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**Integrated Mission Unpacked**

*If the Church in the West is to survive, we must stop believing we have everything figured out and start talking to our neighbours about collective solutions.*  
by Lt-Colonel Ray Moulton

**B**elieve it or not, Christianity is expanding at a phenomenal rate, making it the world's fastest growing religion. It's a remarkable fact considering how, in the Western world, more and more denominations report declining membership, church closures and difficulty recruiting clergy to fill pulpits. The reality in North America and Europe is disturbing. For us, maintaining status quo too often feels like success. So why are we shrinking? Is it just that we live in an increasingly secular culture, or is it something more?

A key difference is our approach to ministry. In the Western world, we often practise a method of service delivery that, rather than helping people, actually creates emotional isolation, institutionalization and greater dependency. In our quest to become more efficient in serving needs, we have allowed our commitment to programs to trump our compassion for people, and our devotion to professional expertise to obscure our ability to listen and learn from those we have labelled "needy" or "disadvantaged."



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The developing world, on the other hand, has been forced to rely on its greatest asset—people. More than buildings, programs or systems, it is the people themselves who are driving positive change in their communities. It is a biblical or integrated approach that encourages participation, shared aims and collective solutions. It's an approach that we must recover if the Church in the West is to survive.

**Western-world approach to mission**

For centuries, the Western world has approached the delivery of education, health, social service or religion by understanding the needs of individuals, families or communities. We observe, identify and study problems in an attempt to get a firm grasp on the issues. Based on our knowledge of these needs—illness, illiteracy, poverty, crime or sinfulness

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—we work to uncover a solution, an antidote, a program. Then we develop expertise in the field, listen to qualified authorities and consult with professionals who have a track record of success.

When we think we've "figured it out," a document is prepared that defines the problem, catalogues the options and proposes a way forward to meet the needs and fix the problem. Then we raise funds, marshal resources, recruit the right people and find the best building. Within a strictly defined timeline, we provide the necessary service, put the world right and get on to the next need.

The Western world packages solutions to be provided to those in need. In fact, a great deal of the economics of communities and nations are wrapped up in this approach. For example, we package groceries, shelter, counselling, discipleship training, toys, even salvation, and deliver to those we view as needy, poor or underprivileged.

This system of delivery creates formal structures that determine eligibility criteria. We decide who "deserves" our care and what is their "level of need." Roles are created, levels of authority enshrined, appropriate boundaries established, responses calculated—all with relatively little emotion or empathy. The culture of efficiency behind this service delivery is designed to allow needy individuals to better cope with their situation for the least amount of effort.

Over the past 40 years, John McKnight and his associates at Northwestern University in Chicago have studied this approach to service delivery in urban neighbourhoods in Canada and the United States. McKnight paints a scathing picture of "how competent communities have been invaded, captured and colonized by professionalized services" with devastating results. He recites a litany of lethal effects produced by service providers: families collapsing, schools failing, violence spreading, prisons swelling. And, we might also add, churches closing or losing mission effectiveness. He charges these social-service systems with eroding the very soul of community. "The enemy is not poverty, sickness and disease," McKnight writes. "The enemy is a set of interests that need dependency, masked by service."

### **Integrated or biblical approach to mission**

In opposition to this approach to service is a biblical model, widely used in the developing world, and labelled by The Salvation Army's International Headquarters as integrated mission. Several other terms have been used by others to define this same set of values or principles:

- Holistic ministry
- Incarnational ministry
- Community capacity development
- Integral mission
- Human capacity development

The principle at work in integrated mission is to facilitate community participation—to look for and use the strengths and assets in the people and neighbourhood that will help them solve their own concerns and achieve their own aspirations. There isn't a "we know best" attitude, nor does it devalue gifts from what may be viewed as "impoverished" people. Rather it helps people contribute to creating their own solutions.

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### ***The principle at work in integrated mission is to***

In a process of facilitation, the community identifies the concerns and issues of the people, looks for the collective resources to meet them and develops an implementation plan. In this way, they take ownership and are empowered. The process may take longer, but it is far more enduring. The solution that a community



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## *facilitate community participation ...*

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arrives at may be totally different than a facilitator would predict, but it is this shared solution that makes the most sense in the culture of the community. Real change, hope and transformation are the results of mutual learning and discovery.

The solutions that community members propose rarely have a single focus and are not applied to meet a single need, but instead are holistic in their approach. They take into account various aspects of community life and promote wholeness, not a fragmented answer. Environmental, health, social and faith factors are all contained in the community response.

This collaborative approach has its basis in the Incarnation. In the person of Jesus, God came to earth and took up residence in the human community to facilitate our understanding and build solutions. In the same way, we show our solidarity by identifying with those to whom we minister. We cannot be on the outside pushing solutions at others. Rather, we are called to participate in the conversation, share our gifts, validate the assets that others contribute and celebrate the transformation of communities over time.

This approach to ministry is long-term, not a quick fix. The action taken could have many twists and turns and may seem far from efficient, but over time it produces solid, enduring results. God is calling Christians and congregations to participate in their neighbourhoods—to be part of the solution, not dispassionate observers offering tokens of service. This requires demonstrations of our faith and prayer. It is emotional and personal, not detached and formal. It causes us to meet people in their homes, in living spaces that they occupy. We can no longer require them to come to us. We must go to them, seeking to understand their needs, feel their pain and share their joy.

### **Early Salvation Army approach**

I am a member of the Salvation Army, and I use our experience as an example. A pre-1900 *Orders and Regulations for Field Officers* expresses practical instructions for Salvationists to create teams of workers called "cellar, gutter and garret brigades." They were instructed to meet families in the neighbourhood to regularly and routinely be in relationship with them in ministry, not providing food or clothing, not going with a limited agenda of soul saving, not giving up if there is no early sign of response.

The principles used by early-day Salvationists were consistent with those employed by Salvationists in the developing world today who are enjoying growth in God's Kingdom. In this territory, our concept of Living the Vision includes understanding and living out our mission with integrated approaches. It will not come without great personal commitment, prayer and intentionally involving ourselves with our neighbours.

We can no longer drive past them to meet in our safe centres of worship, thinking that we are fulfilling our need for ministry. If we want to truly make a difference, we must radically change our focus. We must humbly admit that we do not have all the answers. We must resist the temptation to treat people like an assembly line. We must open our eyes to the capacity and gifts of those we may have previously dismissed. We must learn to trust less in our own righteousness and begin to discover Christ in other people. We must move out, open our hearts and embrace a world that has so much to offer.

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