



Executive Summary

**DEFINING MISSIONARY ...**  
**Identity and Function**

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So, who is a missionary? The historical development of the missionary role, coupled with the contemporary views of North American Assemblies of God congregations, reveals a significant broadening of how AG constituency understands and applies the term missionary. Because of the diversity of views over this issue, the current debate regarding how to define a *missionary* can be emotive and multifaceted. Yet, with Christian love and attitude, we offer this working definition:

**A missionary is a person called and empowered by the Holy Spirit and commissioned by the church to cross barriers of culture and language, boundless in geographic location, in order to proclaim the gospel, disciple believers, establish the church, and demonstrate compassion.**

Further, we believe the following positions are firmly reflected in Scripture and informed by present missiological realities. The positions below help guide our thoughts as we attempt to make recommendations about a way forward.

First, as part of the body of Christ, we affirm that all Christians are called to share in the apostolic nature of the Church. Both the Old and New Testaments provide a description of God's intention for His people to be a missional body. The New Testament reveals the conferral of divine calling on every believer to share in Christ's mission (e.g., John 17:18). This collective mission enjoyed by all believers entreats us to be witnesses for Christ (Acts 1:8). Therefore, all believers are called to share the missional nature conferred on the universal Church (John 20:21). Through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, followers of Christ should passionately employ the diversity of their gifts and talents to participate with God in His mission, and from within this body, specific individuals are set apart for unique cross-cultural engagement to the sake of Christ's name among all peoples.

Second, while recognizing that Scripture bears witness to the missionhood of all believers, we also believe that God sets apart certain individuals to specific mission tasks, which calls them to cross-cultural, linguistic, and ethnic barriers for the purpose of bringing about the obedience of faith for the sake of Christ's name among all nations (e.g., Rom 1:5). This distinct calling is characterized, when possible, by a vocational commitment. The Holy Spirit leads the Church to recognize and set apart certain individuals for specific works in cross-cultural ministry (e.g., Acts 13:1-3).

It is evident from Paul's calling, ministry experience, and understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures that God calls different disciples to different tasks, and He bestows on them different measures of faith and gifts for the work of ministry (e.g., Rom. 12:3-8). Paul's letters make explicit that God calls and confers gifts to certain individuals for the unique role of missionary service, characterized by cross-cultural church-planting activity and specific supporting roles (e.g., Timothy, Titus, Apollos, Silvanus in evangelistic,

pastoral, teaching, and other roles). Scripture indicates the continuance of this ecclesiastical practice until the return of Christ.

Third, we observe from the writings of Paul, supported by other Scriptural passages, that the biblical office of *apostle* and the role of a contemporary cross-cultural church planter appears to be analogous. In the New Testament, the term *apostle* refers not only to the unique calling and authority of the Twelve, including Paul, but is also used in reference to individuals working on apostolic teams who functioned in other roles (e.g., teachers, evangelists, pastors, etc.) toward the goal of raising apostolic consciousness among younger established churches.

While the term *apostle* had specific connotations in the New Testament, our movement today should exercise care from constructing applications that too narrowly define missionary identity and function. Nonetheless, the patterns that emerge from the New Testament concerning missionary identity and function provide certain insights that should be safely guarded in our contemporary mission structures. If every Christian service takes on the term *missionary*, we lose the ability to capitalize on New Testament equivalent usage, we tend to devalue the biblical concept of individual calling unto specific full-time missionary service, and we tend to reinforce a hyper-individualism, which hinders unified vision and strategic missionary placement.

Furthermore, though the root of the term *missionary* means “to send,” this does not imply that every believer should be considered a missionary and every Christian service represent missionary work. Though Scriptural evidence supports diverse kinds of missionary activity, we believe the predominate apostolic model in Scripture emphasized two priority areas of missionary function:

(a) Apostolic church planting among unreached peoples (2 Cor. 10:16). We observe a primary commitment by Paul and his companions to focus on evangelism and church planting activities in pioneer contexts. The testimony of Scripture portrays Paul’s *apostolic* ministry as focusing on planting and extending communities of faith among all people groups of the earth.

(b) Local leadership training among younger churches in order to strengthen the body of Christ and to enable the harvest through the training of additional laborers for both domestic and international ministry (1 Thess. 3:2). The New Testament describes Paul as highly concerned about training and equipping local leaders for the work of ministry.

These areas of emphasis do not relegate other kinds of missionary service as invaluable as long as those services are connected in spirit and strategy with the Pauline objective “*to bring about the obedience of faith among every people group.*”

Fourth, there remains a need for long-term cross-cultural missionaries today. Though short-term-mission roles provide valuable support toward reaching mission

objectives, on-the-ground cross-cultural workers remains critical to the fulfilling the Great Commission.

Much has been written about the shift of Christianity's center of gravity from the Western to the Southern hemisphere in the late twentieth century. The traditional mission fields now represent the most inhabited Christian nations, namely: Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As a result, the emerging churches in the Two-Thirds World have now responded in their own way to be missionary sending bodies. Ironically, Western nations that have experienced a dramatic decrease in Christian presence now receive missionaries from the Two-Thirds World in an attempt to re-evangelize their people. The era of missions from everywhere to everywhere has dawned.

In this backdrop, some voices called for a moratorium on sending traditional cross-cultural type missionaries from the West, except in areas where specialization was needed. There were several motivations for this view:

- There was a growing belief that earlier generations of pioneer missionaries had planted a sufficient number of local churches. Now, local churches in various part of the world should rise to evangelize their own areas. As a result, missionaries from the West were no longer needed.
- There was a view that the financial requirements to send one western missionary family could easily fund many national workers to do the same tasks at a greater level of effectiveness.

Also, where missionaries have continued working alongside existing church movements, a new era of partnership between national churches attempts to bring various strengths and gifts to maximize ministry to enhance national church ministries. The advance from paternal-dependent, to independent, to interdependent relations characterizes the majority of mission work today. In this changing global environment, some may raise questions as to whether cross-cultural missionaries from the West are still wanted or needed. Yet, we believe the following represent a few of the reasons why cross-cultural missionaries are still a necessity:

- The biblical imperative remains to disciple all nations. This mandate rests on all national churches equally, which means no one national church has the right to discourage another national church to abdicate the apostolic nature conferred by our risen Lord and Savior.
- A significant percentage of our world today waits to receive an incarnational witness of the gospel for the first time. Thousands of people groups remain unreached and have no viable witnessing communities of faith in their midst.
- Though the gospel has penetrated most regions or countries of our world, which has resulted in the emergence of many indigenous local churches,

there remains a large number of national churches who still struggle based on various issues and need the continued presence of western cross-cultural missionaries.

Fifth, we affirm the work of the Holy Spirit in calling and guiding individuals to commit their lives to full-time vocational missionary service. In Scripture, we observe a divine and distinct calling that is conferred upon individuals. At the same time, the Bible also reveals the Spirit using the corporate body of believers to guide the subjective interpretations of a person's individual calling. Often an individuals' sense of calling is perceived to be associated with specific geographical placement and ministry assignments. However, a biblical approach should consider the interface between individual calling and collective mission, which yields to the role of the Holy Spirit in using Church leaders and fellow workers to speak into the discernment and decision-making process of one's missionary task. If the body of Christ is ordained to play a critical role in recognizing a person's calling and to set apart for the task of cross-cultural mission work, then that same body should have a measure of input into the prioritization of placement and assignment.