates to all-out war in some churches – the battle between living local and going global. With limited time and resources and energy in any given context, it can feel like local mission and global missions are constantly vying for attention, competing articles rather than one seamless garment.

On one side, we see the needs around us in our city and feel deeply that proximity implies responsibility. God has called us to live on mission right here in our locale, “reached” as it may be, but still very needy. So many are lost in this city. On the other side, we ache over the world’s 7,000 unreached peoples and feel deeply the summons to send our best and give sacrificially and hold the ropes to get the gospel to the peoples who otherwise have no access to it.

How do we decide which mission gets our best energies?

No New Tension

Granted, there are tough decisions to be made about the allocation of finite resources and finances and personnel – and personal callings – but before fleshing out the practical’s, it can steady our perspective to take a step back, look at the bigness and simplicity of Jesus’ Great Commission, and be reminded that there is one unified Christian mission. Fresh as a new emphasis on living missionally may feel in many contexts, this is no new tension between local mission and global missions. A generation ago, in November of 1984, John Piper preached into this tension at Bethlehem Baptist Church. The church was a year into a major awakening for global missions, and the advocates for local mission were feeling the pinch. You can hear the tension between local and global in the title: “The Relationship Between Diversified Domestic Ministries and Frontier Missions.”

Take heart that the tension’s not new to your church, and that God stands ready to give a local body resolve together about the seamless garment.

Why Global Missions Needs Local Mission

Here are three reasons why global missions needs local mission – why living missionally at home is essential for missions to the unreached. The first two are from Piper’s 1984 sermon, and the third is an expansion from it.

1. Credibility

Missional fruit here can produce a kind of credibility for global missions abroad. Here’s how Piper puts it: *“The engagement of the church in the transformation of its own domestic front (local mission) may go a long way to creating some credibility for the messengers we send to the frontiers (global missions) with a gospel we say is transforming. So domestic ministries are a means to the credibility of frontier missions.”* Such credibility not only serves the unreached people who ask about the church back home, but also the missionaries themselves in dreaming about the kind of transformation the gospel can bring when it crosses into a new people.

2. Resources

Local mission provides the resources for global mission. And by resources, we mean both financial and personnel. Again, here's Piper from 1984: *"Domestic ministries win new recruits to the cause of Christ and give them invaluable training."* Without mission at home raising up laborers and finances that can be sent in support of the global mission, the arduous task of disciple-making will not be completed.

3. Training

This third point is mentioned by Piper, but can be developed further. There are principles of ministry that should be learned in one's native culture and then carefully contextualized to a second (or third or fourth) culture. To the degree that you don't learn core principles of gospel ministry in your native culture, you expose yourself to greater likelihood of misjudging particular practices in a non-native culture. Thorough training as to the shape of Christian theology and the basic principles of disciple making and leading others are invaluable in crossing a culture and learning a language and trying to learn how to navigate the endless line of difficult decisions you face in a new cultural context.

Why Local Mission Needs Global Missions

But it's not just global missions that needs missional living at home. It works the other way around as well. Here are three reasons why global missions are essential to local mission.

1. Authenticity

That the good news of Jesus is good enough to go global authenticates the message of the local mission. It authenticates our message when we proclaim a gospel locally that is not just for people of our city and nation, but for every human everywhere.

Put another way, Jesus is no tribal deity. He's not just the God of our own tribe, our own tongue, our own people, our own nation. He is the God of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation and will win to himself worshipers from every group, and demonstrate his unparalleled grandeur in doing so. The human heart is too hungry to be satisfied by the god of a single people. The human heart longs for the God who is there, the God who created all peoples (and all things), the God who came among us in Jesus, and the God who has redeemed us. It is the God of the nations to whom we call people in local mission, not just the God of our little locality.

Global missions authenticates that we have something here that's good enough to export.

2. Perspective

Missionary discoveries from crossing a culture with the gospel should inform those of us doing local native-culture ministry. We inevitably develop blind spots when ministering the gospel among our native culture for an extended period. The issues that missionaries must wrestle with when crossing a culture, and seeing the church become native in a new culture, should come back and challenge the mother church who sent them out. The sending church needs the help. We desperately need to listen to our missionaries – not just to give approval or not for their methods and what practices they're promoting or not, but to evaluate and reform our own ministry practices.

Local mission needs the perspective that global missions provides. And as the West becomes increasingly post-Christian, we must listen all the more to our missionaries and keep evaluating the way we've always done things. Acquiescing to "That's not the way we've always done it" will signal decline in our churches, but "I think there's something we can learn here" is the sound of doors being opened to new possibilities for gospel flourishing.

In general, churches that are listening well to their missionaries are learning and thus doing better ministry at home.

3. Confirmation

Global missions is a first taste of the fulfillment of local mission. It is the flowering of good local mission. Every local ministry should aim at producing, sending out, and sustaining cross-cultural gospel carriers. It's a sign of ministry maturity and health. Sending out missionaries doesn't mean the local work is done, by any stretch, but it does mean that a mature movement is beginning to emerge.

Conversely, it is a sign that something is sick, or at least there is significant immaturity, when a local church's concern is low for the global advance of the gospel. It's at least a tell that the church is insular, if not much worse. And on the flip side, when a church is engaged with not only local mission, but also global missions, it's a sign of health and maturity. It is confirmation that work being done locally is sound gospel work.

One Lord, One Faith, One Mission

So global missions should not feel threatened by local mission, but thrilled by it, and local mission should not feel threatened by global missions, but thrilled by it. Jesus calls his church to mission at home and missions among every people on the planet. Local mission and global missions.

There is one Christian mission. We are not to be torn between casting our support behind mission among a reached people and missions to the unreached. Jesus' mission is one seamless garment that covers every nook and cranny of our city and every people on the planet.

David Mathis

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