

## PRESBYTERIAN WORLD MISSION AND MULTICULTURALISM

Matters of the Word: *Scripture teaches us valuable mission practices*

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1. In small groups, read Numbers 10:29-30 together.

This passage records a little-known encounter between Moses and his brother-in-law Hobab from the land of Median. It is a story that helps us to see a better way to share the good news, one that models mutual respect and interdependence.

Hobab and Moses had just come from the community of the Midianites, a desert people, who like many people today, were looking for some measure of independence, autonomy, and freedom to be themselves. When Moses invited Hobab to join the Israelites and share in the blessings God had for them, Hobab replied, "I will not go. I will depart to my own land and to my own kindred."



Why such a reply? Listen again to what Moses is *really* saying to Hobab. He is basically saying, "We've got it all. God is our possession; but if you come with us, do things our way, joining our community, then we will treat you well and share the blessings God gives us."

Hobab's response is not so surprising. He is being asked to leave everything that has been important to him – his kindred, his land, and his hopes and aspirations, both as an individual and as a member of a community. He is being asked to give it all up and join Israel and follow Israel's God. According to this passage, Israel's God doesn't even make any promises to him. The promises, as he hears Moses describe them, were made to Moses and Moses' people. Hobab only has Moses' word that God – and Moses – will be nice to him.



Sometimes this has been the way we have approached mission and presented the gospel to other people. Intentionally or unintentionally, we may seek to reproduce our culture, our kind of church, and even our style of worship. And it works the other way, too. Some people may want to be Christian because, after all, the missionary has a car, a camera, a laptop. They may think, "If I hang out with the missionary, maybe I will get these things, too."

Over the years, the Presbyterian Church has become increasingly aware that this type of approach can encourage dependency and inequality. As a result, we began to emphasize a partnership style of mission that promotes interdependence and equality. Our goal is to give the gospel a chance to put down roots in a different culture and to develop churches that will be part of that culture with a theology that will respond to their needs and concerns—which may be very different from ours.

2. Now read Numbers 10:29-32 together.

Listen to how Moses responds. When Hobab says, "No, I don't think so. I will stay here with my kindred, my culture, my traditions," Moses replies: "Do not leave us, for you know where we should camp in the wilderness and you will serve as eyes for us." Moses realizes that there were things in Hobab's tradition and culture that the Israelites needed if they were going to make it to the promised land. There was a part of the journey that Moses and his people couldn't make, unless the people of the desert walked with them. Moses had come to the point of realizing that, "we are in this together. None of us is going to experience God's blessing in the promised land unless we learn how to enrich one another.



The church today is approaching mission with this commitment to interdependence. Mission is not just sending help to poor, needy people in other countries. The churches around the world can offer us things we need in order to enrich our worship and our Christian life. They can be the eyes we need to perceive all that God is doing in the world and to help us understand our part, our place in God's kingdom.

One of the exciting things today is the way in which people in other parts of the world are indeed becoming the eyes for the rest of us, offering us fresh perspectives on the message of the gospel. Sisters and brothers from Latin America, Asia and Africa – neighbors from across the globe or across town -- have often experienced faith journeys that are radically different from ours. They may be able to share a theology that is envisioned with new eyes – the eyes of the poor, the eyes of women, the eyes of different racial, ethnic and cultural outlooks. These interpretations do not necessarily reject the biblical scholarship of historically dominant traditions; more frequently they can enrich, amplify, build upon and transform other interpretive approaches.

**Questions for discussion:**

1. Think about the ways that you, your congregation or your presbytery has encountered "outsiders". In what ways have you been like the Moses of verse 29, inviting others to be like you? In what ways have you echoed the Moses of verse 31, valuing what other could bring to a common table?
2. If God calls you to mission, what might you have to leave behind? Think not only about material goods, but also attitudes and behaviors. What would you find most difficult to give up? What would you look forward to?
3. Where have you encountered a person from a culture other than your own? In what ways has such an encounter opened your eyes to new perspectives or new ways of thinking? Have you had cross-cultural encounters that have given you fresh insights into scripture or helped you to discern anew God's call in your life? How did you feel? What did you gain from the experience? What did you feel you offered to the person from another culture?

*Adapted from a Bible study by Alice Winters, a Presbyterian Mission Co-worker in Columbia*