

Using the M W Words

and an Update on a Completely Different Topic!

BY KEVIN HIGGINS

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I am grateful for the topic of this *Mission Frontiers* edition. The language we use and the way we use it, is of course, absolutely crucial.

Frontier Ventures has, for more than forty years, sought to help keep as clear a focus as possible on the “edges” between where the gospel is in fact taking root and growing and where it isn’t, and pressing into answers for the question, “why”?

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The M Words: *Mission* and *Missionary*

For us that “why” question is the essence of *frontier mission* (as a focus of mission action and prayer and heart), *frontier missiology* (as a whole multi-disciplinary field of study), and *frontier missionaries* (those believers, from every reached people group, who specifically follow the apostolic and Abrahamic call to participate in God’s blessing of those nations where the good news has yet to take root and grow).

The central premise of our topic, “When Everything is Missions and All Believers Are Missionaries,” is that if we blur the sharp edges of the word “mission” and “missionary” we will begin to lose the needed clarity of focus on the unreached and frontier peoples.

I agree with the effort to try to keep the word focused.

But let me for a moment take another tack. That is that there might be a problem with keeping the words at all.

Bear with me a moment, and I promise to return to the main point!

In Other Words

More and more, people are raising questions about using M Words (mission and missionary) from a different angle than our edition of *MF* is asking. Essentially, people are asking: “Can’t we find better words? Words less tied to a colonial era? Less tied to a paradigm of western dominance and style and finance and strategy?”

That is a different set of questions than, “How can we make sure we use the M Words to really just mean mission (instead of everything)?”

In the gathering of the International Society of Frontier Mission (Dallas, September 13-15) we addressed this issue from several angles, asking how to critique our vocabulary and potentially find alternatives.

Several proposed alternative English words. For example, Mike Stroope, author of the book *Transcending Mission* presented, and he has helped many readers begin to think more deeply about the issues of language and the paradigms of mission which can be carried by language even when we don't know it.

I presented a paper sharing about vocabulary that believers in emerging movements among Muslims are using for things like “mission” and “evangelism” and “church” and more. That was an intentional attempt to hear some different voices, from different contexts and different languages, as they have sought to find words—words other than the M Words.

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These are efforts which are tackling the problems of the M Words in a different way, from a different angle than this edition of *MF*. These are important, but I want to return to the issues others in *MF* are raising this time.

Keeping the M Words Focused

I am a realist. Even if we do find new words that do a better job of carrying more humble and incarnational missional paradigms, those new words will eventually be co-opted for many purposes.

In particular, we know by experience, that whatever new word might be selected to focus on the work of seeing the gospel take root where it is not currently flourishing, will eventually be used to refer to all sorts of other (good and vital in their own right) ministry efforts.

So, let's solve that problem for the M Words as long as we still have them (which I'm sure we will for some time to come)!

« We should fight for preserving the clarity and purpose of the words *mission* and *missionary*. »

If we begin to “fuzz” the edges of the meaning of mission so that it begins to mean everything we do, then it will mean anything we do, which ends up robbing “mission” of really any meaning at all. So we go from mission meaning everything to it meaning, essentially, nothing.

I believe, even as I am concerned for the effort to find new words, that we should fight for preserving the clarity and purpose of the words *mission* and *missionary* as used distinctly for all that is involved in seeing the gospel find soil and take root and thrive and grow as a movement within peoples and cultures least touched, least reached, by the gospel.

That is the main focus of this edition of *MF*. And as always, it is crucial that we are pairing this specific theme with the updates in every edition that share about movements that are spreading within unreached peoples.

And an Update On an Entirely Different Point!

In a prior column I shared about our efforts to recover the data from the “Last Thousand Campaign” and to begin to reach out to those who decades ago helped us launch the movement that has seen such a sea change in getting unreached peoples on the map of global mission.

Many, many people helped us, and some requested that once we had raised the funds we sought during the LTC, we would pass the amount of their gift to another ministry as they designated.

We have the records and know of the just over 200 people who made that request. We are systematically reaching out to them to communicate, thank, and make sure we know their intentions correctly.

As I write, we are making arrangements for the first such gift to be forwarded to a ministry of Frontiers!

Thank you, also, to those of you who have written to me to express your support of what we are doing, and for asking us to keep the gift you invested all those years ago.

