# THE FUTURE OF MISSION 3: PHOTOGRAPHS AND LANGUAGES

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How group photographs and the use of language reflects some changes in the mission world.
**Category:** Observations

You can't have a missionary conference without a group photo; and what a palaver that can be! Generally, the photo is arranged for the start of a meal or coffee break, which ends up being severely curtailed by the time that everyone gathers, arranges themselves in rows, smiles for the camera and so on. Thankfully, the advent of digital cameras and online photo sharing means that we no longer have the older rigmarole where everyone in the group would want a photograph taken with their camera. The poor photographer would find themselves having to deal with thirty different cameras, most of which he didn't know how to use. Happy days!

However, these days there is a new trend. After the photograph is taken, all of those working in "creative access" situations, step away and another picture is taken; one which can be used publicly. Many missionaries work in places where they cannot be open about their Christian motivation and because of this they don't want to be photographed in contexts where they can be clearly identified with mission work. This has always been an issue, but today, it is veryÂ easy to post pictures on Facebook, Instagram and what have you, and this poses a real danger to people who are working in potentially hostile situations. If you are working as a doctor or lecturer in order to gain access to a country where the government is opposed to Christianity, the last thing you want is to be tagged in a photograph of a meeting of church-planters on Facebook!

These days we all have cameras in our pockets and we can take pictures and share them around the world at the touch of a button. Because of this, many missionaries are going to be increasingly unwilling to have their photographs taken.

When we first arrived in Ivory Coast in 1988, about half of our colleagues were native English speakers and the others - Germans, Swiss and Dutch - tended to speak English just as well as the mother tongue speakers. Because of this, our business and fellowship meetings tended to be held in English. However, as more and more Ivorians joined our group, we found ourselves facing the ironic situation that local people were having to learn a foreign language in order to be involved in a mission in their home country.

This issue came up in our conference discussions, yesterday and it is more complex than you might have first thought.

Mission teams are almost always composed of people from a number of nationalities; so they have to choose a common language to work in. Very often we default to the *de-facto* international language, English. However, if we are are serious about partnership with local Christians and churches, then we will carry out our business in a language which allows them to participate. Generally, this will be the national language of the country in which we are working. However, though this makes good sense, there are a number of problems.

- It is difficult; sadly, some missionaries don't achieve a level of competence in local languages that allow them to participate in business meetings.

- It poses organisational problems; most mission agencies work in a number of countries and if business in country A is carried out in a different language to country B, it can make international cooperation very difficult.
- It means that short-term missionaries will find it difficult to fit into the group.

However, these problems are related to the internal comfort and function of the mission; not our partnership with local people.

The church is growing around the world and mission movements are springing up across the globe. If historic mission agencies want to be involved in what God is doing in the future, they will need to adapt their way of doing business to the new reality of the church. Perhaps one indication of the extent to which we are willing or able to adapt to the changing world is the language in which we do our business.