

Business as Mission by the year 2020

I hope very few people will talk about Business as Mission (BAM) in 2020. The term is like scaffolding: it is needed for a season as we build the real thing, businesses that glorify God and bring about holistic transformation of people and societies*.

The term BAM has its merits in clarification of the concept. The term has been helpful in the affirmation of business people and the mobilization of other resources. But the term is not important, the concept and the applications are.

Some people dislike the term or question its usefulness. That is fine with me. Other phrases are also used like business for transformation, Kingdom companies or business as integral calling. These kinds of discussions can be constructive as we pursue a better understanding of the theological, missiological and strategic underpinnings of the concept. But they can also cloud the issue and divert from the task at hand. We also need to remember that even this article highlights a limitation regarding terminology: it is in English.

Thus the term is of secondary or tertiary importance, also acknowledging the above terms may not translate at all or very well into other languages. But my hope for the term Business as Mission to fall into disuse by 2020 goes beyond terminology.

Business as Mission is a subset of a broader category of theology of work and theology of calling. Today there is still a need to state the Biblically obvious: God calls people to and equips people for business. That is still a farfetched idea in many churches, mission conferences and theological seminaries.

Most Christian leaders would never argue against the call to business, but many of us are still limited to a non-profit paradigm, and influenced by the Greek Gnostic dichotomy of sacred-secular. In practice we – the Church worldwide – still see “fulltime ministry” as the pinnacle of service to God. We may disagree with it, but it is nevertheless a permeating fact of church and mission life.

Mark Greene, Executive Director of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, has suggested that there are basically two strategies, *modus operandi*, for the church*: Either we can try to get people to give some of their leisure time and spare money to church programs and mission activities. Or we can equip people for every day work and activities, being salt and light everywhere all the time to everyone in all things they do.

Let's face it: we are stuck in the former way of being and doing church. Business as Mission is one expression of the other strategy: business people being affirmed, equipped and deployed to make a difference in the market place in and through business.

A paradigm shift takes time and often involves some stress and pain. But once we are through, it becomes a given. The new paradigm will then be an assumed baseline.

Until then, and through the paradigm shift, we need terms like Business as Mission to highlight inadequacies of the present paradigm and to guide us through to a more Biblical and holistic concept of work, calling and business.

Similar processes have happened before in the Evangelical world. The Lausanne Congress in 1974 put a focus on unreached peoples. During the 1980s and 1990s there was quite a bit of discussion on the term unreached people. Some liked the term, others questioned it. But it served well in clarifying the unfinished task and to mobilize the church worldwide to develop strategies for unreached peoples. Today there is less talk about unreached peoples - and less controversy. It has become a given, as it were.

The Lausanne Covenant from 1974 also emphasized partnering. Similar to the unreached people concept, it has gone from being a buzz word to become a baseline. Scaffolding can be removed.

Business as Mission as a concept and as a global movement has come a long way in the past 15 years. The global think tank on BAM under the auspices of Lausanne (2002 – 2004) served to clarify the concept and further catalyze a global movement. The BAM paper and the BAM Manifesto were two tools that God has used to stir the global church into the for-profit paradigm with a view of seamless holistic and transformational bottom lines.

My dream, hope and prayers are that ten years from now Christians in business will just do “Business as Mission” and that the term will fade away. It could and should be remembered for historical studies and for reference. But a new baseline has hopefully emerged and become a given: When we as Christians do business we recognize God’s calling and gifting. We see ourselves as called to business, as stewards of companies, as God’s ambassadors who seek to glorify God and serve people in all our relationships: staff, owners, customers, clients, suppliers, tax authorities, community, environment, and nations.

This is what we are and what we do. No particular terms or labels are needed. We do real and good business – as unto the Lord.

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* For further information see the two 10 – 12 minute video clips from Lausanne III in Cape Town in October 2010:

1. Business as Mission – Successes & Failures; Mats Tunehag:
<http://conversation.lausanne.org/en/conversations/detail/11371>
2. Two Main Strategies for Reaching the World; Mark Greene:
<http://conversation.lausanne.org/en/conversations/detail/11359>