

Mobilising for mission – Reinhold Straehler

“As the Father has sent me, so am I sending you!” Bible reading – John 20:21.

No one knows how old Sheikh Ibrahim really is, it must be quite some years. But the man with his broad smile is still strong and walks the few kilometers every Sunday to the little church building between the mountains. About 55 years back he was baptised as the first person from his people group. He was in his teenage years with a sharp mind. He was eager to understand the world around him. At that time strange people came, with a different skin colour, speaking a different language, from a different country, and bringing a different message. It was a message of a God who loves all human people, no matter what language, skin colour or culture they have. A message that touched the heart of young Ibrahim deeply and that created a longing within him, to get himself into a personal relationship with this God. So he took the daring step and became the first follower of Jesus Christ among his people somewhere in the Sudan. Because other followers of Jesus Christ from a far away country had been sent by their home churches, sent to this particular area in the Sudan, because they struggled to overcome geographical barriers, learning a new language and culture, because they adapted to life in a completely new environment, a new church was planted. And as Ibrahim took the first step, others followed him. More and more, until today there is a strong church among this people group.

This real event in history was made possible due to a wider movement among Christians commonly called “mission.” We will examine exactly what this mission movement is about and what it has to do with us today?

1. Mission: God’s Desire

First of all we need to clarify something important: Mission is not a Western enterprise and it does not originate from a human source. Rather, it is rooted in the nature of God, God who sends and God who saves. This can be seen in the whole of the Bible. After the fall of the first humans into sin, God came searching for Adam and Eve, calling: "Where are you?", Genesis 3:9. This question God asked shows His character throughout all generations. God searches for people! He is concerned about people!

We have a wonderful illustration of this desire of God in the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt. In Exodus 3:7-10 we read how God called Moses for his new ministry:

“I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Just imagine this vivid description: God looks from heaven. He shades and squints His eyes to see clearly. He sees the misery of His people. He begins His plan to save them by sending Moses to the Egyptian leaders! God cares for people in need. He is very much determined to help them! What a wonderful God we have!

In 1 Timothy 2:3-4 we have the strong statement that God “wants all men and women to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” This is not the will of a hard ruler, but the deepest desire of a loving God. This is where mission has its origin. The heart of God is mission. We want to be motivated by this same desire. We want to develop a burning passion in our hearts for people who do not yet know this loving God. We want to be involved in this mission of God.

There are several aspects involved in this mission:

- a) God originates the mission. Mission is His plan.
- b) Jesus Christ enacts the mission, through His death and resurrection people are reconciled with God.
- c) The Holy Spirit gives power to the mission.
- d) The church carries out the mission.
- e) The world receives the mission. Every person gets a chance to hear the Christian message of reconciliation.

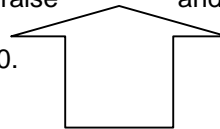
This summary shows us that even though mission is God's desire, we as the church have an important part to play. Our Christian faith is by nature missionary. In the following thoughts we want to explore a bit more what our task as a church is.

2. The different directions of church activities

Sheikh Ibrahim's church somewhere in the Sudan is a lively church, like so many others in the country. Yes, people have gone through difficult times. War, famine, displacement and many other challenges they have faced. But through these times the church has always been involved in a number of activities that have been very precious to the church members. Activities that are mentioned in detail in the Word of God. Actually there are four such main activities Sheikh Ibrahim's church is engaged in. These activities can be understood as different "directions".

2.1 Worship – an upward direction

When the people in Sheikh Ibrahim's church are together, they love to worship God. You should hear their singing! In typical Sudanese fashion, with music composed by their own musicians and poets, and with instruments that are so highly regarded in their culture, they praise God! Worship concentrates upon the Lord. It is the praise and exaltation of God, please read Psalm 95:6; John 4:24; Ephesians 5:19-20.

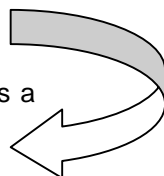


It is appropriate that the church,

which belongs to God, praises and glorifies Him. In this activity the church does not concentrate upon itself, but upon who and what God is. The aim of this activity is upwards.

2.2 Edification (building up to make stronger) – an inward direction

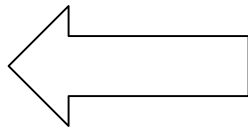
Fortunately, Sheikh Ibrahim's church has enough Elders who can share the meaning and application of the Word of God. Once in a while the Evangelist or the Pastor from the neighbouring church is preaching. People listen eagerly to understand the Word of God. It is a joy to see how the Holy Spirit gives gifts to



build up the body of Christ, Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Corinthians 14:12. After church services the people often talk with each other for a long time, enquiring about how the others are. During the week many visit other houses in order to encourage believers. Edification happens through the preaching and teaching that is going on in the church and also this fellowship among the believers. The aim of this activity is inside the church. It is like building a wall of defence around church members.

2.3 Evangelism – an outward direction

One of the characteristics of the members of Sheikh Ibrahim’s church is that they do not just stay within their church walls, but that they go out and visit others in their community – even the non-believers. Farmers on their fields, the ladies who sell their vegetables at the market,



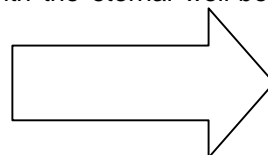
men working in government offices in the nearby city, all church members share the wonderful love of God with the people they meet

day by day. According to the final words of Jesus to His disciples in the Great Commission, He regarded evangelism as one of the reasons for their being alive, please read Matthew 28:18-20; John 20:21; Acts 1:8. The call to evangelise is a command. But it springs out of the Father-heart of God, out of His deep love for all lost people. Evangelism is done in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the presence of Jesus. Jesus is unseen, but with us as we talk about Him. The aim of this activity is outwards, beyond the boundaries of the church.

2.4 Social Concern – a parallel outward direction

Despite the peace that has come to the area, there are still so many needs in the community where Sheikh Ibrahim’s church is located. Wherever possible, the believers from the church help as best as they can. Sometimes it is no more than cooking a meal for the elderly neighbours where the wife is so sick. Recently the church helped with drilling a well so that all the people of the area – Christians and non-Christians – would have clean water. The church does not exist for itself. It is not only concerned with the eternal well-being of people. The

church has a responsibility to perform acts of and compassion for both Christians and non-



Christian love
Christians,

Matthew 5:13-16; 22:35-40. The model for Sheikh Ibrahim's church in this is Jesus Christ who cared about the problems of the needy and the suffering. He healed the sick and even raised the dead on occasion. If the church wants to be relevant in the wider community, it will be engaged in some form of ministry to the needy and suffering. The aim of this activity is also going outwards, beyond the boundaries of the church.

We have seen that four important activities of a good local church are: worship, edification, evangelism and social concern. Like a strong table needs four legs of equal length, so these four activities balance the ministry of any local church.

As one gets to know the church of Sheikh Ibrahim a bit better, one realises that this church has a good balance of these four activities. They know that if they want to grow spiritually as a church, they need to be careful not to neglect any one of these areas of church life. Whereas most churches are involved in worship and edification, often the areas of evangelism and social concern are not fully developed. We therefore need to take a closer look at these two ministries. Both have to do with stepping outside the boundaries of our church. Perhaps they are uncomfortable for us, but they still need to be done.

3. Stepping outside the boundaries of the church

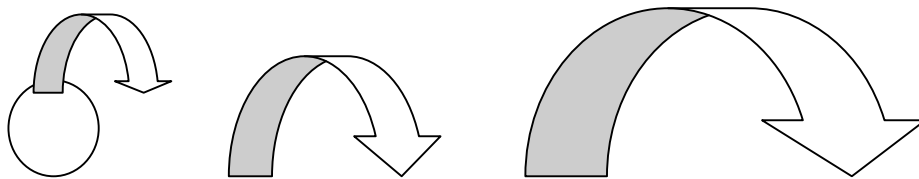
In Acts 1:8 Jesus gave His disciples a description and a promise regarding the task He wanted them to achieve. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth." These different steps in the Great Commission for bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world refer to different kinds of evangelism. The difference between them lies in the cultural distance between the Christian who is witnessing and the people to whom he or she is trying to bring the gospel.

- **Evangelism "in Jerusalem" and "in Judea"**: This happens in the immediate environment of the church, among people with the same culture and the same language.
- **Evangelism in "Samaria"**: This takes place when Christians share the Gospel with their neighbours, e.g. people from the neighbour tribe who have a similar language

and culture. Often there is not much sympathy between the two groups, but those barriers are overcome.

- **Evangelism “to the ends of the earth”** refers to sharing the gospel with people from a very different culture and language. In order to do this, Christians have to learn a new language and a new culture in order to be effective witnesses.

The following illustration shows these steps in evangelism:



Jerusalem ... Judea ... Samaria to the ends of the earth.

In order to reach all of these groups, it is necessary for Christians to step outside the boundaries of their church. The members of the church of Sheikh Ibrahim are very happy when they are together as a congregation. But they also look outside their own community and care for people who do not yet know the Lord Jesus Christ. They do not wait until these people come to the church. They meet them wherever they are, in the neighbourhood, at the market or at their working place.

We praise God for everything that God has been doing in the Sudan. How the churches have grown in recent years. Hundreds of thousands of people have accepted Christ. We acknowledge that this has often happened in the midst of much suffering, of war and persecution. But despite these obstacles the church has grown. This is a reason for being thankful and for praising God.

Yet at the same time we need to realise that this tremendous church-growth has been restricted to certain areas and to certain cultures or ethnic groups. Many other areas and communities have not been affected at all. There are many ethnic groups that do not have a

church in their midst. There are groups and places with no Christians, or only a handful at best.

The church of Sheikh Ibrahim is aware of this fact. It makes them sad. Their denomination (group of similar churches) has thought a lot and prayed over what they can do about it. They realise that as a church they need to step out from their own boundaries of culture and language. They need to leave “Jerusalem” and “Judea” and move to “Samaria” and towards “the ends of the earth”! So as a whole denomination they started to make specific plans to work among some of these ethnic groups where there is no church yet. They trained several couples and then sent them out to different areas, supporting them to do so where necessary. These couples are living now as witnesses for Christ in areas where there is no other Christian witness. They share the wonderful Gospel of Jesus Christ with people there who have not had a chance to hear before. More Christians need to take efforts to cross the lines of language and culture in order to reach out to more of these people.

Stepping outside the borders of our church is also necessary so that we can care for people in their physical and emotional needs. The church needs to shoulder some responsibility for society around us, with all of its challenges. That is why the church of Sheikh Ibrahim has initiated the drilling of a well and why individual members are helping in their neighbourhood wherever there is a need.

This stepping outside the borders of the church has a lot to do with the movement of “mission” which affected Sheikh Ibrahim when he was a youth and set his life on a completely new track. We come back now to the question we asked earlier: what does this mission movement have to do with us today?

4. Sending out like Jesus was sent

The word “mission” comes from the Latin word *missio* and simply means “sending”. Throughout the Bible we see how our God is a sending God: He sent His prophets, His Son and His Spirit. The sending of the Son of God was the climax of God’s mission. But this

mission goes on! The Son, Jesus Christ, sends His disciples, His church to continue His mission. "As the Father has sent me, so am I sending you!", John 20:21.

The church is sent into this world to be its salt and light, Matthew 5:13-16. In order to fulfil this calling the local church itself needs to send out people for specific tasks. The church needs to serve and witness among the immediate society she is living in, but she also needs to send out teams and individuals to start a ministry of serving, witnessing and establishing a church in cultures and areas where there is no Christian witness yet. Once the awareness of missions is growing in a church, the church will realise its responsibility to send out people for starting new ministries.

Much of the growth of the church in the Sudan over the last 20 years has happened unplanned and we praise God for what was achieved. Now, in order to establish the church in the areas and cultures where there is no church yet, careful planning and the sending out of special teams is needed. This is needed now. It is what Sheikh Ibrahim's church realised and where they started to send out couples to other areas. But they realise that even this is only the beginning. Much more can be done and should be done. Other churches also begin to ask what their share in the mission movement today can be. Most churches in the Sudan trace their roots back to some missionaries from other countries. Centuries ago people came to our areas in order to begin to share the Gospel. Even though these foreign Christians have not always been sensitive enough to the culture of the people they were serving among, still it was the beginning of today's Church in the Sudan. Now Sudanese churches all over the country need to take up the same responsibility and send out missionaries from among their own congregations. They need to send missionaries to those areas where there is no Christian witness yet.

5. What can we do?

- We as the Church and as individual Christians in the Sudan need to be mobilised ourselves by the Holy Spirit. We need a new burning desire to extend God's Kingdom in this nation and to bring the Gospel to those who have not heard yet.

- Any missionary activity begins with prayer. As a local church we can pray for those in our own community who do not know the Lord Jesus Christ yet. We can pray for those people groups in our country, and beyond, where there is no church and no Christian witness yet.
- Local churches or denominations can “adopt” a people group or geographical area for which they pray specifically and for which they prepare people who can minister.
- Local churches or denominations can send out a team of believers to a specific area. They may be working in a secular job for support, but they are moving there with the clear desire to plant a church.
- As people from other cultures and tribes become Christians, we all need to be open to accept their expressions of Christianity which may be different from our own cultural forms. They are our brothers and sisters even if they are a little bit different from us.

All over Africa the Church is taking up its responsibility in regard to the worldwide task of mission: making God’s love know all over the earth, helping people in their needs, transforming communities, and witnessing about the great salvation that is in Jesus Christ. Sheikh Ibrahim’s church may be small, their financial resources may be limited, but they are determined to play the part that God has assigned for them. “As the Father has sent me, so am I sending you” said Jesus to his disciples 2000 years ago. Jesus’ words still speak to us today.

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. Think of all the different people who live within 30 kilometres of you.

How many do not yet acknowledge Jesus Christ?

What can you do to share Jesus with them all, one by one?

What are the major hindrances you face?

2. Describe how you know from history, both biblical and more recent, that “God is a missionary God”.

3. Share the different ways you and your church engage in “outward direction” ministries – evangelism and social concern.

What gaps can you see in these ministries, where more and different people may be reached?

4. Think of a group of people in Sudan who are unreached with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Imagine ways people *sent from and supported by your church* could reach them.

Count the cost realistically. Plan a target timescale.

5. What does John 20:21 tell us about God the Father?

about God the Son (Jesus)?

about God’s people (us)?