

A Relational Approach to Missionary Training

Introduction

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In April the principals and senior staff of five missionary training colleges met for a workshop in Germany. These five colleges, in Netherlands, Brazil, Mexico, New Zealand and Tasmania are all under the umbrella and care of one mission organization. It was a privilege to be with them and facilitate their conversation. These college trainers left the workshop with new ideas and new actions to take which reminds me of the purpose of the IMTN; to connect, share, and act.

The workshop in Germany also reminded me that it is in relating to others that we learn. Through dialogue we perceive what we know and what we don't know! This Bulletin spotlights relationship as a focal point for mission and we are grateful to Mark Hedinger for his article bringing this to our attention.

Mark is a member of the IMTN Steering Committee. In 2017 Mark co-authored a book with Enoch Wan titled 'Relational Missionary Training.' We are grateful that in this article Mark helps us to think through biblical perspectives of relationship and discusses how Christian ministry is influenced when relationship is the focal point. Mark leaves us with 4 implications of a relationship paradigm for us to consider in the design and delivery of training.

Mark Hedinger leads a training organization based out of Portland, Oregon (USA) called CultureBound that offers intercultural ministry and language training for those who are taking the Gospel to an unfamiliar culture.

Before we turn to Mark's stimulating article there are two things to bring to your attention – a book and an event.

A new book titled, *Spirituality in Mission. Embracing the Lifelong Journey* has been recently published by William Carey Publishing. Contributions from authors in eighteen countries brings multicultural biblical and missiological perspectives. In recommending this book Samuel Escobar writes, "*Century after century, missionary vision and dynamism have always come from churches and persons that enjoyed spiritual vitality. Missionaries that I have known who left a mark in mission history were women and men that practiced regularly the spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation of the Bible. The value of this new book, Spirituality in Mission, is how it explores and expounds its subject through personal testimony, reflection, and Bible exposition. The diversity of authors and subjects make it a milestone in missiological literature.*" With trainers in mind, I contributed a chapter titled 'Teaching and learning to Nurture Spirituality' that may be of interest to IMTN members.

There is a consultation between 29th October and 2nd November 2018 hosted by ICETE (International Council for Evangelical Theological Education) in Panama City. Members of the IMTN will be represented there. Please do check the ICETE website for further details if it is possible for you to attend. <http://www.icete-edu.org/panama/>

Enjoy Bulletin 11! Ruth Wall

A Relational Approach to Missionary Training

Mark Hedinger

Relationship as the focal point of mission

The artist looks at a landscape wishing to capture the broad expanse before her eyes. How best to do that? Across centuries and cultures, the idea of a focal point has been the answer to that question. The human eye and mind cannot simply grasp a wide expanse; we focus on one point and put the rest of the landscape into context with that focal point.

Teachers, theologians and scientists do the same. We don't teach the "science of everything." We find focal points, for example, physics or chemistry or mathematics. We find our focus, we create a context based on a defined point, and we understand other topics, concepts and objects from that point of view.

In theology, the focal points vary across centuries and cultures. The mystic pursues a godly life from the point of view of the individual in contact with God. Historical-grammatical hermeneutics lead to understanding God through analysis of words, grammar, and history. Other Christian movements focus on other points: traditions, hierarchical structures, or the direction set by a group of leaders.

In 2006 Dr. Enoch Wan introduced a focal point, a paradigm of understanding Scripture, Christian life, and Mission that is the basis of this edition of the IMTN Bulletin. Wan's proposal is that reality is understood as relationships: vertical relationships with God in the first place and secondarily the horizontal relationships between created beings.

Growing from this concept of relationship, this edition of the Bulletin will 1) define the idea of a relationship paradigm further, 2) consider a relationship paradigm from biblical perspectives 3) discuss relationship in the context of Christian ministry, and 4) look at relationship as key to training for mission.

1) The Relational Paradigm defined

Wan wrote, "Ontologically, 'relational realism' is to be defined as "the systematic understanding that 'reality' is primarily based on the 'vertical relationship' between God and the created order and secondarily 'horizontal relationship' within the created order¹."

The focal point for understanding reality is found in the interactions between the Creator God and creation. The phrase "vertical relationship" refers to relationships between Creator and created – including human and spirit (angel or demon). 'Horizontal relationship' refers to interactions between created beings – people, angels, and demons.

¹Enoch Wan. "The Paradigm of Relational Realism." Occasional Bulletin of the Evangelical Missiological Society. Vol 119 No. 2, Spring 2006.

2. The Relational Paradigm and the Bible

God exists in three Persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. The fact of the Trinity confronts us with one of the most powerful reasons for understanding reality in terms of relationship. Simply stated, reality is relational because God is relational. There is relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit. Triune God is Three Persons who are perfectly unified and united. They love One Another, communicate with One Another, accomplish their activities together. The concept of relationship distinguishes Christian faith from the monotheistic heresies on one hand (which deny the reality of Three Persons) and from polytheistic heresies on the other (which see multiple independent gods).

Theologians over the centuries have created vocabulary to describe the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit². In this short article we won't cover that ground except to say that a relational perspective about life and ministry grows from the relational nature of the Triune God Himself.

The Bible presents a focal point of relationship. When defining the greatest commandment, Jesus used relational language: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind" and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37 – 39). Descriptions of vertical and horizontal relationships are a major theme across Scripture. In vertical terms, we are to have no other gods, and we are to be faithful (a relational word) to the true God. We are to obey, love, trust. In horizontal terms, we are to give honor to whom it is due, we are to love our neighbor. We are to speak truth to one another.

As we look at Scripture, there are some important relational issues to keep in mind:

- a. Relationship is not abstract or generalized. God can "love the world" (John 3:16, for instance.) As created beings, though, we are finite. Rather than "love the world" we are called to "love your neighbor"—a relationship between real-life people. Ministry is not generalized or abstract; it is concrete. My neighbor is not a concept; he has a name and a family and his own joys and struggles.
- b. Relationships are not good simply because they exist. There are healthy, appropriate ways to relate to God (honor Him, trust Him, obey Him, worship Him). There are healthy, appropriate ways to relate to your neighbor (do not covet, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not kill, love your neighbor, do good while it is in your power).

Similarly, there are inappropriate, unhealthy relationships. Satan is relational. His relationships, though, are toxic, dysfunctional, and evil. They are counter to what God has told us. Healthy relationships speak truth to one another. Toxic, demonic relationships are from the father of lies. Healthy relationships honor the king. Toxic relationships lead "each man to do what is right in his own eyes." Evil includes counterfeit relationships - unhealthy, unholy, inappropriate, and destructive.

- c. There are different sorts of relationships: the Bible speaks of horizontal relationships between husband and wife, between parent and child, between king and citizen. The fact that there are varieties of roles points us to the complexity of relationship.

That complexity can distract us from the core truth: it is the relationship between people as appropriately expressed in their various roles that we keep in view. Books on leadership can easily focus entirely on strategic steps and lose sight of the centrality of relationships

² Enoch Wan and Mark Hedinger. *Relational Missionary Training*. Skyforest, CA: Urban Loft Publishers, 2017.

(leader/follower, follower/follower etc). Books on parenting can present so many childhood development facts that we forget that the goal is to establish healthy, appropriate relationships between the child and parents, teachers, peers, and God.

- d. The relational paradigm is interested in both vertical and horizontal relationships, not in either one apart from the other. John tells us that our relationship with God requires a certain relationship with our neighbor (1 John 2:9). A healthy relationship with the Triune God includes healthy horizontal relationships. At the same time, healthy horizontal relationships include vertical interaction with the Spirit of God who gives His fruit of relational markers like patience, love, mercy and long-suffering (Galatians 5:22 – 23).

A healthy relationship with the Triune God implies healthy relationships with other people; a healthy relationship with people is intimately involved with healthy and appropriate interaction with God. It is a both/and paradigm.

3) The Relational Paradigm in Christian Ministry and Mission

There are three key ideas about relationship that apply in ministry and mission. The key words are interactive, networks, and convergence.

Interactive

Biblical, healthy relationships are interactive: they focus on “one another” mutual involvement. When ministry is most powerful there is a feeling that people are working and growing together with one another. Conversations are real; dialog and interaction are two-directional – even in issues like evangelism. Think of the interaction between the Lord and the rich young ruler in Mark 10: there was no manipulation, but there was honest interaction, quite different than non-relational approaches based on technique and methods.

Networks

A second word that shapes relational ministry is “network.” People interact in social networks. Those interactive groups could be family, neighbors, citizens. Interactive networks tie people together based on things like hobbies, sports, language, or profession. Through many forms, interactive relationships tie people into networks. The local church can be thought of as a network of people in horizontal relationship with one another who have vertical relationships individually and corporately with God.

Convergence

The third word for understanding ministry is “convergence.” As networks in one part of the world grow they connect with networks of believers in other parts of the world. Networks become ever more complex and yet at their root, they are all about relationship. A web of Christian networks in one nation sends people to another part of the world where a new network is formed. People from the different networks get to know one another; they develop relationship with one another and with the Triune God.

Mission can be thought of as a network of relationships that begin in one part of the world and extend into other parts. The result of mission is to extend the network of vertical and horizontal Christian relationships. Mission happens through relationship, much more than technique or method.

At times we oversimplify church into organizational charts and job descriptions. We simplify mission into techniques and competencies. Thinking of Acts 1:8, the more accurate picture is of interactive vertical and horizontal relationships spreading from Jerusalem and extending the network into Judea and Samaria, and from there to the ends of the world. Christians in distant lands are not just “converts.” They are brothers and sisters in Christ, related to all the rest of us through the network of horizontal and vertical relational ties.

4) The Relational Paradigm in Missionary Training

So far we conclude that reality is relational and is seen in vertical and horizontal relationships. We also conclude that Christian ministry is relational, as it facilitates interactive relational growth through ever expanding networks of horizontal and vertical relationships.

From that understanding of ministry, how do we train for mission? Below are four implications for those who train missionaries; curriculum design, teaching methods, holistic approach to learning and, social justice and spiritual ministry.

a. Curriculum issues:

Historically, curriculum design has been interested in one of three questions: what is the need of the student (student-centered design), what is the logical flow of the content (curriculum-centered design), or what are the social needs that must be met (society-centered design).

There are advantages to each of these schools of thought. We would argue, though, that relationship-based training allows for curriculum that honors God even as it serves society, is true to needed curricular items, and serves the needs of the students. When the template for ministry preparation focuses on relationships, there is a natural relevance to student, curriculum, and society while also building a healthy vertical relationship.³

Relationship-based training should help the trainees relate to God through repentance, faith, experience of the Holy Spirit’s guidance, prayer, worship and Bible reading. Relationship-based training also helps trainees relate to their families, co-workers and others in Christ’s Body as well as helping trainees relate to those they are evangelizing and serving.

b. Teaching methods:

Ironically, our increasingly connected world can foster a wide range of very superficial relationships. Teaching methods can be designed to transmit content to large numbers of learners, a kind of mass-produced teaching. Those wide approaches, though, do not necessarily foster relationships.

When designing teaching methods, we not only want to teach the importance of healthy interactions, we want to model it.

The problem is how to model relationship in our training. As finite beings we are limited in how many relationships we can handle. How do we deal with this in training?

- Keep training programs small and face-to-face. While internet and print materials are powerful tools for augmenting training events, they cannot replace live interaction. A small group of learners can interact face-to-face with trainers. Distance methods serve well for follow-up.

³ Robert Pazmiño is close to our point here with his God-centered curriculum approach. Robert Pazmiño. *God our Teacher*. Baker Academic 2001. Republished Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016.

- Build training around relational cohorts. Relationships are not limited to only the trainer/trainee relationship. Thoughtful design can also create interaction between peers as a way of increasing relational impact.
- Be flexible about methods. Returning to the idea that networks of relationship are fundamental to mission work, we recognize that different networks (cultures) have different preferences in learning styles, learning environments, teaching processes etc. The ability to shape biblical truth into local preferences is a truly relational part of mission outreach; by doing that, we facilitate the extension of the Church into new networks.

c. Holistic approach to learning:

Relationship is both vertical and horizontal. This leads us to the wonderful realization that training is not separate from worship. In distinction to either/or thought that sees worship as somehow distinct from teaching/training, it is refreshing to understand that training includes both the horizontal and the vertical. Teaching and learning experiences can merge back and forth into prayer, worship and mutual encouragement.

d. Social justice and spiritual ministry:

The interaction between social justice and spiritual ministry often suffers from a false dichotomy. The relational paradigm calls for healthy vertical relationships of worship and obedience. The relational paradigm also calls for healthy horizontal relationships, which in some cases includes social justice action. Micah tells us to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). The pattern is not either social justice or spiritual vitality: the relational approach calls us to both.

Conclusions

The relational approach to life and ministry calls for refocusing of missionary training and outreach based on the focal point of relationship. The focal point for mission training is neither to be found in its content, methodologies, techniques, nor the skills it develops. The relational paradigm lets us understand that the focal point of life and ministry is seen through vertical and horizontal relationships that grow into networks of relationship, converging into worldwide gospel expansion. The same content and methods that we include in training continue to be important, but they are repositioned within two relational dimensions:

Vertically, do we and those we train grow in healthy, appropriate, biblical relationship with the Living Triune God?

Horizontally, do we and those we train develop healthy and appropriate relationships with our trainees, co-workers, neighbors and the ever-expanding networks in the Christian church around the world?