

Sustainability & Missions: Framing the Conversation

By Tom Bassford & Jonathan Bell

What follows is an attempt to frame the conversation about church missions, community development, and sustainability. It's meant to help us understand the complimentary components of missions and ask the right questions so we can more intelligently and collectively test possible solutions and manage to desired outcomes. Our assumption is that no one has figured out "sustainability." There are a good many people and organizations working hard at it, but for those who are honest and looking beyond anecdotes, we are all still a long way off. The further we travel down this road, the more we have realized the need for a framework to help shape and guide the conversation, as well as provide a common language. For us, that framework has come down to: **One Big Question** and **Four Domains** with **Evidence-Based Scorecards**.

One Big Question

Giving definition to what we mean by "sustainability" in the context of missions and community development and then framing it in a question that guides our thinking, problem-solving and experimentation has been critical. This defines our end goal and answers the question: *To what end?*

Here's our "One Big Question":

How can we do missions in ways that lead to healthy, disciple-making churches within self-sustaining communities where basic needs are being met without outside charitable resources and where the community itself has the increasing ability to provide its members with the ongoing means and opportunities to achieve their full potential?

Four Domains

As we have continued to try and solve for true sustainability and community development, we began to notice that the world of "church missions" is made up of four distinct but inter-related areas, or domains, all of which need to be understood separately and then integrated into a cohesive, comprehensive strategy. Missional leadership in the past may have been able to focus and define missions through one or two of these domains but those days are quickly coming to an end. Where we find ourselves today in missions is in the ongoing struggle between these four domains trying to understand, serve, fund, measure and balance each one against the needs and demands of the other three. We must do more than manage and mitigate the different needs between these four components; we must understand, lead, evaluate and integrate them through strategic alignment into an overall comprehensive missional strategy.

Here are the "Four Domains":

1. The Individual – *Spiritual Formation*
2. The Church - *Mobilization*
3. The Partnership - *Execution*
4. The Community - *Transformation*

Evidence-Based Scorecards

Quoting from Mario Morino's book, *Leap of Reason*, "[Funders] will migrate away from organizations with stirring stories alone, toward well-managed organizations that can also demonstrate meaningful, lasting impact." As hard as it is and as impossible as it seems, we have to create "scorecards" that help us measure our outcomes and impact against the resources we mobilize and deploy into our missional efforts. Developing the scorecards for each of the four areas above is the first step to creating the strategic alignment of all four areas and an overall comprehensive missional strategy. It's about measuring the right things and, for that, the most important questions are "what" and "why" not "how." We can figure out the *how* once we better understand *what* we should be measuring and *why*. What follows is the very early and ongoing work of developing evidence-based scorecards for the four domains above in order to:

...do missions in ways that lead to healthy, disciple-making churches within self-sustaining communities where basic needs are being met without outside charitable resources and where the community itself has the increasing ability to provide its members with the ongoing means and opportunities to achieve their full potential.

The Four Scorecards

Developing metrics or scorecards is an ongoing, iterative process. The process to date has been to identify the continuum that exists in each of the four domains and then begin to think through the right questions we should be asking in order to clarify the *what* and *why*. The questions included below are meant to serve as examples and are far from exhaustive. The reason we include a continuum in each of the four domains is because we recognize that growth or process is inherent in each of these four areas and, therefore, must be considered in the metrics we develop and the things we choose to measure. It's our hope that others will join us in using this framework, ask more and better questions to help us define our metrics and develop scorecards around missional activity that leads to sustainable, redemptive transformation.

The Individual: It's about... Spiritual Formation

Summary: At the individual level, missions is focused on individuals and their "missional maturity" as part of overall spiritual formation process of the church.

The Continuum:

The continuum at the individual level is more about levels of commitment to missional activity. We define this continuum in terms of:

Exposed \Rightarrow **Engaged** \Rightarrow **Entangled**

This continuum spans the individual journey from "benevolent narcissism" to "redemptive entanglement."

Some key questions we need to ask:

- What are the characteristics of each level on commitment?
- How do we identify where individuals are on the continuum?
- How do we help move them along the continuum?
- What role does life stage play in where a person is on this continuum?
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The Church: It's about... Mobilization

Summary: At the church level, missions is focused on the church as an organization and its ability to mobilize and deploy appropriate resources of time, talent and treasure.

The Continuum:

The continuum at the church level is about the scope of missional activity and should not be seen as progressively better types of mission. We define this continuum in terms of:

Relief + Individual Betterment + Community Development = Sustainability

All three types of missional activity are necessary at different times and for differing reasons.

Some key questions we need to ask:

- How do we define and differentiate between each type?
- What should trigger the start of relief and what should trigger its end?
- Do we have mobilization opportunities in each category?
- Do we have models of success in each category?
- Do we have alignment that creates synergy toward sustainability?
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The Partnership: It's about... Execution

Summary: At the partnership level, missions is about the partnership itself as a distinct entity with a focus on what it takes to build and maintain a relationship that is intrinsically healthy and externally impactful.

The Continuum:

The continuum at this level consists of the sequential “building blocks” necessary for building healthy partnerships that are characterized by mutuality rather than dependency. We describe this continuum as follows:

- ↳ **Relationship** – Note: There is both a “fixed cost” and “opportunity cost” to all relationships.
- ↳ **A Plan to Execute** – A clear “roadmap to self-sufficiency”
- ↳ **Leadership to Execute** - Demonstrated capacity – Is “potential capacity” enough?
- ↳ **Resources** – Both indigenous and non-indigenous resources

It is through this dimension of missions that leaders and their organizations work together across socio-economic disparities to change lives and transform communities.

Some key questions we need to ask:

- When should resources be introduced into the relationship?
- How and when should an initial assessment be used in determining the potential of the partnership?
- How do you build mutuality and reciprocity into the partnership?
- How do you identify leadership to execute?
- What safeguards are needed to avoid dependency?
- What type of partners does this process require (i.e. are there prerequisites)?
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The Community: It’s about...Transformation

Summary: At the community level, missions is about the quality of life (spiritually, mentally, physically, socially and economically) for those who live within walking distance of the indigenous church. This brings us full circle with our definition of sustainability as the end goal of missional activity:

...disciple-making churches within self-sustaining communities where basic needs are being met without charitable resources and where the community itself has the increasing ability to provide its members with the ongoing means and opportunities to achieve their full potential?

The Continuum:

The continuum at the community level is more a set of key result areas that, when measured, give some sense of the quality of life or the relative health of the community. Our key result areas include:

- Health & Wellness
- Home Ownership
- Economic Development
- Education
- Community-minded, collaborative, disciple-making churches
- Safety



This continuum is a picture of the community as a collective whole and is best pictured by a bucket with many holes through which it continues to “leak.” The capacity of the community, like the bucket, will always be limited by the number of holes and especially by the lowest holes.

Some key questions we need to ask:

- What are the assets/strengths already existing in the community?
- What are the “benchmarks” we can use to measure the quality of life in the above areas of our continuum?
- How can we develop “collective impact” strategies between existing stakeholders in the community?
- How will we track quality of life changes over time and their causal vs. coincidental relationship to outputs?
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