

**AN AFRICAN VISION FOR A
PEOPLE-FOCUSED, MISSIONAL CHRISTIAN LIFE**

**PEOPLE
ARE THE
WEALTH
ANDŪ NĪ O ĪĪNDO**



**FOREWORD BY
ERIC GEIGER**

CHRISTIAN MUNGAI
GLOBAL MOVEMENT PASTOR AT MARINERS CHURCH

I've known Christian for more than a decade, and his writing offers a refreshing and deeply insightful perspective, dismantling prevailing Western ideals in the most humble way. With real-life examples of serving our neighbors and living missionally, this book is a powerful call to actively live out our faith in a way that truly reflects the heart of God.

BIANCA JUAREZ, pastor, podcaster, and bestselling author of *Grit Don't Quit* and *Play with Fire*

Christian Mungai's *People Are the Wealth* is a powerful call to rethink missions through relationships, not just resources. Drawing from his journey from Kenya to America, he challenges Western churches to be catalysts, not controllers—listening before leading and serving alongside rather than from above. His “three-legged stool” approach—balancing proclamation, demonstration, and community—offers a much-needed shift from creating dependency to fostering sustainability. This book will transform how you view global engagement, moving from transactional charity to true partnership.

DOUG FIELDS, pastor, author, chairman of Milele International

From the first time my wife, Carol, and I met Christian Mungai, while he was a student in the US, we were struck by his charismatic energy and strength of conviction. As long as we've known him, Christian has carried a relentless passion for rethinking and reshaping the prevailing model of missions—moving beyond the traditional “from the West to the rest” approach toward one rooted in mutual respect, partnership, and dignity.

In *People Are the Wealth*, Christian teaches us that missions should not be about imposing solutions but about walking together with the people we serve, honoring the wisdom already

present in the local community, and being open to learn from others as we serve together.

Christian's persistence in lovingly challenging outdated paradigms has resulted in a work that is both timely and necessary. This book is a must-read for anyone who believes that missions should not be about power, but about people.

MURIITHI WANJAU (PASTOR M), senior pastor, Mavuno Church Movement and author of *Mizizi (Rooted)* curriculum

I learned many things from the evangelical theologian John Stott. I love what he wrote about missions and how we should relate to the world. And I'm a big believer in what he called the Third Way, where we are like Jesus when we go into the world and give ourselves in selfless service. We are to do the *work* of the gospel while sharing the *words* of the gospel—both showing God's love and telling about God's love. This is what we are sent into the world to do. The key to this is *relationship*, but for a long time I didn't understand what that really meant.

Through Christian Mungai I discovered I had a blindness. In thinking of missions as “from the West to the rest,” I saw my role as going to show God's love, and I assumed I knew what loving was. I was surprised to learn that I had to listen and create real dialogue from a heart of humility, through conversations that honored mutuality and dignity and valued each church, people group, and country. It wasn't easy. In fact, it was one of the most challenging things I think I've ever done. But I couldn't have learned any other way, and I experienced the thrill of being part of the global church.

Christian Mungai is unique, and God has used—and is using—him in unique ways in America and around the world. I have experienced the truth of this book to be life-changing for

me personally and the ministry of my church, and I believe it will do the same for you.

KENTON BESHORE, pastor emeritus, Mariners Church

People Are the Wealth is a transformative and much-needed reimagining of global missions. With deep wisdom, personal experience, and a passion for the gospel, Christian Mungai challenges us to move beyond outdated models of charity to embrace a missions strategy rooted in relationship, mutual respect, and the recognition of every person's God-given dignity. His insights, drawn from both his African heritage and his extensive ministry experience, offer a refreshing and compelling vision for the future of the church's global engagement.

Christian Mungai is a bridge builder, a storyteller, and a thought leader in the missional space. His ability to challenge and inspire, while remaining deeply grounded in biblical truth, makes this book a must-read for anyone seeking to engage in missions with wisdom, humility, and effectiveness. This book will not only change the way you think about missions, it will change the way you see people. Highly recommended!

REV. DR. SAMEH MAURICE, senior pastor, Kasr El Dobra
Evangelical Church

In *People Are the Wealth*, Christian Mungai brings fresh and challenging insights into global missions through an African lens. He brings out biblical truths through great stories to move us from independence and dependence into an interdependent global body of Christ. As you read this book, I know you will be blessed, challenged, and inspired, just as I was.

JOSSY CHACKO, founder and president, Empart, Inc.

This is more than a book—it’s a calling, a revelation, and a challenge to rethink global missions. My faith journey is blessed by knowing Christian Mungai, from our first meeting in Kenya in 2008 with Mariners Church leadership to sharing life and faith in a small group including him and his wife, Delta. For decades, I’ve watched Christian live out every word in this book, embodying the message he so powerfully shares. With inspiring stories, profound theological insights, and a compelling vision for the future of missions, Christian challenges us to move beyond “doing for” to instead embrace interdependence—listening, learning, and fostering reciprocal partnerships with the global church. Reading this book will stretch you, inspire you, and reframe your understanding of what it means to be the church in a globally connected world. This book is essential if you want to see missions through a biblical lens and engage in meaningful, sustainable, and transformative outreach.

INÉS S. FRANKLIN, teaching pastor at Mariners Church, founder of Trochia Ministries, and author of *Uncharted: Navigating Your Unique Journey of Faith* and *The Image of God*, a Deep Dive series study

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Foreword

God has used the book of Galatians in my life to remind me of his grace and to invite my restless heart to continually find rest in him. Within the book of Galatians there is a powerful verse that refreshes us with what Christ has done for us: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.”¹ I am no longer cursed for my sin, because Christ was cursed in my place.

As I have traveled to meet with brothers and sisters in our global family—what we call our global partners at the church I pastor—I have learned to love this verse even more.

In Haiti, people fear someone pronouncing a curse on them; so to hear that Christ has removed the curse is such good news. In South Asia, there are some who are called “untouchables,” the Dalits, so low in society that they are cursed to live outside the caste system. When they understand that Christ humbled himself for them, their joy is unspeakable. In the Middle East, many live in a climbing religion, always trying to earn their way to eternal

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life and never knowing if they have done enough. When they grasp that Christ offers what theologian John Stott called “a rescue religion,”² their commitment to Jesus because of his rescue is humbling. In Uganda, those with special needs are often viewed as if they are cursed. To serve alongside our partners and my daughters as we distributed wheelchairs and helped people who were left to crawl on the ground into a chair reminded me of God reaching down to pick us up.

Christian Mungai and I were together on all those trips (Haiti, South Asia, the Middle East, and Uganda). Our church enjoys being part of a global family. I enjoy being part of a global family. And God has chosen to use Christian, one of our pastors, to bring us all together. Christian’s passion for the gospel rubs off on me and has helped me see the truth of verses like Galatians 3:13 through the lens of different cultures. The verse sits above every culture and is true in every setting, but seeing the verse at work in different cultures has stirred my awe for God’s truth and grace.

Another verse that reveals the heart of God is Galatians 3:8: “Now the Scripture saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and proclaimed the gospel ahead of time to Abraham, saying, All the nations will be blessed through you.”³ The apostle Paul is reminding us that God’s intention has always been to rescue people from every nation through the gospel of Jesus. Genesis, the first book of the Bible, contains the promise, and Revelation, the last book of the Bible, gives us the final fulfillment—because Christ was “slaughtered and . . . purchased people for God by [his] blood from every tribe and language and people and nation.”⁴

We live in the messy middle between the promise that God will bless all the nations and the reality of people from every nation in his presence. In the messy middle, we are commanded to join Jesus on his mission—to make disciples of people from every nation.⁵

FOREWORD

The global family is setting the pace on making disciples from every nation. I have been in meetings where bold plans have been set in the Middle East to take the gospel to dangerous places. I have been on private Zoom calls with leaders in South Asia who are risking their lives to take the gospel to people groups who have not heard of Christ's finished work for them. God is using the global church right now to pursue people for himself.

The leaders I have met have blessed and inspired me, and their example has challenged me. The people are the wealth. I commend Christian's thinking and teaching to you. You will be reading the words of a very rare combination of missiologist/theologian/pastor, who before any of those titles is a faithful follower of Jesus and a great husband and dad. You will enjoy this book, and you will learn a lot.

ERIC GEIGER

Senior Pastor,
Mariners Church in Southern California



INTRODUCTION

SHIFTING THE FOCUS OF GLOBAL MISSIONS

Early in the twentieth century, a small group of people in a little Kenyan village would get up every morning and drop to their knees facing a nearby mountain. When they looked at the snow-capped peak, they felt a sense of awe and wonder. They surveyed the lush, green foothills and said, “This thing is so majestic, it must have some power behind it.” So they would pray to Mwene Nyaga, “the owner of the mountain that has snow on it.”[†]

When some missionaries from Scotland made their way to the village, they observed what these people were doing and tried to understand why they followed this daily ritual.

When the villagers replied, “Just look at that mountain. It is too majestic, too grand, too beautiful not to have some power behind it,” the missionaries saw an opportunity to tell them about God.

[†] This reminds me of the apostle Paul’s declaration in Romans 1:20: “Ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God” (NLT).

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“We actually know the story of the creator of that mountain,” they said. “We know who Mwene Nyaga is.”[†]

One of the villagers—my grandfather—said, “Please, tell us more. If you’re right, then we want to know more about this creator of the mountain.”

That’s how my grandfather came to know these missionaries and began to travel with them. He ended up working as a chef in one of the schools they established—a school that still exists today. Over time, he heard more and more about the creator of the mountain and eventually decided to place his faith in him.

After my grandfather embraced Christianity, he raised his kids in the ways of God. My father also came to faith and ultimately became a Presbyterian minister. Not only did he serve faithfully in his own generation—in the National Council of Churches, in family life education, and at a university—but he also raised me to be a Christian.

When I was eighteen, my parents sent me to pursue a law degree in India. I had no desire to become a lawyer, but in Africa, you don’t do things because you want to; instead, it’s a family decision. For young Africans at the time, there was a holy trinity of careers to pursue at university: law, medicine, or architecture. If you didn’t do one of those, you would disappoint your parents. People from individualist cultures make their own choices, but in a family-based culture such as we have in Kenya, you do what the family asks you to do. So, against my will, I went.

As an international student who didn’t really want to be there, I found myself in a very difficult place. I felt isolated and way out of my comfort zone, but that’s where my faith really began to take shape. God used those tough years to solidify, mature, and transform my relationship with Christ.

[†] Likewise, this evokes memories of Paul’s approach to the philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens: “As I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: ‘To an Unknown God.’ This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I’m telling you about” (Acts 17:23, NLT).

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Instead of going on to sit for the bar examination when I graduated from law school with a bachelor's in social legislation, I handed my parents my diploma and asked for their blessing to let me go pursue what I wanted to pursue—namely, acting in Hollywood.

I reached out to a friend of my father's who lived in Pasadena, and he and his wife invited me to stay with them while I got situated in Southern California. But all my attempts to find an acting job fell flat because I didn't have the proper paperwork. I had come to America on a student visa and thus was unable to work legally. So even though I was called back on three separate auditions, no one would hire me. I quickly began to realize that I was not in a position to take care of myself, and after moving out of my host family's home, I ended up in a homeless shelter in Los Angeles.

Fortunately, I met a guy on the street early on who took one look at me and said, "You're not using."

"I don't do drugs," I said.

"Well, there's a church nearby that takes in people who are clean like you," he said.

And that's how I found the shelter where I stayed for the next seven months.

During my time there, I heard about a prayer breakfast in Pomona for Kenyan expats, and I decided to attend. When I showed up at the venue, lo and behold, I ran into three childhood buddies I had grown up with—Harry Mwaura Kiiru, Kaima Mwiti, and Kanjii Mbugua. These were guys I hadn't seen in more than ten years, when we were part of a Christian family fellowship in Kenya, where our parents were all Christian leaders.

I have come to see this unexpected reunion as a *divine reconnection*, because we could not have planned it in a million years. We were all in the United States at the same time and happened to show up at the same gathering. So we started hanging out together and talking and catching up.

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Harry, Kaima, and Kanjii are all musically talented, and the Kenyan fellowship soon asked them to lead worship. When they said to me, “Hey, Christian, you should join us, because, you know, you can make noise,” I laughed. But then they said, “You’re an actor. You can *act* like a musician.” So we started playing together at the fellowship, and that’s how our Afro-fusion boy band called Milele (which means *forever* in Kiswahili) was formed.

At first, we had no aspirations of becoming a band. We were just some friends playing a few songs together. But then we met a group called Limit X from Uganda who told us, “You guys are pretty good. You should record an album.”

When we told them we didn’t know how to do that, they said, “Don’t worry. We’ll show you how.” They generously paid our deposit at a studio in Northridge, and over the next three months we recorded our music.

When the album came out, it was sent to Kenya, and before we knew it we had the top four songs in the country. There we were, just four young friends who had put together an album, and all of a sudden there’s a buzz in our home country about who we are.

In 2000, Milele was invited to spearhead a big Y2K concert at one of Kenya’s largest stadiums. We ended up playing to 30,000 people at Nyayo National Stadium in Nairobi. It was about that time that it hit me: We had something precious in our hands. We were living in a sight-and-sound generation, and once people got to hear a group like ours, we could pretty much steer them in any direction we chose. It was very intoxicating to have such instant fame and celebrity, and I began to recognize that it would either make us or destroy us. I realized that we could use our fame for one of two things: either to draw attention to ourselves or to draw attention to something *greater* than ourselves.

All this time, I was dealing with feelings of inadequacy because I knew I wasn’t a musician. I was the hype man and the spokesman

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for why we did what we did, but even with all our success—which the other guys deserved—I was suffering from impostor syndrome. So I told Harry, Kaima, and Kanjii, “We have to do something different. I can’t keep acting like a celebrity musician when I’m not even a singer.”

“What do you want to do?” they asked.

“I want to incorporate Milele as a nonprofit, and then we can use our music as a platform to draw people to something larger than ourselves—especially causes that are linked with changing Africa from the inside out.”

This idea was based on conversations we had already been having about how Western missionaries in our experience had engaged with Africa—addressing *symptoms* rather than the underlying systemic issues. Having now been stateside for a few years, we had become disgruntled with the way American Christians portrayed Africa as a charity case. The prevailing mindset seemed to be, “Go to Africa—they need you,” not recognizing that Africa has tremendous assets of its own that were going untapped. Instead of engaging with the African churches as equal partners and working to build reciprocal relationships, everyone approached missions from a “*we are coming help you*” perspective, which only perpetuated the stereotype that Africans needed Americans or Westerners to rescue them.

I was convinced that our music could help to reframe that story, so I said, “We need to rethink this.” We incorporated Milele as a nonprofit organization with the idea of creating a platform to help change people’s minds about how the American church approached Africa (and other parts of the world).

As we continued singing together, we found we were able to use our music as a gospel-driven Trojan horse to get us into churches, where we could then connect with their global missions programs and try to expand their understanding of “how to do

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missions” in twenty-first-century Africa. Once they had welcomed us in to perform, we would tell the people about an Africa many had never heard of.

“This is the Africa you may *think* you know,” we said, referring to the common stereotypes of poor, undernourished kids with runny noses, “but there is an Africa you *don’t* know.” We would tell them about a vibrant generation of young Africans that we believed could solve the continent’s problems—from the inside out, not from the outside in. Up to that point, we hadn’t seen anyone coming in from the outside who seemed to recognize—much less be prepared to build upon—what God was *already* doing in Africa. This quickly became the focal point of our message.

The way you diagnose a problem determines how you will treat it. If your diagnosis is wrong, your treatment plan will also be wrong. So you can imagine how good, well-meaning Christians, who were used to being told, “Hey, these people are hungry, they need clean water, they need better schools, they need our help,” were taken aback when they heard our message, which was more along the lines of, “Hey, stop doing what you’re doing in Africa. Rethink your approach. What you’re doing is actually not helping us. It’s probably even hurting us.”

Though the people always received us warmly and treated us well, most could not fully grasp what we were saying until we began inviting them to come to Kenya with us. We didn’t know it yet, but Milele had created a unique niche. We were using the tools God had placed in our hands—playing vibrant African music while giving (primarily) American audiences a glimpse of African celebration. In return, the churches, schools, and other institutions would give us an honorarium and would buy our music, and we used these funds to invest in long-term solutions for Kenya.

At first, we were funding anybody back home who was doing a great job of addressing systemic issues. We were partnering with

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Kenyans, in Kenya—not telling them what to do, but rather investing in what they were already doing. We did this until 2005 or 2006, when I felt a call in my heart that Milele should focus on changing how orphan care is done in Kenya by returning to traditional family integration versus the institutional model brought in by Westerners—a story I will tell in greater detail in chapter 12.

Eventually, Milele toured in more than forty US states for three consecutive summers. When we played for an outreach weekend at Mariners Church, in Irvine, California, it initiated a long-standing relationship that would take my life in a new direction—though I didn't know it at the time.

While things were running well with Milele, I met a Kenyan pastor who was assigned to a Methodist church in Santa Ana. He said, “You seem to understand young people. Would you help me start a youth group?”

“Absolutely yes,” I replied.

So I started helping him at the church, with a youth group of five kids.

As a Kenyan, I am naturally very attuned to building community and engaging with people who are not like me. In my mind, a stranger is only a friend I haven't met yet. So for me it was simply a matter of getting to know the five kids in the group and asking them, “Where do you live? Can we go there?” Then we would go there, and I would say, “Who are your neighbors?” and they would tell me. And then, “Who do you hang out with?” Then I would go hang out with those kids and their neighbors and their friends.

As I modeled for them what it means to be a good neighbor and a good friend, these kids began to realize, *Hey, we're having a cool time with this guy from Africa*, and they started inviting others to join our youth group. Everybody wants to be invited to something. It's just that most people don't have the fortitude to do it. So when I encouraged these young people to invite their friends

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and said, “Hey, come on over, we’re gonna have a good time,” they would come and they would have tons of fun. The youth group grew from the original five to two hundred in about six months. We had kids from three demographics—Cambodians, Hispanics, and Vietnamese—with a few white kids as well.

I had been mentored as a younger guy, and now it was my turn to mentor others. Our pastor was teaching us how to do mentorship using movie clips. So I started doing the same thing with the guys who were coming to the group. I would show them a movie clip and then pull a biblical lesson from it, and they thought that was pretty cool. And when they found out I was a member of a band, they thought that was pretty cool as well.

The presiding Methodist bishop at the time, Bishop Swanson, heard about me, and he said to the pastor, “You have somebody who has grown your youth group. Maybe you should consider him for ministry.”

So they asked me if I wanted to go to school. I said, “No, I’m not a minister. I like community development.” But they said, “What if we helped you get into our seminary?”

I was completely unfamiliar with the Claremont School of Theology, and I wasn’t all that interested in seminary or theology, but for a free education at a master’s level, I said, “Okay, I’ll go.”

So I went to Claremont, and it was a struggle right from the start. The theology they taught there was very liberal compared to the conservative theology I had grown up with. In fact, in 2010, Claremont began to “add clerical training for Muslims and Jews to its curriculum” with the goal of becoming “the first truly multi-faith American seminary.”¹ Today they describe themselves as “a progressive interreligious theological school.”²

I think several of my professors at the seminary did not even believe in the existence of God, but what the environment there did was whet my appetite for apologetics. While I was at Claremont,

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I started following people like J. P. Moreland, Greg Koukl, and others, and I prepared myself to rebut the teaching of my professors. It was very difficult, but I wouldn't trade that experience for anything because it really made me challenge my faith. Sometimes when you're challenged, it helps you check your own assumptions. I enjoyed that.

While I was in seminary, I was still part of the band and still involved in the Methodist youth group. I would oscillate between school, helping the church, and running the mission of Milele.

As a follow-up to our concerts in churches, I met with their global missions pastors to ask what they were doing in Africa. When they shared their thoughts and ideas, I would typically respond by calling their efforts ineffective and out of date—which, admittedly, was not an inviting, kind, or compelling approach. When I met with the pastors at Mariners Church in 2004, they heard me out but told me they saw no reason to change their approach to missions. As I told a reporter who interviewed me some years later, it's hard for Americans to learn from other people.³

In 2006, Mariners hired Matt Olthoff as their new global director. When I first met with him, I did my usual schtick, and as you might expect, it turned him off.

That evening, the Holy Spirit strongly convicted me that I had become the Ugly African—that is, “arrogant, self-absorbed, demeaning, thoughtless, ignorant, and ethnocentric.”⁴ I had become so frustrated by what I saw as “missions as usual” in the American church that I could hardly wait to tell them that their approach was all wrong and they should stop what they were doing. But now I realized I was going into these meetings with an *agenda*—just like an American would. Instead, like an African, I needed to lead from a place of *relationship*.

The next day, I called Matt Olthoff back and humbly asked for another meeting. I promised not to talk about Milele or Africa; I

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just wanted to get to know him as a person, to give him my *presence*, not any product or program, as the Holy Spirit had convicted me. Matt agreed to meet . . . but as it turned out, we didn't get together for another six months or so.

When we finally reconnected and spent some time just getting to know one another, that's when the change began to happen. Eventually, Matt asked me about Milele and our passion, and I was only too happy to explain it all to him.

Around that same time, he told me he was planning a trip to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He asked if, while he was in Africa, he could stop by and see our home church, Mavuno, a fledgling but fast-growing congregation in Nairobi, Kenya. Our lead singer from Milele, Kanjii Mbugua, had recently moved back to Kenya and was serving as the worship pastor at Mavuno. By then, Milele and Mavuno Church were planning a joint tour of the US, dubbed TIA (This Is Africa)—taken from a line spoken by Leonardo DiCaprio's character in the movie *Blood Diamond*, where he declares that nothing in Africa works. We intended to use our music to debunk the lie.

Matt attended the launch of TIA in Nairobi and told me he had never seen such a vibrant group of change agents. Upon his return to the United States, he asked if we would play another concert at Mariners Church. I told him we could do our final performance of the tour there, which we did in November 2007. I didn't know it at the time, but that would be my first unofficial day on staff at Mariners. Matt asked me to help them plan the weekend, and once I was there I just never left. As I write this, Mariners has been my church home for eighteen years.

Also on that African tour, the leaders from Mariners Church met with Pastor Muriithi Wanjau (we call him Pastor M) from Mavuno Church. They wanted to hear his vision and plan for turning ordinary church members into fearless influencers of society. Pastor

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M explained what Milele had always tried to communicate—that Africans, not well-meaning Westerners, must be the ones to provide solutions for Africa’s challenges. And that meant we in the Western church needed to rethink our models of engaging in overseas missions.

Pastor M invited Mariners’ then-lead pastor, Kenton Beshore, and his wife, Laurie, to travel to Kenya to see for themselves. He especially urged Kenton to meet with Bishop Oscar Muriu, Pastor M’s own mentor, who leads a family of churches connected to Nairobi Chapel, which has planted more than three hundred churches around the world. The Beshores agreed to a visit, and in January 2008, at the height of some post-election turmoil in Kenya, a team of twenty-four Mariners leaders made their way to Africa for a visit that would result in a monumental shift for both Mavuno Church and Mariners.

The Dangerous African

Bishop Oscar is known for his willingness to speak directly to issues affecting the global church, and especially the church in Africa. Unfortunately, over the years, many from the West have not been willing to engage with him—even going so far as to label him “the dangerous African”—because of his hard-hitting approach. But what he has done for young African leaders in the church is to give us a voice. Under his mentorship we started feeling a sense of “Hey, we have some dignity. We have a sense of ability. We have something to offer the global church.” So there’s a whole generation of up-and-coming leaders who have been inspired by people like Bishop Oscar.

When Kenton, Laurie, and the rest of the team met with Bishop Oscar, he caught their attention and challenged them with these words: “There’s a global party going on to which the American

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church is not invited. Your churches are dying, ours are growing, but you're still sending us missionaries. Shouldn't *we* be sending missionaries to *you*?"

Laurie Beshore later said, "We felt like we'd been slapped in the face with the truth."⁵

Though I can understand why some in the West might hear the bishop's words and think, *We're not invited? Fine. We'll just stay home or invest our time and money elsewhere*, such a reaction would be unfortunate. I believe Bishop Oscar was simply using semantic hyperbole, much like Jesus did when he said, "If you want to follow me, you must hate your father and mother," or "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off," or "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven." In every case, Jesus was using arresting language to get people's attention and make an important point. Bishop Oscar is known for taking a similar approach. We have learned that the more we engage with these tough conversations, the more we grow. As the saying goes, no pain, no gain.

Bishop Oscar's comments also startled Kenton, but he wasn't put off by them. Instead, he wanted to know more. To his everlasting credit, he replied, "I've never heard anybody say anything like that before. I've always thought of missions as us going to the uttermost parts of the earth to *give* and to *help* and to *serve*. Tell me more about this global party."

I won't try to recapture their conversation in its entirety, but some of the topics they discussed included the tendency of the American church to bring a fix-it mentality to missions that is increasingly counterproductive and out of step with the types of issues faced by the global church. As I've heard Bishop Oscar say many times, "If there are two qualities that mark North Americans, it is your ability to solve problems and your *assertiveness*. You are quick to speak your mind. But your greatest blessing may be your

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greatest curse. Because when you come to Africa, you want to *fix* Africa. Well, you *can't* fix Africa. You must learn to come as *listeners* and as *learners*.”⁶

He also addressed the idea that the global church must break free from the “culture of dependence” that is often created (perhaps inadvertently) by the classic Western approach to missions. The goal instead must be to “build bridges of healthy *interdependence*” and “build *reciprocity* into the task of missions.”⁷ Indeed, *reciprocal partnership* is the emerging model (as we will discuss in a later chapter).

Bishop Oscar wanted the leaders from Mariners to understand that “the world has changed; the center of Christianity has moved to the Southern Hemisphere; our definition of what it means to be Christian is going to be increasingly defined from the two-thirds world; and our paradigm of missions must of necessity therefore change.”⁸ The Great Commission wasn't given from the lips of Jesus to the Western church. It was issued to his disciples and to *all* followers of Jesus who would come after them. Accordingly, indigenous churches around the world today have the *same* missionary mandate to follow (which we will also discuss in greater detail in a later chapter).

Bishop Oscar has said,

As we develop partnerships between the Western church and the two-thirds world church, such partnerships must work hard at developing and enabling reciprocity. Every time the West sends out a missionary to Asia, it should work just as hard to bring one back to the Americas. Mission organizations need to retool and re-strategize themselves—not just to send out missionaries, but to enable the budding missionary movement in the two-thirds world church, and to facilitate *reverse missions*,

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bringing in Africans and Asians and Latin Americans into Canada and Europe and North America . . . that they may come into *your* context, and they may enrich *your* faith. Do not allow missions to be one-sided. Build in reciprocity. For *this* is the nature of the body of Christ.⁹

For so long, the prevailing mindset in missions has been “from the West to the rest,” essentially a one-way model of *us* going to *them*. But just as no part of the human body only receives and never gives anything back—that is, every part of the body depends on every other part of the body to make up a functioning whole person—so too in the body of Christ must every part learn to give and receive interdependently with the rest of the body.

“The African church *knows* it desperately needs the American church,” Bishop Oscar has said. “But how does a church in North America *need* the African church? How does a church in Canada *need* the Asian church? I have spoken with pastors on this continent who cannot answer that question. They cannot imagine why the church in North America would ever need the African church. *What does Africa have to give? You are so poor, you have so little, you have no technology. What in the world could the African church ever give to the church in North America?*”¹⁰ That is a question I hope to answer well in the pages to follow.

Because Kenton Beshore had the fortitude to engage with Bishop Oscar and grapple with these issues, the two became very good friends. Kenton would say to him, “We want to engage with you, but you’re being too harsh.” What would happen was that Bishop Oscar would be the one to slap, and I would be the one to soften the blow by telling the leaders at Mariners, “This is what he really means.” You see, the bishop would do his thing and then go back to Kenya, but I was still at Mariners. So that’s how

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the journey evolved. It's one thing to have a prophetic voice; it's another thing to carry a shepherd's staff.

I learned to shepherd our people by being involved with them, knowing who they were and caring about what they cared about. The more I did that, the more I was accepted, and the more they were willing to engage in some tough—even harsh—conversations. The key to it all is *relationships*. Speaking the truth in love, you can soften the blow through relationship. Even still, at one point Kenton had to say, “Hey, Oscar, we’re listening. Stop slapping us.”

Missions as Personal Formation

As we discussed the role of missions and evangelism in the church, Kenton said he had never thought of missions as a way for people to be fully formed in their faith or disciplined from a global perspective. All he had ever heard was “Come help! Come help! Come help!” But now he could see how that type of appeal was doing *nothing* for the people at Mariners. Living in affluent Orange County, they were well-versed in sending money and going on short-term missions trips. They didn’t need to be told to come help. But Kenton wanted to challenge them to embrace a new level of engagement. After spending time in Kenya and talking extensively with Pastor M and Bishop Oscar, Kenton realized that—now more than ever—the American church *needed* the people of the global church. Missions is not merely evangelism or doing good things to help people in need. Instead, it is an essential component of personal and spiritual formation through a global lens. As men and women and young people go out into the mission field, they must realize that, in the process, *they too* are going to be formed more closely to the image of God.

So now when we say, “Hey, let’s go to Africa,” it’s not so that our people can *help*, but so they can gain a new perspective—on

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the world, on missions, and on themselves—a perspective they currently may not have.

When we first started taking groups from Mariners to visit Mavuno Church, people were surprised that we weren't taking along school supplies, food, money, or any of the other resources commonly associated with short-term missions. Furthermore, we didn't have plans to build a school, paint a church building, or do Vacation Bible School. Those things are all well and good, but we didn't want our people to focus on what they were going to *do* there; we wanted them looking for what God was *already* doing there and for what he was going to do *in them*. We want people thinking in terms of an ongoing *faith adventure*, not a short-term missions trip that would eventually fade in the rearview mirror.

For this to happen, we must become bridge builders. If we want people to change their mindset about missions, we must show them how to bridge the gap between where they are and where we want them to be.

For me, one bridge has been inviting people to go to Africa.

People ask me, "What are we going to *do* when we go to Africa?"

"Well, we're going to meet people who are doing XYZ, and we're going to get to know them."

"Yes, but what are we going to *do*?" The Western mindset that says, "I want to go *do* something, I want to *fix* something, I want to *accomplish* something, I want to *maximize my return on investment*," does not change easily. So I tell them, "What we're going to *do* is go *be human* with our brothers and sisters in this new place." It's getting to a place of actually seeing people as brothers and sisters, not just in lip service. We talk about our brothers and sisters in the Lord, but oftentimes it's just a manner of speaking—it's not a reality. But if we really see other people as our brothers and sisters, it starts to break down the impulse to try to *rescue* them or *fix* their circumstances.

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This is where we get into the idea of *being* before *doing*. With your family, you don't try to *do* something to connect with them. You just live your life with them. So, what if our essence is simply *being* with people—meeting people where they are and engaging with them as they are? When you meet people as they are, you get to know them as fellow bearers of God's image. And that should make you curious. What do they care about? What do they know that I don't know? It becomes a different way of thinking. If we change our mindset from *doing* to *being*, it will move us away from the Western fix-it mentality or the African posture of begging. You see, for many Africans, what is ubiquitous is the idea of putting our hands out. It's like we always have our hands out because we're always looking for a Westerner to help us—not realizing that God has already deposited his image in us, and therefore we have a potency within ourselves. And what if we tapped into that potency?

So I tell people when we go, “Don't worry, there will be things to do, but they will be priorities established by the indigenous leadership, not some good intentions we're bringing in from the outside.”

So, for example, Pastor Sam, an indigenous pastor in Haiti, has a desire to plant churches in Les Cayes. How can we serve as a catalyst for his efforts? We go down there and help them with the fifty-five orphans they're caring for. We spend time with the church leaders, the moms, the orphans—you know, playing games with the kids. Over the span of ten days, we experience the culture, see what is happening there, and have four training sessions—how missions is connected to the mandate of the church; spiritual warfare; cultural sensitivity; and how to talk about your story and how it connects to the larger story of life. We also incorporate team-building exercises into all four sessions because we have seen too many short-term missions teams that were dysfunctional.

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We want people to understand that this is not just going to be about them *doing* something. It's more about who they're going to *become*. And as they become, they will start to realize the opportunities that God has for them, and that God is going to do some incredible work in their hearts and their lives. What comes out of these trips is much more than what would have happened if we had simply gone to work on a project. We get to help advance what the indigenous churches are doing, and they have a chance to impart to us a sense of faith that we do not have, or perhaps insights on prayer and dependency on the Holy Spirit. Dependency on God and dependency on each other is something that is deeply embedded in African culture. There's an opportunity to serve together, but also to *grow* together as we learn to collaborate in reciprocal partnerships.

At the end of every day, we debrief. What did you see today? What is God telling you? How is your life going to be different? Who are you going to *be*? And only then, what are you going to do? During the reentry process at the end of the trip, we talk about how to integrate the experiences we've had into our day-to-day lives: Who is someone you're going to be in touch with? And we talk about rethinking ROI: What is the return on investment we're looking for in spiritual growth?

Let me tell you one more quick story to illustrate the power of a "being before doing" mindset.

In April 2024, I took a couple from our church with me to Uganda. They're both *doers*, so naturally they wanted to know the itinerary. I told them we were going to *observe* what Pastor Peter and the people in his church were doing. I said, "I want you just to sit and listen and be a part of it." And they did.

On our last night there, they said to me, "We've come to realize that what Pastor Peter and his church are doing we could never do. But we want to be a catalyst to help them reach their goals."

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And they handed me checks totaling \$340,000 for seven ministries they had seen in action. Now, they are generous people and people of means, but if I had simply asked them to give without first meeting the people and seeing where the opportunities were, they might have written a check for some amount and that would have been it. But being there and experiencing firsthand what God was already doing in Uganda opened their minds to unforeseen possibilities. And here's the thing: I didn't ask them for the money. That was their own decision. They told me they just wanted to have a stake in what Pastor Peter and the church were doing. They had been transformed by the renewing of their minds.¹¹

It's hard for people to change direction. That's why we have to walk alongside them. And that's why my role is building bridges. Finding bridge builders is the key to changing people's minds—and the bridge builders don't have to be African, Asian, or Latin American. Anybody who learns the importance of mutual respect, healthy cultural engagement, reciprocal partnerships, and seeing the image of God in everyone can become a bridge builder. If more people would recognize this and do it, it would be a big win for the Kingdom of God.

Where Do We Go from Here?

In the remainder of this book, we will examine the theological underpinnings of missions and of a missional Christian life, and then reimagine the philosophy, the ethos, and the practices that will most effectively enable us, together, to pursue the Great Commission in the twenty-first century.

I believe that the most effective missional outreach and global engagement strategy in our age begins with understanding, acknowledging, and emphasizing that every person in the world is made in God's image. When we start with the realization that we

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possess the *exact* same nature as the people we're trying to reach (regardless of cultural differences), and that those individuals express the image of God to precisely the same degree that we do (no matter their station in life), we realign our theology of missions with the Word of God, which in turn changes our philosophy, ethos, and practice of missions.

The *content* of the gospel doesn't change, nor does the gospel *mission* change. But how we go about it—our methods, our means, and our mores—must inevitably change. As successful as world missions have been over the past 175 years or so, following a Western model, we are now in a new era due to advances in technology, political and economic factors, and the emergence of indigenous leaders around the world.

God still calls every one of us to go into all the world and preach the gospel, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus commanded us. That's true for both vocational missionaries and for every other Christian—those God has called into the business world, to the food service industry, to stay at home and raise kids, or to any other area of human endeavor. God promises a blessing to his children who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and minister to prisoners.¹²

How we do it is the subject of this book.

Agents of Change

In the pages that follow, I want to invite both individuals and congregations to reconsider what it means to become potent agents of change, to serve as compassionate ambassadors of the Christian faith by emphasizing the importance of cross-cultural sensitivity, mutually beneficial relationships, and strategic engagement. If we

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start where the Bible itself begins, in Genesis 1–2, with our creation in the image of God, our theological convictions about the inherent dignity of *every* human being will inevitably modify our philosophy of missions, which in turn will reshape our posture toward both the people who serve and the people we are serving, and will naturally and inevitably reform our practices. This does not mean that proclamation and demonstration of the gospel take a back seat. It just means there is an added third spoke to the wheel, which was intended from the beginning: the premise of *community*—and a diverse but united community at that.

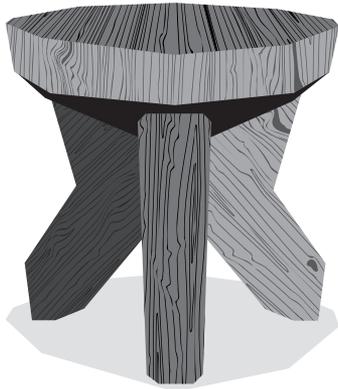
People Are the Wealth provides a way for churches and everyone engaged in outreach to build bridges and foster understanding in today's interconnected world. We want to reengage ourselves and the local church with the global world and the global body of Christ, much as I've seen happen with my fellow believers at Mariners Church, where I continue to serve as the global movement pastor.

To make this happen, we must reimagine our strategies. And the sooner we start, the sooner we will find ourselves in alignment with what God is *already* doing around the world. God did not send us an argument for his existence; he sent us a living, breathing person who set aside his own divine power to become like us so we can become like him.



PART ONE

THEOLOGY



Let's begin by examining the key biblical concepts that undergird the entire book. This will provide the *why* behind the work. I emphasize theological underpinnings that deeply resonate with my African cultural experience—and yet theology always supersedes culture, transcending our ethnocentricities. God's Word never changes, even in a constantly changing world.

Jesus had an intensely people-centered ministry. He came to serve others, not himself. His style of ministry led to unity and cohesion of mission, which created a profound sense of conviction and authenticity. This, in turn, produced a deep effectiveness that continues to reverberate throughout time and rings true to eternity. Starting with the core idea of the image of God in all human beings presents a solid foundation for a people-centered approach to Christian missions. Finally, by no means am I calling for uniformity; rather, the centrality of God's Word in Christian missions calls us to unity in our diversity.

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My favorite theologian of all time is an unschooled, illiterate, barefoot villager from Kenya named Njoki. More often I call her Grandma, or Cúcú in my native tongue.

Cúcú Njoki grew up in a mission center called Thogoto—which is actually a Kikuyu word but is based on a phonetic rendition of *Scotland*. When Scottish missionaries arrived in the area where my grandma grew up, they said, “We are from Scotland.”

And the people said, “What?”

And they said, “Scotland.”

“What? Thogotoland?”

And so the place became known as Thogoto.

The missionaries built a center there and started passing along the gospel to the villages, and my grandma was one of the people who heard about Jesus that way.

Interestingly, my grandmother could neither read nor write, but because the gospel was shared orally, through stories, she got

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it. And as she became acquainted with God's Word, she started living it out—what she *heard*, she *did*. And she made theological observations the likes of which I haven't heard from far more learned theologians. Consider just a couple of examples.

Whenever we would insist on getting shoes for her, she would say, "Why do you want to give me the comforts of this earth that will never satisfy? I want to walk on the dust I was created from so I can be reminded daily that I am returning to dust."

One time, my mother asked if we could put running water in CúcúNjoki's house, but she vehemently rejected the offer. "I don't need that luxury," she declared. "I love to walk to the river, meet others who gather there to fetch water, tell them of the one who can quench their eternal thirst, and then take my pail of water and walk back to my house, ruminating on how Jesus carried a cross for my salvation."

I have attended seminary and read the works of many accomplished scholars, but I have never encountered such profound wisdom as I did from my illiterate, unschooled, barefoot village grandma, CúcúNjoki. And it all came from her hearing the Word of God, not reading it. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."¹

Even evangelism just became part of her daily life. She never used the word *evangelism*. She used to call it *ngwatanĩiro* (*fellowship*). "I just want to go and fellowship with people and tell them about the way the Lord has been good to me every day."

My tribe has something we call *ũira*, which is *testimony*. Testimony is simply telling someone (often in a court of law) what you have seen, heard, or experienced. Likewise, Christian testimony is simply telling others what the Lord has done for you or how you came to faith. My grandma would meet people on the road and tell them, "Today, the Lord did this for me, and I'm grateful." Your testimony is simply what God has done for you

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today. That's how my grandma and the people in her village grew up. She also raised my mother and her siblings that way.

I used to go to my grandma and ask her to tell me what God had done in her life. And her stories were always amazing examples of faith in action. That's why I call her my favorite theologian. She would just tell me her stories, but I always heard deep truths in them.

One time when I was home in Kenya for a while, she asked me, "Are you in trouble with the law in America?"

"No, I'm not in trouble with the law, Grandma."

"Yeah," she said, "I saw you in a dream, being in trouble with the law. And I stood up and I told those people to leave you alone. You're a servant of God. Okay?"

This story didn't make sense to me until two weeks later, when I was returning home through LAX. As I was coming in, I was stopped by Immigration and Customs, and the immigration officer said, "Hey, you seem to have violated your status," which was true.

So for the next four hours—the longest four hours of my life—I sat there, expecting to be deported back to Africa, never to return.

While I was waiting, there was a shift change and another officer arrived to replace the one who had detained me. After a time, he came over to me and said, "I see that you have violated your status; but now you have a new status, and you have an opportunity to get it right."

I was dumbfounded.

"I see that you're doing ministry," he continued.

"Yes, I am."

"Go and serve the Lord," he said as he stamped my passport and released me.

My grandma had had a premonition of what was going to happen to me, and I had no idea. Unfortunately, she died soon after that, so I didn't get a chance to see her and tell her what had happened.

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But that's the kind of faith that people like my grandma had—a faith I have never experienced from people who are well educated.

But if someone had gone to Africa and looked at my grandmother, they would have seen she was barefoot, and they would have said, "We need to get her shoes." They would have found that she was illiterate, and they would have said, "We have to give her education." All this without stopping to wonder, *What does this woman know? What does this woman think? What kind of faith does this woman have?* If they had done that, they might have realized, "Oh! This woman has a faith in God that we can learn from."

I tell these stories to illustrate how we can often miss out on profound wisdom, either by making assumptions or by moving too quickly to give people *content* before we establish a living connection with them. Too often, our Western models of global engagement and missions (whether for individuals or organizations) focus on disseminating information without first taking the time to get to know and understand the people we desire to reach—and perhaps discover what God is already doing in their midst.

I'm grateful that the missionaries who first encountered my grandfather didn't follow this typical pattern. Instead, they approached with wide-eyed curiosity, carefully observing what the villagers were doing, and seeking to understand their ways. They didn't immediately label these Africans as idol worshipers, but rather asked them why they felt compelled to worship the mountain. They sought *connection* with the people before giving them the content of the gospel, and that strategy made their message all the more powerful and captivating.

It has often been said that the way you diagnose a problem will determine how you treat it. Have we misdiagnosed the proper starting point for our outreach efforts? And if so, how do we reimagine them?

Different Marching Orders?

Most Christians who work vocationally in missions, or who as individuals have a great interest in global engagement, find their marching orders in the Great Commission, given by Jesus in Matthew 28. They fan out over neighborhoods, cities, regions, and the world to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, teaching new disciples to obey everything the Lord commanded. That's nothing new. For centuries, people have written books about the necessity of fulfilling the Great Commission.

Others with a different focus on worldwide missions gravitate toward works of compassion and justice. They often cite passages such as Matthew 25:34-40, where Jesus commends his true disciples for feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, tending the sick, and visiting prisoners in jail. Individuals committed to this expression of global missions often dig wells for communities that lack safe drinking water, build schools in areas with little access to good education, supply medical help to those with no health care, and so on. They, too, write books about the necessity of reaching out to impoverished and oppressed peoples, supplying them with the physical necessities of life in the name of Jesus.

Both of these approaches have their merits, and in my experience, most missions-minded people embrace one or the other. But rarely do they do both. In fact, these two groups have spent decades hotly debating which approach is the more biblical and the more loving. But if we have an integrated view of missions, the two parts are inextricably linked—acts of compassion, care, and justice are inseparable from proclamation of the gospel. To do one is really to do the other, and to neglect one or the other would be unjust.

Please don't misunderstand me. We must remain committed to *both* Matthew 28:18-20 and Matthew 25:35-40. We must proclaim

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the truth *and* demonstrate God's love; evangelize among the lost *and* alleviate pain among the hurting; share the gospel *and* show God's heart to the world.

But what if the question is not which *approach* is right, but where we should begin the discussion in the first place? What if we have started our missions journey at not quite the right location and thus have ended up at not quite the right destination?

Is the best starting point really in the Gospel of Matthew, three-fifths of the way through the Bible? What if, instead, we started in Genesis 1, where God himself began the human story, as our foundation for thinking about how to introduce Jesus to others? How might that change our approach to missions, whether in our neighborhoods or on the other side of the planet?

A Better Starting Place

In Genesis 1, we see God creating all things. He creates the sun and calls it good. He creates the earth and calls it good. He creates plants and animals, and day and night, and calls *everything* he makes good.

But note what happens when it comes to creating human beings. Suddenly, God starts referring to himself in the plural. He says, "Let *us* make man in *our* image."²

What would happen if we rooted our practice of missions, first and foremost, in the biblical doctrine of the Trinity? Scripture reveals God as a community of divine persons existing as a single deity, rather than as a solitary God, an individual God, or an isolated God. We understand God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—three distinct persons in one unified Godhead. What might change in our outreach models if we expanded our approach to include the unity in diversity we find in the Trinity?

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God has *always* existed in community; his three-in-one essence predates Creation. And God made human beings *in his own image*, such that you and I and every other person on the planet bear the image of a God who reveals himself as a plurality, a community.

Not only that, but we all bear the image of God to precisely the same degree as every other person on earth—irrespective of race, ethnicity, class, or stature. We all possess the *exact same nature*. What if we were to make this reality the starting point for our bedrock theological convictions, especially regarding global missions and individual missional engagement? How would this foundational truth inform the nature of our convictions, bearing, and attitudes as we move out from our “Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,”³ in obedience to Jesus’ command to make disciples?

What if we started looking at someone like my grandma as first and foremost a bearer of God’s image, rather than as merely a barefoot, illiterate, elderly African woman? What if instead of trying to meet her perceived needs from the get-go, we first seek to know her and to call forth what God has innately placed in her? Making disciples of all nations should not start with asking, “What do these people need to learn?” but rather, “What does loving these fellow image bearers require of me?” Perhaps the greatest adjustment we must make to our thinking is to set aside all our answers, all our solutions, all our vaunted expertise, and approach the mission field as *listeners* and as *learners*, as Bishop Oscar has suggested.

It might take a change of mindset for people in the Western church to realize that people in Africa, in Asia, or in Latin America have something to offer us. But it starts with truly seeing people for who they are as created in the image of God.

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Gregory Boyle, in his book *Barking to the Choir*, tells a great story about seeing through the facade to the image of God that lies beneath in every person.

One Sunday, I was sitting with my friend and Jesuit brother, Al Naucke. Both of us had our coffee and were silently turning the pages of the paper when the doorbell started to ring repeatedly. Initially, Al and I hid behind our papers, waiting it out. The doorbell rarely rang, but when it did, it was almost always some homeless person. Finally, Al, the way better man, quietly put down the paper. There was no annoyed sighing (though who could blame him?).

Some ten minutes later he returned, sat down, took a sip of coffee, and resumed his reading. After a few beats, I asked, without lowering the paper, “Well?”

“Well what?” Al replied, not lowering his paper either.

“Who was it?”

From behind the sports section he said, “Jesus, in his least recognizable form.”⁴

If we start by seeing every person as created in, and reflecting, the image of God—which is a picture of unity and community in diversity—it will enhance our Great Commission efforts, and it will enhance our compassion and justice.

That is the mindset change I’m talking about—that the impetus for everything we do is the image of God, the *Imago Dei*. On that foundation, we are being asked to build relationships, to build community and connectedness. In God we are all one. And in that connectedness, we’ll realize that it’s not okay for our brothers and sisters to go hungry; it’s not okay for our brothers and sisters to go without knowing the gospel. People are the wealth because

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people are the only thing created in God's image. And if people are the wealth, it means that we recognize the image of God in every human being. Accordingly, this becomes the premise for everything we do in Christian missions.

Communal vs. Individual

Many of the most popular books on Christian missions were written by well-educated and well-intentioned scholars from the Western world. Though the majority world (or two-thirds world) is grateful for the positive impact these books have had, I believe too many of these works inevitably come up short because of a myopic perspective that leads to a gargantuan omission.

Western cultures tend to emphasize individualism rather than our communal identity as human beings born into societies and cultures. This might seem like a small thing to many Westerners, but it has an oversized impact on people from the majority world.

Consider the example of marriage. When two people from the West decide to get married, they do so on their own, as individuals. They might solicit input from trusted friends and family, but they alone determine that they are fit and ready to make that commitment. In the majority world, by contrast, most marriages result from a communal decision requiring several ceremonies before a couple is granted the blessing of marriage. In my own Kikuyu tribe, we have at least three (if not four) important ceremonies before the wedding nuptials.

Whether our perspective on Christian missions is individualistic or communal greatly affects the strategies we use. Though God certainly gives a *personal* call to missions, the much richer and deeper idea is that the Great Commission was given to *us* as the body of Christ, not merely to you or me as individual members of the body. This seemingly insignificant detail makes the key difference between

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a *people-focused* mission—communities that create countercultural cities on a hilltop that cannot be hidden⁵—and isolated individuals who do their best to share the gospel. Many of us have missed this reality and thus have suffered significant setbacks.

In this book, I'd like us to reexamine, rethink, and reconsider the idea of *Imago Dei* as it relates to a community and not only to individuals. As we do, we will align ourselves more closely with what we see in the Scriptures right from the beginning. Consider one salient example of what a people-focused and communal-centered mission can look like.

The Wisdom of Community

I got a big surprise one day as we were planning a short-term missions trip to Kenya. One of our African residents, Henry Wamai, who had recently come from Mavuno Church, which at the time was relocating to a new facility, said to me, “Do you know who we need to take on this trip?”

“Who?” I asked.

“Roman Garcia.”

“Roman? Really?”

I must confess, I was dumbfounded. *Why would we take our head of facilities to Africa on a missions trip?*

Don't get me wrong, I love Roman. He has worked at Mariners Church for more than thirty years, and he is as proficient, dedicated, and experienced as they come. Roman knows every tree at Mariners, every light bulb, every nook and cranny. He's a joy to be around, and he takes his job *very* seriously. Roman and his team keep our facility in tip-top shape. They clean and care for and organize everything so that we always have a place to sit down and discuss our missions strategies. But it had never occurred to me—or to anyone else, apparently—to invite Roman to go on a

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missions trip. That's just not how we tended to think at the time. We had already assembled our team for this trip, with all the right people and all the right résumés for teaching, evangelizing, and bringing resources.

"We need to take Roman to Kenya," Henry insisted. "We're relocating to a new place that we will use to reach out to our cities and to the global world. We will need to thoroughly understand this new facility, this new place, and I've never seen anybody who is more capable than Roman at understanding a facility."

I accepted Henry's challenge to include Roman on our team, and everyone in the church was excited to hear the news. Team members usually raise support to go on a short-term mission, and Roman raised his money more quickly than anyone else on the team, because it seemed that *everyone* wanted him to be able to go.

When we arrived in Kenya, Roman met the head of facilities at Mavuno, an astute man named Peter Kabuki. Peter isn't your average facilities person either; he's something of an expert in logistics. He and Roman had a wonderful time, and Roman freely shared everything he knew.

Afterward, Peter approached me and said, "I have just realized that I'm not cut out to be head of facilities. If being head of facilities is being like Roman, then I'm nowhere near that level. That guy has more passion, more acumen, he's more astute about facilities than I'll ever be." Spending time with Roman helped Peter realize that he should not head up facilities at the new Mavuno campus. He told me, "I'll never care as much about that facility as Roman does."

Unless we are intentional about keeping the doctrine of *Imago Dei* front and center in our ministries, we will likely never consider an ordinary person like Roman to be a candidate for impact in the global world. Sure, he runs a well-oiled facilities crew in the States, but he's certainly not an evangelist . . . right? But Roman helped

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Mavuno set up what would become a hub for launching ordinary people into their mission as infiltrators of the local culture.

Mavuno's mantra is "turning ordinary people into fearless influencers of society." So for them, anybody who comes into the church is an ordinary person, but they want them to become an *influencer* for the gospel in the sectors of society where they already are. Mavuno's mission is to reach young, upwardly mobile Africans who are detached from church and don't care about the gospel, but who are people in places of influence.

Pastor M told me that when people go to the mission field, they often look for people who are like my grandma—illiterate and out in the villages—or they find the people who are poor. What people don't go after are the well-to-do ones—because these people don't need us and they're not going to be easy to reach. But Pastor M said, "That's my demographic, because if I can get the people who are upwardly mobile in the upper echelons of society, then I will be able to shape them to influence our society in a different way than self-aggrandizement. They become potent agents for the gospel."

Mavuno does not have an outreach department; rather, they decided that *everyone* in the church is in outreach. Their people simply identify which sectors of society they are in, and that's where they seek to influence people with the gospel by showing and telling—sharing the gospel and living it out.

Roman and I roomed together in Kenya, and as we spent time talking, he told me how grateful he was to be invited on the trip, and how it had inspired others on our facilities team with the idea that they too might be invited to go on a global missions trip. They now saw themselves as an active part of the mission, and Roman said, "Not only are we able to give of our service, but we can actually give of our minds and our hearts as well."

Through our conversations, he also opened my eyes to see the image of God in other members of our facilities team back home.

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“Let me tell you about Teresa,” he said. “She has worked at Mariners for many years, and she’s our ‘mom.’ She keeps us in line. She watches over us, and we all have great respect for her.” I would later see Teresa at a wedding I officiated. Another staff member had gotten to know her well enough that he invited her to his wedding.

Roman also told me about Alberto, an older gentleman on our facilities staff who had eight grandchildren. Alberto was still working in his late seventies because he wanted to continue to provide for his kids—some of whom were not doing well—and he was helping his grandkids.

Roman, Teresa, and Alberto are people who are living with a certain sense of mission, but if we don’t pay attention to understanding who they are, we may miss opportunities to contribute to their spiritual formation and to be formed *by* them.

Then there’s Marco, who uses his vacation time to take clothes to his people in Guatemala. Marco’s story will probably never be told in a missions conference—because he’s “Marco from facilities,” and many people are not aware of who he is. But he is living out his own identity as a Christ follower, and he’s using his opportunities in America to support people in Guatemala.

During my time with Roman in Kenya, I learned more about the early days of Mariners Church, including how he’d had a unique friendship with Hudd Saffel, one of the church’s founders, who went home to be with the Lord in 2019 at the age of ninety-seven. If I hadn’t engaged with Roman and gotten to know him, I never would have heard those stories. He and I have since become good friends.

Since the time of that missions trip to Kenya, and with our ongoing emphasis on seeing the image of God in others, members of our congregation have become more aware of those who serve behind the scenes. Relationships have formed—even through language and cultural barriers—and we have learned to celebrate the

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inherent dignity of all people. These are not just people who serve at the church; they are people who are part and parcel of our community, and we are richer because of them.

When Roman's thirtieth anniversary at Mariners came around, he was probably the most celebrated person in the history of the church—even more than our former senior pastor and founder. People came out of the woodwork to join the celebration. People who had worked at Mariners or attended Mariners many years ago came back just to show their appreciation for Roman. It was inspiring.

I tell these stories to illustrate three important points:

1. We must learn to start *seeing* people before we can begin to appreciate the wealth they bring—of wisdom, experience, skills and abilities, understanding, and areas of expertise. Most people at Mariners know Roman as the janitor, but that is almost a total misunderstanding and undervaluing of his true role.

We need to start seeing our *own* people through the lens of Imago Dei before we can ever hope to see people in other nations and cultures that way. Forget about going overseas; what about the people all around us right here at home? How can we begin to see the gifts that God has uniquely placed in each and every person we meet? Gifts he wants to develop and use. We at Mariners came to realize that we needed to be “transformed by the renewing of our minds”⁶ in how we saw people and treated people *everywhere*. Honoring the “wealth” of people starts at home.

2. We must learn the importance of reciprocal ministry. As leaders, we can become so focused on our own agenda and what we are taking *with us* to the mission field that we don't stop long enough to consider what we want our people to get out of the trip in terms of their own spiritual formation.

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3. We must recognize the importance of considering input from other perspectives. If I had not been willing to heed the advice of Henry Wamai, Roman might never have gone to Kenya, and we would have missed out on all the benefits that accrued from his participation on that trip. Moreover, Henry brought to our attention an important priority at Mavuno that we were completely unaware of—namely, the need to consult with a facilities expert like Roman. Again, we had our own agenda and plans, and we had not stopped to consider what our Kenyan brothers and sisters might actually *want* or *need* from us.

An Apostolic Philosophy of Mission

In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, the apostle Paul lays out what amounts to his underlying philosophy of missions, though he doesn't call it that. Consider carefully what he says here:

Though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

The key Greek verb for “become,” repeated multiple times in this passage, is *ginomai*. Paul says he *became* like a Jew so that he might

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win Jews to faith in Jesus. He *became* like someone living under the law—even though he wasn't, in fact, under the law—in order to win those under the law. He *became* like those outside the law, and *became* weak, and *became* all things to all people . . . why? He spent so much time and went to such great effort, he said, so that some of these people might place their faith in Jesus as their Savior. The apostle made himself a slave so that others might be made free.

It cost Paul a great deal to become “like a Jew,” or “like a Gentile,” or to become a “weak” individual, or to become “all things to all people.” First, he had to learn a good deal about them. He had to investigate their lives, their customs, their likes and dislikes. He had to put himself on the same level with them. To gain the ability to become like someone else implies the exertion of significant effort. It suggests an earnest, energetic attempt to identify with other people, not just pop in to say a quick hello.

The apostle went to such lengths and worked so hard so that “by all means I might save some.” He longed to see people in a right relationship with God. He focused on the people, caring for them so much that he willingly made himself a slave for their sakes. Paul did not put the *task* of proclaiming the gospel ahead of the *people* who needed the gospel.

Connected by Our Essence

Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath may provide a good analogy to help us understand the proper relationship between the task of missions and the people whom missions is intended to bless.

By the time Jesus came to earth, the religious authorities in Israel had turned the Sabbath into a legalistic requirement, rather than treating it as a boon to the people created in God's image (as God had intended). Jesus therefore declared, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”⁷ Humans came first, he

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insisted. The Sabbath was introduced only afterward, as a divine gift designed for our benefit.

Likewise with the gospel. Humans (created in God's image) came first, and the gospel appeared afterward as a divine gift designed to rescue men and women from their sin. That being true, what sense does it make to elevate the *task* of missions over the *individuals* whom Christ died to save? Yet, when we put *content* before *connection*, we can start treating people as merely the targets of our message, rather than as the treasure that prompted God to create the message in the first place. Both content and connection are indispensable; but biblically speaking, *connection* must come first.

As we read the Genesis account of God's creation of the world and everything in it, we encounter a repeated refrain: "God saw that it was good."⁸ In fact, the only time God declares that anything in Creation is *not* good is in Genesis 2:18, when he says, "It is not good that the man should be alone." He then remedies the situation by creating Eve *out of* Adam, thereby creating both *relationship* and *community* on earth, patterned after his own nature, which is diverse and yet one. His nature preexisted time, space, and matter. Before we were, he always was, eternally existing in a devoted relationship of loving and being loved, enjoying and being enjoyed.

I find it interesting that after Adam and Eve were created on the sixth day, God took the next day to rest "from all his work that he had done."⁹ Thus, Adam and Eve's first day after their creation was a Sabbath. They began their lives by resting in their *being*, in their belonging to God, and in their connection with God. As such, our "beingness" is inherent to our identity as humans created in the image of God.

God's identity is eternal—that is, he simply *is*. Yes, he also *does* things, but those things are expressions of who he already is. The same is true of *us*, as created in God's image. For that reason alone,

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we have value, even if we never do or say *anything*. Our *worth* is inherent in the Imago Dei.

Because we have eternal value, every one of us is vital to God's mission on earth. That's why Paul could say about the church, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable."¹⁰ *All* Christians are connected in *one* body, Paul insists, and every part is equally important.

Bishop Oscar has paraphrased 1 Corinthians 12:14-27 to drive the message home. It's worth quoting in full:

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many.

If the American church should say, "Because I am not African, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the Canadian church should say, "Because I am not Asian, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were European, where would the sense of joy be? And if the whole body were African, where would the sense of order be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The Canadian church cannot say to the Asian church, "I don't need you!" And the American church cannot say to the African church, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, the Asian parts that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the African parts that we think are less honorable should be treated with special honor. And the Latin American parts that seem unpresentable are treated

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with special modesty, while the presentable parts like the big, wealthy American church need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body, and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.¹¹

That They Might Be One

In John 17, Jesus makes a remarkable request of his Father. He asks that every one of his disciples—there in the upper room, around the world, and throughout history—“may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, *so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*”¹² As if that isn’t enough, he then prays that his disciples might “become perfectly one, *so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*”¹³

How’s *that* for a key text about our global mission? Oneness—unity—in the body of Christ. Jesus says that people will see who God is by observing the countercultural, radical community among Jesus’ disciples. This requires that we be *united* in our *diversity*. The more the world sees how united we are *in* our diversity (not despite our diversity), the more they will see who God is (in his triune presence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). By observing the diverse but unified body of Christ in action—the globally united, gospel-centered family of God—the citizens of earth will catch a glimpse of God’s holy and loving nature.

I met my wife, Delta, at Mariners Church in 2009. She is a

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blue-eyed blonde from South Dakota. I *never* thought I would marry an American, much less an American so completely different from me. But through God's grace in changing my heart, I came to the point where I fell in love with this beautiful young woman, and eventually we decided to get married.

Marrying someone from the very culture I had initially rejected made the journey toward embracing that culture all the more profound. Having a mixed-race daughter, Kabi, named after my mother, stretches us all even further as we navigate a ton of nuanced situations in American life. We are still learning and growing together.

In 2010, my groomsmen and I went to get measured for our wedding suits. In typical Kenyan fashion, the outfits were shiny, swanky, flashy—not the best look for my white brothers, but they looked great on the black guys. As the store employee took our measurements, he suddenly stopped and said, “I have a weird question. Please bear with me. But how do you guys know each other?”

He asked because our group consisted of three Kenyans, a Vietnamese guy, an Armenian, and a German. He could not help but notice our multicultural diversity.

“First of all,” he said, “you guys all *look* different. But second, you're getting along so well. How do you know each other?”

His question opened the door for us to tell him we were all friends from the same church. “I'm a pastor working at the church,” I said.

“I'd like to go to your church,” he replied immediately. Imagine that: This man felt intrigued enough to visit our church, simply by seeing the unity and diversity among a group of friends. That day, we saw why Jesus identified *unity* as our primary gospel witness.

I can't end this section without briefly visiting Revelation 7:9-10, which pictures the staggering culmination of Jesus' prayer. There we see people from every nation, every tribe, and every language

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standing before God's throne and before Jesus, crying out in a loud, unified voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"¹⁴

The scene reverberates with such energy that even the angels around God's throne fall on their faces and worship God, shouting with great joy, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."¹⁵

We must learn to engage globally in a way that reflects our creation in the image of a God who is a community, three persons in one. In that Trinitarian community, there exists both unity and diversity. The beautiful thing about this for us is that there is no one culture, or one person, or one context that can ever fully reflect the image of God. We need the entire world to fully reflect God's image.

Biblical, effective gospel work—whether by individuals or groups; on mission at home or on mission around the world—begins in Genesis and culminates in Revelation. All the way through Scripture, God highlights the inherent dignity and value of every human being. Recognizing the image of God in every human being leads to a robust, theologically orthodox, and effective commitment to global missions. I cannot think of a better way to view the practice of missions than through the lens of Christian unity.

How to Be Wealthy

My dad, the late Reverend David Kiarie Mungai, always told me, "Son, money will make you rich, but it will never make you wealthy. You're only as wealthy as the people you have around you." By that definition, we are *extremely* wealthy in the global church, because as a Kikuyu proverb says, *Andũ nĩ o iĩndo*, or "People are the wealth."

In order to equip individuals and local churches to engage the global community, and thereby create a lasting impact, we must

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think of people as the wealth. We must start by recognizing the inherent dignity and the image of God in everyone we meet. When we look at other people—regardless of their station in life—we are, in a very real sense, looking into the face of God.

My dad raised his children to be part of the church. He could have afforded to give us a home in a different part of Nairobi, but he had us live in Eastleigh, a poor area that many called “the ghetto.” But we attended school where the wealthy people lived. He sacrificed a higher lifestyle to benefit our future, so that we could get an excellent education.

I went to one of the better primary schools in the country, but this created an unexpected tension within me. I wasn’t “ghetto enough” for living in Eastleigh nor wealthy enough to acclimate with my classmates. I quickly found myself in no-man’s-land.

In time, God used that tension to make me into a bridge builder. I understand what it means to be from a difficult, poverty-stricken area, but I also understand the wealthy and the well-to-do. I never quite fit in either one of those worlds, but I learned how to build bridges between them. In God’s divine wisdom, and without my choosing, he predestined my life for connecting people.

There is an African philosophy known as *ubuntu*, a concept that originates from the Bantu languages of Southern Africa. It means, “I am because we are.” These words emphasize the interconnectedness of all individuals within a community or society and underscore the importance of social relationships, collaboration, and cooperation. In that sense, it challenges the Western concept of individualism.

I see small examples of *ubuntu* whenever I lead group adventures to Uganda, Kenya, and Congo, and we pass out candy or anything edible to the children. They quickly go away and divide one piece into tiny amounts, so that everyone can have a little

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instead of one person having it all. In a sense they are saying, “How can I be happy if the others are sad?” The shocker is when we tell them we have one for each. They are left stunned with amazement.

Ubuntu encourages compassion, understanding, social harmony, and mutual respect. It also calls us to deviate from a common Western way of thinking. In the West, if you have five people and five fish, typically everyone will get one, because that’s fair. But in ubuntu, one person might get two or three, depending on when they last ate. Others will give up their share to provide for those with the most need. Fair? No. Ubuntu? Yes!

I am where I am today because the people around me made me who I am. God has continually brought people into my life who could help me. Everyone in our lives brings something important, even if it seems small. That’s how God works. He uses community to care for individuals.

As I prepared to graduate from high school, my parents thought that my very opinionated, vociferous, strong-willed personality might make me a good lawyer, but they couldn’t really afford to send me to law school. On top of that, I lacked the grades to get into any of the major universities in Kenya, which would have been less expensive than a private university. So instead they sent me to India, which has some of the better, cheaper educational institutions, especially for a degree such as law.

My parents funded my Indian adventure by inviting a few church members and other friends to come together for a *harambee*, which means “pull together.” *Harambee* is a concept that helped build Kenya as a nation, because we didn’t have the money to build public schools, and *harambee* is how families in Africa can afford to send their kids to college. Every day, there’s a fundraiser for a family somewhere. Everybody pitches in a little, and it doesn’t even have to be for someone you know. The whole country does this. I never

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had to worry about setting aside money for my education—in part because I didn't have anything to set aside anyway, but also because I knew we'd all pull together to make it possible.

Harambee is also how Kenyans pay for funerals, because not many have life insurance. In a community-based society, your insurance is other people. When my dad died, people walking outside our door would see the wake and ask, "What happened?" Someone would answer, "Oh, the pastor died." And the person walking by would take out ten shillings, give it to us, and that ten shillings joined another ten shillings, and another, and in the end we had enough to pay for the burial.

But before that, when it came time for me to go to university, my parents raised enough money to pay for a one-way ticket to India and one term of tuition and fees.

"That's enough," they told me. "That's all you need. Go ahead. God will be with you."

When I arrived in India, I had the name of the university and nothing else. When I got off the plane and walked into the terminal, I saw a guy holding a sign that said, "Harrison," which is actually my first name.

Oh man, I thought, God has sent somebody to me!

"Are you Kenyan?" I asked the guy.

"Yes," he said.

"Are you waiting for *me*?"

"No, I'm waiting for Harrison."

"I'm Harrison," I said.

"No," he replied, "another Harrison."

It just so happened that another guy named Harrison had taken the same flight. When he showed up, they asked where I was staying.

"I have nowhere to go," I said.

"Come," they answered, "you can stay with us."

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And so, Harrison and Harrison became roommates for a few weeks. Through God's providence and the kindness of strangers, I found a roommate. God was showing me that he would answer my parents' prayers, even using my name in his answer.

Further Divine Provision

Soon after that incident, God raised up a woman named Gladys Opperson, from Bakersfield, California, who had "just happened" to run into my dad ten years before in Chicago. While boarding a plane at O'Hare, she tripped and fell. My dad helped her up and they both boarded the plane. My father also helped her off the plane, for which she expressed profound gratitude.

"May I have your address?" she asked.

"I live in Kenya," my dad replied. "I'm here for just a very short time." But he gave her his post office box address anyway. She took it . . . and promptly forgot about it.

Ten years later, while cleaning up her home, she found an unfamiliar Kenyan address.

Who is this David? she wondered. And then she remembered: *Oh, he's the guy from Africa who helped me. I wonder if he still uses the same PO box?*

She wrote to my father, and he wrote back, saying, "Gladys, I'm well. We've actually just sent our son off to college, by faith, and we hope that God will provide for him."

"You know," she replied, "I've been wondering what to do with some money that I've set aside for something special. Maybe I could help your son?"

Gladys continued to pay my law school tuition until I finished. What an incredible person she was in my life. This story shows, once more, how *real* wealth is found in *relationships*. My dad once helped a woman who fell down trying to get on a plane,

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helping to preserve her dignity as an image bearer of God. Little did he know that she would be the person whom God would later use to bless his family. That's the true wealth we have in people. We don't go to the mission field with an agenda. We go to find out what is required to love these fellow image bearers of God. We recognize how much inherent dignity and worth resides in every individual.

If you want to find the heart of missions, then you must start in Genesis 1, where you see the heart of God and the crucial importance of human beings made in the image of God. And *that* becomes the impetus for everything else.

The Real Wealth of the World

The real wealth of the world lies in the divine image bearers that God created. Such wealth is inherently dignifying and powerful. And it is that God-given wealth that should motivate us to share the gospel, whether as individuals or as a part of a group.

Imagine what would happen if we engaged in missions work knowing that every person we meet is imaging God in some way. Picture how our interactions would change.

In his classic book *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis writes:

The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. . . . There are no *ordinary* people. You have never

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talked to a mere mortal. . . . Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbour, he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ . . . the glorifier and the glorified . . . is truly hidden.¹⁶

If we fully embraced this idea and used it to reimagine our approach to missions, it could not help but change what we do. If we started with the idea that people are the real wealth, if we looked first at the inherent value of everybody we meet, I believe we would soon realize that we cannot engage globally without compassion and justice going hand in hand with our efforts to proclaim the gospel.

As an African, I call this a three-legged stool. According to my Kikuyu tribal tradition, a three-legged stool (known as *igũũko*) symbolizes three main pillars of support: unity of the family; connection to the elders and ancestors; and economic self-reliance, which places major value on hard work. This three-legged stool suggests a holistic approach to life that balances spiritual, social, and economic aspects to create a flourishing community. As a Christian who also happens to be a Kikuyu, I use the image of the three-legged stool to showcase stability and balance.

We can only rightly expect God to honor and multiply our efforts in global missions when we combine a profound respect for the dignity and worth of every human being with a commitment to do our missions work with compassion and justice and with a passion to clearly declare the unchanging message of the gospel.

Don't we *all* want that?