MISSIOLOGICAL CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY THE CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONARY: MAN-MADE OR NATURAL? THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Missiological challenges are about the difficulties the missionary encountered in the process of taking the gospel to, and making disciples in a culture that is far removed from his or her own home culture. The crossing of this various boundaries generates some challenges that are either natural or man-made or a combination of both. When missionaries go to a different culture to evangelise and make disciples, the difference in people's understanding, the communication barrier arising from different languages, customs, environment, and differences in what people value would suggest that it will be foolhardiness to present the gospel to them in the way it is done in the missionary's home culture. Therefore, to overcome all these missiological challenges we hereby reflect on the above-mentioned topic.

Keywords: Religion, Missiology, Cross-Culture

Introduction

A Missionary is someone sent to propagate the gospel in a culture different from his/her own. Sometimes, it is used to refer specifically to "those sent by believers in their own culture to establish or assist the Church in a culture distinct from their own."[1] John N. Dombong in his book, states that "… whether they serve within or beyond their national boundaries, missionaries will cross some combination of linguistic, culture, social and geographical barriers."[2] So the cultural context is a primary factor in the definition of the term missionary.

Considering the postmodern era and its attendant consequences, these are "very exciting times to follow Christ and more so to obey the Great Commission."[3] And as Christians are doing all they can to take the Gospel to people who do not share the same cultural context with them, they are faced with challenges that they do not face in evangelising their own people.[4] Roger S. Greenway, corroborates this thus, "the missionary challenges throughout the world have never been greater than they are now. We need to know the challenges and consider what they mean for the Kingdom of Christ, and its growth."[5]

Missiological challenges in this paper refer to the difficulties the missionary encounters in the process of taking the gospel to, and making disciples in a culture that is far removed from his home culture. The crossing of this various boundaries as highlighted by Dombong, generate some challenges that are either natural or man-made or a combination of both - natural and man-made. When missionaries go to a different culture to evangelize and make disciples, the difference in understanding, the communication barrier arising from a different language, customs,

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[1] Willam D. Taylor, "Missionary" *In Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000).

[2] John N. Dombong, *Apostle Paul and th*e Modern-Day Missionary: Assessing Present *Day/End Time Missionaries,* (Makurdi: Uncle King Print, 2014), 6.

[3] Roger S. Greenway, *Go and Make Disciple! An Introduction to Christian Missions*. (Phillipsburg: R&R Publishing, 1999), 3.

[4] Lois K. Fuller, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, (Jos: African Christian Textbooks: 2015),114.

[5] Greenway, 3.

environment, and differences in what people value etc, go to suggest that it will be foolhardy to present the gospel to them in the way it is done in the missionary's home culture.[6]

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to identify some challenges arising in the cross-cultural missionary assignment in respect to what is considered as mission, the message of mission, cultural challenges and finally challenges arising from the missionary's relationship to other missionaries and sending agencies. Each challenge identified will be classified as either man-made or natural; then recommend the way forward immediately. This discussion will begin with challenges arising from the nature of the missionary task.

Challenges from The Nature of Cross-Cultural Missions Task

In this section, mission and what constitute the missionary task will be considered.

Mission and the Missionary Task

Early in mission history, the goal was clearly the salvation of souls. But from the mid-sixties, each missionary society set its own understanding of God's will and its own assessment of the situation it faced. There were of course many variations on this, but there was a consensus "that the great goal was to win men and women to faith in Jesus Christ with consequent forgiveness of sins, the gift of eternal life and gradually thereafter, transformation of society.[7] However, Bosch states that "there can be no doubt that the last decade have seen a surprising escalation in the usage of the term 'mission'- surprising, that is, in the light of the fact that these decades have also witnessed unparalleled criticism of the missionary enterprise."[8] Ironically a "new mission" which stresses among other things, deemphasising reconciliation with God and the push

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[6] Fuller, 114-115.

[7] Donald McGavran, *New Mission, A Systematic Reinterpretation of the Concept of Missions*" Contemporary Mission Theology, edited by Arthur F. Glasser and Donald McGavran (USA: Baker House Company, 1983), 47.

[8] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 523.

for reconciliation with other humans; liberation from poverty above liberation from sin; and stresses development of social action, has become popular.[9] The advocates of this new mission are redefining and using the classical words of mission in unbiblical, humanist, and Marxist way.[10] In other words, this school of thought says everything done by the church to meet man's needs is mission. But, this writer sides with Bosch, quoting Steven Neill, "If everything is mission, nothing is mission."[11]

This redefinition of mission is a man-made phenomenon which is purportedly aimed at, simply seizing for social reconstruction, the millions of dollars (naira) raised each year for discipling the nations. With these much money available, the new world they so propose can become a reality.[12] However, the concern for the welfare of man on the planet seem to be the primary focus of this redefinition which the proponents have their basis in the Bible just like those who hold to the conventional conservative definitions. This, some sending agencies and churches have bought into. However, if the missionary, who in this case is an evangelical and true to biblical missiology, does accept this position, he is likely to run into some difficulties with the sending body. Although the missionary has a wide range of reaction to this trend, which can either be that of utter disbelief, compromise, adjustment to the mission, or he may accept the new mission because it furthers the work of classical mission[13], i.e. mission has always engaged in social services and social action. It is a fact that mission has been a multifaceted ministry in respect of witness, service, justice, healing, reconciliation, liberation, peace, evangelism, fellowship, church planting, contextualization, and much more.[14]

There are some dissenting voices on this redefinition. Bosch opined that to list this as some dimensions of mission is fraught with danger, because it again suggests that we can define what is infinite.[15] The

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[9]McGavran, 51-52

[10] Bosch.

[11] Bosch, 523.

[12] *Ibid*, 524.

[13] Bosch.

[14]*Ibid*, 524.

[15] Ibid.

Protestant (as against the Catholic) understandings of the task of missions developed from a broad consensus focusing primarily on evangelism accompanied by works of compassion and development. They have some quite divergent emphases driven by opposing convictions regarding the very foundations of mission. During the second half of the twentieth century, considerable tension and polarisation about these questions grew between conciliar and evangelical wings of Protestantism.[16]

Summarily, defining mission and what the missionary task is, is a man-made challenge that the cross-cultural missionary should deal with personally in conjunction with the sending agency so that both can work in the same direction. This, if not properly handle, can be a potential clog in the progress of the mission enterprise. This is what this paper unequivocally recommends to missionaries, churches and sending agencies as the task of Mission. Having settled the issue of what mission is and what the missionary task is, the next challenge to discourse are those arising from the cultural context of mission.

Challenges of Cultural Context

This section shall discuss ethnocentrism and acculturation.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism poses a very serious challenge to human existence generally and to mission particularly. Ethnocentrism is defined as "an attitude of cultural superiority which implies that one's own culture is better than some other culture. It is the basis of racism, nationalism, and tribalism."[17] Ethnocentrism is a major issue for those who hold the view

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[16] Bosch.

[17] Van Rheenen, Gailyn, "Ethnocentrism," *Mission Dictionary*, (January 13, 2011) http://www.missiology.org/missions-dictionary/#E *accessed September 20, 2017.*

that civilization[18] is a core aspect of missionary work.[19] In fact some theologians saw missionary work as taming of wild people, while others saw it as the process of unifying humanity, therefore, civilization is the key.[20] To this end, the only civilized culture is that of the missionary, so it is incumbent on him to understand that all other cultures he/she will encounter, in the course of the mission work, are inferior and need civilizing[21]. This was the way the missionaries from the West approached missionary work in Asia and Africa, however, the same is also happening now that Africans and Asians are now involved in cross-cultural missions. There is an air of superiority among missionaries sent to "less civilized" places and they tend to act in condescending manner to the host culture.

From the foregoing, the initial response will be to condemn the ethnocentric attitude of missionaries, in fairness to both the past and modern day cross-cultural missionaries, there are times when they come across "some lifestyles that appeared not only primitive but often brutal traditions, and customs, and some extremely inhuman practices"[22] which sort of justifies the attitude. Nevertheless, the outright and wholesale condemnation and rejection of "all" aspects of the host culture during a mission enterprise is condemnable to say the least.

Thus, this challenge is both natural and man-made. The way forward begins with an objective study of culture. This can at least raise one's awareness of the home cultural traits and idiosyncrasies. Besides the limited gains from a textbook study of anthropology, the process of actual

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[18] Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, 120 "By civilization we mean the intentional attempt by missionaries to bring not only the gospel but the culture of their sending church to non-Christian peoples. It was viewed moral obligation, if not a practical necessity to raise "heathen savages" from their depravity by civilizing them."

[19] *Ibid.,* 120-122.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, 123 -124 they pointed out that there are two schools of thought about civilization and its relation to mission. There are those who believe that civilizing is a precondition to the conversion of "primitive" people and there also those who rejected civilizing as an approach to mission. Warneck pleaded that civilization should not be used as a means of Christianization.

[22] Ibid,

cross-cultural living itself can often assist in helping one to develop a better understanding of another culture.[23]

Furthermore, there is the all-important need to learn and master the home culture.

> One reason for the importance of knowing the home cultural assumptions is the fact that culture creates unconscious blinders that hinder one's ability to understand another culture and value system objectively. The simple fact is that people do not act "naturally," that is, in accordance with a universal value system, but in accordance with the cultural assumptions they have learned since childhood.**[24]**

So, the missionary must work hard to understand both cultures that has become part of his life. The next challenge in this section, which if properly handled solves the problem of ethnocentrism, is acculturation.

Acculturation

Acculturation is defined as the "the process by which adults acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and behaviours that enable them to become functioning participants of a new host culture"[25]. Some of the greatest challenges we face in missions are due to cultural barriers.[26] These are natural as each man is a product of the cultural milieu in which he grew up. These cultural barriers separate people and make it difficult for the message of Christ to move from one group to another.[27] Cultural barriers can be very formidable and they sometime worsen in the level of resistance they pose to the gospel. It is not prudent to think that these barriers will disappear on their own.[28] It is a naturally occurring challenge arising from the nature of the cross-cultural assignment.

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[23] Paul G. Hiebert, Cultural Anthropology, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 445-46.

[24] C. M. Arensberg and A. H. Niehoff, eds., Introducing Social Change: A Manual for Community Development, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Aldine, 1971), 208.

[25] Van Rheenen, Gailyn, "Acculturation."

[26] Greenway, 5

[27] Ibid.

[28] Greenway.

The way to adapt to culture is what missiologists call acculturation. The process of achieving this which is in stages as highlighted above, is what could be very challenging for the missionary but it should happen if there is going to be any success in the mission work. Fuller opines that "It is only a proud man who believes that his own way of doing things is the only right way. They are right and you are right too."[29] Another step, in acculturation is learning and understanding the language of the host culture. Missionaries have been faulted regarding their lack of enthusiasm to learn a new language as they most times have the option of speaking through interpreters,[30] or they feel that learning the language is a waste of time. The writer's experience[31] disclosed that a good command of the host language is key to entering and understanding a new culture. Without this, it will be difficult for acculturation to properly happen. From this writer's perspective, dealing with the challenges acculturation is a better deal compared to avoiding or parrying it with the hope that it will sort itself out. The seemingly simple steps prescribed above have proven priceless in this regard. Having discussed challenges arising from the cultural milieu of mission, it is high time to delve into some challenges arising from what the message of mission is.

Challenges of the Message of Mission

This section will deal with challenges arising from determining the message of mission as well as the challenge of contextualising the gospel.

The Gospel of Mission

The Christian church is called to mission, but there can be no mission without a message. Determining the message of the mission is a challenge for the contemporary missionary in the face of various opinions of what constitutes the gospel. Ferdinando opines that mission and gospel are intrinsically linked to each other, i.e. they are indivisible. He further argued that the "Good News must be declared; otherwise, it is no news let alone good." The English word "gospel" is the translation of the Greek

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[29] Lois K. Fuller, The Work of the Missionary, (Jos: African Christian Textbooks: 2013), 63.

[30] I*bid*, 67.

[31] A missionary to Ghana from September 2007- June 2013 where he served in a rural area pioneering a mission activity.

word, *euagelion* which means "an announcement of good news." This simply means good news, but determining of what the good news is has been a challenge in contemporary times.[32]. Prill suggested some types of messages that are considered as good news or gospel today, all of which seem to have their source in the Bible.[33] While some speak of the message of salvation and forgiveness which is for all nations, others, like in sub-Saharan African countries (and elsewhere), are often confronted with a different position as to what the gospel is. Some them include, (a) the prosperity gospel, (i.e. the good news that God wants to give us power, success, wealth and health)**,** principally teaches that Christian people have the right (and even the responsibility) to be prosperous in all areas of life, especially in terms of financial prosperity and health.[34] Others include, the gospel of liberation, the feminist gospel, the post-modern gospel, the syncretized gospel, the gospel of universalism, the gospel of holism and transformation, and the gospel of apartheid and denominationalism.[35]

All of these are man-made gospels that are directed at meeting the yearnings and the physical needs of people. These are prevalent in contemporary times and the missionary has an uphill task of deciding which gospel he/she is going to preach and champion on the field after a thorough study of the scriptural position of what the gospel is. Though this may not be that simple, especially if the sending agency or Church has a particular leaning in terms of the gospel they espouse and propagate. This is more difficult if they see the work on the field as a direct extension or annex of the home church, they would expect the missionary to propagate same even if it is against his/her personal conviction of what the gospel is. So, the missionary must ascertain up front before going to the field what the gospel is and what his/her sending agency or Church sees as the gospel to avoid misunderstanding. After determining the Gospel, the next challenge is how to contextualise it. Thus, the next challenge is contextualisation.

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[32] Thorsten Prill, *Contemporary Issues in Mission: What Christians Need to Know.* (2015), https://m.grin.com/document/295102. Accessed September 21, 2017.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Prill.

Contextualisation

Contextualisation[36] means "relating the never-changing truths of scripture to the ever-changing human contexts so that those truths are clear and compelling." In other words, it is "presenting the unchanging truths of the gospel within the unique and changing contexts of cultures and worldviews."[37]This is another major challenge the missionary has to face and deal with after determining the gospel. How does he/she bring the good news across to the people in a culturally acceptable manner without making it sound or feel like it is a transplantation of his home culture in the garb of religion.

Though the challenges arising from contextualisation is a natural one, it poses a very serious challenge to the cross-cultural missionary, because some missiologists believe contextualization may result in some dangerous phenomena such as Syncretism[38] and watering down the gospel. "what are the limits of appropriate contextualization, and how can we protect the process of contextualization from the danger of syncretism?"[39] In contextualization, the heart of the gospel must be kept as it is encoded in forms that are understood by the people, without making

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[36] The time the word contextualization came into missiological discourse and the person to first use it seem to be in doubt. Craig et.al feel it seems to have been first used by Shoki Coe 1976, while Ashford says it first appeared in Ministry Context, a publication of the Theological Education Fund. The later defined contextualization as "the capacity to to respond meaningfully to the gospel within the framework of one's own situation."

[37]Ed Stetzer, Calling for Contextualization, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ . Accessed September 20, 2017.

[38] Syncretism is "the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements" (Moreau 2000b, 924). Some modern scholars are not concerned about syncretism, suggesting that it is a natural, neutral blending of ideas between religions that takes place all the time." Craig et.al., 275.

[39] Bruce Riley Ashford, *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nation.* (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H publishing Group, 2011), 119-120.

the gospel captive to the contexts. This is an ongoing process of embodying the gospel in an ever-changing world. Here cultures are seen as both good and evil, not simply as neutral vehicles for understanding the world. No culture is absolute or privileged. We are all relativized by the gospel.[40]

Therefore, the solution to this challenge is for the missionary to do a proper exegesis of the culture also to exegete the scripture. This is no doubt it is a challenging task, but the success of contextualizing the gospel depends on it. The missionary cannot escape from it. He should adopt, out of all the various approaches[41], i.e. the critical contextualization. This approach preserves the truths found in the Gospel while also considering cultural differences and "the goal for contextualization which is to create "indigenous expressions of gospel-centred, mission-shaped churches."[42] That is the way to go! Having determined how to successfully determine the gospel and how to contextualise it, the next discussion borders on the challenge arising from the work on the mission field.

Challenges Related to Missionary's Work

This section will deal with challenge of submission, ownership of the work, and funding of the mission.

Submission in Missions

Submission is one of the criteria considered in engaging missionaries. Many mission organisations, especially evangelical hold on to the idea of submission in high regard. The concept of submission is an important part of their organisational culture. Some have suggested that a test of whether a missionary is submissive is in his/her willingness to allow the home church to hold them accountable. This may be tempting, but wise

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[40] Ed Stetzer, "What is Contextualization? Presenting the Gospel in Culturally Relevant Ways" Christianity Today, (October 12, 2014)

[41] Paul Hiebert has helpfully suggested that there are four levels of contextualization: no contextualization, minimal contextualization, uncritical contextualization, and critical contextualization.

[42] Ed Stetzer

churches will not send an awkward rebellious person as a missionary, they would rather send the most submissive and loyal[43].

With individualism flourishing in the postmodern globally, in which any form of authority is being questioned,[44] submission has almost become a *faux-pas*[45] word.[46] Thus leaving the decision that affects one in the hands of others leave a feeling of uneasiness. Missionaries are also faced with this challenge. Some of the causes of this has been identified by Prill as, 1. the possibility of hopping from one mission agency to another or the option of leaving the field and taking on other ministerial assignment in other organization and 2. The status of the missionary and their relation to the sending church, mission organizations and receiving churches.[47]

This situation seems to be an experience peculiar to missionaries from the West, but from the experience of the writer, same is obtainable for the African missionaries that are sent by churches or mission agencies. Furthermore, the missionaries are not considered as members of the churches on the field neither are they members of the churches that "sponsors" them. The missionary is a mere employee of the church who can be fired. This can be very disturbing to the missionary. Furthermore, the challenge of submission is exacerbated by multiple lines of authority that leave the missionary in a situation of having "two-masters."

The missionary should deal with the issue of submission at different levels. Submission to the Locales, to the authority of the sending

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[43] Ray Porter & Keith Walker, Mission: no new crisis, (Evangelicals Now 26 no 1: 2013), 19.

[44] Peter Ropo Awoniyi, " Challenges of Post Modernism to the Proclamation of the Gospel in African Context," In Theological Educators eds. Peter Ropo Awoniyi & G. O. Olaniyan (Ogbomoso: The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 81-96

[45] Vocabulary.com Dictionary, "Faux Pas" literally means false step in French. This connotes stepping in the wrong direction or saying the rong thing and this could sometimes offend people and sometimes an embarrassment for the one involved.

[46] Thorsten Prill, "Submission on the Mission Field," Affinity Gospel Churches in *Partnership, no. 1 (2014) Under "Mission Matters" www.affinity.org.uk/downloads/mission-matters/submission-on-the-mission-field.pdf* Accessed September 12, 2017

[47] Ibid.

agency or church, and even to team members on the field. Still closely related to this challenge of who owns the work.

The Challenge of Ownership (Proprietorship) of the Work

The challenge ownership of the work sometimes may not seem like an issue, but it becomes a grim problem when certain aspects of the work is being considered. This is a man-made phenomenon arising from a gross misunderstanding of the Kingdom principles of Ownership of the field or the harvest. It must be noted here that the field belongs to God. Thus, the churches planted by the missionary are God's. This is a crucial element to the church becoming fully indigenous in its worship and ministry life.[48]

Thus, the solution or the way forward concerning this challenge as advocated by Ott et. al.

> that effort should be made to promote freedom and creativity, so that biblically acceptable, but culturally natural styles of worship and governance can be incorporated from day one. For, culturally relevant church life will flourish best when introduced early in the life of the churches planted in the mission field.[49]

Finally, knowing that the work belongs first to God, then the locals. The challenge of sponsorship or funding is also one the missionary is faced with in contemporary times.

Funding and Sponsorship

Money is a very important, almost indispensable factor in missions. "Money is to mission, what fire is to human condition"[50] which is in line with a popular Yoruba saying, "*Owo ni keke Ihinrere*" which translated or means "Money is the Gospel's bicycle." It is considered as God's provision for survival, empowerment, and even for our enjoyment. Like fire, however, if not properly handled can be very destructive. The challenge of handling it well is often what makes it a burden.[51] Money

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[48] Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss.120
[49] Ibid.
[50] Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss.
[51] Ibid

helps in a variety of ways in the fulfilment of the Great Commission and a lot of it goes from the churches, to the agencies or sometimes directly to the missionary. Most of these funds are meant to execute some predetermined projects or ministry-oriented assignments. Improper handling of finance related matters can create distrust and mar the relationship among the stakeholders.

The challenges arising from funding and sponsorship are man-made and the way forward is as recommended by Moreau et.al. in "How to see and handle money," summarized as follows:

> a) Money is no substitute for passion, but it can be an effective expression of it.
> b) Money ought to be used only where clear and justifiable ends and means are in plain view and when even in a worst-case scenario, the money will not hinder the ultimate ends of developing healthy indigenous churches and ministries
> c) Money ought never to be used as a power wedge for one part of God's family to enforce its will on the other members of the family.
> d) Stewardship of financial resources is for everybody, both the sender, the utilizers, and the beneficiaries. [52]

In addition to the above, the missionary must be transparent with those on the field and fully accountable for all the financial resources going into the field. Where there is a need to use a designated fund for another purpose, it should be done with due consent of the sender. By so doing, the missionary's integrity is left intact and he can subsequently advice the agency or individual better. The next challenge arising from the work is the decision of the target people or place for a mission activity.

Challenges related to People and Places

This is a man-made challenge that the cross-cultural missionary experiences in this regard. It may manifest in situations like, "the decision and commitments already made to focus on a particular people or people

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[52] Moreau, 226-227.

group sometimes can be challenged by the circumstances on site in a particular location."[53] This could be natural and manmade. Natural because some places are difficult to penetrate and man-made because the sender may have vested interest in starting the work in the locality or among the people group. The way forward is for both the missionary and the sending agency, and even the locales (where they are already involved) to prayerfully ask for divine guidance in the right direction to go. A Biblical example is in Acts 16 :6-7 where Paul and team had wanted to preach in Asia, they were forbidden by the Holy Ghost, against the planned to go to Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit will not allow them. And in verse 8, the Lord opened a door for them in Macedonia.

The solution to this is, where there is a conflict of where to go, the stakeholders should seek the face of the Lord. He would answer them, and prosper the work. Otherwise, if one goes on despite the other, things may not turn out right.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted some of the issues and challenges that the cross-cultural missionary faces in contemporary times. These include the nature of cross-cultural mission's task; e.g. mission and what constitutes missionary task; challenges of cultural context e.g. ethnocentrism, acculturation; challenges of the message of missions e.g. the gospel of mission and contextualization. Also, challenges related to missionary's work e.g. submission in missions, the challenge of ownership (proprietorship) of the work, funding and sponsorship and challenges related to People and Places Most of them are not peculiar to this time, but this era seems to accentuate their impact. The paper has also recommended some ways to handle the identified challenges.

        The writer therefore recommends further that, all stakeholders, i.e. sending churches or agencies, the missionaries, and the host or receiving people must cooperate to ensure that the work of the Great Commission is finished. Misunderstanding and disagreements are inevitable in human relationships, but when there is dialogue and the spirit of brotherliness

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[53] Ibid, 222.

prevails, there is no challenge that cannot be surmounted. Prayer is one general solution to problems associated with the Great Commission and so much attention should be given to prayer. Also, enlightenment or proper education of all those involved in mission will also go a long way in helping to amicably resolve challenges that may arise while doing the Master's Command.

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