

HAND IN HAND

Implementing Business-as-Mission to facilitate Church Planting

There are almost as many definitions of “Business-as-Mission” (BAM) as there are people who use the term. Christian universities and missions organizations have added BAM curriculum to their training courses; several books have been published on the topic, and there is certainly no shortage of BAM conferences which one may attend.

Consequently, the Business-as-Mission movement has been understood a number of ways.

Some practice BAM as merely a façade for church planting work. Others have defined it as simply “Christians doing business” or “workplace ministry.” In 2004 the Lausanne Movement suggested a more strenuous definition. The group writes in their Business as Mission Manifesto that BAM “is about business with a Kingdom of God perspective, purpose, and impact...for the greater glory of God.”

In the midst of all the BAM definition discussions, do we then need another attempt at defining Business-as-Mission? We think so because how we understand BAM will affect our implementation of it. With this in mind, we decided to add our voice to the chorus.

BAM, as Access Partners pursues it, is neither just a means to an end nor an end in itself.

More specifically, we do not think that the sole purpose of BAM is to get missionaries into unreached areas or that it is simply doing business excellently as a Christian. We aim to see both purposes being accomplished simultaneously.



BAM is serious business, not a façade business

There should be little difference in excellence between a regular overseas business and a business established with missionary goals. Around BAM circles, some understand establishing business with missionary intentions as merely a means to entering restricted access countries, regardless of whether the business is credible or not.¹

We believe that a healthy understanding of BAM sees businesses not only as required paperwork to get visas but also as an important part of long-term church planting strategy. So, we want to promote kingdom businesses with the understanding that they need to be legitimate businesses.

A business operated with integrity and excellence will earn a community's respect and trust. It also may allow a church planting team to stay in a country for a longer period of time.² Running a business is also a natural way to build relationships and lessens the amount of scrutiny a church planting team may receive from the local government.³

Conversely, a "façade business" which is just a front for missionary efforts will inevitably hurt a church planting team's credibility, and thus, is not beneficial to the work of spreading the gospel. It is often very clear to locals (and much more apparent than may be perceived by the team), that the platform is a front, especially if it is not earning any money and the employees are spending their time differently from other local businessmen. Furthermore, if the business folds or fails, the visas it grants to church planters may be revoked, which means that continued access into the country can also be jeopardized.

serious business
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BAM supports church planting goals

A business operated with integrity and excellence will earn a community's respect and trust.

If we agree that the application of BAM needs to be legitimate and sustainable, we also need to realize that a successful business is not the end goal. A business may be operated in a restricted access nation with Christian principles, be accomplishing social good, making a nice profit, and employing Christians and still not be a BAM business.

Business-as-Mission, as we define it, needs to facilitate church planting.

Missionaries who participate in the business also need to have the ability to devote sufficient time to do what they are there for. Quite simply, they need to be investing plenty of time in church planting activities. These include taking language classes, learning the culture, developing relationships, mobilizing support from their sending churches, prayer, setting up partnerships with local believers, and the list goes on. If their involvement in business hinders ministry within the community, then BAM is not being accomplished.

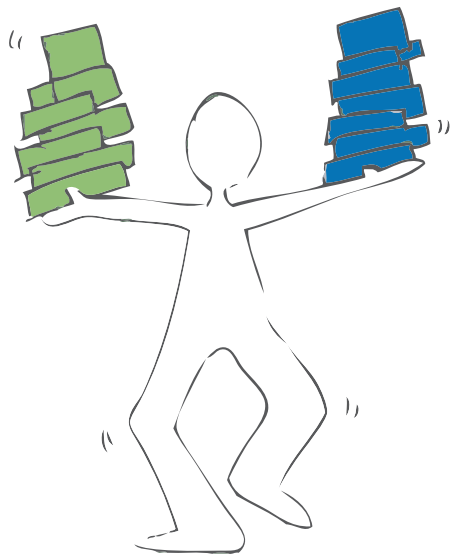
¹ Most countries that have limited access to the gospel are the same ones that make it difficult for religious workers or missionaries to enter their countries. Even Christians who have entered as students or humanitarian workers are increasingly being expelled because of their faith. In most of these areas, business-related visas are the only way the governments will let foreigners in.

² Church planting work among those yet unreached by the gospel can take years so it is ideal to have a business that will allow for a team's sustained presence in the area.

³ One church planting team we have come in contact with ran a book distribution shop in a restricted-access country. The shop even sold translated Christian literature but because they were making a profit, they were paying taxes faithfully, employed locals, and were even getting business from other nearby countries, the whole operation made sense to the government. Even when police would regularly visit their shop, they could not find fault in these Christian businessmen.

THE CHALLENGE: Balancing business and church planting

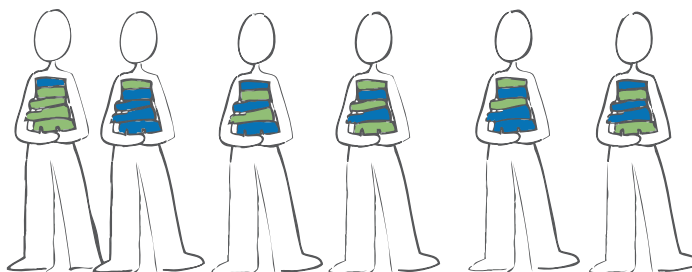
If BAM is meant to embrace and facilitate a church planting strategy, then Christian workers committed to these teams must spend a good portion of their time running a viable business and planting healthy, reproducing churches. Here is where the challenge lies.



On one hand, a church planting team will already have a full schedule and set of responsibilities. Especially in countries where there are few known believers and Christian workers are “breaking new ground,” church planting is a full-time job. On the other hand, any business professional or entrepreneur knows that a business needs a reasonable investment of time and resources to succeed. Even the most efficient church planter will find balancing both loads burdensome.

Trying to accomplish both goals at the same time is not only a daunting task, but it can also potentially prohibit a team from doing either job well. If the church planter spends most of their time on church planting (which is the main goal), the business may suffer and may put the team’s access to the country at risk.

On the flipside, if most of the time is spent keeping the business alive, then church planting work will be negatively affected, if accomplished at all. So, how does one balance church planting goals with business goals?



THE SOLUTION:

Recruit the right people
and assemble a
complementary team

Businesses have three main components: a viable idea, sufficient capital, and qualified personnel. A successful BAM strategy will address each of these issues. Most importantly, it will address having the right people on the team.

Currently, church planters are asked to take crash courses in business management and then expected to navigate the ever changing waters of international business. Instead we think that the church planting team should partner with mission-minded business professionals who already have experience and expertise. Vice versa, we would be remiss to expect business-oriented people to perform two full-time jobs overseas. Instead, business professionals can be teamed up with people who are well-trained and equipped with hands-on experience in ministry, culture adaptation, Bible translation, and other church planting related skills.

Our goal is to assemble a team of experts working towards a common goal while using their strengths to support each other’s work and ministry.

Members of the team will have differing amounts of time invested in the business or in church planting efforts depending on their area of focus. This blending of time and expertise can be arrived at by developing clear expectations and roles on the field. Establishing clear leadership for the entire church planting team and delineating a director for the business promotes stability, team unity and sustainability.

A Note on the Effectiveness of Business-as-Mission

While businesses help provide entry into restricted access nations, they are not “expulsion proof.” In these regions, it is best to expect the unexpected. In reality, some of these areas have unstable, war-torn economies that are not friendly to businesses. Local regulations are changing all the time, visas can be revoked, and governments may always increase pressure on Christians. Missionaries in these areas know that persecution is always a possibility. Eventually, if you are preaching Christ and living a life that displays the power of the gospel faithfully, opposition is not too far way.

Ultimately, we must depend on God, not on the business, for the continued work of spreading the gospel in these restricted access nations. We can have all the best plans and all the right resources in the world, but these efforts will not succeed apart from the grace of God.

One way we are pursuing the team approach in business as mission is by recruiting business directors. If you would like to explore the possibility of applying as a Business Director overseas, or simply find out more information about the Business Directors program, please contact us by calling:
202-609-7375
or email:
businessdirector@access1040.com

