

# A MISSIONARY MINDSET:

LESSONS LEARNED FROM  
E. STANLEY JONES





## DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES

The United Methodist Church

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*[Excerpts from the book by Douglas Ruffle: A Missionary Mindset: What Church Leaders Need to Know to Reach Their Communities—Lessons from E. Stanley Jones (Discipleship Resources, 2016)]*



## IDENTIFYING OUR DEFAULT CULTURE

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The classic dilemma for a missionary is to learn where one's own cultural trappings interfere with the presentation of the gospel in a culture different from one's own. A person with a missionary mindset is aware of his or her own culture while learning as much as possible about the new culture served.

The term *default culture* is borrowed from the world of computers. Default settings are the original settings on the computer when it comes out of the box. As we add programs, these settings often change. We might adjust them to better fit our needs and habits. Sometimes defaults are changed inadvertently and end up causing problems. For example, we might upload incompatible software systems that compromise the operation. Sometimes the entire operation becomes so compromised that the only apparent solution is to hit the “reset” button and return the computer to its original, or default, settings.

Like computer software, we have defaults—assumptions and habits about every arena of life that we have adopted from our family, work environment, church, the wider culture. Our tendency to carry our default culture into a new community can produce harmless and sometimes humorous results, but it has too often misfired. The church I served in New Jersey in the late eighties resisted my predecessor's insistence on purchasing a computer and copier. They preferred the default system of a typewriter and a mimeograph. We are talking about change here: our resistance to it and our tendency to cling to what we have always known. Sometimes the only defense is the clichéd response, “We have always done it that way.”

A classic example of navigating the change inherent in one's default culture occurred in China in the 19th century, when missionaries from England attempted to convert the Chinese to Christianity. The English missionaries continued to dress as they did in England, and they lived apart from the Chinese, in a "missionary compound." The Chinese looked upon these well-intentioned people as strange, and the missionaries themselves began to wonder if they would ever gain acceptance.

Hudson Taylor arrived in China as a young missionary and before long began to take an entirely different approach. He moved out of the compound and into a dwelling among the Chinese people. He discarded his English clothing in favor of indigenous garb, learned to speak the language well, and even cut his hair except for a small ponytail. He managed to gain a hearing among Chinese people and was able to sow the seeds of the gospel.



## LESSONS FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

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In the context of a world that is increasing in diversity, church leaders are challenged to know their own default culture even as they reach out to persons whose cultural background is very different. We can get help on how to do this by taking a look at the meaning of one of the most familiar passages from the bible.

In the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20), the Greek word translated "nations" is *ethné*, the root word for "ethnicity." Jesus commands followers to go to all ethnicities. In most cases, *ethné* is used to refer to people who are non-Jews. Going to all nations, in this sense, means proclaiming the God of Israel, the God of Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Miriam, to the people beyond Israel. What Jesus has done through his teachings, life, death and resurrection is to open wide the doors, inviting non-Jewish nations to embrace the Jewish God.

Matthew, who wrote to a Jewish Christian community, is proclaiming to his people that they need to take Jesus beyond their own tribe. The commission is to go beyond our own boundaries and proclaim the good news that all people are invited to believe in and embrace the God of Abraham and Jesus. This commission does not abrogate the religion of the people of Israel. It is a call to extend the reach of that religion to ethnicities around the world.

Ethnicity houses culture. Ethnicity references a person's race. Culture embodies the traditions, practices and accepted behaviors of that ethnicity transmitted from generation to generation. In the twenty-first century and the context of an ever growing world migration that is increasing diversity in the Americas and Europe, making disciples of all *ethné* takes on an even broader meaning. We are invited to develop a missionary mindset: to embrace and love people whose cultural context is different from our own. From the beginning, the challenge for followers of Jesus has been to navigate from our tribe and culture to present the gospel to a tribe and culture different from our own.



## ADOPTING A MISSIONARY MINDSET

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I served as a missionary in South America for nine years. I learned some things that I think are relevant to challenges faced by churches in the 21st century. The things I had to learn when I went to serve the church in Argentina—another language, another culture, new music, new art, a new way of dressing, a new way of getting around via transport, new food, new beverages—were all bits and pieces of a new way of approaching life and connecting with people. I was well aware that I was a foreigner in a new country. The better I learned how to speak their language and the better I learned to love their food and beverages and the better I blended in by wearing clothes like theirs, the better chance I had of getting a hearing from the people I came in contact with. I needed to learn a “missionary mindset.”

Our current context for ministry in the United States feels foreign enough to many church leaders that our role seems a lot like that of a missionary. We are surrounded by a culture estranged from the Christian context that was present 30 or 40 years ago. George Barna and David Kinnaman refer to the current U.S. culture as “churchless.”<sup>i</sup> As many as 70 percent of younger people do not find the church either relevant or meaningful and therefore see no reason to attend. Those of us who have grown up in the church are called upon to learn the language of the people with whom we live and value their music and art and way of dressing and the many other characteristics that help us get closer to a people we want to communicate with, learn about and love.

We are called to love our neighbors in all of their diversity and understand the similarities and differences between our way of living and theirs. After all, as the most quoted verse of the Bible says, “God so loved the world that he gave his only son...” God came in the person of Jesus not because God loved the *church* but because God loved the *world* and sought to show the world the way, the truth, and the life. Since we church leaders live with so many *churchless* people, we are to take this love of God to heart and love the world as God loves it.

The challenge for Christians in today’s world is to earn enough trust from the people we intend to serve that the gospel message can be heard and heeded. We approach our mission field as if we were from some different country and learning a new way of communicating, a new culture, a new way to connect people to the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. *This* is a missionary mindset.



## ESSENTIALS OF THE GOSPEL MESSAGE

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Most importantly, a missionary mindset is clear about the essentials of the gospel we proclaim. We affirm these essentials in the simple, easily remembered statement often repeated when communities of faith gather for holy

communion: *Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ shall come again.*

*Christ has died.* We give witness to the fact that Christ died. He sacrificed his life for us. He died for our individual sins and the sins of humanity, so that we might live a new life in him and so that all creation might be reconciled to God. Especially when these words are spoken in the context of communion, we remember our own sinfulness and our complicity in the sinfulness of humanity that made it necessary for Christ to die for our sins. He died not only for the individual sins we have committed but for the sins of humanity, including the systemic evil of tribes and nations and of principalities and powers. We are moved to confess our sins and ask God for forgiveness. We can affirm, along with the apostle Paul, that he died so that “we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

*Christ is risen.* A missionary mindset leads us to proclaim that through the divine initiative of God, creator of the universe, God sent God’s own son in the person of Jesus to save humanity from eternal death. Christ defeated death through the resurrection. This gives us hope that through our relationship with Christ we can overcome the evil of the world. We so trust God in Christ that we live with confident joy that God will defeat the forces of evil in the world. The gospel of Luke tells the story of how Jesus broke bread with two of his followers after they had walked on the road to Emmaus. At the breaking of the bread, these followers exclaimed that “their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (Luke 24:31). When we affirm that Christ is risen, we celebrate the wonder that he defeated death. We move from guilt over our sin and grief over the many manifestations of evil in the world to celebration of the resurrection. We celebrate that we can see Christ in each other as members together of a community of faith.

*Christ shall come again.* A missionary mindset embraces the affirmation that God’s will and God’s way will ultimately prevail over humankind’s inept attempts to create world

order. We also affirm that in the spirit of the Christ who lives in us, we become partners with God in bringing God's future kingdom to reality. This is a challenging call, especially in a world torn by violence, evil and hatred. Our trust in God's ultimate victory in Christ gives us hope for the future and encouragement to work with God and others to bring about a world that is transformed by God's love.

A missionary mindset seeks to invite others to embrace this same faith that Christ died for our sins, that he rose so we may live a new life, and that God will ultimately claim victory over the forces of evil in the world. We proclaim the good news of the kingdom that Jesus inaugurated with his presence on earth and invite others to give their allegiance to Jesus and his kingdom.

As we delve into the details of a missionary mindset, we are invited to remember the essentials of the gospel and to be clear about what we proclaim—the good news of Jesus Christ. We also look for lessons from missionaries past to apply principles from what they did to our own context in ministry. We turn now to one of the great missionaries of all time who served in the previous century.



## LESSONS FROM E. STANLEY JONES

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He was a friend of Mahatma Gandhi, and his writings deeply influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize two times. He was a confidant of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and an inspiration to Billy Graham. He was described as the greatest missionary since the Apostle Paul. He wrote 29 books that were translated into 30 languages. His first of ten devotional books, *Victorious Living*, sold more than 1 million copies after it came out in 1936. In 1938 Time Magazine called him “the world’s greatest missionary evangelist.”

His name was E. Stanley Jones.

Jones served as a missionary in India beginning in 1907. Shortly after he arrived, Jones felt called to relate to higher caste people. A Hindu government official had asked Jones quite pointedly, “Why have you gone only to the lower castes? Why haven’t you come to us?” Jones replied that he and others had supposed the higher caste members did not want them. The Hindu replied, “It is a mistake. We want you if you will come in the *right way*.”<sup>ii</sup> Jones remarked that ever since hearing this comment, he had eagerly sought “the right way.”

What would be the “right way”?

At first Jones reflected on several methodologies that were practiced in his day—and are still used today—but which he would eventually reject. He did not want to tear down the belief systems of others in order to build up and replace them with Christian beliefs. Such a method is arrogant and disrespectful. He refused to persuade others that Christianity somehow “fulfills the ancient faiths,” as if it somehow summed up the religions of the world. He would have disagreed with the popular tendency today to dismiss the differences in belief systems by asserting, “All religions lead to the same thing.” Nor did he want to attempt a more subtle manipulation that starts off addressing a general subject of common interest only to morph into a Christian message and appeal. This is perhaps the slyest form of proselytism that disguises hidden agendas with an air of openness.

Jones sought a better way, one that built on principles without attacking anyone’s belief system. He wanted to connect with others honestly and openly with no hidden agendas, subtle manipulations, or sideways approaches through “safe subjects.” He wanted to bring people to a round table where everyone could speak to his or her truth without anyone assuming a position of superiority.<sup>iii</sup> He encouraged open, honest dialogue where questions could be asked and difficult issues faced. He believed that “Christianity must be defined as Christ, not...Western Civilization, not even the system built around him in the West, but Christ himself.”<sup>iv</sup>

Jones sought a Christ in an *Indian* setting. He sought “the Christ of the Indian Road,” not the Christ of his country or culture or of his native prejudices and practices. He knew instinctually that he needed to go beyond his default culture, the Christianity he learned growing up in a Methodist Church in Baltimore, Maryland. He knew that doing so takes commitment as well as self-awareness. Jones knew that we must be willing to let loose the cultural ties that we carry within us. While we cannot extricate ourselves from our own culture, we can be sufficiently aware of our baggage that we are willing to make the effort to embrace another’s culture, one different from our own default

Jones took to heart and kept in mind what the Indian literary genius Rabindranath Tagore said: “When missionaries bring their truth to a strange land, unless they bring it in the form of homage it is not accepted and should not be. The manner of offering it to you must not be at all discordant with your own national thought and your self-respect.”<sup>v</sup> Tagore sought honesty, authenticity and transparency from Christian missionaries.

The key for Jones was presenting what he called “an untrammelled Christ.”<sup>vi</sup> He put himself in the challenging position of speaking to the truth he knew in Christ in dialogue with learned Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and skeptics (akin to today’s *nones*), who in turn spoke to the truth they knew in their religions. All of this was done in an atmosphere of civility, mutual respect, and humility. Jones kept in mind the greater good of humanity who would benefit from this kind of conversation.

Jones believed that this approach was grounded in scripture. He quoted Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians: “We refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 2:2b-3 NRSV). Jones believed that “Jesus appeals to the soul as light appeals to the eye, as truth fits the conscience, as beauty speaks to the aesthetic nature.”<sup>vii</sup>

Jones believed that Christ needed to be discovered in India by Indians as one walking an Indian Road. When we transfer this principle to our own day, then we are invited to desire a similar outcome—that the people of our city or town discover the Christ who walks with them, who is recognizable among them, and who fully understands their context.



## LOVE AND “THE RIGHT WAY”

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Jones’s struggle to find the “Right Way” to present Christ in his missionary context must be our struggle as well today, for we also live in a missionary context where many have not heard the gospel in terms they can understand. Just as Jones wrestled with the question of *the right way*, contemporary missionaries need to discern what the right approach would be in our context. In 21st-century United States, the context includes descendants of Hindus and Muslims that Jones related to a century ago as well as what recent demographers term “nones,” that growing part of the population who do not identify with any religion at all.<sup>viii</sup>

Our challenge is to present what Jones called “the untrammelled Christ.” Jesus continues to capture the imagination of people. People speak against the actions of the church, past and present. Yet, they continue to be fascinated with and attracted to Jesus, the friend of the marginalized, the poor, the outcast, children, and women. If our focus is on Jesus, we are more likely to gain a hearing. Our challenge is to focus our witness on the person and ministry of Jesus.

We are invited, then, to plumb the depths of what it means to present an “untrammelled Christ” today. There is no better way than to take to heart the Great Commandment of Jesus to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” . . . and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22: 37-39). Our approach must be permeated with the love of Christ in our hearts. As Paul

wrote, “Clothe yourselves with love” (Col 3:14). With this love, we care deeply for all people, whether they profess faith or not, whether an ardent follower of a religion or avowed atheist or agnostic. Our involvement with people begins by loving them and thus valuing them as human beings. It is through this love that we respect, dignify, and honor their humanity and that desires the very best for their souls. *This* is the “right way” to approach people today.

As we seek to transmit the good news of Jesus in today’s world, we would be wise to learn from the wise example of E. Stanley Jones. We are invited to adopt a *missionary mindset* that affords us the chance to communicate the gospel in ways that will gain a hearing among those who are estranged from a community of faith, as well as those who have never had any interest: the unchurched, dechurched and nones.



## TRUSTING GOD

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E. Stanley Jones lived his life trusting God. His deep prayer life opened him up to listening to what God was saying to him. Whenever confronted with a dilemma or a difficult choice, Jones would meditate and wait upon a word from God. Jones observed that when we surrender the self to God, we let go of the anxious work of trying to control things and outcomes, and we instead live out the true meaning of comfort: “*com*, meaning with, and *fortis*, meaning strength—strengthened by being with another. You are strengthened with all the power of the higher Power,” wrote Jones. “It is a transfusion that makes us become a transformed person, different—doing things that you can’t do and going places that you can’t go and being what you can’t be.”<sup>ix</sup>



## REACHING OUR NEIGHBORS TO MAKE AN IMPACT

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Christians with a missionary mindset approach a community as if we ourselves were from some foreign land. We don't assume anything about the community, even if we were born there and grew up there. We start with a clean slate. We reflect on our “default culture”—our own upbringing and the biases and understandings that up until now we may have taken for granted. We cultivate an awareness of this default, so we recognize when we interpret our experience while wearing the tinted glass of our particular past and when our past even blinds us from seeing other perspectives.

Christians with a missionary mindset seek ways to embrace the cultures of others. We want to take in the aromas and the sights and the sounds and the promise and the possibility of other ways of understanding the world: its food, clothing, language, slang, hurts, hopes, art, music, stories. In these times, we need people of all races and nationalities to serve as instruments of God's kingdom to bring people together in community. In our churches and in our community organizations, we should seek to break down ethnic and religious barriers, so we can meet each other as human beings—gifts of God.

With a missionary mindset, we fall to our knees in prayer before embarking on knowing our community, for we know that our own gifts and talents, however sharp they may be, fall short of perfect love. We pray that God guide us and those who work with us to open our hearts and minds that we can listen deeply, love unconditionally, and trust the movement of the Spirit in our midst.

As Christians with a missionary mindset, we seek a greater understanding of our self. Not only do we want to gain an awareness of our default culture, but we want to cultivate a deeper self-awareness of who we are. Knowing ourselves better and gaining clarity about our own strengths and

weaknesses and our own personality type will help us build bridges of love and understanding to the people we seek to reach. Our self-awareness will help us draw upon our strengths. It will also help us understand our weaknesses, so we can try to surround ourselves with people who have complementary gifts. Self-awareness can help us recognize the difference between the person we were taught to be (our default) and the person we are trying to become in Christ.

With a missionary mindset, we recognize that the only way we can even begin to deepen our understanding of the people in our community is by listening deeply, listening beyond the words that are shared in conversation and connecting to the stories of the people. We listen with our ears and we listen with our heart and we seek to understand.

As people with a missionary mindset, we acknowledge that our approach, if it should have a chance to be received well, will be characterized by humility. It is not a false humility that wants to be noticed. Rather, it is a humility born in the soul of a follower of Jesus who wants the very best for others. It is a humility that does not seek acclaim but rather gives all the glory and honor to God for any success, any spark of hope that comes about.

While we want to cultivate prayer, self-awareness and humility for our missionary mindset, more than anything we want to love. We are ever mindful—as the Peter Scholtes song conveys—that they will know we are Christians by our love, and we aspire to the agape love that Jesus exemplified and that Paul described in his letter to the Corinthians.

A missionary mindset strives for the kingdom of God. E. Stanley Jones gave a balanced Christian witness. In addition to calling people to give their lives to the unchanging Savior, Jesus Christ, he also called hearers to enter into the unshakeable kingdom that Jesus proclaimed, a kingdom of peace, of love, of cooperation with others. Jones was an evangelist who not only made altar calls, but called on the president of the United States to advocate for peace.

He called on people in the United States to rid themselves of racism. He lifted up the importance of women taking leadership roles not only in the church but in all of life. The fact that he advocated for such social justice 70 and 80 years ago should catch our attention as we continue to find ways forward on these issues today.

E. Stanley Jones always referred to himself as a “Christian in the making.” For as much as he knew the way of Christ and the way of the gospel, he also was humble enough to know that he did not live out the Christian life in all its perfect fullness. As we strive to incorporate all of these principles into our lives and witness when we reach out to our communities, we too, know that we are still Christians in the making.

As imperfect as we are on this journey of faith, however, we can move forward with confidence because we trust God. That trust allows us to imagine a different world, a world that E. Stanley Jones saw as replacing this present unworkable world order, based on greed and selfishness, with God’s order. We imagine a world where hope trumps fear. We imagine a world where respect and civility characterize our dialogue with persons of other faiths and with those who profess no faith at all. We imagine leaders of communities of faith serving as peacemakers. We imagine churches championing cooperation over competition. We imagine persons of faith embracing others of differing races as brothers and sisters. We imagine vast teams of disciples transforming their communities through the love of God. We imagine a world filled with those who would receive the unshakeable kingdom and follow the unchanging Jesus.



## SOME QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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1. How would you describe your default culture?
2. How would a “missionary mindset” help you relate to people who live in your community?
3. What is your understanding of the essentials of the gospel and why is it important to have clarity about them?
4. Compare the methodologies that E. Stanley Jones rejected with current approaches to evangelism you are aware of.
5. What religions are represented in your community? What do you know about them?
6. How can a missionary mindset help you reach your community with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

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<sup>i</sup> GEORGE BARNA AND DAVID KINNAMAN, GENERAL EDITORS, *CHURCHLESS: UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S UNCHURCHED AND HOW TO CONNECT WITH THEM* (BARNA: 2014).

<sup>ii</sup> E. STANLEY JONES, *THE CHRIST OF THE INDIAN ROAD* (ABINGDON PRESS, 1925), P. 22. ITALICS ADDED.

<sup>iii</sup> JONES DESCRIBED THIS IN HIS BOOK, *CHRIST AT THE ROUND TABLE* (ABINGDON, 1928).

<sup>iv</sup> E. STANLEY JONES, *THE CHRIST OF THE INDIAN ROAD*, P. 26.

<sup>v</sup> TAGORE AS QUOTED BY JONES, *THE CHRIST OF THE INDIAN ROAD*, P. 28.

<sup>vi</sup> E. STANLEY JONES, *THE CHRIST OF THE INDIAN ROAD*, P. 31.

<sup>vii</sup> *IBID.*, P. 30.

<sup>viii</sup> “CHRISTIANS LOSE GROUND, ‘NONES’ SOAR IN NEW PORTRAIT OF US REGION,” BY CATHY LYNN GROSSMAN, RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE, MAY 12, 2015. [HTTP://WWW.RELIGIONNEWS.COM/2015/05/12/CHRISTIANS-LOSE-GROUND-NONES-SOAR-NEW-PORTRAIT-U-S-RELIGION/?UTM\\_MEDIUM=EMAIL&UTM\\_CAMPAIGN=RNS+DAILY+REPORT+---+TUESDAY+MAY+12+2015&UTM\\_CONTENT=RNS+DAILY+REPORT+---+TUESDAY+MAY+12+2015&UTM\\_TERM=VIEW%20STORY%20AT%20WWWRELIGIONNEWSCOM](http://www.religionnews.com/2015/05/12/christians-lose-ground-nones-soar-new-portrait-u-s-religion/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=rns+daily+report+---+tuesday+may+12+2015&utm_content=rns+daily+report+---+tuesday+may+12+2015&utm_term=view%20story%20at%20wwwreligionnewscom)

<sup>ix</sup> E. STANLEY JONES, *DIVINE YES*, PP. 58-59.