

## **Mission Research and Applied Scholarship (MRAS): A Research Project about Mission Research**

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What mission research themes are academic institutions around the world addressing? What topics are being overly addressed, and what topics are being missed? How is the sometimes erudite, “ivory tower” world of academic mission scholarship intersecting with mission research that is organizationally connected to practical, on-the-ground ministries of missionaries and mission agencies?

### **1. Project Background**

This Mission Research and Applied Scholarship (MRAS) project emerged from internal discussions in early 2017 at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS) related to the trajectory of mission research and scholarship globally. Where is rigorous research happening; what are the trends; are there priority areas that are under-researched; how do we address imbalances in the global church’s capacity to engage in mission research and disseminate knowledge? A project was proposed to gather research and publishing data from the past ten years and invite participants from mission research centres to meet, interrogate the data and plan collaborative work. Happily, the Akrophi Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture (ACI, Akropong, Ghana) agreed to co-facilitate the project.

Through numerous cycles of prayerful reflection, planning and review, it became clear that the MRAS project faces an opportunity not simply to gather data as a one-off process but to set in place a dynamic digital platform for documentation, analysis and collaboration between mission research centres globally.

### **2. Project Summary**

There is a need for a better understanding of the direction of mission research and applied scholarship in the broadly evangelical world and beyond. There is no evidence of global, regional or even national strategic intentionality in research focus – at least among academic institutions. Each researcher and institution operates largely independent of others. Furthermore, the capacity for quality mission research remains unevenly distributed in the church around the world.

This project aims to address these issues in the prayerful expectation that greater intentionality and collaboration can be brought to mission research. Accordingly the hope is to develop plans to grow the research capacity of those parts of the worldwide church that remain under-resourced. Our goal is not simply the multiplication of research and applied scholarship. Rather, we hope this work will be put to the service of the church in mission. As such, the project will include mission agencies and churches as well as mission research centres.

### 3. Problems/Opportunities Addressed

**Imbalance in mission research capacity:** With the shift in the global church's vibrancy and demographic weight to the 'majority world', considerable efforts have been made within those contexts to grow the capacity to provide theological formation by local institutions. Efforts to develop the capacity for rigorous mission research and applied scholarship have lagged behind. OCMS has been at the forefront of these efforts since its creation by leaders from Asia, Africa and Latin America in 1983. Other evangelical institutions have begun as well, sprinkled throughout Asia, Latin America, and Africa. None the less, the institutional capacity for academic mission research appears to remain largely located in North America, Europe and Oceania.

**Ignorance of mission research agenda:** There is currently no data on what mission research, nationally, regionally or globally, is being done by broadly evangelical (and beyond) institutions. There is no data on who and where research is happening, or not. So we are left to speculate on strengths, weaknesses and trends within the global mission research world.

**Lack of agreed strategic priorities:** Mission research appears to be driven largely by the interest of individual scholars or institutions. Since most mission research that is accessible is being done by 'Western' individuals and institutions, the voice of the majority church is still insufficiently shaping the global Church's research agenda. We don't know which mission themes are being most frequently studied or where there might be areas that are not being effectively addressed.

**Lack of connectedness between researchers:** Addressing the problems identified above will require better understanding of the current realities, intentional building of research capacity in some parts of the global church, and greater connectedness between key research institutions.

#### What is being done about it?

There are a number of global and regional mission research consultations. The capacity of parts of the global church to participate in these is limited, with even less ability to shape the agenda.

In particular, we have no evidence of any attempt to understand what is happening globally or regionally in academic mission research. Nor are we aware of any attempt to think strategically (at least among academic institutions) at a national, regional or global level about mission research priorities. Conversations with leading scholars around the world all confirm this has not been done.

While individual Western institutions have partnership relationships with others around the world, there appears to be no joined-up attempt at mutual empowerment and reciprocal learning for mission research capability.

### 4. Intended Project Outcomes

#### Longer term impact of this MRAS Project:

1. Identification of strengths and contributions of different players in mission research;
2. Increased ability of all parts of the global church to participate in quality mission research and scholarship;

3. Strategic prioritization of mission research at regional and global levels;
4. Increased collaboration between leading scholars and research institutes.

**Short to medium term outcomes we are anticipating include:**

1. Ability of participating institutions to track the characteristics of their own mission research and scholarly output, as well as to compare these characteristics with those of other institutions;
2. Evidenced-based understanding of where current research and scholarship is focused and by whom;
3. Identification of potential research areas needing greater attention – gaps and priorities
4. Deeper mutual understanding of and appreciation for the mission research concerns and interests of different sections of the global church;
5. Strengthened relationships and ability to connect between institutions and individuals engaged in mission research and applied scholarship;
6. Publication/dissemination of key learnings for the benefit of the wider world of Christian mission research and scholarship.

## **5. Four Development Phases**

### **Phase 1: Conception and Preparation (October 2017-March 2018)**

- ✓ Formation of a Steering Group made up of leaders from OCMS and ACI, plus Dr Nelson Jennings and Dr Kirsteen Kim;
- ✓ Elaboration of the broad contours of the project: objectives, outcomes, key components, resources etc.;
- ✓ A network of 13 regional coordinators established to facilitate global institutional participation. The world has been divided into regions in order to facilitate participation by institutions and agencies;
- ✓ Initial project funding raised (\$50,000 by Feb 2018);
- ✓ Identification of core data to be gathered by the platform from the mission research and scholarly output of participating institutions and mission agencies.
- ✓ Begin to formulate the contents of a research platform that includes:
  - Criteria of research/publication permissible to the site;
  - Research content data (analysable by key words). This would make the data collection far more versatile and multi-layered than the taxonomy developed thus far;
  - Research approach;
  - Context data: geography and date;
  - Researcher data;The platform would allow for three main functions: Documentation, analysis, and connection & collaboration.
- ✓ Identification of key mission research institutions to be included in the platform Alliance (described below)

### **Phase 2: Building Core Alliance and Construction of Platform (April 2018-November 2018)**

- Vision sharing and buy in by 8-12 leading mission research institutions distributed globally. These institutions will form the initial Platform Steering Group that will take the project forward until a pivotal consultation in November 2019 about data gathered.

- Collaborative work to finalise the main capabilities and key data areas provided by the mission research digital platform
- Agreement of the kind of research and scholarly output to be accepted on the platform.
- Design of platform. It may be possible to use a commercially available platform, but it is more likely we will need to custom-design a platform that will enable data collection, analysis and collaboration.
- Management and administration of platform agreed and put in place
- Beta-testing of platform by initial Alliance members,
- Promotion of the platform by regional coordinators to the institutions and agencies within their regions.

### **Phase 3: Generalisation of Participation (January 2019-June 2019)**

- Institutions and agencies invited to join and populate the platform. Initially data upload will be for the years 2010-2018. Once research output from these years has been uploaded, institutions and agencies will be free to populate the platform with previously completed data, backdated as far back as they wish to go;
- Establishment of consultation planning team.

### **Phase 4: Data Preparation and Consultation (July 2019 –November 2019)**

- Initial data gathering and sorting in such a way that it can be used effectively at the consultation. Some initial, broad analysis will be done prior to the consultation and papers written and circulated to participants.
- The consultation planning will take place in detail once the broad picture from the research emerges. Members of the consultation planning team will meet in July 2019 to review the data and plan the best way to analyse, reflect on and respond to the data.
- The consultation will be by invitation only and will bring together representatives of institutions and agencies participating in the platform. Opportunity will be provided in a number of ways to reflect on the issues arising from the data gathered in the per-consultation research: thematic, regional, and global.
- The consultation will move from initial focus on analysis to reflection and the drawing of conclusions to response and action. It will be designed in such a way as to create the space to meet the stated objectives of the project: fostering relationships, growing understanding, identifying priorities and gaps in current research, hearing the specific needs and gifts of different regions, building partnerships.
- It is anticipated that a number of initiatives will be generated through the project. These will be monitored and documented.
- The information generated by the initial research and the work of the consultation will be captured and distributed in the form of a dedicated edition of an appropriate journal (e.g., *Transformation*), web-based distribution and, if appropriate, a book.
- It is possible that further gatherings will be organized as the platform continues to provide a place for documentation, analysis and collaboration.

## **6. Major Inputs Required**

### **Vision and Engagement:**

The critical component in the success of this project is that there be widely shared vision and felt need to research, understand and act more intentionally in mission research. All those involved so far have immediately resonated with the issues and encouraged pursuit of the project.

Widespread engagement is vital, since the success of the project depends of a wide range of institutions globally taking the time to upload and maintain accurate data on the digital platform. The value-added of participation needs to be clearly communicated to research institutions. This is the main reason behind building an initial Alliance of major players.

### **People and Time:**

A number of people will be important for the success of the project.

**Coordination:** The steering group are in place and functioning well. This will be broadened as the core Alliance is formed.

**Digital platform development and maintenance:** Identifying the right people with the skills and vision for this work will be critical to the success of the project.

**Management & logistics:** OCMS and ACI have identified additional people resources for this.

**Research champions:** Research champions have been appointed to be the primary connectors with institutions and mission agencies.

**Regional Coordinators:** A strong list of 13 coordinators have accepted to be part of the project.

**Consultation process facilitators:** There is considerable experience in the steering group but it is anticipated that two additional persons will be made available to the team later in the project.

### **Facilities:**

The consultation is currently planned for Ghana under the organisational leadership of the Akrophi Christaller Institute in Akropong, Accra. There are a number of other excellent facilities in Accra should we decide we need other space.

### **Finance:**

Significant financial assistance will be needed to support the project. The intention is to raise the funds to cover all set up costs for the digital platform as well as bursaries to bring a number of global south institutions to the consultation.

On-going running costs of the platform will be covered by participating institutions, shared in an equitable way that recognises the relative financial capacities of different institutions and agencies.

## **7. Strategic Past Experience**

OCMS and ACI have been at the forefront of mission research in the majority world for over 30 years. The recently completed Edinburgh Centenary Series, published by OCMS' imprint Regnum Press and composed of 35 volumes and over 600 authors from around the world, is evidence of the connectedness and engagement of this institution in global mission research and applied scholarship.

The project will be managed and monitored by the Steering Group led by OCMS Director Dr Paul Bendor-Samuel. He has had considerable experience in organising large scale interventions through his prior work with Interserve International, leading two organisation-wide review processes across 50 countries. He is also trained in Organisational development and is used to large group facilitation.

## 8. Evaluation of Project

The project will be evaluated in two stages.

The first at the beta-testing of the platform once initial Alliance members have populated the platform with their research output.

The second stage will happen at the close of the consultation, in which participant feedback will be solicited against Outcomes 1-5 described in section 4 above.

Following this regular evaluation of the effectiveness and direction of the mission research platform will be performed by the Platform Steering Group.

## 9. Finance

### Funding Strategy

We will approach trusts/foundations and individuals that may be interested in supporting the project.

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\*\* Special acknowledgement to OCMS Director Dr Paul Bendor-Samuel for compiling the bulk of this proposal.

J. Nelson Jennings was raised in a U.S.-American Christian home and married (Kathy) in 1981. After Nelson completed the MDiv at Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis), in 1986 the Jennings family moved to Japan as church-planting missionaries. In 1995 Nelson completed a PhD in Non-Western Christianity through Edinburgh University. Jennings taught at Tokyo Christian University (1996-1999) and at Covenant Theological Seminary (1999-2011), then served at the Overseas Ministries Study Center (2011-2015) and with GMI (Global Mapping International, 2016-2017). Since September 2015 Jennings has served as Mission Pastor, Consultant, and International Liaison for Onnuri Community Church (Seoul). He is also a member of the WEA Mission Commission's Community of Mission Information Workers Task Force, and he serves as Editor of the online journal [globalmissiology.org](http://globalmissiology.org).

