

Mobilizing God's People for God's Mission

To better welcome many different kinds and styles of mobilization and mobilizers to GMC2015, this paper offers a simple but clear idea of mission, along with a broad, descriptive definition of mobilization emerging from scripture and practice. Leaders from several countries worked together to produce this paper, which will likely be improved in later versions. The lead author is Steven C. Hawthorne. Please do not publish without permission. Send inquiries and suggestions to steve@waymakers.org. Version 2.1 October, 2015

1. The necessity of mobilizing

We rightly confess with ancient creeds that the church is apostolic in nature.¹ It has been said that the church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning.² While it is the nature of the church to be on mission with God, it is rarely, if ever, natural and automatic that Christians venture into costly mission endeavor without the teaching, challenge, counsel and encouragement of other Christians.³ When Christians intentionally inspire, instruct, mentor or equip fellow Christians to become engaged and fruitful in His mission, they are doing the work of mobilizing.⁴

The work of mobilization is normal and essential—as important as catechism, discipling or spiritual formation. Those who serve as mobilizers often see themselves contributing to the entire process of how Christians and churches mature to be and to do all that Christ is calling them to live, to practice and to accomplish.

The term mobilization⁵ is sometimes used in a narrow sense to describe the work of recruiting and training specialized, cross-cultural mission workers. Although this is common in some circles, we use the idea of mobilization in its broadest sense of helping God's people to move with God in His mission.⁶ The idea of getting God's people to “move with” God is a useful analogy to describe how Christians participate with God as He fulfills His mission,⁷ regardless of their location or vocation.

2. God Himself pursues His mission

The phrase, “the mission of God,” refers to the purposive work of God Himself, initiating, enacting and fulfilling His mission.⁸ The Father sends His Son,⁹ giving His Spirit, impelling and empowering His people to co-work with His Son to fulfill His mission. The goal of mission is a relational consummation—that God Himself would be loved and served by a worshiping people drawn from all the peoples of the earth.¹⁰ God has purposed to call to Himself, by the power of the gospel, movements of loving obedience to Christ among all peoples.¹¹ Through these movements He has promised to bring forth transforming blessing amidst all nations and places for His glory.¹²

3. God fulfills His mission with His people

God involves His people in His mission in two ways: First, by His enabling, sending grace,¹³ Christ sends apostolic laborers to work with Him to bring forth Christ-following movements in every people. This part of mission must be fulfilled so that the full family of humankind—some from every people—is gathered to the Father.¹⁴

Second, by Christ's life-giving power, God intends that Christ-following communities become His long-promised blessing, bringing forth tangible realities of righteousness, peace and sustained evangelism for His glory.¹⁵ As God's people pursue this aspect of mission they seek to abound in good deeds in every dimension of life, society and the created order.¹⁶

Accomplishing the task of establishing Christ-following movements in every people has a strategic priority since the inception of such movements is necessary to bring forth the ongoing blessing and fruit of Christ's Lordship.¹⁷ At the same time, encouraging God's people to abound in good works of blessing has a crucial primacy of glorifying God among all.

4. God entrusts mission to His people

God calls His people to co-work with Him in mission. He has revealed His global purpose to His people by the deeds, promises and commands recorded in the Scriptures.¹⁸ Christ's commission is even more compelling when it is seen as confirming God's ancient promises. Since the initial formation of God's people, mission has always been an empowering gift from God to His people.¹⁹ His promise of blessing entrusts them with responsibility and hope. God calls people, not merely to be utilized as tools for a task, but He calls them to Himself in collaborative relationship²⁰ so that they will bear fruit for their joy and His glory.²¹

God entrusts specific assignments, stewardships, visions and dreams, along with His enabling spiritual power, to particular people and churches.²² God's people in every generation have contributed toward the fulfillment of God's mission. God excludes no church or Christian from this apostolic, sending grace. God, as Lord of the harvest, orchestrates collaboration among the diverse streams, traditions and generations of mission workers.²³

5. The identity of mobilizers

Who does the work of mobilization? Mobilizing takes place in numerous ways, often done by people who may not recognize their work as mobilization. For example, mobilization for mission is part of the work of any parent or pastor as they nurture and exhort Christians to fulfill their highest calling.²⁴ Whenever elders, deacons, teachers and other leaders serve their churches well, they are working, in part, to mobilize their congregations for mission.²⁵

Even though God desires everyone to encourage others to effective mission, He assigns specialized work to particular leaders to mobilize God's people for mission. Referring to them as "mobilizers" is a recent designation for an ancient practice with rich biblical warrant.²⁶

God endows each of His people with enabling, sending grace. "But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Ephesians 4:7). Christ enriches His church with servants who are gifted to equip and to encourage every Christian to fulfill their work in His mission. Each of the five roles mentioned in Ephesians 4:11-12—apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, pastoral and teaching—are important aspects of mission mobilization. Apostolic ministry in the Ephesians 4 context involves the enlisting and equipping of other apostolic workers. Prophetic ministry can be understood in the biblical tradition of servants who call God's people to return to their primary calling in God's purpose.²⁷ In similar ways, many who specialize in evangelistic, pastoral or teaching ministries intentionally multiply their ministries to equip all of God's people to serve well in fulfilling God's global purpose.

6. The work of mobilizing

Mobilizing is the process by which people become fruitfully engaged in the mission of God to the world. Mobilizers find ways to encourage, challenge and equip Christians of every age and calling to be fruitful in the part of global mission that God has given them.

Mobilizers always seek to develop a sustained and growing motivation that cultivates a passionate love for God as the source of compassionate care for people. Most mobilizers, however, understand the work of mobilization as a process that involves more than matters of motivation. The process of mobilization has been defined in several ways, with different suggested sequences of learning, maturity or preparation. Such schemes have been helpful to some mobilizers to analyze needs, to make plans, or to evaluate progress.

Since education, organization and mission practices vary widely in different cultures and countries, effective mobilizers are careful to find culturally appropriate ways to serve their churches. Within almost any scheme of the process of mobilization, and in the midst of diverse cultures, the work of mobilizing can usually be seen as flourishing in three broad categories:

a. Mobilizers build vision: To understand and to embrace God's global purpose

Mobilizers help build awareness of God's global purpose in a variety of ways: recounting the biblical mandate and the great story of God's purpose, recounting the history of the advance of the global Christian movement and introducing believers to their fellow Christians of other cultures and countries.²⁸ Mobilizers also work carefully to research trends, populations and realities of the world so that others will clearly articulate present-hour challenges and present the needs and opportunities of mission in creative and compelling ways.²⁹ Mobilizers are often busy organizing informed, focused and sustained prayer.³⁰ All of this work builds a visionary paradigm of seeing God's work in the world that instills biblical hope. This is mobilization by education.

b. Mobilizers encourage fruitfulness: To develop maturity and effectiveness

Some mobilizers specialize in helping people in practical ways to be effective, persistent and fruitful, whatever their role might be—as those who cross cultural barriers to serve others, or as those who prayerfully support those who do. Mobilizers recognize that disciplines of community, simplicity, generosity, learning, and prayer are necessary regardless of one's role in the work of mission. Along with visionary knowledge must come cultivated zeal and practical wisdom. Mobilizers can be found coaching, challenging, guiding, mentoring or monitoring—whatever it takes to continue to press for excellence in the work of mission. This is mobilization by encouragement.

**c. Mobilizers enlist participation and engender partnership:
To engage and train in specific mission work.**

Mobilizers often focus on inviting people to be involved with specific mission ventures, projects and agencies. Enlisting participation with specific mission efforts can open strategic connections, develop effective partnerships and help form needed mission structures. Mobilizers often highlight the most undone or difficult aspects of mission.³¹ Such recruiting is most effective if potential workers are also introduced to appropriate training and apprenticeship opportunities. This is why mobilizers are often involved in training and short-term ventures in specific mission endeavors.³² This is mobilization by practical equipping and engagement.

¹ Jesus Himself was the first to describe His people as apostolic, or “sent”: “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). The church is sent by and with Jesus. One of the first confessions of the church named Jesus, “the Apostle...of our confession” (Hebrews 3:1).

² Brunner, Emil, 1931, *The Word and the World*, London: Student Christian Movement Press, p. 108.

³ Paul could confidently say that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself,” and that He had committed to the church the ministry and the gospel of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). But despite this gift of mission, described as “the grace of God,” and even though the church was “working together” with God, Paul knew that he needed to urge and challenge the Corinthian church “not to receive” God’s sending grace “in vain” (2 Corinthians 6:1-2).

⁴ In the scriptures we often see God’s people challenged to be active in praying, giving and engaging in gospel endeavor: 2 Corinthians 8:6-7, Philippians 4:2-3, Colossians 4:17, 2 Thessalonians 1:11, 1 Timothy 2:1-4, Titus 3:14, and 3 John 8.

⁵ The word “mobilize” (or British spelling “mobilise”) is derived from French/Latin terms, *moveo*, meaning “to move,” and *mobilis*, meaning “moveable.”

⁶ Jesus said of His mission activity, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working” (John 5:17).

⁷ Jesus said, “He who sent Me is with Me” (John 8:29).

⁸ Numerous texts declare God as initiating all that we now regard as mission, among them, “Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). Or, “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things” (Romans 11:36).

⁹ “When the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son” (Galatians 4:4). See also 1 John 4:9, 14, and many more.

¹⁰ The Father seeks people to be “His worshipers” (John 4:23). Because the Son has purchased people from every tribe and tongue to become worshipers (Revelation 5:9-10), God will be served by some from every people (Revelation 7:9, 15, 22:3-4).

¹¹ Our Lord mandates that groups of disciples publically wear His name and be trained to obey Him (Matthew 28:19-20). Paul’s version of the commission is not greatly different: “to bring about the obedience of faith among all the peoples for His name’s sake” (Romans 1:5).

¹² Genesis 28:14, Psalm 72:17-19, 67:1-7, among many others.

¹³ Paul often speaks of grace without any reference to salvation, but to apostolic sending. For example, the familiar text, “by the grace of God I am what I am” refers to God giving Him a specific grace, which moved Paul to exert Himself all the more vigorously so that “His grace toward me” would “not prove vain” but instead bear fruit (1 Corinthians 15:9-10). See also, Romans 1:5, 15:15-16, Ephesians 3:2, 6-8, Galatians 2:9, Philippians 1:7, 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12, 1 Timothy 1:12-14, and 2 Timothy 1:8-9. The idea is not limited to Paul. See Acts 14:26, 15:40 and 1 Peter 4:10-11.

¹⁴ The decision of the council in Acts 15 was shaped by the confidence that God had begun “taking from among the peoples (Greek: *ethne*, as in ethnic peoples) a people (Greek: *laos*, a worshipping people) for His name” (Acts 15:14).

¹⁵ See Genesis 18:19, in which Abraham heard that the blessing of the nations had much to do with “his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice.” The promised blessing brings glory to God because the generosity and justice are God-wrought realities: “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed” (2 Corinthians 9:8).

¹⁶ Such fruitfulness is not automatic. Note how Paul presumes unfruitfulness unless God’s people are trained and engaged to serve: “Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unfruitful” (Titus 3:14).

¹⁷ Those who place their faith in Christ become part of God’s family, but also become Abraham’s sons and daughters (Galatians 3:6-9). They inherit the promise and can become the fulfillment of the promise (Galatians 3:29) that all peoples will be blessed in both tangible and spiritual ways. Abraham’s descendants in our day must still be encouraged, challenged and equipped, that is to say mobilized, to work with God to bring forth God’s intended blessing.

¹⁸ Paul refers to Isaiah’s promise that God’s people would become a “light for the nations” as more than a mere promise, but a clear imperative: “For so the Lord has commanded us” (Acts 13:47). In Romans 16:25-27, Paul says that God was

able and willing to engage and strengthen people in the work of the gospel among all peoples in accord with the word of the prophets and “the command of the eternal God.”

¹⁹ From the promise to Abraham that he would be blessed in order to be a blessing (Genesis 12:2-3), to the prayer of Jesus that He had accomplished the work that the Father had given to Him (John 17:4), to Peter writing about being “good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10), mission is primarily a generous gift from God rather than a burdensome obligation or ethical duty. Effective mobilizers work in accord with God’s ways of entrusting mission.

²⁰ Paul told the Corinthians, “you were called into fellowship with His Son” (1 Corinthians 1:9). God calls people to Himself more than He calls to a task. Jesus called the twelve “so that they would be with Him and that He could send them out” (Mark 3:14).

²¹ In John 15 Jesus shows that He regards His followers as beloved friends (John 13:1, 15:14-16), expected to bear fruit for their joy (15:11) and for His glory (15:8).

²² Paul speaks of a distinctive grace in the work of the gospel being given to the entire Philippian church (Philippians 1:7, 29). In the stewardship parables of Jesus (Matthew 25:14-30, Luke 12:41-48, 19:11-27) the master apportions investments and assignments according to ability, “to each one his task” (Mark 13:34).

²³ Times and seasons vary throughout the generations. By God’s hand, history moves incessantly, but unevenly, toward fulfillment. The certainty of harvest means “that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together” (John 4:36). Recognizing how God-given assignments may differ (Galatians 2:9), or may be shared (Philippians 1:7) means that fruitful collaboration in mission should be expected. “Others have labored and you have entered into their labor” (John 4:38).

²⁴ Paul regarded Timothy as his “beloved son” (1 Timothy 1:2) who had become a fellow “soldier of Christ Jesus” in the gospel (2:3-4). But he also recognized how the faith of parents and grandparents had contributed to Timothy’s maturity as a mission leader (1 Timothy 1:5).

²⁵ John writes to church leaders about the joy of beholding spiritual children “walking in the truth” (3 John 2-3). But he goes on to urge that they work to send missionaries “in a manner worthy of God” so that they would become “fellow workers with the truth” (3 John 5-8).

²⁶ Without question Jesus gave us the best example of mobilizing. But Barnabas stands out as a mobilizer. Recognizing God at work drawing many Gentiles to Himself, Barnabas began exhorting them so that many more followed Christ (Acts 11:21-24). He brought Saul to Antioch (11:25-26) to help in the harvest. Barnabas helped form an environment of “prophets and teachers” and prayer, in which Paul matured as an apostle, and became clear about “the work to which” he was “called” (13:1-3).

²⁷ There are several examples of prophetic servants calling God’s people back into His purpose, some with negative outcomes, as in Jeremiah’s case (see Jeremiah 7:25-26); and some advancing God’s purpose as in the case of Haggai (see Haggai 1:1-14).

²⁸ Jesus recounted the story of God’s purpose in all the scriptures (Luke 24:26-27, 32, 44-47, and Acts 1:3). James at the Jerusalem council said that God’s work of forming a worshiping people from all the nations (Acts 15:14) was something that “the words of the Prophets agree [Greek: *symphoneo*, or “symphonize”]” (Acts 15:15). In Romans 15:9-12 Paul put together four statements from prophetic writings in a sequence that forms a narrative of God’s purpose being fulfilled among the nations.

²⁹ Pauline letters show that there were messengers sent (2 Corinthians 8:23) to convey the latest developments, what Paul called the “progress of the gospel” (Philippians 1:12). Paul said that it was important for sending churches to “know about my circumstances, how I am doing” (Ephesians 6:21) by up-to-date reports. Paul wanted to inform churches “about the whole situation” of his mission work (Colossians 4:8).

³⁰ See Romans 15:30, Acts 13:1-3, 2 Thessalonians 3:1-2, and many more.

³¹ Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in part to mobilize the churches there to be directly involved in the mission to Spain (Romans 15:20-24).

³² Jesus sent His followers more than once on short-term training ventures: The twelve were sent in Matthew 10. The 70 were sent in Luke 10.