



Episode 064: What's Happening in Missions Today?

Ted Esler serves as the president of [Missio Nexus](#), an association of mission agencies and churches representing over 30,000 Great Commission workers worldwide. Ted has worked in the computer industry before he became a church planter in Bosnia. He's an author and a podcaster, and has served in various leadership roles in [Pioneers](#). Ted and Annette now live in Orlando, Florida, and have five grown children and one grandson.

Please tell us just a little bit about your role with Missio Nexus.

- I became the president of Missio Nexus after having served in various roles in executive leadership with Pioneers. We have a small team of 5 people, and our focus is to be a networks. Most of us work virtually. We have an office in Atlanta.
- Our job is to work with the Great Commission community in North America and make them be more effective, particularly as it relates to sharing information and expertise, partnering together, and collaboration.

Some of the topics we're going to discuss today are found in this new book, the [Missions Handbook Research Project](#). Please tell us a little bit about this project. Why did you undertake it and how was it completed?

- We're in the 22nd edition. These books usually come out about every three to five years. The last book was in 2008. The book is basically an overview focused on mission agencies - how big, the scope, where the reach is, where people are working, etc. in the Great Commission globally.

When you look at the demographics, what did we learn about the people who are participating in missions?

- A few things stand out right away. There are three single women in missions for every single man.
- Overall, the number of missionaries globally has slightly grown. The numbers in this book are coming from mission agencies. There's a lot of work that happens outside of mission agencies. By using consistent numbers we know that among agencies we're continuing to see some growth in the mission agency movement.



The statistics we're talking about are North American statistics. If you're interested in the growth in the majority world church and how it interacts with the North American church and agencies here, you can check out [Episode 055: "What's the Role of the North American Church in Global Missions?" with Paul Borthwick](#). Are mission workers going to the same places or are they going to different places? What type of ministries are they engaged in?

- In this survey there was a marked increase in people that just wanted to say that people are “global”. They're doing that because of security concerns for their missionaries.
- We did see some shifts in the regional deployment numbers. I have a sense that most of that shift simply has to do with how they're being reported, not more people are being sent. Maybe the one outlier there is Oceania, which is more than doubled, almost tripled, in terms of how many missionaries are deployed there.
- Traditional activities like evangelism and discipleship has fallen off while relief and development, education, training, and mission agency support have gained traction pretty much at the expense of evangelism and discipleship. What we're seeing is a changing role for the North American. 10 years ago, it was more common to find a North American go out into evangelism. Now North Americans are going to be involved in partnering with nationals who are doing the evangelism. The role of the North American is going to be more, for example, in education and training. The North American role has shifted pretty substantially in the last decade.

I have asked Ted to talk with us about three macro trends that he's observed in the results of this study. One of those trends was a shift from classical missionary activity to other kinds of ministry such as tent-making and business-as-mission. Is that a typical shift that you're seeing broadly? Is that happening a lot?

- I think so. Some of the terms for Business as Missions etc. have become more specific in the last decade. Those numbers did increase even though my sense is that many of these people are doing tent-making without agencies involved. In other words, they're just moving over, perhaps getting a job, or starting a business, and there isn't necessarily an agency there. But even so, the agency participation has increased. I find that really encouraging that the new models of mission are being deployed even by agencies.

What advice you would have for missions committees and agencies for them in approaching this transition trend? How can they participate fruitfully in this?

- I've seen teams that are made up fully of traditional missionaries as well as people that are using all these new models. My sense is that the best teams are hybrid teams that are comprised of many different types of missionaries.
- If you're looking to send somebody out, for example, that wants to do tent-making, there's no reason why they can't hook up with an on-the-field, long-term team. Working alongside in partnerships I think can be a lot more fruitful both for those long-term missionaries



and for the tentmaker. Ask about the types of partnerships that are available in field. Unless you're really going to the remote areas of the unreached, most of these tent-makers are going to major cities around the world. In those places, there's many opportunities for partnership.

What do you mean by “tent-making” and “BAM”?

- Tentmaking is when you go and find a job working in a corporation or a company. Tent-makers don't raise support, although some may raise a little bit of support. Business as Mission is most often focused on people that are entrepreneurial who are trying to start businesses where they're going. In the last couple of years the term “Business For Transformation” has become popular as a broad term that represents a number of these different models.
- Recommended Links:
 - [Global Intent](#)
 - [Crossworld](#)
 - [Pioneers](#)
 - [MoveIn](#)

Is this a positive trend?

- I think it's fantastic. If you're looking to go overseas and work in a tent-making capacity, I would highly suggest you consider talking to a number of agencies first to see what kind of partnership possibilities are going to be there on the ground when you arrive.

The church is struggling to find common definitions of really important terms such as “mission”, “missions” and “missionary”. What's meant by this? Why has this happened? What's going on here?

- First of all, I'll just point out that those words are not biblical terms. We're not able to lay a really precise theological definition on them as much as a historical definition of them. I think we need to also recognize that the world is changing.
- In the United States and Canada, a lot of the mission that used to be strictly overseas has come to us. That's created a different view of what mission is. In Europe, you have the idea of re-evangelizing seculars. A gentleman Leslie Newbigan has been writing about that for some decades. In the academic world, there's been a shift in terms of how we understand and see what mission is.
- For the average layperson, it really comes down to what is the mandate of the Great Commission, what are we trying to accomplish? Because we have professionals in the mission arena, they've gone very specific with what that definition might mean.
- You might've seen the sign as you drive away from a church in the deep south of the United States that says "You are now entering the mission field." Professional missionaries wouldn't say that the southern US is a missionary field because it doesn't conform to this idea of “unreached” where there are no Christians - no people there that would be able to communicate the gospel to them.



- All of that has led to a questioning about what is the task that we're trying to accomplish.
- Another piece of this, is that postmodernism is deconstructive. In the case of mission, I believe that academics have tried to whittle away at the definition of mission. Then of course there's the issue of the shifting role of the North American church, which means that what you went out to do 10 to 30 years ago is something that is done in partnership with someone that's an indigenous person. That has also contributed, I think, to a shifting definition of mission.
- My sense is that in 2010 the community of missionaries and mission agencies were feeling a little bit of an identity crisis. They were asking themselves, what is it that we're supposed to be doing and what is our primary calling? In 2017, that's kind of dissipated. People have come to the conclusion that there's a lot for us to do, we just need to do differently and we need to be willing to embrace this new role. There's a lot of love to show unto people that don't know Christ and we need to get out there and make that happen.

So some of your advice might be to focus on the job that needs to be done instead of the definition?

- I think so. I also think technology and change in the world have made it possible for your local church to be directly engaged in global mission. I would not shy away from that and I would suggest that people really think through how God has enabled them to participate in the global Great Commission and really take that battle up as much as they can.

If you had the opportunity to speak to the missions committee again, what advice would you have for them in this dilemma of definitions?

- The first thing to recognize is that there's a lot of work that has to be done out there. We could sit around and talk and discuss these definitional issues, but the bottom line is there's people out there that we need to love and let them know about Christ. I wouldn't get too hung up in these definitions.
- There has been a discussion about who owns mission. As mission agencies have gotten very involved in the Great Commission. At times the local churches felt left out of that equation. Some have said that in the Scriptures, there were no mission agencies; it was the local church that God sent out on mission. I would just be cautious about that in a couple of ways. First of all, mission agencies as we know them today didn't necessarily exist in the Scriptures. However, when the Scriptures talk about the church being on mission it's rarely the local church, it's talking more about the church universal - all of us who are believers. I'm not really sure how much this debate about who owns mission has actually contributed to our understanding of what the task is and what needs to be done. I would end to deflate that a little bit.
- On the other hand, changes in the global economic systems, communication, and travel has made it possible for every person in your local church to participate in the Great Commission. I would encourage churches to really think about how they are going to have a specific involvement in the Great Commission and not just to leave it up to mission agencies. There's plenty of work out there for all of us and it needs to be an all-hands-on-deck proposition.



Our next episode is an interview with two authors, Denny Spitters and Matthew Allison. Their recent book is called [When Everything is Missions](#). We're going to dive a little deeper into some of these topics. I wanted to ask you about the new networks emerging to accomplish global missions. What have you observed about networks these days?

- There are hundreds of mission focused networks and there's new ones every day. Oftentimes, they are focused on an area or a region, sometimes they're focused on a strategy or a paradigm in mission. If you're in a local church context and you're looking for ways to meaningfully engage, I would be looking to these different networks because, in many cases, they can plug you into good resources and fast-track what you're trying to do.

I would just like to mention [Episode 061: The Strategic Value of Global Networks with Eldon Porter](#). Eldon has brought together a [database](#) of people who are linked geographically, or by ministry theme. It's a great resource. Ted, the data in the handbook is very rich and I appreciate some of your synthesis. Who would this book be good for? Who should look to acquire the [Global Mission Handbook](#)?

- The Global Missions Handbook is really great if you're looking for information on specific agencies - particularly contact information. There are five different chapters that are topical - about big picture trend ideas.

If our guests want to learn more from you or [Missio Nexus](#), how can they reach out to you?

- On Twitter, I am [@tedstur](#), and [missionexus.org](#) is our website. If you fill out the contact form on the website and mention that you want to contact me, it'll get to me real quickly.

You're standing before the missions committee. What do you want to say to them?

- Keep in mind that even though the Great Commission is being done differently today than it was 15 to 30 years ago, there is so much work to be done. Now is not the time to think that somebody else is going to do the task. We as North Americans need to be involved directly. Think about your involvement through missionaries, through nationals, through people that are sitting in their congregations every week. It's a "all-hands-on-deck" proposition.

