"If we hope to reach young people today, we must both know their world and know them *in* their world. In *Youth Ministry as Mission*, Hull and Mays show us how missiology can help us see a way forward in youth ministry, humbly discovering the mission of God right where we are—where we, too, have been sent to become living translations of the gospel for young people."

—Brad M. Griffin,
senior director, Fuller Youth Institute;
author of *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager*

"With deferential scholarly humility, Mays and Hull have written a book that insists on integration over invention. Both hefty and substantive, it's also winsome. The authors eagerly synthesize diverse contributions in pursuit of truly helpful answers. Compelling theological clarity gives shape to culturally savvy youth ministry practice; a missional mindset flows into biblically faithful activity. Thought leaders contemplating future church and twenty-year-olds aligning weekly youth ministry efforts with God's purposes will find considerable value in this text. May our vision soar as we embrace life with Jesus among young people on mission!"

—Dr. Dave Rahn,
coauthor of *Disrupting Teens with Joy*

"The field of youth ministry is in need of an approachable, yet deeply theological, examination of cross-cultural missions. This is that book. Whether you are a devoted lay member, a seasoned youth pastor, or a youth ministry educator, this innovative and engaging book will be a valuable and timeless tool."

—Dr. D. J. Coleman,
student ministries pastor, Northwood Church

"*Youth Ministry as Mission: A Conversation About Theology and Culture* is a must-read for new and experienced youth ministers alike. Hull and Mays establish clear connections between youth ministry and Christian missiological principles that will provide fresh insights for communicating the gospel to and with youth. Their questions and suggestions for practical application have already encouraged our team to creatively engage our local church community in this important work."

—Caleigh Smith,
youth ministry director, Bulverde UMC;
advisory board member, Youth Becoming Leaders:
High School Christian Leadership and Global Transformations Institute

"As the director of the Global Center for Youth Ministry, I am thankful for this valuable resource from Brian Hull and Patrick Mays. This new book is a helpful tool for understanding the connection between contextualization, missions, and youth ministry. Hull and Mays not only present a powerful argument for youth ministry as missions, but they also grant student ministry leaders a tool for mobilizing their students to do missions. This book will help students and student ministers to develop a vision for global student ministry. We need the type of global movement the authors describe. This book is an important contribution to that movement."

—Tim McKnight,
associate professor of Missions and Youth Ministry and
director of the Global Center for Youth Ministry,
Anderson University and the Clamp Divinity School

"Hull and Mays's *Youth Ministry as Mission* makes a crucial contribution in developing new ministry pathways for twenty-first-century realities where missions is no longer geographic, but temporal and generational. In a constant-change context, traditional youth ministry that passes on the Christian faith in the image and worldview of the existing adult generation is obsolete and has resulted in large numbers of millennials and GenZs leaving churches. *Youth Ministry as Mission* provides a framework to interpret the next generation as an emerging culture and develop the means to both reach and enable youth to contextualize the gospel for their own generation's culture.

"Youth Ministry as Mission is not just another program but provides youth workers with the necessary theory and skills to bridge and reach changing generational cultures. I suspect *Youth Ministry as Mission* will be an essential youth ministry textbook for generations to come.

"I should know because Brian Hull trained my own son to be an effective youth pastor, overseeing a thriving 150-plus-member youth ministry."

—Samuel K. Law,
senior dean of Academic Affairs and
associate professor of Intercultural Studies, Singapore Bible College;
pastor-at-large, the Evangelical Chinese Church of Seattle

"What can youth ministry learn from missiology? Brian Hull and Patrick Mays masterfully weave together theological, missiological, and youth ministry scholarship to provide a compelling way forward for youth ministry. Age-old Christian practices such as incarnational witness and discernment are reintroduced to us through the lens of missions. Hull and Mays remind us of the significance the church plays in culture, while also providing concrete ways to engage youth culture. Hull and Mays model the significance of narrative throughout their analysis, making this resource accessible and relevant for those engaged in youth ministry in multiple contexts. I, for one, look forward to using this as a textbook in my undergraduate course on youth and culture!"

—Sarah F. Farmer,
assistant professor of Practical Theology and Community Development,
Indiana Wesleyan University;
coauthor of *Raising Hope: Four Paths to Courageous Living for Black Youth*

YOUTH MINISTRY AS MISSION

A CONVERSATION ABOUT THEOLOGY AND CULTURE

Brian Hull & Patrick Mays

KREGEL MINISTRY

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To Carol, who has offered continual support and love. To my parents, who have prayed over me and supported me. To Dave Curtiss, who believed in me. To the students, teens, parents, and amazing adult volunteers who have journeyed with me as we learn together about God's great love in and through the lives of young people.
—Brian Hull

To my students at LeTourneau University: you continually impress me with your dedicated study, your challenging questions, your commitment to service, and your faithfulness to live the gospel. You inspire me to be a better professor, a better campus pastor, and a better person. I am forever grateful for our journey together.
—Patrick Mays

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1

INTRODUCTION

IN A GALAXY NOT SO FAR AWAY . . .

Bill looked around the room, amazed at the diversity.

"How did we get here?" he wondered. "Am I too old for this?"

Bill saw a room of forty teenagers talking and hanging out before the midweek youth service. He saw young people from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. He found it almost impossible to relate to the issues they faced on a daily basis.

Manny, a second-generation Mexican immigrant, was in the corner talking to Nephtalie, who was from Haiti. Both of these high school students had family struggles, in addition to the cultural barriers they described in connecting with other youth at school.

Bill just finished a conversation with Ken, a Chinese American, who was struggling with the pressure to get accepted into a top university. Bill knew that was part of the reason Ken's parents moved here ten years ago. The pressure on Ken was daunting.

Besides all the ethnic diversity in the room, Bill couldn't help but notice how society had changed for these teenagers. This was a group with more information at their fingertips than any other in the history of the world. There was no singular "youth culture"; rather, many youth cultures were represented in the room. The world was definitely different from the small, midwestern church Bill grew up in.

And their expressions of faith were different. It seemed to be harder and harder to distinguish the language of the "committed" youth from the "nominal" youth. Conversations about God were easy enough to initiate, but there was a reticence to describe one's relationship in any kind of rich, theological language. Perhaps the reluctance was because they didn't know the language. Bill wondered if he was the one to blame. After all, he was their youth minister!

Bill remembered fifteen years ago when he started in youth ministry at his home church in Iowa. He did not know everything then, but he did feel more comfortable with the cultural issues. Now he knew that the models of ministry he used then were less effective at sharing the good news with teens who were from so many different cultures, value systems, and religious backgrounds. He needed help, and he knew his volunteers needed help.

The next day, while puttering in his office, Bill stumbled upon some books on mission, dusty from neglect. He was reading as a diversion but began to be inspired by the content.

"Maybe I need a change," he mused.

He found himself praying, asking God if he was calling him to be a missionary somewhere, grasping for anything to avoid planning another ineffective youth group event. God surprised him with an answer.

"Yes, I want you to be a missionary . . . right where you are."

This moment brought a flash of insight for Bill. He realized that the reason he resonated with the mission books so much was that they were describing many of the things that he was already doing intuitively in his ministry to youth. His "desperate" acts to be relevant to his youth and their culture, both the failures and the successes, clearly had gaps. He knew that! But in these mission books, he began to learn a new vocabulary, giving life to old ways and opening up new worlds.

Sophia was a new youth pastor across town. She was very energetic and had little trouble attracting a crowd of young people. She could lip-synch Ariana Grande and Taylor Swift with the girls and shoot hoops with the guys. Her passion for music and sports was exceeded only by her passion to reach youth for Jesus. Even though she was only six years removed from being a high school student herself, she was very aware that the youth in her church were culturally different from her. Yes, there was the obvious skin tone difference, since her parentage was mixed-race. But there were also more subtle and sometimes deep differences. She was wondering how in the world she was going to keep relating with youth if they kept changing. She was already

trying to connect with some of this year's fifth graders in the children's ministry, and she realized they lived in a different world from when she was in elementary school.

At a local youth pastors' networking meeting a couple of weeks ago, several youth pastors were complaining about "teens these days." She understood the frustration to some extent, but she also wondered if there were some problems with the current models of youth ministry in reaching the youth cultures of today.

At the meeting, she bravely raised the question. Most people in the room brushed her off. "Clearly a rookie," many thought to themselves.

But one youth pastor, Bill, came up to her afterward. He mentioned that he too had been asking some of those questions and had come across an author she might like to read. He handed her a book by some guy named Lesslie Newbigin.

"Take two ibuprofen, read this, and call me in a couple of weeks," he said.

THE IMPACT OF LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

After thirty-five years in the mid-twentieth century as a Presbyterian bishop in India, Lesslie Newbigin retired from missionary work and returned to his native Britain. He was astonished to find a timid, nonengaging church where there had once been a robust and sending church actively engaging the world. If one listens closely, Newbigin can be heard saying, "What happened? What did you do to the church?"

Newbigin began addressing this situation in his "retirement," and has since been called one of the most significant theologians of the late twentieth century. The main focus of his writing used the missiological principles he honed in India and as general secretary of the International Missionary Council on his own Western culture. His attack on the Enlightenment's "false dualism" and Christianity's failure to critique the rise of reason and empiricism laid a foundation for missiological engagement with post-Christian Western culture. By questioning the assumptions of this prevailing "plausibility structure," Newbigin showed how Christians could confidently assert the truth claims of the gospel in a "pluralist society." In short, he called for a missionary engagement with Western culture that included the recovery of the public truth of the gospel, the missional nature of the church, and a missional analysis of Western culture (1989).

His work has guided a renewal movement in the church. What he discovered might be the key to helping youth pastors like Bill and Sophia.

THE FRONT LINES OF YOUTH MINISTRY

Have you ever had two friends who have common interests but have never met each other? When you hang out with one friend, he or she sounds a lot like your other friend. For whatever reason, they have never met, but you feel like the world would be a better place if they just got together and talked.

We would like to introduce youth ministry and missiology to each other, so they can start having that conversation. In this book, we are going to familiarize our youth worker friends with some of the literature and ideas in missiology that we believe will help make a better youth leader by providing tools to analyze the current context.

As youth ministers, we are on the front lines of the American religious milieu that often makes youth ministry frustrating. The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), led by Christian Smith and first introduced in the book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, helped the church name what was happening to the faith of most young people: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). The NSYR revealed that many adolescents in Christian churches have a "misbegotten" faith that is only "tenuously" Christian. It consists of the following (Smith and Denton 2005):

1. A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Kenda Creasy Dean, who was a member of the original NSYR research team, was charged with the task of giving a pastoral response to the findings of the study. She addresses MTD in her book *Almost Christian*, saying that MTD is not "durable" or robust enough to last into adulthood. She invites the church to take this issue seriously by recognizing that youth ministry needs a different approach. She suggests an effective response involves the whole congregation engaging youth in a missionary way. She heartily draws on the work of missiologists Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls to indicate that mission is translation work, whether that translation occurs in a new geographic location or within an emerging generation. She writes,

> The reason parents, pastors, and youth ministers should take Walls's theory of mission-as-translation to heart is simple: it is not just about witnessing to the gospel in new locales. Translation is how we hand on faith to our children. The principles that describe the gospel's transmission across cultures could just as easily describe the way we ferry faith across generations. (Dean 2010, 98)

This book aims to develop further the mission principles of gospel transmission to younger generations in more practical and theological ways, by connecting to missiology. We believe that youth ministry is mission work. Youth ministry is going to new lands, crossing cultural divides, living with a new people, learning a new language, translating stories and concepts, and transforming lives through sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Whether you are a youth pastor like Bill and Sophia, a student studying youth ministry, the person who said "yes" to leading a youth Bible study, or the youth coordinator because the church board "suggested" it was your turn, you have this sense of the cultural gap between you and the youth you love.

The task of missiology is to study the history and work of missions and learn from it. We believe that the Christian faith is missionary. It joins with God's mission to reach out to the world so that God can be known (in the fullest form of knowing). We believe that good youth leaders—youth leaders who care—learn about the culture of the people they care about. This is mission work.

THE CONVERSATION

If we are going to be claiming that youth workers are missionaries, we want to explain what a missionary is. Following this introductory chapter, chapter 2 makes the connection between youth ministers and missionaries. Many Christians have a sense of what missionaries do. They go to a people, learn their language, and share the gospel. In this process is a fairly clear sense of leaving behind one's own culture and entering a new one. If youth ministry in today's context is essentially a missionary activity, as we suggest, then what do youth ministers (missionaries) do? This chapter begins the conversation between youth ministry and missiology with the classic article by Donald Larsen, "The Viable Missionary: Learner, Trader, Story Teller," and makes the case that youth minister work is missionary work. Dean's *Almost Christian* will be used as a primary example of how doing youth ministry as a missionary is essential in today's context.

Chapter 3 continues the conversation by exploring the theological foundation of youth ministry and missiology. In the first half of the chapter, a

theology of mission will be delineated, drawing heavily on Christopher Wright's *The Mission of God* and *The Mission of God's People*, Andrew Walls's *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* and *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*, and Timothy Tennett's *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century*. The second half of the chapter will make a domestic application of this theology of mission, primarily following the extensive work of Lesslie Newbigin, particularly *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society.*

Chapter 4 leans into the connection between the incarnation and youth ministry. This chapter will consider the impact of the incarnation—God coming to humanity in his Son, Jesus Christ. The theology of this act of grace will be unpacked, and the implications for youth ministry will be explained. The incarnation as viewed in Andrew Root's *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry* will be explored alongside missiology texts such as Darrell Guder's *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*, Christopher Wright's *Mission of God*, and David Bosch's *Transforming Mission*.

Chapter 5 discusses the translatability of the gospel. Drawing heavily on the work of Lamin Sanneh's *Translating the Message* and Andrew Walls's indigenizing and pilgrim principles, gospel translatability is applied to the world of youth ministry. Darrell Whiteman's model and application of dynamic equivalence reveals the convergence of youth ministry and mission practice.

While the first five chapters of the book build a strong theological foundation for why the conversation with missiology is so important for youth ministry, chapters 6 through 13 connect to more practical applications. Chapter 6 explores tools for youth leaders to learn about the cultures of the youth around them, including differentiation between addressing the developmental level of teens and the ministry to teens in culturally attuned ways. Conversations with Stephen B. Bevans's *Models for Contextual Theology*, Robert J. Schreiter's *Constructing Local Theologies*, and Dean Fleming's *Contextualization in the New Testament* will highlight the chapter's argument.

When engaging in the task of learning a culture, the issue of cultural relativism is raised. Chapter 7 tackles this issue by outlining its development as an anthropological doctrine. Then a pragmatic critique questions the myth of primitive harmony and indicates that many societies have maladaptive practices, ones that do not provide adequate answers for their environments. A biblical critique suggests that God validates culture through the incarnation, but societies need transformation to conform to God's will. Four practices,

then, are suggested for Christians to become effective cultural witnesses to the reality of God's incarnational transformation. When Christians are informed by historical and methodological relativism without subscribing to ethical relativism, they make powerful witnesses to God's kingdom in the world. Secular sources such as Robert Edgerton's *Sick Societies* and Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture*, and sources by Christian missiologists such as Lamin Sanneh's *Translating the Message*, inform the discussion. These are missiological reminders for those who teach and work in youth ministry.

Chapter 8, a look at youth ministry as an interpretive community, will discuss the importance of understanding culture(s) within the context of a community. It will give some practical ways to empower the local church community to think, discern, and engage for itself in sustainable ways. Within this discussion, a missional ecclesiology will emerge, as we engage with David J. Bosch's *Transforming Mission*, W. Jay Moon's *African Proverbs Reveal Christianity* in *Culture*, Paul Hiebert's work on "critical contextualization," and the work of the Gospel and Our Culture Network (in particular, Lois Y. Barrett's *Treasure in Clay Jars* and Darrell Guder's *Missional Church*).

Chapter 9 will engage the importance of being able to tell and live out God's story in a way that recognizes the culture and language of a particular group of youth. This will include some examples from the authors' experiences in practicing mission in a youth ministry context. Vincent Donovan's *Christianity Rediscovered* will help set the stage for this chapter, with substantiation from Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen's *The Drama of Scripture*.

Chapter 10 will look into developing indigenous leadership, discussing the necessary shift toward empowering young people in leadership as they construct their own theologies, organizing people toward action, and giving voice to the issues of their lives. This chapter will build on the work of Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson, along with David Bosch's *Transforming Mission*. In addition to this mission literature, we will look closely at young people in leadership in Scripture and Christian history. Finally, the authors' own efforts in developing High School Christian Leadership Institutes will also be discussed.

The next three chapters turn the readers' attention to helping youth witness to their world through evangelism, service, and social justice. Chapter 11 grapples with evangelism in a multireligious context, which many youth face on a daily basis in their communities. Within such a context, how does one hold on to and communicate core beliefs in appropriate and effective ways? This requires an understanding of a theology of other religions and a

missionary approach to the evangelistic task. Timothy Tennett's *Invitation to World Missions*, Michael Goheen's *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, and Winfried Corduan's *Neighboring Faiths* highlight the discussion.

Chapter 12 explores how to encourage youth to engage with key social justice issues within their communities, such as racial reconciliation, poverty, and civic engagement. Miroslav Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace* will be a good conversation partner here, as well as Jung Young Lee's *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* and Gustavo Gutiérrez's *Theology of Liberation*.

Chapter 13 takes a look at the role of service in youth ministry, particularly the short-term mission trip. Recent work by Simone Mulieri Twibell on the effectiveness and pitfalls of short-term mission trips, along with the classic work on pilgrimages and rites of passages by Victor Turner, will serve to help youth ministry leaders make informed decisions about the role of short-term mission trips in the scope of their youth ministries.

Chapter 14 concludes the book with a summary and an inspirational call for youth ministries to embrace their missional contexts.

This book is meant to be read and discussed. Hopefully, you will find some other people to join you in reading this book. You will find some questions for reflection at the end of each chapter to help you and your community engage the material, wrestling with what this kind of approach might mean for youth ministry moving forward in your context.

The story of Bill and Sophia, two youth pastors trying to learn a new way of approaching youth ministry, will weave its way through the book. Neither Bill nor Sophia are real people, but they represent dozens of conversations we've had over the years with youth leaders all over the world—youth leaders like you and me. Bill and Sophia, like all youth leaders, are on a journey as they learn this new way of approaching youth ministry. They and their views on youth, the church, and youth ministry will be changed.

THE CONVERSATION BEGINS

Sophia finished the last page of Newbigin's *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. So many thoughts streamed through her mind that she found it difficult to focus. She was excited, bewildered, and exhausted all at the same time. It seemed clear to Sophia that Newbigin saw the central character of the church as mission.

She wondered out loud, "If the church is in mission, then is what I do in youth ministry really mission work?"

Sophia recalled the missionaries she had met at her church's mission conference. She remembered the cultural artifacts and a few of the dramatic stories. She also remembered the appeals for money. But she realized she never got a sense of what they do on a daily basis.

She snapped out of her brain fog, grabbed her phone, and sent Bill a text: "What is a missionary?"

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Think about a time you had a realization, like Bill or Sophia, in which you recognized that circumstances had changed. What kind of change did this realization require of you?

2. As you begin reading the book, what do expect to learn from missions and missiological literature that could help youth ministry?

3. Look through the descriptions of the chapters. Which chapter(s) look(s) most interesting to you? Why?

4. What do you hope for in reading this book?

2

WHAT IS A MISSIONARY?

BILL SMILED AS HE READ SOPHIA'S TEXT. He recalled the time awhile back when he distinctly sensed God telling him, "Yes, I want you to be a missionary . . . right where you are."

GIVE ME THE ANSWER!

That moment of God's call was both exciting and confusing. It drove him to begin to read any book on mission that he could get his hands on. His initial enthusiasm began to wane, though, when his search for clarity resulted in more bewilderment. So many times he had heard well-meaning friends, mentors, and pastors say, "You don't have to be a missionary to follow God's call." It was always said in an effort to show that God calls and uses people in a variety of ways. He even found himself repeating this message to his youth. But now this message from God was ringing in his head: "I want you to be a missionary." Maybe, he began to think, there is something foundational about this missionary thing, something that gets at the heart of my ministry with youth. That thought compelled him to call Stan.

Stan and his wife, Sally, had been missionaries in the Czech Republic since 1994, right after the fall of communism. Recently retired, they had moved to the community to be close to family and had become an integral part of Bill's church in a short two years. They volunteered to help with some youth activities, and Bill had grown to appreciate their servant attitude, flexibility, and

wisdom that came from their many years ministering cross-culturally. Stan and Sally (known to the youth as S^2) quickly became fixtures of the youth group. The youth loved the fun-loving grandparent surrogates who were always ready for hugs, talks, and coffee. Bill, too, had come to rely on Stan's insights into life and ministry.

When Stan answered the call, Bill found himself blurting out, "What's a missionary?"

"Well, hello to you, too!" Stan mused.

"I'm sorry. I've been encamped in my office for a few days trying to get my mind around the missionary thing. I told you how I sensed God telling me that I needed to be a missionary."

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, when I told you, you gave me that crooked smile of yours and said that I would figure it out. So, I've been blowing the dust off these mission books sitting on my shelf, but now I want to hear from a real person. What is a missionary? And I have chosen you to give me the answer!"

"I guess I should be flattered," chuckled Stan. "I'll tell you what," he continued, "if you don't mind, I'd like to send you an article that helped shape my understanding of mission work. It's a short read and easily accessible."

"All right," said Bill, "I'll add it to my reading list."

"Right now, though, I want to give you some context for reading the article. My guess is that this message from God about being a missionary is throwing you for a loop because of the missionary stereotypes that are running through your mind," said Stan.

"Right," answered Bill. "I really don't think my youth will be able to relate if I show up wearing a pith helmet and khaki shorts."

"You may be surprised that pith helmets and khaki shorts were not regular attire for missionaries in Eastern Europe." Stan loved a little snark.

"Okay, Stan, deconstruct my stereotype."

"Mission derives from a Latin word that means 'to send,'" Stan began to teach. "The Catholic order, the Jesuits, used the term in the 1500s to describe their activity to gather unbelievers and the 'apostate' Protestants into the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants, by the nineteenth century, coopted the term to describe their activity in evangelizing non-Christians, typically in foreign lands. From this narrow use, mission, then, becomes something that professional missionaries do 'over there.' So we get the stereotypes of the helmet, the shorts, and the jungle. More recently, missiologists have worked to recover a more holistic sense of the word."

"Okay, slow down, Stan!" interrupted Bill. "I'm trying to take notes."

"No problem," replied Stan. "I could talk about this stuff all day."

After a pause for a sip of coffee, Stan continued, "I'll tell you what. Why don't we set a time to get together, and I'll walk you through the concept of mission."

A few days later, Stan came to Bill's office with a pile of books. "Are you ready?" asked Stan.

"Let's do it!" said Bill.

DEFINING MISSION

As Stan mentioned to Bill in their earlier phone conversation, the Jesuits in the sixteenth century first used the term *mission* in reference to human agency in spreading the Christian faith. Before then, mission rather precisely referred to the internal activity of the Triune God in sending the Son and the Holy Spirit (Bosch 1991). Timothy Tennent explains, "In short, the word *mission* was originally about God and *His* redemptive initiative, not about us and what we are doing. However, in popular usage within the church, it seems that mission has now come to refer almost exclusively to various tasks the church is doing" (2010, 54). The shift in usage of the term highlights the push and pull of understanding mission as primarily an activity of God or an activity of humans.

As the Protestant mission movement became a compelling worldwide force, culminating in the "Great Century" of Protestant missionary activity in the nineteenth century (Tucker 2004), the concept of mission broadened to include a number of meanings. These included, but were not limited to, the sending of missionaries, the work of missionaries, and missionary-sending organizations (Bosch 1991). The emphasis, though, even in this expansion of the term, tended to be on the role of human actors in the process of spreading the gospel to other places.

The twentieth century saw the fruit of the missionary enterprise, with Christianity expanding in geographic regions outside of the West. This, along with several other factors, have reshaped the mission context for today's church, according to Tennent (2010). He notes "seven megatrends that are shaping twenty-first century missions," two of which particularly confront the idea that mission is something that is done "over there." First is the reality that the West as a geographic entity or Western culture as a sociological force can no longer be considered Christian in any way that connects to historic or theological orthodoxy. Michael Goheen (2014) suggests that Western

economic ideals, placing ultimate value on market-driven and profit-driven motives, are the chief shapers of Western culture. Simply put, Christianity is not the center of the Western experience, "and we find ourselves standing in the middle of a newly emerging mission field" (Tennent 2010, 11).

Second is the movement of Christianity to the periphery of Western culture and the simultaneous emergence of a vibrant Christianity in the Majority World,[1] challenging the "West-reaches-the-rest" missiological paradigm. Whereas before, those of us in the West "instinctively" knew that the "mission field" was in places like Asia and Africa, now mission is being accomplished multidirectionally. Statistically, about 70 percent of Christians live in the Majority World. Many of these Majority World churches are sending out a vital missionary force. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, close to 85 percent of the cross-cultural missionaries in the world came from outside the West. Scott Moreau (Moreau, Corwin, and McGee 2015, 16) identifies this phenomenon as "from everywhere to everywhere" mission, in which "almost every region of the world is now both sending and receiving people" who bear the gospel message.

The result of non-Western growth of the Christian church began to raise questions and critiques about how mission was traditionally viewed, leading Tennent (2010) to suggest that we need to pause for reflection, in order for mission to be useful for the twenty-first century.

Several missiologists and biblical scholars from the spectrum of theological positions offer different conceptions, redefinitions, and various emphases on the concept of mission. Four evangelical writers—Christopher Wright (2006), Timothy Tennent (2010), Michael Goheen (2014), and Scott Moreau (2015)—present thorough and useful discussions on defining mission. Each knowledgeably analyzes the current global context and carefully navigates divine and human agency. Wright (2006, 22–23), who expressing his dissatisfaction with the traditional use of the term, says "our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation." In his effort to reinvigorate the concept of mission, Tennent (2010, 54) says, "Mission refers to God's redemptive, historical initiative on behalf of His creation." Goheen (2014) offers this concise statement: "Mission is participation in the story of God's mission."

1. "Majority World" refers to the non-Western world.

Scott Moreau's effort serves to summarize the current contours of the evangelical understanding of mission in a three-part exposition. First, he defines missions as "the specific task of making disciples of all nations" (2015, 69). It consists of all the various work and activities of organizations, churches, and individual missionaries around the world who are moving beyond their borders to proclaim the gospel cross-culturally. Second, Moreau says mission "refers to everything the church does that points to the kingdom of God" (70). The church, then, is seen as "sent" by and for God into the world. It includes the specific task of making disciples of all nations, along with the wider witness of the church for God through other forms of witness and justice.

Third, Moreau indicates *missio dei*, the mission/sending of God, communicates the idea that God initiates mission. Wright (2006) suggests that the biblical story unveils God's initiative. God reveals himself to Israel and then in Jesus Christ, thereby confronting the idolatry of each age. God elects, forms, and sends a people in Israel and then the church, whose communal life demonstrates and witnesses to God's redemptive activity on behalf of his creation. This puts the emphasis on God's agency in the expansion of his kingdom on earth. The church, then, participates with God in his redemption of the world. In this scheme, *missio dei* is the overarching term that places God at the forefront and the center of mission. Mission focuses more on what the church is sent to do by God in the world, and missions is a subset describing the activity of making disciples and planting churches.

Overall, each puts the emphasis on God's redemptive initiative to the world with an invitation from God to his people to join him in the work.

A MISSIONARY TO YOUTH

"Wow!" exclaimed Bill. "That's a lot to take in all at once." He paused to take a sip of coffee and to peruse the notes he took on Stan's discussion of mission. "Let's see if I get this. Historically, mission was used to refer to the relationship of the Trinity, until around five hundred years ago when the Jesuits began to use it in regard to their work. From then, mission came to describe mostly human efforts in spreading the gospel around the world. Following the Protestant mission boom of the 1800s, Christianity became a vital force in the traditional mission fields outside the West. Now, with the weakening of Christian influence in the West, we have a situation in which the traditional mission sending areas are a mission field, too."

"Yes, that's a pretty good summary," responded Stan.

"I guess the other key part is that this emerging context has caused a rethinking of the concept of mission. I appreciated the writers you mentioned who are, in a sense, recovering the idea that mission begins as an activity with God. And God invites us to participate with him in mission." Bill stopped and pondered for a moment, then continued, "Okay, so I still want to know . . . what is a missionary?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Stan responded, laughing. "Seriously, though, Sally and I had to wrestle with that question when we started to consider being missionaries in the Czech Republic. Yes, the Czechs had been under communist rule that suppressed religious life for almost fifty years, but it seemed a bit incongruous to be doing mission work in the shadow of cathedrals. We did our research and discovered that about 90 percent of Czechs did not believe in God. Clearly, there needed to be a fresh retelling of the gospel in a way that could be understood in the current context. We sensed a calling from God to be missionaries there. So, we went and actually did what missionaries do."

"What's that?" asked Bill.

"We went to the Czech people, lived among them, learned their language and their culture. We built and nurtured relationships. We got to know them so well as both individuals and as a society that we were able share the gospel with them in a new way, a way that this generation had not heard before. First Thessalonians 2:8 became our guiding verse: 'So we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.'"

Stan took a breath, then said, "Another key factor is that we really tried to pay attention to where God was already at work among the Czechs. We partnered with local churches who had held on through the years of communism. We held 'theology on tap' conversations at our local pub. It was amazing to see these Czechs speak with freedom about their religious questions and longings after they had been bottled up for so many years. In short, we tried to follow God's agenda rather than our own. We wanted to see where God was already moving and join him."

"That's amazing," said Bill. "I can see why you and Sally are so great with our youth. You do the same kind of thing with them. Well, except for the pub part."

"It's beer in the Czech Republic, but it's coffee here," mused Stan. "That's how Sally and I approach our ministry with the youth. We have found ourselves pulling from our missiological reading and training as we share our lives and the gospel with these kids. Except for the fact that it's in English, it feels the same. But even their English and their youth culture create barriers to be crossed!"

"So, I need to be a missionary to my youth." Bill stretched his arms in mock exercise. "Okay, how do I start?"

Stan said, "I think you're ready for that article I mentioned to you earlier."

Bill reached under his notes and pulled out four stapled pages. "I've got it right here: 'The Viable Missionary: Learner, Trader, Story Teller,' by Donald N. Larson. Looks like a real page-turner!"

"LEARNER, TRADER, STORY TELLER"

Donald Larson's classic article (1978) seeks to reimagine the conception of the missionary role. Based on forty years of mission consultation, Larson notices that typically there is a gap between how missionaries conceive their role and how people in the local community perceive it. He suggests that locals tend to view missionaries, as they try to make sense of these outsiders, through three interpretive metaphors: school, market, and court. Locals often see missionaries as teachers who are there to communicate material to be learned. Or they view missionaries as sellers in the market, hawking their wares. Or they view missionaries as judges, establishing and executing certain standards.

Larson points out that a cultural outsider faces significant barriers when playing the roles of teacher, seller, and judge. Outsiders in these roles can be found irrelevant and dismissed easily. The way to become a valuable member of the community is to follow an important sequence. One should be learner before one becomes a teacher, "buyer before seller, accused before accuser" (158). Closing this perceptual gap requires missionaries intentionally to take on different roles within these interpretive metaphors—the roles of learner, trader, and story teller—in order to become acceptable and viable in the local context.

First, upon arriving at a locale, a missionary should be a learner, focusing primarily on the local language and culture. Taking language and culture learning seriously communicates to the local population that the missionary considers them worthy of time and effort. Putting oneself in the communication arena every day makes for good practice, to understand and be understood, and also provides opportunities to make new acquaintances and friends. A new language cannot be learned completely in a few months, but relationships can be initiated even with communication limitations.

Second, as the missionary continues to learn the local language and culture, one adds the role of trader. This role is aided if the missionary has "come with some recognizable commercial purpose" (160). The trader role

is a kind of establishment phase, in which the missionary offers experiences, commodities, and/or insights that are interesting and valuable to the local community. In the process, one shares the joys and pains, the successes and problems, in how others live. Of course, language and culture learning progress, and the missionary becomes, hopefully, an established fixture in the community and a bridge to a "larger world" (160).

The missionary then is able to add a third role, that of story teller. One's knowledge of the local language and culture is used to translate the story of God. The story the missionary tells is "based on the wanderings of the people of Israel, the coming of Christ, the formation of God's new people, the movement of the Church into all the world and ultimately into this very community" (161). Along with this grand biblical narrative, the missionary tells his or her own story of coming to and walking with Christ.

Larson's suggestion that missionaries take on the roles of learner, trader, and story teller challenges the stereotype of missionaries as cultural imperialists. Larson explains:

> The learner role symbolizes a number of important things . . . in the communication of the gospel. The learner's dependence and vulnerability convey in some small way the message of identification and reconciliation that are explicit in the gospel. . . . The biblical mandate challenges the Christian to identify with those to whom he [*sic*] brings words of life. (163)

THINKING LIKE A MISSIONARY

Bill looked up from the article and smiled. "That Stan knows what he's doing," he thought. Bill considered Larson's description of a missionary as a learner, trader, and story teller. It dawned on him that those roles had a bit of congruency with his approach to youth ministry. While he and his youth all spoke English, there were times when he understood only about half of what they were saying. Also, there were a myriad of pop culture references that he missed, and he knew these things were shaping the perceptions and approach to life of his youth. There really was a youth culture, actually several youth cultures, for him to learn and know better if he was going to effectively translate the gospel story and communicate it to them to them. "Wow!" he thought. "I'm already starting to think like a missionary."

In processing these things, he recalled a youth ministry book he had read a few years back. He seemed to remember the author saying something about

youth and mission. He searched his shelves and found it: *Almost Christian*, by Kenda Creasy Dean (2010).

YOUTH WORK IS MISSION WORK

In 2005 Christian Smith and Melinda Denton introduced to the public their seminal research of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) (2005), research that both rocked and affirmed what youth ministry practitioners understood about American youth. They concluded that American youth, in general, hold to a faith that Smith and Denton labeled Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). It is a faith that encourages people to be nice to each other and play fair. Its main purpose is to help people feel good about themselves. Yes, there is a God, but one that can be relegated to the fringes of life.

Dean (2010) published her compelling treatise on how the church should respond to the findings of the NSYR. What can be done to engage youth who exhibit a lackadaisical faith that only marginally connects to the historic, orthodox Christian faith? Indeed, what can be done when, as Dean pointedly tells pastors, parents, and youth workers, "we're responsible" (2010, 3)? What can be done when it is realized that this isn't just a youth ministry problem—it's a church problem?

Dean focuses on the 8 percent from Smith and Denton's study whom they identify as "highly devoted." These youth "possess articulate and integrated theologies" and "faith stories" that "influence their decisions, actions, and attitudes" (Dean 2010, 47). Borrowing from sociologist Ann Swidler, Dean proposes a "Christian cultural toolkit" that vital churches employ and that youth benefit from in the process of becoming formed like Christ. These include, first, claiming a creed. Christian creeds typically refer to historic declarations of faith, like the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed. Dean broadens the concept to include what youth think and say about God. Highly devoted youth communicate belief in both the transcendence of God (respect and grandeur for the Creator) and the immanence of God (as exemplified in God's desire for personal relationship through Jesus Christ). A second "tool" is a relational and authoritative connection to a faith community, particularly with available adults. A clear sense of calling is a third item in the toolkit. Dedicated youth express and live out a purpose and a moral responsibility to participate in God's work in the world. Hope is a fourth, though a bit less developed, tool demonstrated by faithful youth. Still, the highly devoted showed a greater propensity than MTD youth to put into

practice "Christian hope as a generalized trust that God has the future under control" (Dean 2010, 78).

For Dean, operationalizing this Christian cultural toolkit is the antidote to the apathy of MTD. However, these tools are effective only as they are empowered by and point to Jesus. Dean explains, "Our creed, our communities, our sense of call and hope are useful only if they reflect Christ's Light into the dark places of the world" (2010, 84). This is done as churches recover their "missional imagination" (Dean 2010, 85).

"Every church is called to be a 'missional church,'" she writes, one that "ratchet[s] up expectations by consciously striving to point out, interpret, and embody the excessive nature of God's love" (Dean 2010, 85). She notes that recovering the core biblical, missional identity of the church makes sense in our current cultural climate: "American young people's experience of religious culture is less like the overarching Christendom of the Roman Empire, dominated by one religious perspective to the point of rendering most other religions invisible, and more like the Hellenistic pluralism of the New Testament, or the multireligious world of ancient Israel" (2010, 91–92).

Beyond the pragmatic analysis that we currently share a similar multireligious context with the first-century church—hinting that we might share similar ministry methodologies—is a central truth that God sends his people, his church, as a sign, symbol, and sacrament of the sacrificial love demonstrated in the work of Jesus Christ. This indicates that mission is foundational to the identity of the church. Further, mission is symbiotically tied to the incarnation. God sends himself to his creation in the person of Jesus Christ, who is fully human and fully divine.

Drawing significantly from missiologists Lesslie Newbigin, Lamin Sanneh, and Andrew Walls, Dean presents a big vision for youth ministry as mission that moves beyond the idea that mission is merely a one-week summer trip. Yes, the incarnation is a doctrine of Christian belief, and it is also a "template for the church's missional life" (Dean 2010, 91). It is the evidence of God's interest and engagement with the world. God takes definitive action in this world, and he calls/sends us to do likewise. The incarnation is the "perfect translation," and we continue the witness as "*re*translations" of the original (Dean 2010, 97). Dean summarizes, "Mission simply means translating God's love in human form, putting every cultural tool—stories, symbols, attitudes, language, practices, patterns of life—at the gospel's disposal. To be 'little Christs' means allowing God to become Incarnate in our own lives as we smuggle divine grace into the world" (2010, 98).

Dean suggests that the translatability of the gospel to the peoples of the world is the same kind of translatability that it takes to transmit the gospel to new believers of emerging generations. So mission is more than the geographic expansion of Christianity, for Christians are sent across every human-formed boundary—geographic, linguistic, cultural, and generational. "Parents, youth ministers, and congregations embody the church's missional imagination by transmitting the gospel across generations as well as cultures, translating God's self-giving love for young people through the medium of our own lives—lives that are remembered by Christ every time we remember him" (Dean 2010, 99).

Dean's remedy for the malaise of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism among American youth is a missional embodiment by parents and those who work with youth to translate the life-giving good news to the next generation. Youth work is mission work!

Incarnational philosophies and strategies, particularly among parachurch youth ministries like Young Life, became prominent in the mid-twentieth century,[2] notes Dean. However, the "language of mission field faded" (2010, 232–33) by the end of the century. She surmises that the strategy often shifts from the primary goal of pointing youth to Jesus to lesser, secondary goals of youth group attendance and denominational behaviors and identity. Youth ministries, in one sense, do recognize that a kind of cross-cultural mission is appropriate for the communication of the gospel to teenagers. Talk of learning the pop-cultural world of teenagers for the sake of the gospel pervades the conversations and thoughts of youth ministers across the nation. Without consistent and meaningful congregational/denominational support in training and volunteers, though, it is easy for youth ministers to succumb to the numbers and behavioral game. "Still," Dean asserts, "youth ministry offers the American church a well-stocked laboratory for experimenting with incarnational missiology at home, as we seek to follow Jesus into the developmental and cultural spaces of adolescence" (2010, 93).

TAKE A CHANCE

Bill sat back and thought, a bit wistfully, about reading *Almost Christian* for the first time. Was it really a decade ago? He had been so fired up! He had plans to incarnationally engage the youth of his church and the wider

2. For example, see Mark H. Senter III's *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

community with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And there were moments when he seemed effective. He just could never seem to sustain it. The pressures of the church bureaucracy to report on attendance and budget (important stuff that needs to done), coupled with his own inability to clearly communicate and implement a missional strategy for his youth ministry, left him feeling inadequate. He decided to give Stan a call.

"Part of me is just saying, 'Quit your whining!'" Bill had arrived at the end of his long explanation about what he had learned from the Larson article and his rereading of Dean. "But another part of me is saying, 'You've got to take a chance!'"

"What do you mean?" asked Stan.

"I mean what I've been missing in my efforts of youth ministry is using the lessons of missiology. To use a really bad metaphor, it's like youth ministry and mission are two people who know and like each other, but only as 'friends.'" Bill used air quotes with his hands, even though Stan couldn't see him. Bill continued, "But now youth ministry is kind of looking differently at missiology and missiology is noticing and thinking youth ministry is kind of cute. And they decide to take their relationship to the next level, then they get married and make a life together!"

"And they save the whole world together!" Stan was laughing out loud at Bill's enthusiasm and questionable use of analogy. "You're right, that is a bad metaphor."

"Thanks a lot," Bill pretended to mope.

"Your explanation is quirky, but I think you're on to something," Stan said. "You know, people are always asking Sally and me what we are doing now that we are no longer missionaries. I try not to be too snarky when I tell them that we still are missionaries. We are missionaries to our neighborhood, to the larger community, and to the youth. All the things we did in the Czech Republic, we do here. We live among the people, we learn their language and culture, we craft ways to translate the gospel, and we find creative ways to articulate and embody the gospel that makes sense in this context where God has called and sent us."

"Yeah, people are always saying that you don't have to be a missionary to follow God. That statement has really started to bug me."

"Me, too," responded Stan. "The reality is you do have to be a missionary, one who participates in the story of God's mission, to paraphrase Mr. Goheen."

After a pause in which both Bill and Stan reflected on what had been discussed, Stan said, "Bill, I want to give you the rest of my answer to your question—'What is a missionary?' When we were trying to decide what neighborhood to live in after moving back from the Czech Republic, I came across a book by John Perkins (2001), *Restoring At-Risk Communities*. Mr. Perkins is an African American who grew up in Mississippi and experienced quite harsh racism during his life. He came to Christ in a powerful way, and God called him back to Mississippi to work among the poor and disenfranchised. Serving missionally among people means identifying with them in the name of Christ. Mr. Perkins quotes a Chinese proverb that concisely and eloquently describes the life of a missionary. It reads in part: 'Go to the people / Live among them / Learn from them / Start with what they know / Build on what they have'" (2001, 18).

"Thanks, Stan. That's beautiful," said Bill. "Now, I think I know what my next step needs to be."

"What's that?" asked Stan.

"These definitions of mission and missionary have given me an appetite for a better understanding of a theology of mission. If this is what God has called me to, then I want to be able to know it and apply it purposively," said Bill.

"I can help you with that!" promised Stan.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In this chapter, Bill recalls a time when he heard a call from God. Think about a time when God called you. What were the circumstances? How did you respond? Who were the people in your life who affirmed the call? What actions did you take as a result of God's call?

2. Look over the "Defining Mission" section of the chapter. What are the common words or phrases that each author uses? What is the key idea that each author is trying to convey? Using the inspiration of this section, write your own definition of mission as you understand it at this point.

3. Which missionary role—learner, trader, story teller—do you resonate with most? Why? In which role are you most effective? In which role do you need the most improvement?

4. Why is youth work like mission work?

5. Since youth work is like mission work, what adaptations might this suggest for the way you approach youth ministry, church, and mission?