

WHAT IS INTEGRAL MISSION?

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Although it has recently become fashionable to use the term “integral mission”,¹ the approach to mission that it expresses is not new. The practice of integral mission goes back to Jesus himself and to the first century Christian church. Furthermore, a growing number of churches are putting this style of mission into practice without necessarily using this expression to refer to what they are doing: “integral mission” is not part of their vocabulary. It is clear that *the practice* of integral mission is much more important than *the use of this new expression* to refer to it.

The expression “integral mission” (*misión integral*) came into use principally within the Latin American Theological Fraternity (FTL) about twenty years ago. It was an attempt to highlight the importance of conceiving of the mission of the church within a more biblical theological framework than the traditional one, which had been accepted in evangelical circles due to the influence of the modern missionary movement. In the last few years the expression has been used so widely that the literal translation into English, *integral mission*, is gradually becoming a part of the vocabulary of those who are pressing for a more holistic approach to the Christian mission, even outside Spanish-speaking evangelical circles

What is this approach to mission? In what aspects does it differ from the traditional approach?

The Traditional Approach to Mission

In the traditional approach, which took shape within the modern missionary movement especially since the end of the eighteenth century, the Christian mission was conceived of mainly in geographical terms: it consisted in crossing *geographic frontiers* for the purpose of taking the gospel from the “Christian West” to the “mission fields” of the non-Christian world (the heathen). In other words, to speak of *mission* meant speaking of *transcultural mission*.

The purpose of missions was “to save souls” and “to plant churches,” mainly in foreign countries, by means of the preaching of the gospel. The agents of mission were principally the “missionaries,” the majority affiliated to missionary societies, either denominational or interdenominational (the “faith missions”). The qualifications of the missionaries varied, but it was taken for granted that the first requisite (in addition, of course, to the experience of conversion to Jesus Christ) was to feel, generally on an individual subjective level, “called by God to the mission field.” To answer God’s call to missions, as in the case of the call to the pastorate, was usually considered the highest calling, the maximum commitment that a Christian could make in serving God. By no means was it ever considered to be something to be expected of all Christians.

What was the responsibility of the local church in this pattern? With the exception of a few churches (especially among the Plymouth Brethren) that sent out missionaries without the intervention of missionary societies, the role of the local church was reduced to providing personnel and spiritual and economic support for missions. Even the preparation and training of the missionaries was delegated by the local church to specialized institutions.

It should be pointed out, however, that with all its weaknesses, this concept of mission, characteristic of the modern missionary movement, inspired (and in many cases continues to inspire)

¹ The expression ‘integral mission’ has been adopted by the Micah Network

thousands of transcultural missionaries to do what Abraham did centuries earlier: he left his homeland and his family and went out to the land God showed him. They went out to spread the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, and thus have written some of the most moving pages of church history. Thanks to the work of these traditional missionaries true “heroes of the faith,” many of whom gave their lives for the sake of Jesus Christ, today the church is a world-wide movement with congregations in practically every nation on earth. Praise God!

On the other hand, it must be recognized that the identification of the mission of the church with transcultural mission has resulted in at least four dichotomies that have had a negative effect on the church.

1. The dichotomy between *churches that send out missionaries* (generally located in the “Christian West”) and *churches that receive missionaries* (almost exclusively in countries in the so-called “Two-thirds World”: Asia, Africa, and Latin America). This pattern is changing, with the growing number of transcultural missionaries being sent from outside the West (or from the periphery of the West, in the case of Latin America). It must be recognized, however, that until a short time ago (transcultural) “mission” was that carried out from headquarters in Europe (for example, England, Scotland, Germany, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Sweden, Norway), or in the United States, Australia or New Zealand. The transcultural missionary movement with headquarters in Asia, Africa, or Latin America is relatively new.

2. The dichotomy between *home*, located in some country of the “Christian West,” and the *mission field*, located in some pagan country. It is not surprising that the majority of “career missionaries” (sometimes with years of service) decide to retire in their home country.

3. The dichotomy between *missionaries*, called by God to serve him, and *common ordinary Christians*, who can enjoy the benefits of salvation but are exempt from sharing in what God wants to do in the world. I would dare to suggest that the dichotomy between *clergy* (including missionaries and pastors) and *laity* lies at the root of the problem of the masses of Sunday Christians that are part of the evangelical church.

4. The dichotomy between *the life* and *the mission* of the church. If, in order for a church to be a missionary church, it were sufficient to send and support a few of its members to serve in foreign missions, it is possible that such a church had no significant influence or impact on its surrounding neighborhood: the life of the church was carried on in the local surroundings (*at home*); mission took place in another setting, preferably in a foreign country (*the mission field*).

All these dichotomies were the result of the reduction of mission to transcultural missionary efforts. Consequently, mission was reduced primarily to the task of evangelization carried out by missionaries sent from Christian countries to the mission fields of the world; thus they fulfilled representatively or vicariously--to put it bluntly--the missionary responsibility of the whole church.

Integral Mission, A New Paradigm

From the perspective of integral mission, transcultural mission is far from exhausting the significance of the mission of the church. Mission may or may not include a crossing of geographical frontiers, but in every case it means primarily a crossing of the *frontier between faith and no faith*, whether in one’s own country (“at home”) or in a foreign country (on “the mission field”), according to the testimony to Jesus Christ as Lord of the whole of life and of the whole creation. Every generation of Christians in every place receives the power of the Spirit that makes possible the witness to the gospel “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1.8). In other words, every church, wherever it may be, is called to share in God’s

mission—a mission that is local, regional and world-wide in scope—beginning in its own “Jerusalem.” In order to cross the frontier between faith and no faith, crossing geographical boundaries is not indispensable; the geographical factor is secondary. Commitment to mission is the very essence of being the church; therefore, the church that is not committed to the mission of witnessing to Jesus Christ and thus to crossing the frontier between faith and no faith is no longer the church, but simply a religious club, a group of friends, or a social welfare agency.

When the church is committed to integral mission and to communicating the gospel through everything it *is*, *does*, and *says*, it understands that its goal is not to become large numerically, nor to be rich materially, nor powerful politically. Its purpose is to incarnate the values of the Kingdom of God and to witness to the love and the justice revealed in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Spirit, for the transformation of human life in all its dimensions, both on the individual level and on the community level.

The accomplishment of this purpose presupposes that *all the members of the church*, without exception, by the very fact of having become a part of the Body of Christ, receive gifts and ministries for the exercise of their priesthood, to which they have been “ordained” in their baptism. Mission is not the responsibility and privilege of a small group of the faithful who feel “called to the mission field” (usually in a foreign country), but of all members, since all are members of the “royal priesthood” and as such have been called by God “that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light”(1P 2.9) wherever they may be. As Brian D. McLaren aptly states,

For Christ, his "called ones" (which is what the Greek term for "church" really means) will also be his "sent ones" [or missionaries]. . . . In this line of thinking about the church, we don't recruit people to be customers of our products or consumers of our religious programs; we recruit them to be colleagues in our mission. The church does not exist in order to satisfy the consumer demands of believers; the church exists to equip and mobilize men and women for God's mission in the world.²

According to this view, what is the role of the local church in mission? We have already expressed the answer in McLaren's words: “to equip and mobilize men and women for God's mission in the world”—not exclusively in the church building, which may or may not exist, but *in all fields of human life*: in the home, in business, in the hospital, in the university, in the office, in the workshop . . . in conclusion, everywhere, since there is no place that is not within the orbit of the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Understood in these terms, this “new paradigm for mission” is not so new; it is, rather, the recovery of the biblical concept of mission since, in effect, mission is faithful to the teaching of Scripture to the extent that it is placed at the service of the Kingdom of God and his justice. Consequently, it is focused on crossing the frontier between faith and no faith, not only in geographical terms, but in cultural, ethnic, social, economical and political terms, for the purpose of transforming life in all its dimensions, according to God's plan, so that all people and human communities may experience the abundant life that Christ offers them. As such, integral mission resolves the dichotomies mentioned above in the following ways:

² *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), pp. 156-157.

1. At least in principle, *all churches send and all churches receive*. In other words, all churches have something to teach and something to learn from other churches. The road mission follows is not a one-way street—it does not go only from the “Christian” countries to the pagan countries—; it is a two-way street. A good example is seen in the missionary movement from the countries in the South, which is sending a growing number of cross-cultural missionaries even to countries in the North.

2. *The whole world is a mission field, and every human need is an opportunity for missionary service*. The local church is called to demonstrate the reality of the Kingdom of God among the kingdoms of this world, not only by what it says, but also by what it is and by what it does in response to human needs on every side. Francis de Assisi was right when, as he sent his followers out to proclaim the gospel, he exhorted them to proclaim it by every means at their disposal, and that if it was really necessary they should use words. The proclamation of the gospel includes everything we do moved by the Spirit of Jesus who, when he saw the crowds, “had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9.36).

3. *Every Christian is called to follow Jesus Christ and to be committed to God’s mission in the world*. The benefits of salvation are inseparable from a missionary lifestyle, and this implies, among other things, the practice of the universal priesthood of believers in all spheres of human life, according to the gifts and ministries that the Spirit of God has freely bestowed on his people. It is the responsibility of “pastors and teachers” to “prepare God’s people for works of service [*diakonia*], so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4.12).

4. *The Christian life in all its dimensions, on both the individual and the community levels, is the primary witness to the universal lordship of Jesus Christ and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit*. Mission is much more than words; it involves the quality of life – it is demonstrated in the life that recovers God’s original purpose for the relationship of the human person with his Creator, with his neighbor, and with all of creation.

In conclusion, integral mission is the means designed by God to carry out, within history, his purpose of love and justice revealed in Jesus Christ, through the church and in the power of the Spirit.