Mission in Praise, Word and Deed

Reflections on the Past and Future of Global Mission

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Part One

Mission in Praise

As we contemplate God's global mission and our part in it, Scripture guides us to keep praise in the forefront of our minds. In Psalm 67:1–3, the psalmist prays: "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!" In order to rightly engage in God's mission, praise and worship of God must be paramount. As John Piper observes, "worship … is the fuel and goal of missions, [since] you can't commend what you don't cherish." Indeed, "Missionaries will never call out, 'Let the nations be glad!' if they cannot say from the heart, '*I rejoice* in the LORD … *I will be glad and exult in you*, I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.'"[1]

As those participating in the mission of God, we begin with the end in mind, and this glorious end of global worship catalyzes praise in the here and now, which in turn guides and girds our gospel work. In this section, we explore the idea of ethnodoxology—a foretaste of heaven involving those from all nations, tribes, and tongues expressing their praise of God in ways that stem from and resonate with the artistic vernacular of their own culture rather than that of the missionary. We also look at trauma care through artistic expression that can bring healing and realign the sufferer with faith and hope in God. Finally, we are reminded that those engaged in mission work must remain aware of the reality of spiritual warfare and the need for a robust prayer life to stay connected to and empowered by Jesus, who "appeared … to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8 ESV) and who makes this promise to those who seek to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19 ESV) as he commanded: "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20 ESV).

1 Piper, *Nations Be Glad*, 35–36.

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Chapter 1

The Future of Mission Is Local Worship

Robin P. Harris

My friend Sargylana was born in a remote region of Siberia—an area famous for its powerful shamans with deep roots in Sakha culture and animist religion. The Sakha people throughout the region have lived for countless generations in fear of these shamans, including their memorials and tombs. Sargylana is a soft-spoken, intelligent Sakha woman gifted in languages. She became a Christian while studying for a master's degree, and after graduating, was asked to help translate the Bible into Sakha.

Sargylana asked my friend Vera, a Ukrainian missionary, to bring some of her team to visit Sargylana's home village. Vera and her coworkers were the only believers who had ever visited this area other than Sargylana herself on her visits home.

Vera told me how when they arrived at Sargylana's village, her family greeted them with typical Sakha hospitality—a table groaning with all kinds of food. They insisted that the missionaries try the raw fish and the bear fat: "It's so good for you!" In common Siberian fashion, the missionaries sat around and sang after the meal. But the local Sakha had never heard these songs before—Christian songs in their own Sakha language. The family video-recorded the whole event.

Vera told me, "We could tell that their hearts had been touched when they began to flood us with questions." Sargylana's brother wanted to know how to repent, how to live after repentance, and if there was a need to stop feeding the spirit of the fire. Her father asked about creation and God as Creator. They both wanted to know about baptism: what is baptism, how do you do it, and what is its significance? The father and son eventually made a plan to visit the capital city, where Sargylana was living, to learn more.

Meanwhile, in a village not far from the capital, Sargylana's aunt Dunya got sick. Dunya called Sargylana and said, "I'm sick, so I'm coming into town and you will take me to the shaman." She had a very strong will and

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would not take no for an answer. Sargylana didn't want a conflict with her and came to Vera to pray together for wisdom in the situation. For several days they prayed. God answered in a very special way: the weekend Dunya was supposed to arrive ended up being the same time that Sargylana's father and brother were in town to find out more about God!

So Vera and Sargylana and her family met with Dunya and showed her the video they had just made in the village. The Christian songs in Sakha touched her very deeply. Sargylana also read to her from the New Testament in the Sakha language that she had been translating. Dunya's response to the singing and the joyful faces of the Christians was to change her mind—she didn't want to go to the shaman anymore. She said, "I love their songs—you will take me to *those* people!" Sargylana was delighted to do so!

They sang many songs, shared a meal together, and gave Dunya a New Testament and recordings of Christian songs. She left the place happy and couldn't stop talking about God. More than twenty-five years later, Dunya still talks with the Lord in simple heartfelt prayers, and every Sunday, Sargylana's brother reads the word of God to his family. Heart language Scripture as well as heart music and arts have led to lasting fruit in Sargylana's family. Vera told me after this experience in the mid-90s, "I am convinced that the music of the Sakha is a key that will open doors. I look forward to the day when a host of Sakha churches exist that will 'sing a new song' to God in their own heart music and their own heart language."

From Siberia to Columbia

These events happened early in our ministry in Siberia—shortly before we came to study at Columbia International University (CIU). It was one of many events that convinced me that *the future of mission is local worship*. Globalization and the ubiquitous marketing of Christian music have resulted in many evangelical Christian churches around the world singing and imitating the musical aesthetics of translated Hillsong and Bethel music. But local congregations still have other options. In fact, there is a growing movement that is emphasizing the importance of considering local forms of arts in worship. This new movement—some are calling it a discipline, or field of study—is *ethnodoxology*.

For me, missional engagement didn't start in Siberia. I was raised as a missionary kid in Alaska and went straight into cross-cultural service after graduating from college with a music major. For most of my life, however, my identity as a musician and my identity as a missionary were completely separate. It wasn't until we moved to Siberia in my 30s that I began to think

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about how music and cross-cultural service might have some overlap, providing a true vocation for me.

We lived as a family in northern Russia over a ten-year period and I continued to visit for the next fifteen years, until just before the pandemic. Our initial years were spent in Yakutsk, in a northern Siberian region of the Russian Federation, initially as cross-cultural consultants for a church planting team that was largely comprised of Belorussian and Ukrainian missionaries (like Vera), as well as a few American and Canadian families.

Yakutsk is the coldest inhabited city on earth. During the winter months at that time, it averaged about forty below zero. We went in the mid-1990s when Russians were coming to the Lord in droves. They wanted us to work with them to help start a bi-cultural church more appropriate for the minority Sakha population. We were asked to support and advise the Ukrainian and Belorussian church planting team as they accomplished that task.

The Soviet Union had marginalized Sakha arts, language, and culture, so after its dissolution, the traditional arts and music of the Sakha experienced a widespread renaissance. However, Russian forms of music and arts continued to dominate the expressive culture of the church. Since the music and culture reflected Russian aesthetics and values, few Sakha people were drawn to the church. Sakha people thought you had to take on Russian cultural values to become a Christian, so Sakha believers were reviled for being traitors to their people. The church planters encouraged the use of Sakha language, but initially, Sakha music, dance, poetry, storytelling, and visual arts were not used or encouraged. Unfortunately, we didn't have many artists or traditional musicians in the church. It's possible that artists didn't come because their gifts and talents in their own cultural styles weren't valued. Ultimately, it's difficult to say what caused this lack, but in the early years, the church didn't have musicians and artists who could create powerful expressions of local Sakha arts.

Even our mission agency didn't know what to think of my involvement in the indigenous arts. At one point, a coworker told me, "It would be better for your ministry if you weren't a musician." So I kept my head down and simply learned all I could. Besides, I didn't really know much about *how* to even encourage the use of local worship styles. I just knew that its lack was creating a barrier to the gospel for the Sakha people in our church.

My husband Bill also had many questions about how to approach church planting in this kind of cross-cultural context. So with all these questions swirling around in our heads and a furlough coming up, we

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decided to get some training in intercultural studies. After searching for a school we felt would best address our needs, we chose Columbia International University's graduate program in Intercultural Studies. That decision, as it turned out, was God's gift to us in many ways, but our CIU experience began with a huge disappointment.

We had chosen CIU partly because we had heard that the school had a specialist and some graduate courses related to ethnomusicology in missions. Upon our arrival, however, I learned that the professor for those courses, affectionately known as "Doc O," was on sabbatical. Deeply disappointed, I decided to make the best of the situation, joining Bill in a foundational course on Anthropology, taught by Dr. Robert Priest. That course truly changed my life. The first day of class, I came home bursting with enthusiasm and told Bill, "I love anthropology! I want to do the *whole degree* in Intercultural Studies (ICS)!"

In retrospect, it was God's gift to me that ethnomusicology classes were unavailable, as I would have been content to do those without the important foundation of a master's in ICS. After graduating from CIU, I was eventually able to get good ethnomusicology training at a different school, but starting with a foundation in ICS was just what I needed. As an added bonus, Robert Priest encouraged me to do some independent studies focusing on the music and arts of the Sakha, increasing my knowledge of our Siberian context in important ways, thereby setting a strong foundation for my eventual PhD.

After our time at CIU, we returned to Siberia and I began to apply what I had learned to our work with our church, leading to more stories like Vera's. Over time, applying principles of contextualization of the arts to our work with the Sakha really changed the way they saw their identity in Christ. They began to realize that they could use many of their cultural arts to glorify God and worship him.

In 2007, I helped to catalyze the formation of an Arts Fellowship led by local Sakha believers. They planned and prayed toward a big event that was a dream come true for them—the first Sakha New Song Festival. Because most non-Christians would not be willing to go to a church building for such an event, they rented a large hall near the center of town for the festival. They sent out invitations to their non-Christian friends and relatives from all over the region, hoping to fill the hall with curious seekers.

They prayed, planned, and prepared for months in anticipation of the festival, but just two days before the event, they received some bad news. Local authorities called the festival organizers and told them, "The

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