

New Trends in Mission

The Emerging Future

*Essays from SEDOS Mission Symposium
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Introduction

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“The frog in the well” is a well-known expression in Japan to refer to those who think they know the world but have only seen a small part of it, their “own” world. Missionaries are graced to have come out of the well and to have seen a wider world, not only as tourists but as those who have shared the language, customs, joys and pains, culture and religion of other people. They are the “frontier missionaries”¹ who set a concrete example to all baptized people to move out of their usual environment to meet people, to be with people, and to help the needy among them. Mission means to live as Jesus did: always on the road, ready to go wherever the Spirit moves them.

Mission is in essence a *missio Dei* (being called and sent by God), and this mission is carried out by way of “prophetic dialogue.”² Missionaries can therefore never be “self-referential” (Pope Francis), as they will always refer spontaneously to the God they love and the people they were sent to. Mission-minded theologians too will automatically go against every theological “inbreeding” and will seek to integrate their experience and knowledge of the wider world in their theological reflections, as does, for instance, a liberation theologian, a theologian of religions, or a cyber-theologian. However, missionaries also keep a certain “prophetic” stance toward the people they are sent to, because there is a message to be transmitted, the gospel message, which is not only about peace and harmony, but also about justice and respect for the wholeness (and holiness) of Creation.

¹ See “The Role of Missionary Religious Institutes: A Strange Species of Christians?” by Aloysius Pieris, SJ, in this volume.

² See “Theological Evolution in Mission: A Theology of Mission” by Stephen B. Bevans, SVD, in this volume.

The theme of this symposium on mission, *New Trends in Mission: The Emerging Future*, arose from my experience on the General Committee on Mission I was asked to start for my Congregation, CICM. In our lengthy discussions we always came back to the basic question: “What does mission mean (for you)?” Without that answer we cannot come to a formulation of what a missionary parish is, or a missionary community, a missionary project, and so on. We need to go “back to the roots” of mission and see its task and identity with new eyes, because if we do not see the whole missionary endeavor clearly, we think that mission is in crisis. But if we formulate the task of a missionary well, people will react positively. It is we missionaries, religious and lay, who have to be clear on who we are and what we are doing as missionaries. Mission is basically *ad extra*, even as we have broadened its meaning to *inter gentes*, *intra gentes*, or *missio ad intra*. As missionaries we exemplify the task of mission, going out and meeting people to bring them the joyful message of the gospel. Pope Francis speaks of the “*Chiesa in uscita*” (the outgoing church). This is the core of his missiological message and it makes him a great Jesuit missionary and a missionary pope.³

The theme of the mission symposium is titled “New Trends in Mission.” The word *new* has two meanings here: one refers to the older book of 1991, which is a collection of talks given at different SEDOS residential seminars; and the other refers to the new ways of doing mission. Although not everything is new in mission, we will however point out the new trends that are coming up, and the challenges we will have to face in the future in doing mission, especially now with all of the ecological problems, the many refugees,⁴ and the COVID-19 pandemic. Fr. Chris Chaplin, MSC, a member of the SEDOS Executive Committee, proposed the addition of the subtitle “The Emerging Future” because the future is emerging before our very eyes. We only have to see the signs of the times, judge them, and act upon them. The symposium, and this subsequent book, are guides to this discernment process.

As to the spirit of the book itself, it is not a purely academic study, even though most of the contributors have academic degrees. It wants to be a joint reflection by SEDOS’s members on what we as missionaries are doing, or are supposed to do. SEDOS is an inter-congregational organization that serves its eighty-five member congregations on the level of the

³See “Pope Francis and Mission: A Call to Hear the Crying Existential Peripheries” by Paul Béré, SJ, in this volume.

⁴See “Mission with Migrants: The Roots of ‘People on the Move’” by Carmen Elisa Bando, SSpS, in this volume.

documentation and study of global mission. SEDOS organizes different kinds of seminars—the main one is the yearly five-day Residential Seminar—and it publishes the bi-monthly *SEDOS Bulletin*. The Mission Symposium in October 2021 was a special seminar and the third of its kind in SEDOS's more than fifty years of existence. This book consists of the written texts of the speakers' interventions at the symposium. Part One and Part Two of the book are the more academic contributions but with a personal touch. Part Three contains the more personal contributions on specific themes elaborated by the SEDOS Executive Committee that most of the member congregations have in common. They represent our "common missions."

Part One of the book deals with the "roots" of mission, especially the "why" (*missio Dei*) and "what" (to embody God's reign) of mission. It offers a renewed understanding of mission, starting from the Bible. We then look back at where we came from—especially as SEDOS—more than fifty years ago, and at how missiology has evolved in this period too. This brings us to Pope Francis's challenging vision of mission. We close with a discussion of the place of missionaries and missionary organizations in current church language and structures.

In Part Two the contributions explore in more detail the different aspects of doing mission: who will do it, when is the best time for it, where should it be done, and, last but not least, how should it be done? The many diverse ways of doing mission are not new phenomena. Already in the Gospels, according to Lucien Legrand, "mission is in the plural" (*la mission au pluriel*): to proclaim the gospel (Mark), to make disciples of Christ (Matthew), to witness the work of the Spirit (Luke), and to bring (a trinitarian) unity (John).⁵ The former SEDOS mission symposium came up with four "principal activities" of the church's mission: proclamation, dialogue, inculturation, and the liberation of the poor.⁶ But in general we can discern two basic missionary methods, which the World Council of Churches calls *evangelism and mission*: the *evangelizing* method and the more *caritative* method. Protestants and Catholics are in a continuous search for the correct balance between these two.⁷ There exists in the

⁵ Lucien Legrand, *Paul et la mission, Apôtre des temps nouveaux* (Paris: Médiaspaul, 2021), 163–64. See "The 'Why' of Mission: Biblical Trends in Mission for Our Changing Times" by Rekha M. Chennattu, RA, in this volume.

⁶ Mary Motte, FMM, and Joseph R. Lang, MM, eds., *Mission in Dialogue, The SEDOS Research Seminar on the Future of Mission, March 8–19, 1981, Rome, Italy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 634.

⁷ For instance, the commission for mission within the World Council of Churches is called Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue speaks of "Dialogue and Proclamation."

Catholic Church a certain reluctance to talk about the importance of the “communion between God and human beings,”⁸ and instead to view mission in the first place as implanting the church and/or working for God’s kingdom on earth, the “caritative mission.”⁹ In this symposium, however, the role of the Spirit and of God in doing “evangelical mission” has come well to the fore: first, under the important concept of “initial proclamation,”¹⁰ where we create the condition for a miracle or a calling to happen; and second, in the refreshing idea of “synodality” in mission,¹¹ which declares that we do mission together because Jesus is there where two or more are gathered in his name (Mt 18:20).

The contributors to Part Three were asked to appraise their work and what they see as important evolutions for all those who work, or want to work, in that field, using their own congregation as an example. Most of the twelve themes represented in this part are universal and eternal, but one can also perceive some important evolutions within them. These themes represent our “common grounds of mission” in which we try to discern the “trends” in each of these mission fields. Among these trends, two “new global trends” stand out. To start with, the topic of secularism¹² is addressed first to show missionaries that we should not juxtapose the secular and the religious, as is mostly done in religious (and secular) parlance, but seek how we can be religious in a secular world. Our situation can be compared to that of the people in the Middle Ages (and even today in certain parts of the world), who (vice versa) had to find out how to be secular in a religious world.

The whole world is heading toward a secular and pluralist worldview because of the increasingly intercultural and interreligious reality in which we live. Today, Christianity is everywhere on the globe, as are other religions, nationalities, cultures, and so on. Learning to live and work together in harmony and peace will be—and is already—the great contribution

⁸ See “The ‘What’ of Mission: Refining Our Comprehension of Mission” by Joseph Scaria Palakeel, MST, in this volume.

⁹ For instance, the first mission symposium organized by SEDOS in 1969 carried the theme “Development and Dialogue.” The result of the second mission symposium of SEDOS in 1989 was summarized as “Mission in Dialogue.” See also Part One, “Introduction,” by Michael McCabe, SMA, in this volume.

¹⁰ See “The ‘When’ of Mission: Rediscovering ‘Initial Proclamation’ in Evangelization” by Alfred Maravilla, SDB, in this volume.

¹¹ See “The ‘Who’ of Mission: We Are Mission” by Ida Colombo, CMS, H el ene Isra el Soloumta Kamk ol, CMS, and Maria Teresa Ratti, CMS, in this volume.

¹² See “Secularization: Mission in a Secular Age” by Daniel Patrick Huang, SJ, in this volume.

of missionary religious institutes. However, this remains a challenge also for these institutes and their members.¹³ The book's last article, on eco-spirituality, is surely a new trend in mission that will ask for our special attention and cooperation in the future.¹⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic has placed this eco-friendly effort in danger because of the economic crisis it has caused in the world. On the other hand, thanks to the pandemic, missionaries have started to use the modern ways of communication more intensively, as has SEDOS. For instance, this mission symposium was held fully online, with low cost and high participation. The challenge here, as in every missionary endeavor, is to stay connected in a "Christian" way and not to exclude anyone.¹⁵

Each of the many articles in this book has its own character. Some can be used for personal reflection, some for group discussion,¹⁶ some for getting the historical background of a certain type of mission,¹⁷ and some even as an evaluation grid¹⁸ or as a guideline in a certain mission field.¹⁹ Many also contain valuable academic material students can use. A sincere thanks goes therefore to the coeditor of this book, Sr. Marie-Hélène Robert, OLA, who helped greatly in evaluating the contributions, and to Philippa Wooldridge from the Roman-Catholic newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, who, as a longstanding coworker of SEDOS, has diligently revised all the contributions. During the preparation for the symposium and subsequent book, it was especially Fr. Joseph Palakeel, MST, who guided me throughout this huge undertaking. Special thanks go to him for the unconditional support and advice he has given me.

SEDOS is grateful to Orbis Books for the final edit of the articles by the professional hand of Jill Brennan O'Brien, and for presenting them in a pleasing format. Sincere thanks as well go to all those who have contributed with their precious articles to this rich source of information on mission. A last word of thanks goes to the members of SEDOS who through their annual contribution make all this possible. SEDOS is an

¹³ See "Interculturality: Culture and the Experience of God" by Tim Norton, SVD, in this volume.

¹⁴ See "Integrity of Creation: Our Work Is Loving the World" by Ilia Delio, OSF, in this volume.

¹⁵ See "Media and Mission: Staying Connected" by Monique Tarabeh, RGS, in this volume.

¹⁶ See Colombo et al., "The 'Who' of Mission."

¹⁷ See "The 'Where' of Mission: Fifty Years of *Ad Gentes* in Africa" by Anthony Akinwale, OP, in this volume.

¹⁸ See "Missionary Parishes: Growing as a Missionary Parish" by Lazar T. Stanislaus, SVD, in this volume.

¹⁹ See Tarabeh, "Media and Mission."

inter-congregational effort for reflection on our mission activities, and this book (and symposium) is one concrete example of what a group of people can do when they combine their efforts toward a common goal.

My term as director has come to an end after six fulfilling years. I feel immensely grateful for this rewarding opportunity, and I am happy to hand the torch over to the next director of SEDOS.

In the name of SEDOS, we wish you all happy reading!

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