Missiologist as Vocational Calling: The Life and Work of Robert J. Priest

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Each Fall, JEMS features a life history style interview with an influential missiologist seeking to both honor their life and work, as well as put a face behind their books and ideas. Robert Priest (MDiv TEDS; MA University of Chicago; PhD University of California – Berkeley) has served as professor in several universities and seminaries, past president of EMS, and long-time mentor of a generation of Christian anthropologists and missiologists. This interview was conducted by Anthony Casey and has been transcribed and lightly edited for length and clarity.

Anthony

Bob Priest, thank you so much for talking today about your life and work. Let's begin with you sharing a little about your birth and early years.

Bob

Sure, so the history of my family is very much tied to Christian missions. My grandfather, Robert C. McQuilkin, wanted to be a missionary. He was a conference speaker and assistant editor of the Sunday School Times. He had been planning to go to Africa as a missionary. But after the boat they were going to travel on burned and sunk, they changed plans. He ended up becoming the founding president of Columbia Bible College – where he could focus on mobilizing and training others to be missionaries. He raised all of his kids with the vision of Christian missions. So, my mother and her siblings each became missionaries in different parts of the world – serving between them, if added up, for over 130 years overseas.

My father, who was from Pontotoc, Mississippi, went to Columbia Bible College, where he met my mother. After college, my mom did nurse's training, my dad did extra studies in seminary, and both of them studied linguistics with the Summer Institute of

Linguistics/Wycliffe Bible Translators – which they joined – serving first in Bolivia and later Nigeria. My parents were working with the Siriono of Bolivia – an unreached people group. I was born shortly after they began working with the Siriono into what Ralph Winter would later call the 3rd era of Protestant Christian missions. My father was the first of two SIL members to enter Bolivia – at a time when most of Bolivia's ethnolinguistic groups had no Scripture and no churches. By the time my parents and their SIL colleagues left Bolivia in the 1980s, every language in Bolivia had a New Testament at least, and most groups had thriving churches. So this was a pivotal moment of mission history that I got to observe first hand. The Siriono, with whom my parents worked, deeply appreciated my parents and their work in the areas of literacy, teacher training, health promotion, community development, and Bible translation. I observed their ministry and had many experiences seeing Siriono respond positively to the gospel.

Mission historians sometimes claim that "third era" missionaries focused only on evangelism, rather than on broader concerns with human flourishing. But I had the privilege of seeing missionaries who studied not only Bible and theology – but linguistics, anthropology, medicine, and education in order to understand language and culture – both to help with Bible translation and communication and to help an illiterate monolingual group become literate and bilingual, to have their own members as government-certified school teachers, to have their own health promoters – to help them engage the larger world from a position of strength.

The roots of my own interest in anthropology came both from my many experiences hunting, fishing, trekking, and hanging out with the Siriono, and from my parents' own interests and values. Before I was ten years old, each of my parents published articles on Siriono culture in the American Anthropologist. I learned from them that any good missionary ought to be deeply interested in the language and culture of the people with whom he or she lives and works.

I responded to the gospel at a young age and was baptized by my uncle when I was around 12 years old and began to explore God's call on my life. Later in high school I was interested in missions but wasn't completely sure of my future, but decided to go to Bible college and see where that took me.

Anthony

OK, before we get there can you tell us a little bit about the personalities of your parents, what life was like at home?

Bob

Sure. My father spent most of his time working on Bible translation. I have memories of him in the village sitting down with one (or more) men (occasionally with a woman) hour after hour talking through and working on the meaning of Siriono words, the text, etc. My father grew up in small-town, rural Mississippi, and he actually thrived in a village setting. He had a kind of humor that the Siriono loved. I remember many afternoons after he'd finished whatever he was doing, many of the older village men would gather in our front porch and laugh and cackle as they bantered with him. He would periodically go on hunting trips with them, often taking us along. While he occasionally preached, he focused more on mentoring and coaching Siriono to themselves do the teaching and preaching.

My mother was a registered nurse who received her training at the Swedish Covenant Hospital in Chicago. She was a go-getter. She was out and about in the community non-stop. Much of her early work featured medical treatment. She did health promotion in the communities and worked with women in literacy classes. She did the lion's share of supervising the training of Siriono school teachers who had government contracts. She helped indigenous people become accredited school teachers.

We had family devotions twice a day, morning and evening. It was an environment where we had close family ties. We enjoyed being together with a lot of laughing and joking as we read the biblical stories.

The Bolivia branch of SIL had occasional visits from top linguistic consultants like Ken Pike from the University of Michigan. My parents were Bible translators, interested in linguistics and anthropology, but in service of mission. These consultants (linguists and occasionally anthropologists) would visit and have workshops with the field missionaries and with their indigenous informants. So I grew up in an environment where I saw a form of Christian mission that combined zeal with knowledge acquisition. Knowledge certainly of Scripture was valued, but also of the helping disciplines like linguistics and anthropology.

Anthony

Very good! I noticed you attended Ben Lippen school for a time. At what age did you transition to life in the U.S. and to that school?

Bob

So I was in Bolivia until I finished 10th grade. I came straight to the States, so there were…..some cultural adjustments, let's say. Ben Lippen was then a boarding school in Asheville, NC. It was a mix of MKs, international students, and some Americans. I recall classmates telling me with awe that my roommate was Robbie Richardson, the son of Bobby Richardson, who played for the New York Yankees – with the record for the most RBI's in any world series. I knew the Yankees were a sports team, but I couldn't recall what sport, right? Ha. I acted impressed when they mentioned RBI's, but had no idea what they were talking about.

So, I had a few cultural adjustments at school in the U.S. I won't get into it, but my clothing in the jungles of Bolivia, well, let's just say the people I was around in Bolivia wore old tattered clothes, and went barefoot. So we as MKs also went barefoot, with short pants and T-shirts. This was not a childhood designed to prepare me to value and recognize stylish clothing in America.

One day my roommate, Robbie, grabbed me and told me I was carrying my books like a girl. This was before book bags were the norm. I'd carry my books cradled up against my chest. He said that's what girls did. He held his low by his side. I thought he was pulling my leg, but I sat on the little wall at the center of campus and watched everyone go by, and every girl had their books cradled high like me, and every guy had them low like Robbie. You can imagine I put some effort into making cultural adjustments.

It was a plus, though, that Ben Lippen celebrated soccer success. They hadn't lost a soccer game in 10 years, and I was pretty good at soccer because I grew up with it. So I had one thing that counted and was appreciated and respected in the midst of my other cultural deficits. This was helpful to my transition to America.

Paul Hiebert used to joke that if you have emotional problems, you'll probably become a psychologist. If you have organizational problems, you might become a sociologist. If you have culture problems, you might become an anthropologist. Paul said "I'm a Mennonite. We have culture problems. I'm an MK, which also gives me culture problems. So naturally I became an anthropologist to try and help me deal with

my problems." Well, I'm an MK also. So I was intensely aware of cultural challenges. So maybe there's some truth to that. Anyway, Ben Lippen was a good place and was a good transition time for me.

Anthony

So what led you to Columbia Bible College for your college studies?

Bob

You know I didn't have a lot of guidance from my parents on what I should be thinking for college. When I was playing soccer, there were coaches from a couple Christian schools that expressed interest in recruiting me. I remember my father saying, "You know, I've been to some of those colleges and I'm not convinced that a lot of the students or faculty there are sold out as Christians." He said there are some secular campuses where there's Campus Crusade, Intervarsity, and that he found Christians who were sold out for Jesus in that context, and then, of course, he mentioned his alma mater Columbia Bible College as another place where students and faculty were deeply spiritual. He was trying to steer me either toward a university where there was a vibrant kind of student Christian ministry, or Columbia Bible College. We had, of course, close family ties at CBC. My mother's brother J. Robertson McQuilkin was president at that time, so I probably just drifted into it a little bit by default, but also with an interest in ministry in the future.

Anthony

Can you share a little bit about your development in college? Any influential professors?

Bob

I had various professors I enjoyed. Buck Hatch in particular (father of Nathan Hatch, the historian). In addition to theological training, Mr. Hatch had done his MA in social sciences at the University of Chicago. I was influenced by him with the sense that there needs to be an integrated approach to knowledge. Robertson McQuilkin, my uncle, was the president of Columbia at that time and deeply influenced me. Mary Faith Philips was a fantastic instructor in how to teach Bible in schools. She deeply impacted me. Some visiting professors also come to mind – such as George Murray and Robert Smith.

As I went through the program at CBC I focused on Bible teaching. Many CBC graduates had gone on to teach Bible in the public schools of Chattanooga, TN, Pontotoc, MS, or North Carolina and West Virginia. I ended up doing my student teaching in Bluefield, WV, under an amazing teacher, "Buzzy" Rupp. It was a high school elective Bible class. That was a good and affirming experience. My uncle encouraged me that if I was interested in long-term ministry, I should think about seminary, especially a seminary that was both evangelical and strong academically. He was favorable toward Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, so that's where I ended up applying and attending.

Anthony

I know for a lot of people, seminary is quite formative. Everyone is preparing for some kind of ministry. Do you remember any particularly formative events there or professors that stood out?

Bob

The undergrad school I went to focused very much on oral forms of ministry. Not all of the faculty, but some of the faculty had a tendency to downplay the importance of research and writing. Of course, everyone was teaching a broad range of courses, so there wasn't the same level of specialization you might find in a seminary. But the focus was very much on the public oral presentation of Scripture.

At Trinity, though, I remember my first course was with Leon Morris, who was very quiet and very systematic and pedantically going through the text. The classroom was packed – the opportunity to study with the great Leon Morris! But as I listened to this quiet even pedantic teaching, I was looking around and thinking "why is everyone so thrilled with this?!" I needed a resocialization to recognize the value of understandings rooted in high-quality scholarly work, not simply an authority instantiated by impressive public rhetoric.

In my undergrad, the focus was on the practical, the applied homiletic as you engaged Scripture. Professors at Trinity often focused more on preparing you to engage with critical debates in biblical studies. So it was a different kind of engagement and I think the two supplemented each other. At TEDS I had a couple courses, one with Walter Kaiser and one with Gleason Archer, where I made some mistakes academically and suffered for it. But those experiences taught me some helpful lessons and TEDS was

an excellent transition and preparation for me to go on to graduate school at top universities in anthropology. In seminary, I developed the habits and discipline that are required for good scholarship in competitive scholarly settings.

Anthony

So when you started the MDiv, did you have an endpoint of where that might lead to, and was that further graduate study to prepare for academia or a pastoral ministry mix? How did you end up with an MA in Social Science from the University of Chicago?

Bob

I was still thinking a bit toward ministry overseas. Coming out of college, I didn't feel like I had any special calling other than a deep commitment to living my life in light of the missionary purposes of God in the world. Missions is at the heart of God's concern in the world, and it should somehow be central for all of us as believers. I also reflected on what my gifts were and how those might fit in the purposes of God given in Scripture. So I was sensing that my gifts were more in the area of teaching. I was thinking perhaps theological education overseas. I actually applied to Princeton for a ThM in New Testament and was accepted. So I was planning to go to Princeton and had finished my MDiv a semester before the graduation ceremonies. I had a six-month window before I would start at Princeton so I went to West Virginia to court my soon-to-be wife, Kersten. She is from California but had student taught in West Virginia in the same program I had, and then took a full-time job teaching Bible in West Virginia public schools. So I moved there to finish courtship, and that went well. In the meantime, a small country church had hired me initially for some pulpit supply. Then a larger church hired me as a youth pastor and assistant to the pastor (for an agreed-upon period of 15 months, allowing me to go to Princeton after that). That went well. I got engaged and then married, so it seemed advantageous to postpone Princeton for a year, so they let me stay with this church position for this interim time.

Now, for me, West Virginians were a different tribe. It was a completely different world. When preaching, I could talk about all different topics from a biblical standpoint. The love of money from a biblical standpoint is one thing, and I could exposit biblical accounts involving Achan, Balaam, Gehazi or Judas doing bad things for the love of money. But I didn't understand a lot of dynamics going on all around me in West Virginia in a place where the coal mines were closing down, where there were financial scandals and mistreatment of employees taking place around me. I didn't know what a

kickback was. I could see that Bluefield, WV was divided by railroad tracks with relative poverty on one side of the tracks and relative wealth on the other, with most blacks on one side of the railroad tracks and whites on the other. But I did not know what patterns of human agency had produced what was there. I could not insightfully discuss what the love of money might look like in the lives of Bluefield residents. So in my teaching and in my preaching I was struggling with how to engage people knowledgeably given actual realities of their own lives.

Then I read John Stott's little book Between Two Worlds. He had been to Trinity a time or two while I was there and in his book he stresses that in his preaching the preacher must build a bridge between the world of the ancient text and the contemporary world of people. He said that effective communicators of the gospel need a double hermeneutic. They need to understand the people that they're with, the culture of the people that they're with, as well as what it is that Scripture says in cultural context. So I followed some of his suggestions in some of my sermons and found people very responsive.

The right sorts of understandings of the culture of my audience seemed to allow me to engage people at a whole other level. It was partly during that year that I began rethinking possible futures. Since I had already spent seven years studying Bible and theology, perhaps I needed to balance this out with tools for understanding contemporary human realities so that communication bridges would actually be built. Robertson McQuilkin, when he learned of my Princeton plans, said to me, "Why are you going on to study more New Testament? I'd rather see you do church planting, but if you're not going to do church planting, and your vocation is to be a professor, you should know that as an administrator at this school, it's not hard for me to find New Testament professors. Those are available. What's incredibly hard to find is anyone with strong anthropological training that is simultaneously strong in biblical and theological foundations," and with solid understandings of Christian missions.

McQuilkin had read a paper I wrote in seminary on anthropology, so I assumed he must think I would be good at it. So, under the influence of Stott and McQuilkin, I reconsidered New Testament at Princeton. I decided to put out a fleece and applied to the University of Chicago for their Ph.D. in anthropology. They wrote back and said essentially, "Your GRE scores are fine, but you do not have the social science background for a Ph.D. in anthropology. We would be glad to admit you to our MA in social science. It's a one-year program, and if you do well, then we would certainly be open to accepting you into the Ph.D. program."

My wife and I prayed about it and decided that would be the route we would take. So I went to the University of Chicago. I had a good experience. They had a great program for introducing you to all the theoretical approaches and debates across many of the social sciences. That was a solid foundation to build on.

I was struggling to find a topic for my MA thesis. Most topics we discussed were new to me and I didn't feel motivated or ready to tackle those areas. What I knew the most about – missionaries – didn't seem like a suitable topic for that school. But then I saw a short article by Claude Stipe where he analyzed ways in which anthropologists write about missionaries. I read it and I got stimulated to do follow-up research. That is, I wanted to write a thesis critiquing the ways anthropologists at that time, this is like 1984, had been writing about missionaries. My former advisors McQuilkin and David Hesselgrave were very negative toward that idea. They thought I would get in trouble and wouldn't be able to finish the program I was in. I was kind of like, "Well, if I perish, I perish. I don't have to keep pursuing anthropology." So after prayer, I decided to focus on this topic anyway.

It turns out that the top historian of the discipline, George Stocking, was willing to be my first reader. Basically, I attempted to demonstrate in the thesis that you could predict ahead of time most of what anthropologists would write about missionaries. It was less about what missionaries were actually like, but was driven by presuppositions anthropologists already had about missionaries.

I didn't know how it would be received. I turned it in to Stocking in the afternoon one day. That night, a little before midnight, he called and told me he had finished the thesis. "Very provocative paper, very provocative paper!" He asked me to come in the next day and gave me the thesis with a great big red A+ on the top and said, "I wouldn't have done it the same way, but very workmanlike. Very provocative." He apparently thought it was a great project. I later learned he circulated it to other faculty, including the noted sociologist Edward Shils.

Now, a few months earlier, I had applied again for the Ph.D. at Chicago. They had denied me again. Columbia Bible College had a faculty member on sabbatical and was willing to hire me as a teaching fellow in New Testament and anthropology for a year. So I went to Columbia and while I was there, I got a letter from the University of Chicago saying my thesis had won the $1,000 Earl and Esther Johnson Prize for the best social science thesis in the "divisional masters" program that year, and they would like me to come and speak at their annual banquet fund-raiser for that program. I couldn't figure out why they liked the thesis. They weren't supposed to like it.

As it turns out, this was near the beginning of a turn toward postmodernism in anthropology, where anthropologists were beginning to question their own objectivity. "Maybe we as anthropologists aren't as objective as we think we are." That is, there was a window of time when anthropologists were highly interested in persuasive critiques of their own objectivity. I think, providentially, it was the right time for my thesis. Even five years earlier, it probably would not have been well received.

But in God's timing, it worked out, so later when I applied to Chicago and Berkeley and other places, it was the endorsement of George Stocking and that "best thesis" prize that opened doors for me.

Anthony

So how did you end up at UC-Berkeley over those other places?

Bob

I applied to a variety of schools, two of them rated among America's top three schools in anthropology (the University of Chicago and the University of California, at Berkeley) as well as a variety of more mid-tier programs. Almost all schools accepted me, but without funding. This was probably because in my applications I stubbornly chose to state that my goal was to eventually teach anthropology to missionaries. I did not want to be accepted in a program, and have faculty later claim I had come in under false pretenses. I also decided to stick with my anthropology of religion interests rather than to align my focus with the research projects of my mentors (who might have been able to fund me).

Chicago was very expensive. My wife's family lived right across the hills from Berkeley and they had a garage apartment. They were delighted for us to live with them; and within a year I was able to establish residency and then I was paying just a few hundred dollars a semester for tuition, so Berkeley just seemed to be the best fit all around. When my new advisor met with me, he did let me know that other Berkeley faculty initially had not wanted to admit me to the program given my religious interests, which he suggested confirmed my thesis argument about bias among anthropologists. But he told me not to worry. He said, "I don't want to talk about any of that God stuff with you, but if you're here and run into problems, just let me know. I will have your back."

Anthony

For the sake of time, let's move to your first full-time faculty role at Columbia International University. You likely could have gone just about anywhere with a Ph.D. from one of the best schools in the country. It sounds like you had every intention to perhaps go back to a school like Columbia and invest there where you could use all of your experience, your education to make a difference for the Kingdom.

Bob

Yes. I was hired at what was then called "Columbia Biblical Seminary and Graduate School of Missions." A lot of missionary candidates had college degrees, but without much Bible and/or Missions. Mission agencies typically required a certain amount of biblical and theological training, often combined with some missiology and anthropology courses. So Columbia offered a one-year certificate, as well as MA programs, designed for college grads wishing to retool for missions. At Columbia's seminary (this was before the seminary and ICS program split into separate schools) missions was integrated throughout the curriculum and anthropology was valued. Many of the Bible professors there had been missionaries and intuitively understood the importance of anthropology in the curriculum. My students were actually planning to be missionaries and church planters. I'd have 40-50 students in my anthropology classes. It was a great place to be if you were preparing for missions, and as a faculty member it was awesome to have amazing students in my classes like Bill and Robin Harris, who EMS folk will know.

But when Trinity started working to recruit me, there were strong attractions to Trinity also. Trinity provided me better supports for research and writing. While the school as a whole was not as focused on preparing grassroots missionaries, it had a Ph.D. Program in Intercultural Studies that I would direct for a decade. And this played to some of my strengths related to scholarship. I taught research method courses as well as anthropology, and worked closely with Ph.D. students from around the world. And since my wife knew Chicago would be a better venue for her to do Ph.D. work, that also fed into our decision to accept a position at Trinity.

Anthony

You must have been at TEDS at its heyday for their missions and intercultural faculty as well. What were some of your colleagues like? What was the atmosphere like being in the midst of that?

Bob

Paul Hiebert was a wonderful colleague. His wife died shortly before I came to Trinity. His home was always open. He invited us over regularly. In the fall he would drop bushel baskets of Wisconsin produce by our house – helping us feed four kids. Near the end of his life, his house became kind of an ashram where Ph.D. students, who were coming in alone for brief periods of time, could live. My boys then were junior high and high school and would go over to his house to rake or mow his lawn – but also to hang out with Dr. Hiebert and the other male doctoral students living with him and chew the fat. They came home one time and said, "Dad, when we grow up we want to be just like Dr. Hiebert. We don't want to ever get married and we want to have a house like his where a lot of guys hang out and talk about big issues and debates." My kids loved those experiences and would meet with him at his house often.

Let's see - Harold Netland, Tite Tienou, Craig Ott, and later others (Rick Cook, Alice Ott, David Gustafson). It was a very collegial group. It was a wonderful group to be a part of – and I count each of them as dear friends.

Anthony

Yeah, between those names you mentioned, there's a tremendous amount of output as far as writing and research. You've published quite a bit at various levels. Where did you get that initiative and drive? Was it fueled by the environment at TEDS where everybody was writing a lot? Some people feel this inner burning to write, or they see issues that need to be addressed. Tell us a little about where your writing comes from.

Bob

Yeah, I mean for me it's part of vocation in the sense that there's different ways to have an impact. The best way to have a scholarly impact on the ways people carry out ministry is by putting things together in a form that is readable and reviewable by others in the future. While Buck Hatch at Columbia was a wonderful teacher who inspired many, he wrote almost nothing. At a certain point, my feeling was that

knowledge comes through the discipline of research and writing. And, at least with my mix of strengths, I felt like this was the appropriate place to prioritize.

If you look at some definitions of missiology, missiology is simply "reflection on practice." I've always felt that no discipline (except possibly philosophy) is based purely on reflection. Any discipline claiming knowledge needs grounding in disciplined, research-based efforts at forging knowledge. This requires reflection, of course, but it also involves a disciplined process of knowledge acquisition. I've been in places where there was less support for research and writing, and where competing expectations and structures made research and writing difficult. I remember an administrator at CIU explaining a planned reduction in scholarly supports for faculty as an ethical move reflective of our primary commitment to being a teaching institution. Students don't pay tuition in order for us to do research and writing, but for us to be teachers, we were told.

And then in the same presentation, this administrator outlined his vision for our school to be known internationally as a leading influential institution in the area of missiology.

I remember talking with him afterward. I said you just said two things that are incompatible. You would like us to have global intellectual influence; but you don't want to provide faculty with the supports to actually earn the right to be heard by carrying out sustained and high-quality peer-reviewed research and writing.

Trinity did value research and writing, and provided better supports for faculty in that respect. And for me, the synergy of working with Ph.D. students on research and writing also enhanced my own research and writing.

There were some staff when I was at Columbia who thought that anybody wanting to write was just trying to make a name for themselves, seeking their own kingdom. If you went somewhere to preach, you were honored and prayed for. This was ministry. Writing, not so much.

But the gift of research and writing is God-given, and can serve kingdom purposes. Missiologists should not simply learn from experience and from reading, valuable as these are, but should actively work to help all of us acquire better understandings related to ministry by means of research and writing. I pray over my research and writing, and attempt to plan it in service to God's stated purposes in the world.

Anthony

Good stuff. So, changing gears a bit, you have been married for several decades to another professor, the Doctors Priest. What are the joys and trials of both being in academia together?

Bob

You know, I saw with my parents something you don't see as often in the United States. I saw a married couple working in harmony full-time together with a shared ministry and a shared vocation. I was very attracted to that. My wife Kersten and I both had similar undergraduate education. She would later go on to get her MA in anthropology and her Ph.D. in sociology.

Anthony

Was that a requirement, that she had to have a complementary discipline? "I have anthropology, so you get sociology." Did that discussion ever come up with her focus?

Bob

Well, she would probably say she adjusted to me – but these became her passion. She'd taken some courses in anthropology while I was at Berkeley. When I began teaching we had small children, but Kersten struggled to find a venue outside the home to also focus. I suggested she take a few graduate courses at the University of South Carolina. She did and loved it. There were some faculty there who shared her interests and USC offered her a full ride for their MA program in anthropology.

After we moved to Chicago when I began teaching at TEDS, she waited a year or two for the kids to get acclimated and then began looking into Ph.D. anthropology programs. Most did not seem friendly to Christians and she had had a bit of a painful experience with one professor in South Carolina.

I suggested that it might be easier for us to both get jobs together if one of us was in sociology and the other anthropology, and so she put out the fleece and applied to both anthropology and sociology programs. Loyola University in Chicago had faculty that were very warm and friendly to Christians and at least one or two that were very explicitly Christian evangelicals, or at least somewhat on that end. They offered her a full ride and she was able to go there. She worked with Lilly-funded research on

immigrant congregations in the Chicago area, looking at a Catholic parish with a large Filipino subgroup, and also a Korean Buddhist temple in Chicago, and so on. She's a sociologist who's kept anthropology pretty central in her work.

For much of my life I've taught in settings where I was the only anthropologist. I taught a few years with Paul Hiebert, but other than that, I have taught in places where there was no other anthropologist or sociologist. It is hard to be a good scholar if you are completely isolated from other people in your field. But I was married to one! We've just had a lot of synergy where we've both gotten each other interested in the work that we do. My wife was interested in race and ethnicity very early and she pulled me in. We edited a book with Oxford University Press on race and ethnic relations, and it was really my wife's work that kind of got me galvanized to work in that area. When I started research on short-term missions, she researched with me in Peru on the topic, and then shifted her Ph.D. dissertation to align with this interest – focusing on women's involvements in short-term missions. We often collaborate or work on parallel sorts of things. We have slightly different strengths and interests, but complementary ones. We thus each have a knowledgeable conversation partner.

We had hoped to someday teach in the same institution together, but even when schools had two suitable positions open at the same time – we repeatedly were rebuffed from applying jointly by administrators who were not open to husband-wife teams in the same department. But we did have a number of opportunities to co-teach individual courses together – which I've deeply enjoyed.

Oh, the challenges of the two-scholar family! We taught in separate states for eight years. That meant we lived in central Indiana where Kersten taught at Indiana Wesleyan University, and I commuted to Chicago where I spent half of every week. It was challenging. After a couple of car accidents and some other health issues, I decided to leave TEDS and took a position at Taylor University in Indiana near my wife's school, so we could both live at home and have a more normal life.

I taught at Taylor University for four years but my wife ended up in the hospital last year. She's still in recuperation. When it became clear she couldn't continue teaching, she took an early retirement – and wanted to move close to our children. I was not willing to continue teaching a heavy load at Taylor if this was not actually good for both of us. So I recently accepted a special offer Taylor provided for faculty wishing to take early retirement. We have moved to Louisville to be near our children and

grandchildren. I am transitioning, hopefully, to a time with more focus on research and writing again – as well as more time for family. I'm still exploring how my missiological vocation should be worked out at this stage of life. Any advice is welcomed.

Anthony

What is your encouragement for the future of Christian anthropologists or missionary anthropologists, which are definitely different things? You know you said in 1980 it was difficult for schools to find somebody with anthropological training, but also biblical foundations, and I think in 2021 that's still the problem. So what is your encouragement to a college student or a seminary student who's thinking, "Do I go this route and pursue a degree in anthropology?"

Bob

In an earlier era, many of the Christians going into anthropology had already spent significant periods of time as missionaries (and/or missionary kids). They often had theological training. They'd been grappling with practical issues related to missiology and brought that sense of vocation and calling into their study of anthropology. These days, Christians going into anthropology mostly aren't coming from that background. And since anthropology has long been hostile towards Christian missions, not surprisingly, many younger Christians in anthropology don't naturally gravitate to missiological conversations and projects.

Furthermore, the growth of missions and intercultural studies PhD programs at the seminaries means more missionaries and missiologists are introduced to some level of anthropology in those programs. They are able to pursue doctoral work that builds on their previous theological work. Plus, those Ph.D.'s are much shorter than the ten years or so it typically takes to acquire a university Ph.D. in anthropology, so they are more accessible. That is, the people that in an earlier era might have gone into anthropology with missiological interests are far more inclined to pursue a Ph.D. in intercultural studies/missiology at one of these programs today. Not only do these programs foster integration with theology and missiological ends, but they allow seminary graduates to build on prior training. Unlike what I had to do, one doesn't have to start over to gain social science credentialing.

These Ph.D. programs in ICS often, but not always, include anthropology. In my view, a stronger anthropological focus would make them even better. We do need younger Christians with theological training and missiological experience and commitments to actually pursue Ph.D.'s in anthropology – so that our missiology programs do have some professors with top-level anthropology training.

In any case, missiologists need an integrated approach – where we grapple with human cultural realities in light of biblical and missiological commitments and where we put this together through research and writing in forms that can influence others.

Missiology can draw us into diverse topics. In my early teaching, I saw South Carolina pro-life people align politically with people trying to keep the confederate flag over the state capitol and saw how American racial dynamics harmed the witness of the church. And I began to do research and writing on this topic – a topic my wife and I return to often. I observed the practice of the church in the area of short-term missions – and concluded that research needed to consider the realities and issues involved. I learned of new dynamics in child-witch accusations – as fostered by churches, and I organized conferences, research, and publications to help Christians struggle with the relevant issues.

Anyway, I would love to see more Christians in anthropology, but there are challenges, and outcomes are not always good. In my view, Christians with strong foundations and commitments to biblical and theological truth, with ministry experience, with a clear sense of vocation, and willingness to put in the ten-year commitment to finish a Ph.D. in anthropology should be encouraged and supported in pursuing such a degree. And we should pray for them and then hire and support them as faculty in our ICS programs!!

Anthony

Well, that's all I have. Is there anything I left out that you'd like to speak to before we go?

Bob

Just one last thing I'm thinking of. You know, there are different ways to think about your life and work. There are many topics I've focused on over the years. Part of scholarship is intentionality and working on specific topics over long periods of time.

Laying foundations in the mastery of literature, planning and carrying out research, organizing and interfacing with other scholars at conference level, or in publishing edited results. Real scholarship requires developing foundations in an area but then getting stronger and stronger over time. So I've had topics that I keep circling back to again and again.

We need to focus on important issues and projects, and that means getting other people to engage those issues as well. I have attempted to organize publishing projects, editing projects where people get together and read papers on a topic and work collaboratively. I've secured multiple grants for teams of us to work together on specific projects. Research is enhanced by better forms of interaction and communication through channels such as conferences. That's what I'm excited about regarding EMS. When I first began directing the Ph.D. program at Trinity many years ago, I was frustrated at the lack of opportunity for Ph.D. students to present their research at missiology conferences. Some missiological societies only allowed a few select professors to present, and everyone else had to sit around in deferential postures nodding at this and that. But in recent years, I've taken pleasure in helping to foster change in this respect, and watching as both the ASM and EMS have made changes allowing for much wider possibilities for people to present – including Ph.D. students.

I would really like to see more of a sustained conviction by missiologists that research, and not just reflection, is what matters to knowledge. I would like to see a widespread commitment that we don't just do research once in our life (in a dissertation), but that we carry out research across the course of our lives.

It is only relatively recently, for example, that I've come to believe that changes in our culture in the area of sex and marriage actually have enormous implications that those of us (whether parents or pastors or missionaries or professors) wishing to be faithful to Scripture and to present a compelling witness need to grapple with. I have bought and am reading hundreds of books focused on the topic – by biblical scholars and theologians, and by sociologists and especially anthropologists, and continue to work carefully through them. I believe I am seeing new ways in which biblical teaching on sex and marriage can be commended to others in the current world. I have carried out research projects and have begun to publish. My next publication on the topic should come out in the journal On Knowing Humanity. But this takes time. I hope to find others who will engage with me on these matters from shared theological commitments.

My point is, missiologists need to be people with a clear calling and vocation to put in the hard effort to research, write, reflect, analyze, and then create venues and structures for the advancement of knowledge to help Christians who share our convictions and theological assumptions. We need to be able to put things together in ways that help churches engage the culture, which is becoming increasingly challenging, not just in the United States, but all over the world.

Anthony

I like that – missiologist as a vocational calling for the advancement of knowledge. Bob Priest, thank you so much for your time and sharing your incredible journey with us.