



New Paradigms for Churches and Mission Agencies

Stan Guthrie

A missions elder from a megachurch told Sam Metcalf of Church Resource Ministries in Pasadena, California, why his church had decided to discontinue the ministry of a missionary. “We didn’t approve of what the missionary was doing, so we told him that he and his family had to return to the States,” the elder said. “After all, he’s supported by us 100 percent. He’s our missionary.”

“But doesn’t he work for an agency?” Metcalf asked. “Aren’t they his employer and supervisor?”

Yes,” the elder replied, “but we pay the bill; the agency doesn’t.”¹

Can-Do Spirit

Long-term missionary interest is bubbling in a lot of churches at the launch of the third millennium, with important questions for all stakeholders in the missions enterprise. Like the example above, however, not all are comfortable. Churches, mobilized by everything from the

Stan Guthrie has been editor of World Pulse and managing editor of Evangelical Missions Quarterly. He is now associate news editor for Christianity Today.

can-do entrepreneurial spirit of their business people, short-term vision trips by members, and the process of rubbing shoulders with increasingly multicultural neighbors, are becoming more and more creative in their attempts to obey Christ’s Great Commission to make disciples among all nations. While overall missions interest seems static at best in North America, when measured by long-term workers sent and money spent (see Chapter 3), on the local level some congregations are more creative and energized than ever.

There is no one way to “do” missions in the local church, though there are many wrong ways. Nor is there an ideal size to be effective. Tom Telford’s list includes everything from the 225-member Candia Congregational Church in Candia, New Hampshire, to megachurches like Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, and The Elmbrook Church in Waukesha, Wisconsin.²

In his book *Missions in the 21st Century: Getting Your Church into the Game*, Telford lists nine elements for a top-flight program: outward focus; 30 percent or more of the budget to missions; a training program for candidates; missions education throughout the church’s programs; church sending its own people; must be concerned about and praying for the lost; a pastor who leads in missions helping other churches in missions; and a strong local evangelism program.³

What About Agencies?

However, after reading the list, one mission agency executive groused that working with sending organizations was conspicuously absent. For some churches, that is no oversight. Citing what they see as the high costs and ossified thinking in traditional missions agencies, a sizable bloc of churches, sometimes called “megachurches” for their size and clout, has decided to go it alone. In effect, they, either by themselves or as members of a larger association of like-minded churches, have decided to become

their own agencies. These churches, such as the members of the Willow Creek Association, are now strategizing, training, deploying, and evaluating the success or failure of workers largely without the input of agencies. Of course, they risk making the same mistakes and relearning the very same lessons the agencies have done over the decades—worst of all, needlessly.

A big reason for the separatism is money. These churches don't like the "high costs" agencies say it takes to send missionaries these days and believe they can do it more cheaply. However, they will still sometimes avail themselves of mission-founded schools for missionary kids or other resources paid for by somebody else. Irritatingly, to the agencies, some of the high costs churches complain about are caused by things they demanded agencies provide for their people—such as 401 (k)'s and medical insurance.

Some churches refuse to send missionaries through outside agencies, to cut out the "middleman." Others, less radical, support only their own people, usually in part because of budgetary constraints. Part of the reason for the estrangement of these long-term partners is theological. Some in the church-only movement see the church, either locally or through denominational boards, as the only legitimate sender of missionaries.⁴ Independent boards are seen as, at best, necessary evils, because the church hasn't gotten its missions act together. They are not given the same status as the church.

Most churches, however, are willing to dance with their long-time agency partners, who know the ropes when it comes to cross-cultural ministry, obtaining visas, and the thousand and one details associated with missions. Bethlehem Baptist is one that has chosen not to re-invent the wheel. Missions pastor Tom Steller says, "I don't feel we have the time or expertise to do what a well-run agency can do."⁵

Even the many more congregations that choose to work with mission agencies now ask tougher, more probing questions of their long-time ministry partners than they did. Fading is the old paradigm of agencies simply harvesting the money and manpower of supportive and compliant churches. Agencies, so much a force in the modern missions movement since William Carey's day, are being forced to justify everything they do. Agencies have discovered that he who pays the piper calls the tune, even in missions.

Money Matters

Raising support remains a formidable obstacle for many would-be missionaries thinking about going through traditional, independent agencies. The process can mean visiting scores of churches around the country, families in tow, and can last 18 months, two years, or more. Some missionaries, who might be good in ministry but bad in raising funds, never make it.

In response, a few very large churches have committed to support a smaller number of missionaries at 100 percent of their financial needs. Instead of paying 100 missionaries \$25 a month, the idea is to pay one worker \$2,500 a month, for example—saving on his or her wear and tear and speeding the start of actual ministry. Other local churches have banded together in consortia, such as ones in Indianapolis and the Twin Cities, and agree to support a pool of workers at significant financial levels. In exchange, the missionaries and candidates are expected to do ministry in these churches and get to know their church members.⁶ For these churches, a five-minute Sunday night presentation once every four years just won't cut it anymore. This approach fits well with the baby boomer desire for personal, hands-on contact and involvement.

A downside to these kinds of concentrated support is the risk that supporting churches may splinter, close, or change their ministry focus. Such developments leave their workers far more vulnerable than those working under the old paradigm. If a church that supports a missionary 100 percent collapses because of internal strife, that missionary must return home. However, if that church provides only a small fraction of his support, the ministry can go on.

A Question of Control

Another problem is that a church can decide, for whatever reason, that a missionary family no longer fits its strategic vision. One worker and his family doing Bible translation work among Muslims were forced back to the U.S. after a supporting church's leadership decided to focus on church planting. (The missionary wondered how church planting could be done apart from the Bible, but that is a different story.)

When Paul Borthwick, former minister of Grace Chapel in Lexington, Massachusetts, wrote an article entitled "What local churches are saying to mission agencies" in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (July, 1999), Larry Sharp of UFM International penned a quick response, "What an agency leader would say to local churches" (January, 2000). "Agencies and churches pull in different directions when it comes to missionary evaluation and accountability," says Jim Reapsome, editor-at-large for *World Pulse* and *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. In a column he said churches want regular performance reports, more say in missionary deployment, up-to-date financial support information, pastoral care for missionaries, and current information on agency personnel needs. He says most agencies come up short in these areas. He likens churches and agencies to a team of horses pulling in different directions.

"For more than 40 years I have traveled with both horses, both as a pastor and as a member of several mission boards," Reapsome said. "I have listened to both

sides and am amazed that they cannot find time to sit down and listen to one another with mutual respect, trust, and appreciation. They must get off the path of mutual criticism.”⁷

While the dialogue between churches and agencies has been civil (for the most part), it has, at times, been painful. Like an employee writhing under a tough review from the boss, agencies have not always enjoyed all the questioning. But, slowly, they are learning to live with it. Those who embrace the creativity of churches, learn from it, and correct its excesses will prosper in the 21st century. For while the local church is not the only element the Lord of missions uses, it is the key one.

“Local churches are the key to world missions,” stated Paul Beals, professor emeritus at Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary, in an article for the Evangelical Missiological Society’s *Occasional Bulletin*. “They are the source of missionary personnel, of financial support and of informed prayer. They are the engine, under God, that drives world mission.”⁸

Bethlehem Baptist Church, a large congregation in downtown Minneapolis, illustrates the point. BBC sent its first missionary out in 1890, but its overseas outreach program slowly slipped into dormancy. But in 1983 the speaker chosen for the missions conference was unable to come at the last minute, and the pastor was hastily inserted in his place. As he planned, prayed, and pored over the great missionary themes in the Bible, the pastor’s heart was ignited for the glory of God around the world. That pastor’s name was John Piper, the author of the instant missionary classic *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*. Among its maxims: “Missions exists because worship doesn’t.”

Bethlehem caught his vision and began setting goals. The 1,100-member church, with a \$580,000 missions budget, invests part of it in its own inner-city neighborhood helping the jobless become employable. In 1990 the church purposed to plant three churches by 2000. That goal has been met. Another was to send 200 church members as missionaries. That goal is still in process.⁹

Still, it hasn’t taken the church long to turn things around. Missions mobilizer and agitator Tom Telford, on staff with United World Mission, has named Bethlehem among the top 21 missions-minded congregations in the U.S.¹⁰

Missions Pastor Tom Steller says simply, “Long-term missionary interest is bubbling strong again at BBC.”¹¹ 🌐

Discussion Questions

1. Which do you think is God’s primary means to spread the gospel—local churches, denominational mission boards, independent mission boards, or something else? Why?
2. What factors contribute to the high cost of missionary support? How can it be lessened?

3. Does your church work well with mission agencies, or vice versa?

4. What are some creative approaches your organization can use to engage in global ministry more effectively and more faithfully to the Scriptures?

Further reading:

- “When local churches act like agencies,” by Sam Metcalf, *EMQ*, April 1993.
- “What local churches are saying to mission agencies,” by Paul Borthwick, *EMQ*, July 1999.
- “What an agency leader would say to local churches,” by Larry Sharp, *EMQ*, January 2000.
- “Growing local church initiatives,” by John Siewert, *Mission Handbook* (Monrovia: MARC, 1997).
- “The right stuff: Former umpire calls 21 churches on the ball in missions involvement,” by Deann Alford, *World Pulse*, August 21, 1998.
- Missions in the 21st Century: Getting Your Church into the Game*, by Tom Telford, with Lois Shaw (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1998).
- “Mission societies: Are they biblical?,” by Frank M. Severn, *EMQ*, July 2000.

1. Samuel F. Metcalf, “When local churches act like agencies,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, April 1993, p. 142.
2. Deann Alford, “The right stuff,” *World Pulse*, 21 August, 1999, p. 1.
3. “The right stuff,” p. 2.
4. John A. Siewert, “Growing local church initiatives,” *Mission Handbook 1998-2000* (Pasadena: Mission Advanced Research and Communication Center, 1997), p. 59.
5. Tom Steller, interview by author via Internet, 11 November 1999.
6. *ASKAMISSIONARY NEWSLETTER* (see <http://www.askamissionary.com>; send an e-mail with the word “subscribe” in the message area to [askamissionary@xc.org]).
7. Jim Reapsome, “Pulling together,” *World Pulse*, 3 December 1999, p. 8.
8. Paul A. Beals, “The triad for Century 21,” *The Occasional Bulletin*, Spring 1999, p. 1.
9. “The right stuff,” pp. 1-2.
10. “The right stuff,” p. 1.
11. Tom Steller, interview by author via Internet, 11 November 1999.

Reprinted by permission from ch.1 of *Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century* Paternoster Press, 2000.

To order copies, see pages 28-29 of this issue of *Mission Frontiers*.

