



## Getting the word out: research, reflection, and writing for global health

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### Introduction

Observing the world around us, evaluating humans and nature, measuring results, and understanding present reality are important professional activities for the people of God both locally and globally. Christians have a significant footprint in responding to human need, but sometimes fail to measure their impact or assess their own practices in light of a growing base of evidence in the literature. Additionally, their work and wisdom could have significant effects on global health practice if it were more discoverable in this growing body of evidence. In order to build a greater capacity for research, reflection and publishing for individuals and organizations inspired by the Christian faith, we will start with the essence of evidence gathering, then assess motivations, then move to methods, then finish with a call to action.

### Evidence & Research

Evidence is the available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid. It is used to support a hypothesis or assertion. Research is using established methods to investigate a problem or question with the aim of generating new knowledge about it. It is observation and analysis of the knowable world.

### Evidence from a Christian Perspective

It is clear that God made the world knowable and gave humans a special place to test and steward the earth's resources. "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory

of kings." (Prov 25:2) There is an expanding body of knowledge in all sectors, disciplines, and nations ready to be searched out and to be contributed to. Though the Church is designed to embody the fullness of truth, she does not have a monopoly on the truth. There was wisdom in the men of the East in Solomon's day (1 Kings 4:30), the Queen of Sheba was thought able to judge the generation of Jesus' day (Matt 12:42), and the Cretan poets were true in their self-assessment of unhealthy practices in Paul's day (Titus 1:12-13). The creation mandate of Gen 1:28 was to have thoughtful dominion over the created order (including *knowledge stewardship*). God extolled King Solomon for asking for wisdom and discernment over riches or long life, and he was granted both (1 Kings 3:11-12). Jesus was the word (*logos*) who became flesh and embodied the wisdom of God as the light of human beings (Jn 1), and he invited his disciples to follow the evidence wherever that may have led (Jn 14:11) and to test the spirits to see if they were from God (1 Jn 4). The Scriptures are the living word, useful for equipping for a great many things (1 Tim 3:16), and the Holy Spirit confirms collective wisdom (Acts 15:28). The disciples were called by the Apostle Paul to knowledge stewardship: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor 10:4-5) We are also called to speak the truth in love in order to grow (Eph 4:15), "that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight . . . so that you may be able to discern what is best." (Phil 1:6&10).

Evaluating what works and what doesn't work is applying wisdom to the phenomena of life, in order to actualize best practices. It's making the most of every opportunity, because of the pervasive problems of life (Eph 5:16). The result is to promote life and godliness through knowledge stewardship (2 Peter 1:3) and to avoid waste and duplication of efforts. It is to practice contemplative reflection "Whatever is . . . true, noble, excellent, praiseworthy, think about such things . . ." leading to practice and peace (Phil 4:8). As Paul instructed his protégé Timothy, "be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction." (2 Tim 4:2)

## Motivations

### Practical Reasons to Research and Publish

There are several practical and professional reasons to engage in research, reflection, and writing. It is a way to participate in collective wisdom and scholarly dialogue. It is being a good steward of one's skills and experiences, refining and improving the quality of one's work — and enhancing the quality of the work of others. It advocates for people that one serves, highlights one's organization, generates further resources, and leads to professional development. It also facilitates partnership development with collaboration toward shared goals.

Research through observations and analysis of the knowable world accomplishes more than satisfying curiosity. It can move us from knowledge to wisdom when we apply that knowledge for a greater good. When research is applied at the community level, it can move us from information to better practices — data to development, truth to transformation.

### The Pursuit of Evidence in the World and in the Word

Evidence can be pursued in the knowable material world (*cosmos*). "Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge." (Ps 19:1-6) It is discerned in the science of biomedicine which assesses and cares

for the biosphere. It looks at historical trends and taps into the existing body of collective knowledge — the literature. It assesses associations vs. cause-and-effect and pursues testable realities across cultures and across sectors. It considers (and critiques) international standards of practice, pursuing the best practices in local contexts.<sup>1</sup> It is utilized to understand social or spiritual determinants of health and to deal with complex systems challenges.

Evidence is also used in following the precepts in the word of God. "The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul." (Ps 19:7-14) "Come let us reason together. . ." (Is 1:18). It is encouraged by an invitation to see the wounded hands and the empty tomb. It is an affirmation of life and abundance (Jn 10:10) and a manifestation of God's presence and activity (*shalom*). Paul encouraged the Ephesians to speak the truth *in love* (Eph 4:15), eschewing fruitlessness and exposing it (Eph 5:11). He regularly used reason and persuasion for a diverse audience in Corinth (Acts 18:4). Christians are called to properly exegete Scripture, the universe, and humans toward the higher purposes of God.

### Accountability and Transparency

Part of social responsibility and truth-telling is to give an account. It is one of the four aspects of a faith-based approach of measuring, evaluating, accountability, and learning (MEAL) in development,<sup>2</sup> and a part of guided excellence in evidence for faith groups.<sup>3</sup> Christian accountability is in three directions:

1. *To give an account to God.* Knowing the Omniscient One still asks for honest reporting from the beginning — Adam was asked in the garden, "where are you?" (Gen 3:9). The response of the righteous leader is this: "Test me, Lord, and try me, examine my heart and my mind." (Ps 26:2). No one can escape the purview of God, as Job realized, "that you examine them every morning and test them every moment?" (Job 7:17-18) The Hebrew writer reiterates this reporting responsibility: "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is

uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (Heb 4:13) Therefore, our research must be done with integrity as God, knower of all, is the ultimate reviewer of our work.

2. *To give an account to Others.* Mutual confession and prayer for healing were hallmarks of the early church (James 5:16). Paul encouraged the Corinthians to “examine yourselves . . . test yourselves” (2 Cor 13:5). The goal in a community of grace is to have honest appraisals and to then collaborate in order to bear each other’s burdens by forgiving shortcomings in order to improve (Col 3:13). Paul instructed Titus to build into emerging leaders through integrity and capacity-building: “In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.” (Titus 2:7-8) The goal of mutual transparency is to remain above reproach, and this principle can be applied to collaborative research pursuits in pluralistic contexts.
3. *To give an account to the World.* Christoffer Grundmann highlighted the Christian call to give a credible account of the “corporeality of salvation” in their respective witness to the world, “which will be credible not in what it claims but on what it actually brings about tangibly.”<sup>4</sup> This should be life, life in abundance (Jn 10:10) — true human flourishing. Actions are louder than (empty) words (James 2:14-23). The international community is asking for more evidence from faith-based organizations: More than high-minded ideals, or pious speculations, but measurable life-giving outcomes. Will we search out the evidence in our work and publish it in order to uncover the light that is there that others may recognize the goodness of God? (Mat 5:16)

## Displaying Christian Distinctions

What are the marks of the Christian community that might set them apart from others in research and evidence gathering for global health and professional healthcare?

- The *imago Dei* concept of human dignity at all levels of development and dependency and fostering moral responsibility instead of just claiming human rights.
- Real humility instead of false humility, such as learning from others and being willing to report even poor results.
- Prioritizing those populations in greatest need through self-sacrificial service and attention — the poor, the oppressed, the foreigner, the vulnerable (Isaiah 1:17, Zech 7:10).
- Longsuffering service in areas of deprivation in the slow progress towards community transformation.
- Localization of aid at the community level, ethical integrity, and mobilization of existing local resources for sustainable development.<sup>5</sup>
- Whole-person care in all dimensions of life — physical, social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, economic, and ecological.
- Maintaining hopefulness that a better world can be realized, with patient expectation of the fullness of transformation through an eschatological long view.

Research, reflection, and writing become essential elements in an authentic and persuasive global Christian witness

## Methods

### Areas of Inquiry

Credibility is enhanced, and authority is granted to those using the scientific method to discern truth from un-truth, real news from fake news. Christians and Christian agencies can contribute to health research in all areas of inquiry. However, some specific areas that Christians are well positioned to research include clinical care and public health assessments amongst the marginalized, value-based leadership, the role of religion/spirituality in health, analysis of social determinants, ecological considerations, theo-

logical scholarship applied to health, and health-related mission studies.

### How to Research

It starts with a research question, derived from practical experience or imagination, which leads to a hypothesis. A search of the literature allows the researcher either to answer the question or to show that the question is novel, and the research will seek to fill gaps in collective knowledge. Collecting a research team, procuring funding if needed, identifying the appropriate research methods to be used, and, if needed, the sample population to study. Research ethics are paramount and need to be formally addressed up front, or the research risks being unethical and most likely unpublishable.

Data is then collected, then the results are analyzed and interpreted. Claims to truth are made based on the results and not beyond the results. Results are then applied to relevant contexts and conclusions synthesized based on the findings in light of the existing literature. Finally, limitations of the research are then expressed followed by possible suggestions for further studies.

### How to Publish

Truth claims completed through research and reflections must be communicated, and this can be done via pulpit, patient, population, or pen — speaking up and into the world's literature and conversations. It means sharing the evidence in consultations, churches and other forums, government health systems, conferences, books, posts, and journals. Taking the extra time to move these insights into concise written communication is worth every moment. The work or research and reflection can then be submitted for publication, preferably in peer-reviewed, reputable and discoverable journals to as wide and strategic an audience as possible.<sup>6</sup> The process of publishing is an exercise in clarifying and proclaiming, like the Apostle Paul who meticulously wrote about that which he had observed and reflected and asked the Colossians to “pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.” (Col 4:4).

The goal is to fill gaps in knowledge, to propose keen insights, or to challenge existing paradigms. It could be an honest appraisal of your organization's results (positive or negative), which leads others into better practices in their own contexts. It utilizes numbers and narratives, images and words, tables and figures, all to convey a single overriding communication objective (SOCO). It takes time, intentionality, and courage to publish in the scientific and theological literature — but it is time well spent. It is not to boast, but to be a blessing, and to reflect the light you can shed in the darkness and chaos of the world.

We acknowledge that the whole research, reflecting, and writing process can be daunting. Both authors are editors of the *Christian Journal for Global Health*, an open-access, scholarly, multi-disciplinary, international journal. CJGH is unique in that instead of rejecting research offhand, we work with the corresponding authors to guide them through the demanding and sometimes overwhelming process of telling their story clearly, using the best of evidence and making this available to researchers everywhere.

### Conclusion and Call to Action

We invite you to consider publishing your research in the *Christian Journal for Global Health*. We must not hold our experiences and the truths we embrace to ourselves, but creatively and intelligently share them in order that our collective and unique voices may be clarified and magnified. In line with the ancient texts, “we also believe, therefore we speak.” (2 Cor 4:13). Research, reflection, and writing is both an ancient and a modern way to derive and share truth in the knowable world. When we engage in such intelligent processes, we enhance credible witness and can more effectively persuade both our supporters and our critics. Collective wisdom is enhanced and capacity is built for global health. When the Divine element is included in analysis and reporting, it becomes an exercise in ascribing to the Lord glory and strength for the healing of all nations (1 Chron 16:28). The world is clamoring for evidence. When we are reflecting God's

wisdom and ways in our truth searching and evidence production, then we speak clearly into the public square and bring more substantial healing to the nations.

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