

Embracing the World: The Church and Global Mission in the 21st Century

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Editor's note: Below are the remarks made by CBF Global Missions Coordinator Rob Nash during the Friday afternoon session of the CBF General Assembly in Washington, D.C. Exact wording of this sermon is subject to change during delivery of the message.

By Rob Nash

CBF Global Missions Coordinator

It was as clear and clarion a call to global mission as I have ever heard. The man who uttered it was short and stocky, a former imam at a mosque in the Middle East who had managed to plant a Baptist church in the middle of a challenging and difficult urban context. The two of us were participants in a church planting conference at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut. Among our number were a sprinkling of Americans and Europeans and a group of about 15 church planters from Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.

He delivered a word from God directly to me, on cue, and straight from the mouth of the Almighty. I heard myself take a sharp breath and then discovered that I wasn't exhaling.

You see, I'd been pounding the pavement since your Coordinating Council, in an act of absolute madness, elected me to this position last June - and I'd been in more states than I want to admit and more pastor's offices and fellowship halls and Baptist meetings than my therapist spouse thought healthy, and I heard from you and talked with you about the fact that God was doing something powerful in the United States and around the world and that it was high time that we figured out how to take this power and energy within the global church and change the world with it. I mean, I thought it was a good idea - and you churches seemed to be on fire about it. But, like Hans Luther, Martin's father, I wasn't sure if it was an idea from God or from the devil.

Then it happened - in the Middle East of all places - where most of us would assume nothing of any significance in the kingdom of God. As I recall, it was during a time for response to what some of the Americans and Western Europeans had to say. This former imam, a Shia as I recall, raised his hand and stood to make his point.

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“There was a time,” he said, “when we Christians here in the Middle East asked for you Christians in the West to send us your missionaries. But now,” he continued, “I have a different challenge for you. In this new day and in this new century, we ask that you send us not your missionaries only- but also your churches. Send us your churches - let our churches and your churches come together in ministry in the name of Jesus.”

I don't know if anyone else there heard it or remembers it. But I heard it. For me it was absolute validation of the new direction in global mission that I am convinced must become foundational to our understanding of what it means to be Christian and to be church and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. The time has come for congregations to engage the world in concert

together and with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The time has come for a whole new paradigm in which congregations join together in global mission and in partnership with sister congregations all around the world for the purpose of learning from each other and of sharing the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's just sad that such an undertaking requires a revolution in our understanding of our Christian calling in the world. David Bosch has said that mission is the "totality of the task God has sent [the] church to do in the world."^[1] This understanding of mission is predicated upon a number of convictions - that mission is the chief calling of the church in both its universal and local expressions, that all of scripture points toward the missionary mandate and that the calling of every Christian person is, at heart, a missionary calling to bring about a truly converted and transformed community of people who are committed to following in the way of Jesus.

This particular understanding of Christian mission in the world is becoming increasingly clear in this first decade of the twenty-first century. For the first time in Christian history, a truly global church is emerging. Christians and congregations across the world are embracing the reality of their own missionary callings and moving beyond the modern divides of the twentieth century that divorced professional from lay missionaries and the sending church of the West and North from the receiving church of the East and South.

This new effort is both exciting and fraught with challenge, particularly within the western church. "There was a time" (my Jordanian friend was right) through most of the twentieth century when congregations in North America and Western Europe outsourced their global mission engagement to their respective denominations and, through those denominations, created a powerful missionary force in the world.

It was a powerful and mighty thing that God did. A predominately western missionary force of thousands carried the gospel to the world. These missionaries taught and preached and baptized and the gospel took root in other cultures in the southern and eastern hemispheres and became something different from what either those who preached or those who listened ever expected it to become. The faith, despite its apparent enslavement to western culture, became a Filipino faith, a Korean faith, a Nigerian faith, an Indian faith, a Chilean faith - and the church in those places saw things in that gospel that we in the West could never see and they heard things in it that we never heard and they learned things from it that we never learned.

Meanwhile, back at the Western ranch, congregations were doing their very best to support the work of career missionaries. They gave. They listened. They prayed. When they could engage directly, they did and their efforts came to be identified as “voluntary” and supportive of the role of career missionaries rather than as equal in importance to the career missionary. This complementary role worked quite nicely in a time in which travel was rather difficult and/or expensive and congregations were precluded from such engagement.

Then somebody moved the equator. On November 9, 1989, a wall fell in Berlin. The foundations shook. The earth quivered. We lived for a time in “No Man’s Land” - the times between. Aftershock after aftershock rocked our world. Then . . . sudden silence as a new century dawned. It was the calm before the storm. The big one hit on Sept. 11, 2001. Two more structures came crashing to the ground. We were suddenly catapulted beyond the boundaries of old paradigms that were no longer meaningful. We stepped out of no man’s land and into a universe turned upside down. The destruction of the wall convinced us to engage the world. The destruction of the towers demanded of us that we learn to embrace it.

For congregations, there was no longer a reason to remain on the edge of

the global mission engagement – to stand on the sidelines while others carried the essential message of Jesus into the global arena. The work was too significant and enormously challenging and possible. The shift began in the mid-1990s as thousands and thousands of Americans, sent on short-term mission engagements by congregations, engaged the world in global mission. After Sept. 11, 2001, that tide swelled from thousands to millions. In 2004, something between 2 to 3 million American Christians, sent out from local congregations, embraced the world. This embrace is the pattern Christ intended from the earliest days of the Church.

We are on the edge of something here, something profoundly significant in the kingdom of God. By “we,” I want you to understand very clearly that I do not mean “we” as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. I don’t even mean “we” as Baptists. I mean “we” as God’s people, followers of Jesus Christ, in the world. This is a kairos moment in which we have the possibility to join what has gone before in the twentieth century with the passion of congregations and field personnel and partners all over the world in a truly collaborative network of global mission engagement that can carry the gospel of Jesus Christ to a hurting, lost, hungry and sick world.

We have the power through Jesus Christ to end poverty in our lifetimes. We have the power through Jesus Christ to make sure AIDs sufferers in Malawi can get the medicine that they need. We have the power through Jesus Christ to ensure that women and girls are lifted up out of sexual slavery. We have the power through Jesus Christ to bring Muslim and Christian together at table to overcome the differences that separate us. We have the power to end illiteracy in the world. We have the power to share the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ with the world by planting churches and sharing the faith that sustains us, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that it can sustain all who accept it.

But there is no single entity in the world that is going to do this. We’re in it together! It is the missional passion of congregations that will fuel it. It is

field personnel committed to hard, lifetime work in challenging places that will facilitate it. It is a network of kingdom partners that will enable it.

Here's what has to happen. It's a simple approach really:

1. Congregations must take their place at the center of the global mission engagement of the twenty-first century, alongside field personnel and working in concert with them and with other partners.

2. Movements like the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship must facilitate such engagement in ways that enable local congregations to engage in global mission in transformative ways and that create connections between and among congregations and partners.

3. Congregations must be careful to frame a meaningful missional engagement with the world that is intentional and strategic, carried out in concert with other congregations and with the wider Church, and fully sustainable in its context.

4. Such a corporate engagement, by intention and design, must be carried out in ways that are collaborative and network-based and that are not controlled by any particular movement, institution or agency.

I think we are all ready to make this happen. Certainly we are ready to make it happen in and through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. We're ready to implement a viable model for global mission engagement in the twenty-first century that encourages and facilitates congregational participation in global mission, affirms and supports the significant work and ministry of field personnel, and encourages a collaborative and network-based missiological framework that values partnership and engagement with other Christians, churches, and institutions.

To this end, on August 1 the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship will implement a new structure within Global Missions that provides for an intentional and proactive connection between field personnel, local congregations,

partners and the world. A new missional church team will begin its work alongside our field ministries team that facilitates the work of our field personnel. The calling of this new team will be to facilitate the connection of congregations to global mission and to do so with the conviction that the engagement of congregations is as significant and strategic as the engagement of field personnel. This team will be charged with assisting congregations in formulating global mission strategy, training congregations for cross-cultural engagement, assisting in short-term mission engagements, connecting congregations to networks or communities of practice, building global connections for congregations, nurturing missional leaders in congregations, and connecting congregations to the work of field personnel and partners. Our calling will become a calling that enables congregations to “embrace the world” as Jesus Christ has intended for us to do from the earliest days of the church. His calling was clear – it was a call to the church. “As the Father has sent me,” he said, “So send I you.”

For centuries now, missionaries, mission societies, ministers, and denominational agencies have begged, pleaded, and cajoled the church toward global mission. These days of begging, pleading and cajoling have come to an end. Local congregations are ready to engage and we are ready to help you with that engagement.

There is no way to say exactly what this model of congregational engagement will look like in the end. Together, congregations, partners and field personnel around the world will shape it and give it life and vitality and purpose. Congregations and CBF field personnel have been hard at work alongside each other for more than 16 years now, ministering in the world, nurturing relationships, and creating ministries that are fully sustainable. In the future, this process of collaborative engagement will continue with a great deal more intentionality given to the connection and with the conviction that congregations are as necessary to the effort as

field personnel. I am convinced that it is this kind of collaboration that will make all of the difference in God's kingdom in the world.

"There was a time . . .," the former imam said - and indeed there was a time when a professional western missionary force went it alone in the world. There was a time when a Global Mission Coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship would have stood here before you this afternoon and said, "Would you as an individual Christian sitting where you are respond to the calling of God to take the love and grace of Christ to the world.

"But now . . .," the former imam said. But now, indeed. "Now . . . send us your churches." This is his call to us. Do you hear him? It is also God's call to us. I do not stand here to issue an individual call to missions to each one of you. My conviction is that you answered that call on the day in which you asked the Lord Jesus Christ to enter into your heart. I stand here to issue a call to every church that has attached itself to this movement of renewal. It is time for our churches to engage the world with intentionality and purpose, to go, not just to the easy places but also to the hardest places of all - across the street, around the corner, beyond the bend, and over the horizon to the rest of the world. Are we churches ready for that kind of challenge? Are we ready as congregations in the United States to stand alongside our Christian brothers and sisters and our field personnel in the hard, hard places of the world? We are far beyond the time for volunteers and mission tourism and mission trips. It is time for the church in the United States to listen to the voice of the church in the rest of the world saying, "Come over and help us and let what we know about following in the footsteps of Jesus have an impact upon you." To put it in the commonly accepted vernacular of our sacred space, this is not a "you come" like Paul's vision in Acts. This is a "Y'all come." Come over and let's see what we all can do together.

Now is the time for all of us as congregations to embrace the world with

intentionality and purpose – to open our arms to Christian brothers and sisters and to a hurting world both near and far away. We're way past shaking hands. To embrace is to hold onto. It's time for the church here to hold onto the church there and for the church there to hold onto the church here and together for all of us to pull the world up by its bootstraps and into the full embrace of Almighty God.

Here is my challenge to all of us today. It is a call to commitment. I am convinced that it is a divine calling. It is revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, embedded in the pages of scripture and bathed in the blood of martyrs. The church of Jesus Christ is not called simply to send. The church of Jesus Christ is called to go. Where is your church going? Where is my church going? Have we made it across the street yet? Have we considered the possibility that a Baptist congregation in a predominately Muslim country on the other side of the world, pastored by a former Shiite imam wants to partner with us for their good and for ours? Have we considered the possibility that Jesus Christ is calling us, not just to the easy voluntourism spots of the world, but to the hard, hard places where there is sickness and death, hatred and despair? Have we considered the possibility that the church over there might have a whole lot more to teach us than we have to teach them? God is bringing divinely-sanctioned and global possibilities right to the front steps of our churches. May we listen with ears of faith, speak with voices of love, step out with feet of courage, and embrace the world with arms wide open.

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