



### **Episode 060: Evangelicals and Missions - Trends to Consider**

Rick Hiemstra, together with his wife Beth and their four kids, currently lives in Ottawa, Ontario. Rick serves as the Director of Research and Media relations at the [Evangelical Fellowship of Canada](#). He has also served as a pastor and a high school teacher. He regularly speaks on church and cultural trends.

#### ***Please tell us a little bit about your current role at the EFC.***

- My principal role at EFC is to study the church in Canada. We look at things like Bible engagement and missions engagement.
- I'm currently working on a study about how we help young adults stay connected to the church. Then I speak with pastors and church leaders across the country about what I find out.

#### ***Today we will unpack some of the learning from a national survey exploring how Evangelicals - and in particular Canadian Evangelicals - engage with "mission" or "missions". Please tell us just a little bit why was this study undertaken and how you went about it.***

- The Canadian Missions Research Forum, a group of executives from about 15 mission agencies and a few denomination leaders, noticed a decrease in the number of people sensing a call to a long term career missions. They wanted to learn why. They wanted to learn how the local church is thinking about missions.

#### ***When you began to do the research in earnest, how did you go about it?***

- We did it in a couple stages. We looked in the literature to see what other people had done, and there actually wasn't a lot of research about what local churches did with respect to missions. We talked to denominational leaders, mission agency leaders, and people who teach intercultural studies and global missions in Bible colleges and seminaries.
- We developed a set of questions and we went to talk to pastors and laypeople. We developed two national surveys - one with laypeople and another with pastors.
- We tried to make it as representative as possible. These were large surveys. Over 2,000 laypeople and about 1400 pastors participated.

***One of the conclusions from the survey is that the attention of the church has gradually changed. What do you mean by this?***

- Over the last number of decades with the rise of the internet and cell phones and smartphones, our attention can be fragmented. People are spending all kinds of time now on social media for instance. Time for more-concentrated things is gone.
- We don't have time for sustained attention on the things that we used to - like work on missions committee or sustained attention in a church at a missions fair. It's harder to find this big block of time where you can bring people in and educate them about missions, and introduce them to a missionary or a missions work.

***Social media, even a decade ago wouldn't have been nearly as predominant as it is now. Now it's ubiquitous - everywhere, all the time.***

- Most of these technologies have only been around for about 10 or 15 years. We've gone from nothing to something that dominates up to a whole workweek of people's lives. Even the act of doing that changes your habits and changes the way you think. Psychologists say that once your attention is taken off a task, it actually takes you about 20 minutes to completely focus on that task again. It's very hard to get that central focus.

***Did you find that there were some ways that this relates particularly to the discussion about missions?***

- People's ability to give sustained attention to something far away has changed. We think that we can reach out and connect with the missionary at any time through social media, but we actually do it less. We feel that they're closer and so we don't have to make the effort to go out of the way because we think we could get them whenever we need them.

***Historically, many churches have held services on a Sunday evening or perhaps a weekday evening. In recent years, many have discontinued those evening services. How has this change impacted missions?***

- The Sunday evening service or the midweek service was the opportunity that missionaries had to get in front of a congregation. This allowed the missionary to form a relationship with the congregation. In the mid '90s you started to see churches dropping those evening services. What this meant is that the only time churches had to connect with all of their people became the Sunday morning service.
- Worship time is like real estate that is valuable, and pastors simply weren't as willing to give up big blocks of time for missions presentations. This is because pastors get enormous pressure to use that time for the purposes of the local congregation and their ministry.

***Is there something that you would recommend to churches or to missions committees to try and adjust here?***

- We need to find new ways to connect with people about missions. The connections that work have a relational emotional component to them. So you have to find a way to connect where a relationship goes along with the communication.
- We found that when people were forming relationships with missionaries, there was a recommendation from somebody they trusted, or some sort of relational connection that preceded the ability to form a relationship with the missionary. We have to find ways to “piggy back” on relationships that already exist.

***I read in the survey that according to pastors, the church's top three priorities for missions include ministry to the unreached, poverty relief, and working with national churches. It seems that mission effort to unreached people is a high priority. However, the survey also indicated that evangelism among Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist people groups was a low priority. What do you make of this apparent contradiction?***

- The idea of unreached people groups was originally introduced at Lausanne in 1974. Colonies were closing, and there was a sense that if the colonial powers went home, that the missionaries who came in with the colonial powers could go home as well. Lausanne was, in part, an attempt to say that missions is still a calling of the church.
- There were colonial powers in the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist world. We came out of Lausanne with a sense that there is cultural shame attached to colonial missions. There is a difference about how we're thinking of unreached people groups in the Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist world, even though most of those people would never have heard of Christ or heard the gospel preached in its fullness.

***We heard in an interview with the Joshua Project that 86% of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists have never personally met a Christ follower. It seems to be a priority to engage unreached people groups, but maybe we're not getting wheels on our intentions.***

- Generally people think of unreached people groups as Animists. Because we in North America have daily contact with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, we think of those groups as already having a religion. But we don't meet with many Animists. We have to return to the roots of our missions theology and rediscover the calling Christ made to go to every tongue, tribe, and nation.

***I'd like to talk a bit about the advocacy for missions in a local church. According to the survey results, both pastors and laypeople said it's usually a pastor who is the most prominent missions advocate or mobilizer. What can we learn from this?***

- The pastor is the one that is usually receiving the communications, e-mails, support letters, and phone calls. A layperson generally in our culture just doesn't have the time for that.
- Pastors are asked to do far more than they used to do. There's a wide range of activities that they're asked to do. Pastors are able to promote missions because people trust them.

- People's attention is fragmented and they aren't able to process all the information that comes. We use shortcuts. The pastor is a shortcut that most of us use as we learn what is important in missions. We look at somebody that we trust.
- If missions committees want the pastor to be in a better place to be able to promote missions they have to help the pastor. They need to do is digest the information and make it easy for the pastor to promote missions, recognizing the congregation's relationship to the pastor. The relationship with the pastor will be the gateway for most people.

***There are implications for agencies. If agencies hope to lift the advocacy for global missions, it seems that the pastor is going to be a key relationship?***

- There were a few interesting interviews where pastors would talk about how much they just appreciated agency reps coming and sitting down for them and having coffee with them, and talking about the work of the mission agency.
- What was really clear here is that the relationship was important. You need a relationship behind the communication or people simply will not prioritize it, read it, digest it and pray about it.

***There are going to be implications for Bible Schools here as well, that will hopefully include a global mission awareness program.***

- We found that there was a real difference in missions engagement between pastors who had taken a few missions or intercultural courses and those that hadn't.

***Let's talk finally about how God calls people into missions. According to the survey, respondents usually indicated that they would be reluctant to encourage their children or grandchildren to consider long term career missions. Where do you think that's coming from?***

- There is a real sense that the choices that young adults make must be completely autonomous in order to be authentic.
- There are fears about the dangers of the mission field. There's concern about how financially lucrative missions might be as a career.
- Overall, there is a reticence because we as a church have bought into the idea that the choices that young adults make must be completely autonomous in order to be authentic. God also uses his church to do some of that calling. The Holy Spirit works through individuals and works through scripture. We have to help young adults to see the church as an authentic way to hear from God as they discern.

***In all this research that you have done, was there anything that just surprised you?***

- I was surprised at the extent to which people looked at short term missions trips as a way to disciple people in their congregation. There was a substantial minority of people who thought that we should be having non-Christians on our short-term missions teams. They saw the mission trip as a form of evangelism.

- I was very surprised that very seldom did people actually talk about the work that they were going to do on the mission field or the people that they were meeting on the mission field. I think that we need to build some clarity into what we're doing, and why we're doing it.

***If you had the opportunity to stand before a group of pastors and laypeople, what advice would you have for them?***

- If you want to promote missions within your congregation, you have to practically map out the relationships in your congregation. People's attention is fragmented and they will only pay attention to things if there is a relationship that they trust. We have to understand who the people are that our church looks up to and enlist them as allies in promoting missions.
- If we've got a pastor who's busy, we have to go to the pastor and say, "Missions is a priority. How can we help you promote missions? What is keeping you from giving this the kind of attention that we believe biblically it deserves?"

***If our listeners would like to learn more about the EFC survey or to contact you, how can they do that?***

You can get free PDF downloads of the survey documents at [theefc.ca/cmrf](http://theefc.ca/cmrf) or you can email me at [hiemstrar@theefc.ca](mailto:hiemstrar@theefc.ca).

