



FIRST-PERSON: A stream of missional consciousness

By David Sills

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--What's in a name? New words and terminologies arise with increasing frequency these days. Five years ago, the word blog was a typo. Words, especially new words, are necessary tools of communication in a changing world.

Every discipline must have a taxonomy that it uses to share ideas. The field of law is filled with legalese, both terms that date back centuries and those that are new. The worlds of music and medicine each have specific terms that enable communication and education.

Missions is no different. However, the field of missiology is comparatively new and is as rapidly changing and developing as the world that it addresses. It is likely that the global dynamics characterizing our lives this month will be considered historical trends before they are fully developed. Globalization pushes the world toward a global village mentality even though it retains its mosaic of cultures. The burgeoning urbanization of the world creates many other challenges facing missionaries today. Not only are these dynamics more prevalent, they are constantly morphing. Moreover, the principle of acceleration means that information overload is an increasing threat to missionaries' sanity -- or what passes for sanity! Although the world of missions races to keep up, some terms simply cannot keep pace.



Someone has said, "Words do not have meaning, they have usage." Learning the terminology utilized by practitioners in any ever-changing field is like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.

Consider the word cross-cultural. Years ago, we used this term to refer to crossing from one culture into another, whether that was a missionary or an idea. As the field continued to develop, missiologists needed terms of greater precision. Intercultural was coined to refer to interaction between cultures, and cross-cultural referred to those aspects that cross cultural lines, i.e. found in many cultures. For instance, a mother's love for her children is a cross-cultural truth, but I participate in intercultural ministry when I reach out to the Quichua people. Confusion reigns where some use these terms synonymously. As missiology continues to develop, change and subdivide in a world that is itself constantly changing, it is not surprising to see new words appear along the way.

One word that has been awkward throughout the years is the word missionary. Is it an adjective? Most Baptist churches prefer to describe themselves as missions-minded rather than missionary, because Missionary Baptist is a distinct Baptist denomination. Or, is it a noun referring to the one engaging

interculturally in Gospel ministry? In more Gospel-hostile parts of the world, some, who formerly would have gone by the term missionary, prefer "Christian worker." Other times, "Christian worker" is preferred to avoid the negative, extra-biblical baggage that the word "missionary" connotes. What is the verb form of missionary, "to mish?" Whether due to its age, awkwardness or negative baggage, the word missionary seems to be out among the trendsetters in the "hip" set, and the new word missional is all the rage.

Missional is certainly not a new term, but the trendy use of it is. We once spoke of a missionary as one who was sent out by a missions-minded church to go to other cultures and do missions. (I still like that, but I have my own age, awkwardness and negative baggage.) Those days are apparently long gone. Now, Christian workers go out from missional churches to engage in intercultural ministry -- or something similar. In past years, some used the term missioner for the noun for missionary and missional to connote the adjectival form of missionary. Today, these usages are out of vogue but missional is back in. So, what does it mean? It depends on whom you ask.

Some have written in-depth, explanatory treatments of the proper understanding and use of the term missional to define precisely what they understand the term to mean, but it continues to mean different things to different people. Emotionally charged labels, like liberal, are defined by the labelers and where they stand on the conservative to moderate continuum. Just as with countless other words in the English language whose meaning and usage change with time, missional is also a word that can be used verbally or adjectivally. For instance, some words like paint or glue can be verbs or nouns. Other words, such as hit, can be nouns, verbs and adjectives. The missional madness is closely related to the endless emersions of emerging and emergent as a noun, verb and adjective. I mean, really.

I do wonder what some of these "churches" emerged out of and whether they intend to remerge. Of course, it could also be that emerging emergents never actually emerged, as I understand the word. In fact, it could also be that emerging is a noun. I mean, a "church" could be an "emerging" in the same that my children are "birthings." Where does it end? Or, does it ever end? From all I can tell, for the most part, many missional emergents are theologically sound evangelicals. They love the Lord and His people, seek to advance His Kingdom and bring glory to His name in the U.S. and around the world. I am not disparaging them; I only wish that their dictionary would settle down and that all of them would read it. However, other missional emergents define the church in terms that the New Testament would never recognize. The terms missional and emergent seem to mean everything and nothing, are defined nowhere, and are readily understood by those who are "really with it." The emperor has new clothes.

When missionaries need new terms to communicate clearly, for the proclamation of the Gospel and the advance of Christ's Kingdom, we should coin them and embrace them. However, when some desire trendy, "hip" jargon simply to distance themselves from old-school missionaries who thought that tattoos were tribal markings and piercings were what jungle tribes sometimes did to missionaries, I hesitate to jump on the bandwagon. Call me a late adopter, but I am still thankful for missionaries who reach and teach the people groups of the world, proclaiming the Gospel, planting churches and teaching the Bible.

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