

Disciples Engagement in God's Mission

David A. Vargas
*President, Division of Overseas Ministries
and Co-Executive of Common Global Ministries of the United Church
of Christ and the Christian Church(DOC)
Indianapolis, Indiana*

I need to begin this presentation by making a clarification. "Foreign missions" is not the terminology we use today to describe the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) participation in God's mission beyond the United States and Canada. We refer to that involvement as Global Ministries, because we believe in mutuality in mission, which means mission is multi-directional, mission is to everywhere from everywhere. We journey with our sisters and brothers around the world as they journey with us, sharing one another's hopes, dreams, pain, and joys. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ are engaged in one of the most exciting models of church unity, and it is out of that model that we have come together to share in a common witness in mission through Global Ministries.

After decades of ecumenical dialogues, General Assembly/Synod resolutions, and many joint work experiments, in 1996 Global Ministries became a formal partnership in mission in which the Division of Overseas Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and Wider Church Ministries of the United Church of Christ share common persons in mission (missionaries), common home-based staff, common budget, common programs/projects, and common administration and governance in our presence and witness throughout the global community. At present, Global Ministries has a 46 member board of directors, including 20 members

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representing the different areas where we are engaged in ministry beyond our national boundaries: Africa, Middle East/Europe, Southern Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

The Common Global Ministries Board of Directors (CGMB) is led by two co-chairs, who also serve respectively as the chair of the Disciples' Division of Overseas Ministries Board and the UCC Wider Church Ministries Board; our home-based work is conducted mostly from two locations – the Disciples Center in Indianapolis, Indiana, and the UCC Church House in Cleveland, Ohio; all of our persons in mission serve on behalf of both denominations; and our daily operation and programs are overseen by two co-executives: the President of the Division of Overseas Ministries (based in Indianapolis), and the Executive Minister of Wider Church Ministries (based in Cleveland). Therefore, I am participating in this dialogue both as president of the Disciples' Division of Overseas Ministries and also as co-executive of Global Ministries. My co-executive at the Church House in Cleveland is the Rev. Cally Rogers-Witte, executive minister of Wider Church Ministries.

These days, Global Ministries is engaged in mission in over 90 countries in partnership with approximately 270 churches and ecumenical organizations or institutions. One hundred-thirty persons in mission are currently ministering in 50 countries in one of the following appointment categories: fully-supported missionaries (3-4 year appointments with a possibility of renewal); Global Mission Interns (opportunities for mostly young people immediately after completing college education, for 1-3 years, without a possibility of renewal); short-term volunteers (less than 1 year); long-term volunteers (a year or longer); and overseas associates (Disciples/UCC members serving in a valid ministry, but affiliated with other organizations).

For Global Ministries, our fundamental mission commitment is “to a shared life in Christ, and to an ecumenical global sharing of resources and prophetic vision of a just, sustainable and peaceful world order, joining with God’s concern for the poor and oppressed.” (CGMB Standing Rules, IV). Just four years ago, our Board of Directors defined and adopted *Critical Presence* as the strategic approach for the accomplishment of all aspects of Global Ministries’ mission, “always relying on the leading of God’s Spirit and responding in faith to the challenge of a rapidly changing world.” We understand *Critical Presence* “to be timely and appropriately meeting God’s people and creation at the point of deepest need: spiritually, physically, emotionally, and/or economically.”

The adoption of Critical Presence as a Global Ministries strategic approach in mission was not a decision made overnight or as a result of a 2-hour committee meeting, but the product of an evolution or discernment process which began more than 15 years ago, even before the formal establishment of the Common Global Ministries Board.

Specifically, that discernment process began when, in 1993, and in a joint effort between staff and Board of Directors, 5 Guiding Principles were established to serve as a basis for our *common_Disciples/UCC* mission work overseas. In these five Guiding Principles, the following commitments are emphasized:

1. Within the covenantal bounds with partner churches and ecumenical bodies throughout the world, we commit ourselves in Christ to share life, resources and needs.
2. As part of the ecumenical church and in response to particular historical and geographical contexts, we affirm our commitment to share persons in mission.
3. We commit ourselves to discovering and sharing existing new ways to sing the song of faith, . . . hearing, telling and participating in the story of God's love in Jesus Christ.
4. Relying upon God's grace, we commit ourselves to share in God's healing of God's continuing creation.
5. Recognizing the freedom of God's Spirit to act in diverse ways, we commit ourselves to engage in dialogue, witness and common cause with people of other faith and movements with whom we share a vision of peace, justice and the integrity of creation.¹

With the establishment of these five Guiding Principles, it became clear that Disciples' and UCC's mission is not only to give, to help, to send, to teach, to facilitate, . . . but also to receive, to be ministered to and to learn. "Sharing" and "acompañamiento" (that is, being there in various forms and modes of presence) have become key terms in our understanding and interpretation of what mission means. As it was agreed in 1981 in one of the Disciples' documents that inspired the creation of Global Ministries,

We respect the integrity of other churches in the United States and Canada, as well as around the world. (We) assume that the basic ‘planting’ of the church has been accomplished – that is, the foreign missionary movement established the church in every continent, in nearly every nation. An era of ‘world mission’ now exists in which the churches in each country and place in the world must engage in witness and service appropriate to that place. The churches in all parts of the world have different gifts to share with the rest of the Christian community. Finding ways to share mutually in common tasks is crucial for the future of the church and the faith.²

It is based on that rationale that the Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ do not establish today Disciples or UCC churches overseas, but instead work hand-in-hand with established churches and ecumenical organizations/institutions. In some instances, we work in partnership with national churches that were, indeed, established a long time ago by our respective mission agencies, or boards, but which are now autonomous church expressions; but in most instances, our presence and witness overseas occur in partnership with united churches, as well as with Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, Catholics, Pentecostals, ecumenical council of churches, and other faith expressions.

After the approval of the five Guiding Principles in 1993, we assumed that was enough to really guide our mission work for many, many years; however, soon we began to realize that more than that was needed. For that reason, four years later (1997), three Strategic Directions were adopted as our first attempt to define some priorities for Global Ministries, but within the parameters of the five Guiding Principles that were established four years before. In this new phase in our Global Ministries journey and discernment process, the following priorities became evident:

1. The need to nurture communities and relationships (through persons in mission, partnerships and programs) which value the integrity and worth of each person and which express God’s love and grace;
2. The need to link local ministry with Global Ministries in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ, believing that our faith

develops through active engagement in mission and ministry, in theological and biblical reflection, and in encountering people of other faiths and movements with whom we share a vision of peace, justice and the integrity of creation.

3. The need to restore the environment and economics to the service of God, believing that the environmental and economic gifts of God are intended for the whole creation.³

It is worth mentioning that, as part of these three Strategic Directions, the local (US/Canada-based) dimension of the church's work emerges as one of the priorities of Global Ministries. Professor Eleazar Fernandez, a theologian and former member of our Board of Directors, describes that dimension in a very creative way when he affirmed that, instead of local, every congregation should be a "glocal" expression of the church and capable of thinking and engaging in mission "glocally." Professor Fernandez said that . . .

"Of course, we have always been connected globally, but globalization is making us more acutely aware that we live in a global village with shared vulnerabilities and hopes. We are globalized to the point that the global is lived locally and the local is lived globally. The slogan, "Think globally and act locally" is not that simple; neither is the reverse, "Think locally and act globally." More fittingly, I propose that we 'think glocally' and act 'glocally.' Our "glocalized" context provides a lens through which we must see the principle and practice of *Critical Presence*."⁴

It was in 2004, and as the most recent step in our Global Ministries discernment process, that our Board of Directors decided to express our overall strategic mission approach through one sole concept, namely *Critical Presence*. Our understanding was that such an overall approach will serve to guide us, not only in the implementation of each of the Strategic Directions already adopted several years ago, but in all aspects of our Global Ministries mission,

including our rationale for establishing and maintaining global partnerships, our relationship with congregations, regions and conferences in the United States and Canada, our rationale for the appointment of persons in mission, and our stewardship as it relates to administration and governance. With the adoption of *Critical Presence* as our leading strategic mission approach, Global Ministries decided to give priority to ministries of “acompañamiento” to, and with, people in critical situations and needs which may include: Pastoral ministries related to fear and hopelessness where people are desperate for meaning:

- Dangerous or life-threatening situations related to social, economic or political realities;
- Partners living in countries wherein the Christian faith is a minority faith;
- Supporting, encouraging and accompanying interfaith relations;
- Conflict transformation and resolution;
- Places where capacity-building and health care are our primary focus;
- Facilitating the engagement of local congregations and other church settings in global mission and ministry; and/or
- Exploring and implementing economic alternatives that empower the powerless within the human community, giving priority to the poorest communities and those in turmoil.

Sometimes, *Critical Presence* may simply be the result of solidarity, advocacy and/or the financial support of programs and projects responding to material needs of God’s children. In some other instances, Global Ministries’ *Critical Presence* in the world may entail acts “to create and nurture communities of resistance and hope,” as expressed by Dr. James Vijayakumar, a biblical scholar who is currently our area executive for Southern Asia. Vijayakumar states that:

The church is called to be present in this world as an alternative community that pledges its loyalty and alliance to God and God’s

empire as opposed to the Roman Empire or its contemporary manifestations. Thus, its presence in the world is critical and creative. Its *Critical Presence* is marked by its commitment and its ability to resist the designs of those empires and their implementation, and by proclaiming the vision of God's empire of righteousness, justice and peace. The church's presence is not to flow along and cope with the natural course of events, but to create and nurture alternative communities and networks of resistance and hope, ushering in peace and fullness of life for all.⁵

Critical Presence is our response today to Jesus' great commission to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20a).

Critical Presence is our Disciples and UCC way to be Christ to our neighbors and to others ... "to the ends of the earth."

We understand *Critical Presence* is also a way to fulfill, through the church's ministry, Jesus' promise of presence and accompaniment when He said: "And behold, I am with you always to end of the age" (Matt 28:20).

In terms of missionary *Critical Presence*, Global Ministries' priority is to appoint mission personnel in places where capacity-building and health care are our primary focus. We understand capacity-building as leadership and community social infrastructure development leading to self-sufficiency. In terms of our *Critical Presence* relationship with churches and ecumenical institutions/organizations throughout the world, priority is given to develop and/or maintain partnerships with those entities for which capacity-building and health care are also the primary focus.

Friends, this is in a capsule what Global Ministries means for us these days, as a common witness in mission of two North American protestant denominations. However, having said all this with excitement and enthusiasm, I do not want to conclude this presentation giving the impression that our Global Ministries' journey has been, or is always, as smooth as silk or as beautiful and inspiring as a rose garden. Although it is true that Global Ministries is a joyful journey, especially because we understand that we are responding faithfully to a call from God, it is also true that in this journey we encounter challenges every day, very serious challenges. Hiding and not sharing some of those challenges will make my contribution to this dialogue incomplete. Therefore, and among many other challenges Global Ministries

faces as we try to be faithful to our *Critical Presence* commitment these days, I would like to highlight at last two:

The first challenge we face as we try to engage in God's mission today is the reality of the world in which we live: a world in turmoil and at war; a world experiencing HIV/AIDS pandemics and other health crises; a world where racism, classism and sexism still rules; a world with an overwhelming number of victims of natural disasters; a world with hundreds of thousands of refugees; a world with countries divided as a result of embargoes and other political sanctions; increasing doubts and suspicion about the leadership role of the United States in world affairs, churches struggling to be faithful in the midst of political tension and death threats; and the tragedy caused when the wealth given by God to be shared by all of God's people, is still controlled by a few, thus causing poverty and misery everywhere.

The second challenge Global Ministries faces today does not occur abroad, but here, in our backyards in the United States and Canada, beginning with the life and vision of our congregations. In the Disciples faith community, for instance, our denominational priorities for the past few years have been: (1) to establish 1000 new congregations by the year 2020; (2) to transform (or revitalize) another 1000 current congregations; (3) to call and form new leaders, and to continue reforming current leaders; and (4) to become and anti-racist/pro-reconciling church. For Global Ministries, a *Critical Presence* challenge we currently face related to these imperatives or priorities is how to secure that those congregations being established (indeed, more than 500 in the past 5 years), those congregations to be transformed, those leaders to be called and formed, and that emerging anti-racist/pro-reconciling church of our dreams and goals become also, as a priority, expressions of a true global (or "glocal") mission church.

For Disciples and UCC, a global mission church means not only a willingness to engage in *Critical Presence* mission work and ministry beyond our national boundaries, but also to be open, in our local church experience, to allow the global church to minister with, and to, us in our own faith journey in North America; and to be open to the precious opportunity of receiving from abroad the healing and invigorating testimony of our church partners as they address their own community of faith "at the point of deepest need." A good example of what it means to allow ourselves to learn from and to be ministered to by our global partners occurred during our Board meeting last November in Cleveland, Ohio. In his address to the Board, the Rev. Patrick Villier, president of the National Spiritual Council of Churches of Haiti and one of six international representatives on our Board,

described for us what he understood was a reason why it is so difficult for the people of the United States to understand the reality of Haiti and the rest of the poorest countries of the world, and vice-versa.

“In Haiti, for instance,” he said, “we feel that we are 90% spirit and just about 10% material, but in the United States, as we perceive it, you are about 85% material and 15% spirit. That is why we do not understand each other so often; that is why we do not connect, that is why.”

Probably the most difficult challenge Global Ministries faces today is to discover ways to facilitate that the global church that exists beyond our national boundaries be allowed to trespass the privacy and security of our own church experience in North America so that the global church may be able to share with us the good news of Jesus Christ from their distant doorsteps to our own yards, our own congregations, our own seminaries, our own youth camps, and our own regional and general church structures.

These are just two of the many challenges Global Ministries faces today as we engage in a *Critical Presence* mission from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth, . . . and from the ends of the earth to our doorsteps. But, I have also to say that, for Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ, it is also a joy, a great joy, to be committed to respond to Jesus’ “great commission” in such a time as this by “timely and appropriately meeting God’s people and creation at the point of deepest need, either spiritually, physically, emotionally and/or economically.”

Endnotes

¹ CGMB Standing Rules, Section IV, Page 2.

² DOM General Principles & Policies, 198, 21.

³ CGMB Standing Rules, Section IV, 3-4.

⁴ “Critical Presence” as Good News: Meeting God’s people and creation at the point of deepest need, A College of Mission Paper, April 14, 2007, 6.

⁵ The “Great Commission” and God’s Empire, A College of Mission Paper, April 12, 2007, p. 6.



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