# WHAT MISSION ISN'T

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Some thoughts about things that must be present if we are going to call an activity "mission".
**Category:** Observations

Over the years, I've written a fair bit about mission, though I don't think that I've ever tried to define it. To be honest, coming up with a clear, concise and inclusive statement describing mission is quite difficult. In my thesis, I reviewed a number of well-known definitions of mission and found that in some areas they were contradictory. Thankfully, the structure of my thesis meant that I didn't need to come up with a definition of my own.

Rather than try and say what mission is, I thought it might be interesting to say what it isn't. I've got a list of three things which I would say are indispensable if something is to be called mission.

**Intention or Relocation**

Matthew talks about making disciples of all nations, Luke says that we are to witness to Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth and in John, Jesus talks about "sending" his disciples. Each of these involves some degree of travel, it may not be far, but you do have to intentionally go somewhere. I think we make a mistake when we equate mission with travelling half-way around the world to some exotic location, but we can't escape the notion that there has to be some intentional crossing of boundaries.

*Mission involves us going to people (whether 100 metres or 10,000 kilometres away), it does not mean inviting people to come to us.* There is nothing intrinsically wrong about inviting people to come to us; churches up and down the country will be inviting friends and neighbours to join them at carol services this month; I'm all in favour of that. However, it isn't mission.

**Making Disciples**

Matthew talks about making disciples and teaching people to obey Jesus' teaching, while Luke says that we should bear witness to Jesus. For something to be called mission, it must involve intentional, verbal proclamation about Jesus. This can be in the form of evangelism or it could be teaching and training pastors; helping people take their first baby-steps as disciples or helping more mature disciples learn how to serve others. Likewise, the teaching could be by spoken word, in written form or some combination of the two using broadcast media.

The key here is that there has to be some sort of intentional, verbal proclamation. It is not enough to say that "people will see the love of Jesus in our actions". If you are not overtly telling people about Jesus then it isn't mission. This doesn't mean that everyone doing Christian relief and development work, or medical work has to do evangelism, too, but it does mean that in some way overt teaching about Jesus is a central part of the overall package and not just an addon.

Serving the poor, doing relief and development work, advocating for women and children, fighting climate change and all the rest are all good things. However, done on their own, without a commitment to consciously seeking to make disciples, they do not constitute mission.

**Unity**

Mission is about witnessing to Jesus and making disciples. It isn't about promoting our own national, cultural, doctrinal or denominational issues. One of the tragedies of mission is the way that we have exported historic and denominational divisions from the West into the rest of the world. I once tried counting how many different America baptist denominations there were in Ivory Coast and I gave up. With all due respect to my Baptist missionary friends, the Ivorians don't need to inherit our denominational differences - they are perfectly capable of producing their own, over time. Jesus call to unity in John 17 is important; he tells us that it is our unity which proves the truth of our message. I realise that the issues are complex and that theological differences have deep and significant roots, but we can't simply ignore what Jesus tells us to do because it is difficult to do otherwise. If evangelical mission agencies and denominations cannot work together in unity, then I struggle to see how we can call what they are doing mission in any meaningful sense.

There is plenty of scope for working in unity; it can involve joint projects or working separately, but with clear common goals or aims. What it cannot and should not involve is competition and recreating structures in a country or area.