

The Image and Substance of Missions: Three Critical Concerns

David Mays

An old professor used to talk about the "fog factor" in communications. He multiplied the average number of words in a sentence times the average number of letters in the words to get the "Fog Index." His point was that if you wanted people to read and understand what you wrote, it needed to be clear and simple. Someone has said, "When there's a mist in the pulpit, there's a fog in the pew." If people are to understand and support missions as a critical function of the church, we need to be clear about some things that may have become foggy.

We need to be clear about the goal of missions.

For many of us the primary goal or aim of missions has gradually become dim. A few weeks ago, in a Christianity Today article on short term missions, the author mentioned that Christian young people have great compassion for the physical, social, and justice issues of people but many are theologically confused about the need for a transformation of the heart by Jesus. What is it that missions is supposed to accomplish?

There is an end goal. Revelation 7:9–10 shows us a picture of people from every tongue and tribe and language and people worshipping the lamb. As we plan our missions ministry, this is our guiding principle.

We need to be clear about the scope of missions.

The range of projects and activities considered missions is very broad. As I look at church missions budgets and listen to pastors talk, I see a great range of ministries being referred to as missions. Everyday Christians are missionaries. What is missions? And what is it not? Is there a downside if any good thing a Christian does is missions?

Missions used to be reaching the pagans overseas and church work was building up the church at home. The distinctions will never be this clear again. The world is too complex. However, we must somehow draw boundaries between missions – what we send people and resources to do because the congregation can't do it – and what is church ministry – what we as individuals and the church can and

should do as part of our life and ministry among people we can reach.

We need to be clear about the priorities of missions.

The playing field has leveled. One project or activity seems just as worthy as another. The key criteria for worthiness of financial support is often whether people from our church are doing it. Are some things more urgent, more critical, or more strategic than others? If so, what does that mean for our missions ministry?

Many things may be included in missions but not everything is of equal value, importance, or urgency. Our planning must indicate what fields, tasks, projects, and activities we consider of greatest strategic importance. Usually this is most effectively done with budgets and budget goals and with public prayers, reports, and celebrations.

When these things are clear in the minds of our church leaders and our people, we may expect the kind of support and involvement that missions deserves.