
Cricket Mission

Y. Franklin Ishida

*Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Program Director for Asia and the Pacific
Chicago, Illinois*

Whenever Winston Persaud was scheduled to present at ELCA global mission-related events, whether it be for our global mission staff, at missionary orientations, or other mission-related forums, I would stand in front of the group prior his appearance and tell people: “Just wait. Within ten minutes of his talk, Winston will mention cricket.” And sure enough, Winston would bring up cricket, his favorite sport, in his presentation.

Linking our Christian faith with sports is not new. The Bible has several metaphors from what we may call sports to describe spiritual discipline, perseverance, and the race of faith. These are in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (the race for an imperishable crown), Hebrews 12:1 (running the race of faith with perseverance), and 2 Timothy 2:5 (an athlete must compete according to the rules). There are also verses that offer motivational insights for athletes: Isaiah 40:31 (renewed strength), Philippians 4:13 (strength through Christ), 2 Timothy 4:7 (a life of faithfulness and completion) and even from the Old Testament Deuteronomy 31:6 (a call to courage, assuring believers that God goes with them, providing strength in challenging times.)

The Christian Athlete even recommends ten Bible verses Christian athletes ought to memorize,¹ being one part of how Christians can connect with God and Jesus through our sporting actions.

Sports is a major part of North American life, from school sports such as football, soccer, track, volleyball, basketball, and gymnastics, to college and professional sports. You cannot escape the abundance of sports in our daily lives. It's on television, with perhaps more than fifty sports channels by cable carriers, including national networks such as ESPN, regional networks such as Bally Sports, and dedicated sports news channels. And if you start counting things globally, you will find hundreds of different networks available.

Unfortunately for cricket fans, the North American market doesn't have much to go on. But, in some parts of the world, cricket-only channels probably bring a larger audience than football, on a per-match basis.²

1. <https://www.thechristianathlete.com/blog/10-bible-verses-christian-athletes-memorize>

2. According to Nielsen, Super Bowl LIX made TV history with more than 127 million viewers (<https://www.nielsen.com/news-center/2025/super-bowl-lix-makes-tv-history-with-over-127-million-viewers/>)

Linking our Christian faith with sports is not new. The Bible has several metaphors from what we may call sports to describe spiritual discipline, perseverance, and the race of faith.

No, cricket is not in the Bible. And neither are there any biblical metaphors that reflect this sport. But, according to Winston, there is a deep connection between cricket and our practice of mission.

What's this about cricket and mission?

Every sport has a winner. And to win you must score: The ball in the basket; sliding into home plate; the puck slicing through the air toward the goal; the rotating body; sticking the landing on the mat; the “gooooaaalll!” These are what every fan waits for.

“But think about it,” as Winston would challenge his audiences. “Just about every sport has just one person who scores. Even in a team sport, where everyone needs to interact and work together, there is only one person who makes the actual score.”

Cricket is different, as I've learned from Winston, and as I have come to love the sport. It takes *two* to score in cricket. Runs are scored by a batter and their partner running between the two wickets. This comes as the batter hits the ball into the field; the batter and their partner run past each other to the opposite wicket, trading places; they go back and forth as many times as they can before a fielder can return the ball and attempt to get them “run out.” With every completed run, the batting team scores one run.

At all times, the two batters/runners must work in tandem, communicating, cooperating, eyeing each other as they run. This, according to Winston, is what is meant by the notion of “ac-

viewers/) while the 2023 Cricket World Cup had 1.25 billion viewers. (<https://cricketstoreonline.com/blogs/articles/cricket-events-and-global-stats-teams-viewership-and-more>)

companiment” in mission. Those working in mission, from any “side” in a mission setting, work together and in tandem. This is accompaniment.

Mission history in a nutshell

Mission has long been about practice. In many ways, “being missionary” has been an essential part of the church’s identity. At the same time, for most of history, there were no grand strategy-building retreats to set the tone for mission. There were no surveys or planning documents to set the parameters. Mission has just happened, coming from faith and a biblical foundation. As David Bosch presents it, “the Christian faith ... is intrinsically missionary.”³ People went out into the world, led by their faith in the risen Jesus Christ, to spread the gospel. They experienced a living faith, led by a messianic sending of Jesus and an understanding of the reign of God.

The apostolicity of church is another way of putting it, as Christians gave witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the saving grace of God.

Mission means the proclamation and manifestation of Jesus’ all-embracing reign, which is not yet recognized and acknowledged by all but is nevertheless already a reality. ... The reign of God is not a program but a reality, ushered in by the Easter event. The first Christians respond to this reality, which has overpowered them in the Easter experience, by mission.⁴

Bosch goes on to speak of the missionary *practice* of the church in the centuries that follow. And with this come his noted epochs, six of them, in which Christian mission has been shaped in practice.

With the danger of oversimplifying Bosch’s analysis of his missiological paradigms, these epochs are: primitive Christian; the patristic period; the Middle Ages; the Reformation; the Enlightenment; and the ecumenical era.⁵ Each of these progressed within itself as well as onward to a new epoch, matching the particular culture, communication and transportation, economic and political power, and prevalent worldviews; tied with varying theological expositions.

For example, the mission paradigms and their shifts followed trade or colonial routes, while cultural and philosophical dimensions paralleled understandings of the human self as social or individual beings. Economic and political power would dictate, along with colonial expansions, where the center of ecclesial power lies. And theological undergirding follows applications of biblical principles that went with culture, philosophy, science, economics, and power.

As an example of how mission paradigms evolved, these went from 1) the invitation of the outsider; to 2) a “holy war” toward

One reality we have seen historically has been a top-down model—a “we-them” emphasis, a parent-child relationship, a sender-receiver identity. Critiquing this comes with an understanding of the reality of a Euro-centric identity...; followed by Christians in the so-called Two-Thirds World beginning to “see themselves not as objects of mission from the West, but as agents of mission in their own right;” and ecumenism becoming increasingly global, demanding church-to-church relationships ... to be partnered instead of looking to “parent” churches or mission agencies.

the pagans and the expansion of empire; 3) joining with the colonial expansion of European forces; 4) scientific formulae that motivated sympathy, manifest destiny, and apocalyptic fear; to 5) church planting efforts and the localization of church, being a whole church living within *missio Dei*.

Coupled with these were certain biblical principles that centered during these epochs: 1) “Come and see” (John 1:39; 4:29); 2) “Go therefore and make disciples ...” (Matthew 28:19-20); 3) “Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled” (Luke 14:23) and “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is God’s saving power for everyone who believes ...” (Romans 1:16 ff); 4) “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16).

Whether we are still in an ecumenical missionary paradigm, Bosch’s final epoch, or beyond this in a post-modern world may be up for debate. But the world is evolving, and what mission is all about has seen changes. There is no end (yet). A comparison may be in asking whether, like many typical sports, mission may have arrived at some game-winning goal. In reality, however, mission never arrived at any end. It has only seen changes along the way, paradigm shifts, and new directions. At any point in history, there have been critiques of history, correctives of practice, and explorations of new ways.

Mission today

One reality we have seen historically has been a top-down model—a “we-them” emphasis, a parent-child relationship, a sender-

3. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 8.

4. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 40.

5. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 187-188.

receiver identity. Critiquing this comes with an understanding of the reality of a Euro-centric identity and model—and colonialism; followed by Christians in the so-called Two-Thirds World beginning to “see themselves not as objects of mission from the West, but as agents of mission in their own right;”⁶ and ecumenism becoming increasingly global, demanding church-to-church relationships—and hence mission—to be partnered instead of looking to “parent” churches or mission agencies.

On top of this was a theological focus that returned churches to biblical roots in understanding mission in terms of God’s call rather than based on human reality. This was a renewed understanding of an apostolic pattern or origin to mission.

Much more could be said about this new realization, but *partnership* emerged. This is an understanding of how the church, or churches, would engage *one another* in mission. The phrase “Partnership in Obedience” was coined out of this at the Whitby Conference of the International Missionary Council (IMC) in 1947. And subsequent IMC conferences eliminated distinctions between “autonomous” and “dependent” churches, “older” and “younger” churches. All churches are complete from their very first moment, as understood from the New Testament faith communities, such as in Ephesus and Corinth.

But was this truly understood or practiced this way? In any team sport, do you partner with others on the team? Or in cricket, do you partner with the other person with whom you are batting and running? There is something much deeper in relationships. Hence comes a hopefully more precise way of looking at mission.

Global realities today

Winston would sometimes talk about his own family background, Hindu Indian immigrant laborers to the British West Indies. Herein lie some realities of today’s world. A legacy of colonialism and its power dynamics, migration, economic disparities, inter-religious encounters, global communication patterns, and the evolution of human relationships. (The only unchanging thing for Winston would have been cricket. But more on this later.)

Globalization, as reflected in an increased connectedness among the peoples of the world, raises serious concerns of a market economy that spans the world, and which integrates local economies and information into a global market. Information can be exchanged much more quickly than ever before, supposedly bringing various cultures and peoples together, though not automatically producing better cross-cultural understanding or better communication.

Widespread poverty, perhaps even more prevalent than in previous centuries, has illustrated that, contrary to beliefs in trickle-down modernization, the global economy has in fact exacerbated the gaps in our society. Colonialism ended, but the emergence of numerous nation states has not brought any amount

If missio Dei and mission in the way of Jesus Christ is our identity, what is our response in today’s world? And from a Lutheran perspective, if a theology of the cross means mission as the way to the cross, how do we encounter the world as Christ encountered it? What is God up to in all this? How is God calling us to respond?

of stability, and there are images of neo-colonialism in many places, with political instability and authoritarianism, and global powers dominating economics and politics everywhere. Increased migration, refugees, and exploitation of women and children emerge as consequences that challenge our peace-loving mindset.

We continue to see great numerical growth in Christian communities in the Global South. The church in the Global North continues to experience malaise and loss of dynamism that characterized earlier paradigm periods. We know how not just mainline but even evangelical churches in North America and Europe are experiencing an unprecedented decline in numbers and influence.

If *missio Dei* and mission in the way of Jesus Christ is our identity, what is our response in today’s world? And from a Lutheran perspective, if a theology of the cross means mission as the way to the cross, how do we encounter the world as Christ encountered it? What is God up to in all this? How is God calling us to respond? These are questions Winston would certainly pose if he were standing before us.

Accompaniment

This is where cricket comes in. The two batters/runners on the pitch are not merely partners, they accompany each other. The only way to advance (in points) is to live in the world around you (the pitch, the opposing team members, the environment) and encounter the challenges (the ball being bowled toward you at more than 80 miles an hour and bouncing on the ground before hopefully batted); to swinging the bat (to meet things where they are at); and feeling your way together with your batter/runner partner, sharing your minds, signaling perhaps, in sync and with purpose, as you run, toward each other and then past to the other end. Your mutual runs make the score. You don’t merely partner: you are interdependent and in mutuality, accompanying each other with your whole self to make that run possible. This is accompaniment.

Though not unique to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

6. James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1987), 32.

America, this notion of accompaniment emerged as not just new language, but a new paradigm of mission practice.

We understand *accompaniment* as walking together in solidarity that practices interdependence and mutuality. The basis for this *accompaniment*, or what the New Testament calls *koinonia* is found in the God-human relationship in which God accompanies us in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.⁷

The church is called to be in a new relationship where the diversity of viewpoints that exist among churches is affirmed. There is room for mutual questioning and analysis of priorities and practices, with the assumption of basic transparency in dialogue. Mutual solidarity in each other's weaknesses, struggles, and mission also forms the basis for this relationship.⁸

To make this happen, though, mission is not a contract. Like in two runners/batters in cricket, you live things out together.

It is a walking together in Jesus Christ of two or more churches in equal companionship in service to God's mission. In the **walking together** on the road to Emmaus, the Lord reveals Himself to his companions. In sharing a meal, the companions experience the presence of Jesus with them. *Accompaniment* emphasizes relationships before resources. Development of programs and allocation of resources flows from how companions relate, rather than vice versa. *Accompaniment* is valued for its own sake as well as for its results. It is open-ended with no forgone conclusions. *Accompaniment* binds companions more closely together to their lord and further informs their mission.⁹

Like cricket, accompaniment is time shared. Perhaps we should here emphasize that cricket is more than the two runners/batters. The whole match—and a full test match can last five days—is more than bowling, batting, catching, running. As a batter may be out (and there are various ways in which that may happen), a new batter walks on to the pitch to take their place. This goes on until all eleven players on a team (or minus one because it always takes two to be on the pitch) are out. This is the end of an “innings,” at which time the other team is up to bat.

This is about everyone walking together. And not just walking, but also taking intervals together: breaks between innings, for drinks, and time for lunch or tea. And rain can interrupt a match to potentially extend its duration.

Accompaniment is time shared: To spend the time together to get to know one another, the strengths, weaknesses, gifts, and

The church is called to be in a new relationship where the diversity of viewpoints that exist among churches is affirmed. There is room for mutual questioning and analysis of priorities and practices, with the assumption of basic transparency in dialogue.

abilities. Accompaniment in mission is sharing the work, where the stronger partner in companionship shares the work of the weaker partner; when there is a sharing of joys and pains; sharing the work through prayer; and sharing information. It is about living with each other and speaking the truth.

Baptism

Accompaniment can be understood as a sacramental unity. *Com + panis*, eating bread together, is what we see as Jesus broke the bread in front of two disciples at their evening destination on the road in Emmaus. They recognized him and thus found their unity, their part in salvation history. In the breaking of the bread together, they had a winning run ... back to Jerusalem to proclaim the resurrection gospel.

But that event started earlier in the walk, where Jesus accompanied and asked the two disciples—who had not yet recognized him—“what things” have been going on? The two told the story, not yet knowing what they were getting themselves into. And then the still-unrecognized Jesus explains further what this “story” is all about. I have always wondered what the conversation was like, with probably the three talking, debating, and questioning each other. That walk was accompaniment, as they made the gospel story come alive little by little and finally being fulfilled in the breaking of bread.

It's like cricket, as the two runners/batters engage together to make the run. And sometimes bread-breaking moments happen during the match, to continue the accompaniment.

But it doesn't start there. We know that baptism is the starting point. At baptism, we are claimed by God to be God's child. And from that moment on, God is walking with us, accompanying us, as we accompany God—or try to—into life's journey. John Ylvisaker's song, *Born Cry*, illustrates this accompaniment. This song has been sung in my family at baptisms, weddings, funerals—events that mark the lyrics of the song and with which we are reminded of all of life that happens between those events.

Several years ago, I was asked by a pastor among the Orang Asli indigenous people of West Malaysia to perform some baptisms. I immediately responded that it was not my place to do so: I was not their pastor, I was not even from their community, culture, or country, I was an outsider. But the bishop of the church said to

7. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Mission Strategy for Latin America*, Division for Global Mission document, 1992, 9. (Emphasis in the original.)

8. ELCA, *Mission Strategy for Latin America*, 9-10.

9. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Accompaniment: A Vision for Evangelical Faithfulness in God's Mission in the 21st Century*, draft of a Division for Global Mission long-range planning document, 4. (Emphasis and italics in original.)

me: “The community has come to know you (from numerous visits there); you have come to be like their pastor, like anyone else.”

Then it struck me. As I sought to accompany this church and this particular community, in the mountains and jungles of Malaysia—even in my own limited ways, in which I thought of myself as still an outsider—that community was reaching out to me in accompaniment. They were walking with me in my journey as a pastor, in my work to represent not just a companion church, the ELCA, but as one who represented the wider global church. I was thus invited in to be a part of the beginning of a journey for a dozen new members of the church, to proclaim and live together the life given to these new children of God.

Accompaniment may be at times saying, “Wait, hold on,” as one cricket runner may indicate to the other. But accompaniment can be about the other saying, “Go for it, I want you to run with me.”

If accompaniment is a journey, I have learned to journey with the Orang Asli community. Three times now have I been asked to do baptisms, usually more than a dozen at a time. I have experienced joy as I struggled to baptize in a river for the first time and one of the men motioned to me to just dunk him in the waters. I have shared joy as a young woman—one whom I had baptized in a previous visit—told me that the older woman I had just baptized was her mother. I learned joy as these baptisms were not just a ritual, but a moment we could laugh and sing together in what could be the start of a journey that still had ahead of it the challenges of living with poverty and a Muslim-dominant government. I learned joy when I was invited to preach—at a baptismal worship—not in advance of that day, but only at that moment of the sermon time.

Accompaniment starts at the moment of baptism. At that very moment, God accompanies us into our lives, and we begin the journey of accompanying God, treacherous as that may be for us. Together with God, “mission is concerned with regaining the humanity of human beings, redeeming their alienated lives. . . . [it] produces transformation, changes, and a turning back toward the life that comes from God.”¹⁰ This is the cricket moment, where the work of walking, even running together begins.

Accompaniment, cricket, and “God’s work. Our hands.”

Everywhere I travel with my work, I hear how people love the ELCA’s tagline, “God’s work. Our hands.” This tagline was established in 2013 to mark the ELCA’s twenty-fifth anniversary, helping us celebrate our identity as a church freed in Christ to serve and love our neighbors. It has become a core part of the church’s mission because it exemplifies accompaniment. God is at work, it is *missio Dei*. We are embraced into this mission, and it becomes

our mission as well. And our hands—and much more—become our way of journeying together with God and our neighbors.

Cricket is more than a game. If you go to cricket countries, cricket is a way of life. Cricket is played by young people in dusty, empty lots of slums. Masses of people swarm to cricket matches in city stadiums. Flags are unfurled in the streets and stadiums when opposing countries go at each other. Televised cricket matches stream in restaurants, coffee shops, and bars. What had been a men’s sport now features women’s teams, who can be followed just as much as the men’s. And cricket stars, from the neighborhood kid to the national champion batter, become folk heroes. Everyone is in it together.

Accompaniment, cricket, the church at work is about our hands, our feet, our voices. This is God’s mission, and us accompanying God in our mission.

The hymn, *God’s Work, Our Hands*, illustrates this beautifully.

God’s work, our hands: working together,
Building a future, repairing the world,
Raising up homes, planting new gardens,
Feeding the hungry and shelt’ring the cold.
Bless, God, our hands as we work in your name,
Sharing the good news of your gospel.

God’s work, our feet: trav’ling together,
Following Jesus to places unknown,
walking as friends, marching for freedom,
running the race with God’s future the goal.
Bless, God, our feet as we follow your way,
Sharing the good news of your gospel.

God’s work, our voice: singing together,
praising, proclaiming to all who will hear,
praying for peace, shouting for justice,
claiming God’s love for the lost and the least.
Bless, God, our voices as we speak in your name,
Sharing the good news of your gospel.

God is at work in and around us:
Seedlings are sprouting and bread’s on the rise!
Washed and set free, humbled and honored,
Gifted by grace, we respond in God’s love.
Bless, God, our lives as we answer your call,
Sharing the good news of your gospel.¹¹

Winston loves to sing as well. May this hymn be part of Winston’s living with cricket.

10. Theo Sundermeier, entry on “Theology and Mission” in *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*, Kark Müller, Theo Sundermeier, Stephen B. Bevans, Richard H. Bliese, eds (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 441.

11. Lyrics by Wayne L. Wold for the hymn *God’s Work, Our Hands* in *All Creation Sings*. Text © 2019 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, admin. Augsburg Fortress. Reproduced by permission.