

The Importance of Reflective Practice for Missionaries

By GENE DANIELS

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When people hear the term “reflection,” they might think of a quiet pond or the solitude of a monastic religious retreat. Some imagine the reflective person as either a monk in a garden or Ralph Waldo Emerson taking long leisurely walks beside Walden Pond. Even if your mind’s eye does not go to those extremes, it is unlikely you first thought of a cross-cultural missionary. Yet when you actually talk to highly successful missionaries, several surprising insights emerge.

Reflective Missionaries

Over the years, I have been involved in several mission research projects, including interviewing successful church planters in the Muslim world. Some were Western expatriates. Some cross-cultural workers came from Africa and Asia, while others were Muslim background believers who planted churches in their own or a nearby culture. One idea that arose time and again was that of reflective practice.

This is a good place for an informal definition. American philosopher Donald Schön¹ introduced a concept called the “reflective practitioner.” He believed learning through reflection involves exploring one’s experience, deliberately considering one’s impact on oneself and others, and then using the insights to inform future actions.

While the term “reflection” was seldom used in the interviews I conducted, successful missionaries often mentioned times when they “thought carefully” about their ministry practices as they planned future activities. They “spent time reviewing” their work. These descriptions sound a lot like reflective practice to me.

Having been a church planter myself and having a daily habit of reading Proverbs, it was natural to think more deeply about the reflective practices I heard about in those interviews. A few proverbs stand out for how they can inform reflective practice for cross-cultural workers.

¹ Schön, D.A. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

Proverbs 14:15

We will start with Proverbs 14:15, “The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps” (ESV). Here we see a focus on “the simple” (from the Hebrew *peth-ee*). It generally refers to someone naïve or easily persuaded. In this verse, such an individual sharply contrasts with the “prudent person,” someone who takes time to think about their actions, in other words, someone we might call a reflective person.

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This particular Hebrew word for “the simple” does not necessarily carry negative moral connotations. This person may simply be someone easily tripped up by the guile of others. This is where we see the need for missionaries to be reflective. As much as we may hate to admit it, cross-cultural missionaries too often make poor decisions because of cross-cultural naïveté.

One older single missionary I knew was completely blindsided when he was approached by a young woman’s family who expected him to marry her. She had been his interpreter for several months. In their mind, this level of public, personal interaction with a single man strongly implied matrimonial intent, despite the fact he was 30 years older!

This situation could have been avoided if the missionary carefully thought about the situation before it unfolded. Surely there were indications of something amiss. Unfortunately, even good-hearted, godly missionaries can be “simple-minded” when they follow the path of least resistance.

Proverbs 24:32

Another verse significant for cross-cultural ministry is Proverbs 24:32, “Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction.” When new missionaries first cross large cultural divides, they see many novel things: new modes of transportation, ways of raising children, completely new patterns of living, etc. But are they encouraged to follow up on these observations? Do they take time to consider what they might learn from these experiences?

This kind of cross-cultural reflection can help missionaries in important ways. I distinctly remember the impact caused by my first visit to a Central Asian mosque. The old wooden floors seemed so solid until the men began to pray. Their repeated kneeling in unison shook the building... and reverberated through my body. Reflecting on the tangible sensation caused by their unified action was powerfully instructive. It spoke to me about how hard it must be for them to make an individual decision to follow Christ.

Proverbs 20:5

Another proverb says, “The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out” (Prov 20:5), which highlights another important aspect of mission reflection. Missionaries should be careful and intentional to draw out the wisdom God places in the hearts of the local people. Missionaries need to invest the time and effort to draw up these insights from the deep waters of people’s hearts.

Too often missionaries go to the field with the impression that their primary job is to teach what they know to the local people. Certainly, we do go to teach and make disciples, but this attitude runs into trouble fast. It unwittingly shuts us off from the greatest teachers we’ll ever meet—the very same locals we think need to learn from us.

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During our first year on the field, I organized a short-term medical team’s visit to a small village. In the middle of the first day, one local translator came to me to express disapproval of how the clinic was being run. I was hot, harried, frustrated, and not at all in the mood to listen to another complaint.

But later in the evening, I sensed in my spirit that I should hear what the translator had to say. I sought him out and asked him to repeat what he had said earlier. He explained how local Muslims perceived the clinic flow as a form of manipulation since we prayed with them as they waited for medicines. He said that acquiescing to our Christian ritual appeared to be the required payment for the medicines they would receive. He suggested the doctors themselves should take time

to pray for people as part of their medical care, even though it would significantly slow down the patient flow. With some reservations, we tried it the next day, and it was amazing how much more open people were to the gospel. I cringe when I remember how close I came to dismissing this important insight and wisdom.

Proverbs 15:28

Consider also Proverbs 15:28, “The heart of the righteous ponders how to answer.” The key phrase here is “how to answer” (*ānā*). This very common word includes the idea of paying attention. For a reflective missionary, this proverb speaks to the need to listen to others well so that we will know how to answer well.

Missionaries face a plethora of situations requiring thoughtful answers. These range from pleasant conversations with neighbors to interrogation by government officials. Part of being a reflective missionary is developing keen listening skills that help us catch any presuppositions others have so we know what people are actually asking. It’s not just a matter of learning the grammar and words of a new language but also learning the presuppositions behind people’s words. This understanding often requires intentional reflection.

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It took a while for my wife and me to understand that when Muslim neighbors in Central Asia asked whether we were Christians, they were not asking if we believed that Jesus died for our sins. Instead, they wanted to know if we were another kind of Russian because that was the only definition of “Christian” they knew.

In cross-cultural ministry, reflection cannot be a wholly self-referenced activity. We must listen carefully to those to whom we are sent since their perspective does not come naturally to us. Otherwise, reflective practices

will lead us to answers rooted in the rationales of our home culture and miss insights that make more sense to the people of our new home.

Proverbs 4:26

A final text concerning reflective practice is Proverbs 4:26, “Ponder the path of your feet; then all your ways will be sure.” The word *ponder* (*pālas*) can be translated as “weigh out,” placing something in a balance. To discern a sure and trustworthy path, we need to weigh our options.

There are many components to discerning the will of God. A few include prayer, wise counsel, and fasting. But what about personal reflection? Do we deliberately consider past experiences, both good and bad, as part of the decision-making process? Reflective missionaries not only give thought to their past; they also reflect on their own decision-making processes.

Several years ago, on home assignment, we faced several family-related issues that raised the question of whether to return to the field. We prayed and fasted for clarity. No answers came. Eventually, one of our daughters had a minor traffic accident. It caused me to weigh the likely outcomes more thoughtfully of staying or returning to Asia. That reflection brought clarity and peace that I had not been able to find any other way. The decision to stay in the U.S. brought a multitude of changes to our lives and ministry, all of which were very positive.

Conclusion

Reflective practice is encouraged in many professions, from education to medicine to city planning. It is perhaps even more important for cross-cultural missionaries because of their complicated contexts. So much of their knowledge comes from internal evaluations and comparisons between their home culture, a new culture, and Scripture. However, such knowledge is often buried deeply, and the best way to access that insight is by taking time to reflect. 

