

When Local Churches Act Like Agencies

A Fresh Look At Mission Agency-local Church Relationships.

--*Samuel F. Metcalf*

Scene One

The man sitting across from me was the missions elder in a megachurch with a reputation for its commitment to missions. "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," he said. "After all, he's supported by us 100 percent. He's our missionary."

"But doesn't he work for an agency?" I asked. "Aren't they his employer and supervisor?"

"Yes, but we pay the bill; the agency doesn't," he replied.

Scene Two

The letter came from a church missions committee. They wanted an update on a missionary they were supporting. But the particulars were disturbing. The church considered the missionary one of their "missionary staff." Therefore, they asked for "a copy of his performance reviews and evaluations for the past year."

We explained how the person was evaluated and by whom. We also described his effectiveness, and, I hope, provided enough information for the church to know whether or not their giving was a wise use of their mission dollars.

However, the missionary was not their employee. I explained that actual reviews were proprietary information, and we would not release such confidential employee information to anyone.

These incidents illustrate an all too common muscularity exercised by local churches in their relationships with mission organizations. I believe the underlying assumption behind such an attitude is the conviction that the local church, to one degree or another, should operate as a mission agency.

This is not a new idea. Various attempts to carry it out have been made throughout church history. To me, the examples cited above are contemporary manifestations of missiology and ecclesiology that are deficient theologically, historically, and practically.

The view that the church should, in effect, operate as a mission board is being embraced mostly by megachurches, and by other churches that can afford missions pastors. This is a by-product of many otherwise healthy trends toward mobilizing churches for greater involvement in world evangelization.

In support of my contention, here are some observations:

- Megachurches assume larger percentages (sometimes 100 percent) of the support of their missionaries.
- Churches adopt a "we support only our own," or "only those who have gone through our program of preparation" policy.

- Churches ask for more "partnership" with agencies, which may mean a grasp for more control, particularly in decisions affecting the missionary and his or her family.

- More churches are hiring missions pastors.

- Some megachurches refuse to support missionaries going with outside agencies. Believing the local church is "missions," they send and supervise their own people. This is true at churches like Willow Creek Community Church, Barrington, Ill., the Crystal Cathedral, Garden Grove, Calif., and the Vineyard in Anaheim, Calif., and many of its associated congregations.

Why Churches Act Like Agencies

There are a number of reasons why some churches are inclined to assume agency functions. Of course, it reflects their desire to mobilize the resources of the church more fully for world evangelization. They also have come to expect better stewardship of their mission dollars. The "baby boomer" influences suggest distrust of institutions generally, so they don't buy the "just trust us" line of some mission agencies.

Part of the reason is a reaction to abuses suffered by their missionaries at the hands of mission agencies. When problems arise on the field, church leaders often get an earful from their missionaries. Churches feel they should be advocates for their hurting missionaries, and make up for what they perceive as inadequate pastoral care.

These churches also want to reform the system that requires missionaries to spend great periods of time traveling, speaking, and raising funds. They see missionaries and their families return exhausted from these kinds of furloughs.

At the core of the trend is the fact that megachurches, according to church consultant Lyle Schaller, start to act like mini-denominations when they grow beyond 700 members. They assume total responsibility for missions. Because of their success and size, these churches believe "we can do it better" than the mission boards.

They also want to do much more for their missionaries than simply being a conduit for support funds.

In addition to these practical concerns, there's also the subtle theological and ecclesiological conviction that the church should be the primary force in missions. Therefore, agencies are illegitimate. They exist only because churches have abdicated their rightful role in world evangelization.

Here's part of a letter from a mega-church pastor who states this view: "There are numerous organizations who say their purpose is to be an 'arm' of the church. However, in reality they never seem to make it happen. . . . I pray that the need for their existence would become obsolete because churches would obtain a healthy biblical perspective of ministry. . . ."

How Agencies Have Contributed To Churches Acting Like Agencies

All of the causes of this trend cannot be attributed entirely to mega-churches. By their actions (or inaction in some cases) mission boards have also been a significant factor. Here are some problems we have to admit we have, and then do something about.

1. Sloppy accountability. Sloppy accountability drives many people crazy when they realize how poorly some churches and Christian organizations hold their people accountable. The problem may be worse in agencies where support has to be raised. Employee psychology is quite different when money comes from "my donors" rather than from an employer who can demand levels of performance and competence.

2. Poor articulation of goals and objectives, and an inability to track and evaluate effectiveness. This problem can be a smoke screen for a lack of focus or fruitfulness. Unfortunately, "results" is often a dirty word in the helping professions.

3. An unwillingness to remove ineffective people. Mission board leaders know how difficult it can be to let ineffective or incompetent people go, particularly if they have to be brought home. It's much harder to do this in missions than in business and professional life.

I find most Christian leaders are gun-shy to charges that we "shoot our wounded." Instead, we tolerate behavior that cripples our organizations and brings disrepute to the name of Christ.

In his book *Dying for Change*, Leith Anderson states: "Rather than suffer the pain of dealing with a personnel problem, and rather than inflict pain on individuals, most churches and Christian organizations choose to live with the problem. Unfortunately, the resulting consequences can be devastating: ineffectiveness, incompetence, low morale, shrinking income, unfulfilled purpose" (p. 117).

4. Poor communication with donors and supporting churches. All too often the quality of our written and visual media is bad and full of appeals for more money.

5. Inadequate pastoral care. Today's missions force includes an increasing number of people with a history of family breakdown and other problems. Churches see missionaries used, abused, and hurt, and often feel compelled to serve as their advocates.

6. Poor ecclesiology. Too often, mission boards have justified their existence because churches are "not doing the job." Agencies give lip service to the church, but their actions and attitudes do not convey a strong commitment to the church. They see the churches primarily as sources of people and money.

With these observations I indict myself and my agency. Exercising godly leadership in these matters is among my toughest challenges and a major emotional demand. This is particularly true when working with those of my own baby-boomer generation, as well as the "baby busters" (those born since 1964). We do not respond well to authority, revel in our independence, and distrust institutions.

The Results Of This Trend In Churches

Despite these legitimate concerns, a number of detrimental things happen when churches operate as mission agencies. To start with, the agencies often feel hamstrung by the churches and often find themselves in adversarial postures. Under the demand for accountability, church missions committees interfere in operational matters for which they have neither training, experience, or know-how.

The average committee includes godly, well-meaning, but inexperienced people who go on and off the committee at the whim of church elections. Cross-cultural mission is far too complicated, as well as geographically distant from the supporting church, for the committee to exercise responsibility for field strategy and supervision.

When the church tries to control things, the missionaries are placed in an intolerable position. "For whom do I really work?" they want to know. When the church claims the missionaries are part of their "staff," and issues orders to them--bypassing the agency--the missionary is caught in a bind.

Consider the problem that arises when churches require missionaries to pass their pre-field training programs. Some of the very best people who should be on the field are frustrated by these church systems, many of which are poorly designed and implemented. In their well-meaning attempts to prepare people, committees all too

often weed out the best candidates. Entrepreneurial, visionary go-getters will not tolerate being processed to death for years before qualifying for service.

Unlike the past, today's missionaries are fortunate if they can get support from more than two or three churches. Church support is becoming much harder to get, and it has more strings attached. In exasperation, missionaries give up on the churches and go to individual donors. Rather than facilitating the mobilization of resources, churches are actually slowing down our ability to respond to ripe harvests and unique opportunities for evangelism.

We also have to ask what happens when a church that has taken on the lion's share of a missionary's support suddenly falls on hard times. For example, this is what happened recently to two of our families. In the first case, the major supporting church ran into serious budget problems. In the second, the church itself is declining and may fail. These problems could take our missionaries down with them.

History also shows us that whenever the local church exercises control of the missionary enterprise, or seeks to become a sending agency in and of itself, the missionary effort eventually is impaired and may even die.

Problems With This Trend

In 1973 Ralph Winter gave a landmark address to the All-Asia Mission Consultation in Seoul, "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission." He argued that God's purposes have been carried out via two main structures: modalities (the local church) and sodalities (mobile, task-oriented agencies). He claims that both are ordained by God, legitimate, and are equally "church." Their healthy interdependence is necessary for the progress of the gospel. He outlined a functional, or structural, understanding of ecclesiology that is critical if we are to grasp the current tensions with mission agencies and local churches.

In the November, 1990, issue of *Mission Frontiers*, Winter again addressed the issue of the local church's control of missions: "At the heart of the issue, regardless of its particular practical manifestation, lies an inadequate grasp of missiological structures and a lack of understanding of the historical and biblical dynamics between local churches and mission teams sent out for specific purposes."

Following Winter's thesis, I propose the following practical outcomes:

1. Local churches are not expected by God, nor do they have the structural capability, to meet the missionary mandate by themselves. The church in local form is only partially able to fulfill the Great Commission. This is the clear pattern of the New Testament and the overwhelming verdict of history.

Local churches need agencies because agencies have (a) vision and a narrow, task-oriented focus; (b) personnel with career commitments who are more than volunteers; (c) selectivity with personnel; (d) quick decision making and the ability to respond rapidly to opportunities; (e) expertise and professionalism in accomplishing their tasks.

2. Agencies are not expected by God, nor do they have the structural capability, to meet the missionary mandate by themselves. Agencies need local churches because they have: (a) human resources; (b) finances and material aid; (c) a broad base of intercessory prayer; (d) healing and training capabilities for preparing people for productive service and for providing pastoral care of casualties; (e) stability.

3. When agencies fail to create and serve the church, the advance of the gospel is stymied. Agencies do not have the ability to conserve the fruit of their activities, or provide long-range pastoral care.

4. Historically, when local churches have dominated or controlled agencies, they thwart the agencies' efforts and in severe cases kill or render them impotent.

5. Likewise, when the agencies have dominated or controlled the local churches (as on some fields), healthy churches do not result, leadership is stunted, and congregations do not multiply.

6. The result of virtually every worldwide revival and subsequent awakening has been the proliferation of agencies. This is a sign of the health and vitality of the Christian movement.

7. Mission efforts organized and sent under the supervision of one local church have the greatest chance for success when a separate entity is created to carry on this work. The more independent the agency, the greater its chance for success.

8. Not all agencies are pure sodalities. Of necessity they have to do some things that are better done in local church settings, such as pastoral care and a sense of community and life together. Likewise, the most effective churches are not pure modalities, and are usually led by apostolic, or "sodalic," pastors. Even though they operate within a local church structure, they think and act as though they were working with sodalities (agencies).

Local church and mission agency interdependence works best, and the gospel advances further, when leaders of both cooperate on the basis of shared values and vision. This is a powerful combination, especially when a "sodalic" pastor, who believes in the legitimacy of both structures, enthusiastically cooperates with visionary agencies.

9. Agencies that ignore mutually beneficial relationships with churches do so at their own peril. The granting of legitimacy and respect must flow both ways.

Guidelines For Good Relationships

A major step toward improving church and agency cooperation and interdependence would be for leaders to cleanse their vocabulary of the term parachurch. More accurate and healthy terms could be "the church in local form" and "the church in mobile or mission form." Continuing to use church and parachurch only perpetuates a wrong ecclesiology and the view that legitimacy rests only with the local congregation.

A fresh understanding needs to be reached about differences in accountability and control. As a mission executive, I am for proper accountability for our people and organization. However, accountability means open communication with freedom for mutual approval or disapproval. It does not mean mutuality in making decisions. It does not mean that local churches should step into mission strategy, personnel supervision, and policy creation.

The two stories at the beginning of this article illustrate this point. The first was a case of blatant control; the intent of the second is proper accountability.

Certainly we need strong congregational interest in our missionaries, but direct supervision leads to the ineffective use and deployment of people. The churches must stay out of personnel policies and practices. Local churches should either send their people through agencies they are comfortable with, or they should create their own agency and give it enough autonomy to be successful.

Churches and agencies should negotiate clear lines about accountability, fiscal reporting, and communications before the flow of support starts. And I do mean negotiate. All too often agencies are handed a church's policy with a "take it or leave it" attitude. Part of the negotiations should include the expectations of the churches for the agencies to give an account of their objectives and results.

Megachurches should consider the fact that the philosophy of mission that some of them are adopting is not new, not progressive, and ultimately will fall victim to the same structural dynamics that have occurred

repeatedly in church history. Rather than going it alone, they should seek interdependence between themselves and outside organizations with neither exercising an attitude of ecclesiastical superiority.

If local churches want to start their own training and preparation programs, the leaders should cooperate with the agencies. I know of few programs that have been designed as a result of such consultation. How strange, since the agencies have to live with the results, and they know from experience what's needed most in prefield preparation.

I believe it is preferable for missionaries to be supported in smaller amounts by more churches than the other way around. This makes life harder when it comes to raising support, furlough travel, and communications, but the alternative has too many potential pitfalls--the relationship with the church may sour, or the church may fall into decline. Having a multitude of supporting churches provides the potential for more prayer and the involvement of more people.

Unfortunately, this is not the current trend. As a person who has lived on support for 16 years, I would rather have 10 churches giving \$400 a month than two that give \$2,000. The latter may be easier, but in the long run could prove perilous.

Local churches should encourage their members to support missionaries and agencies outside the church budget. So-called "storehouse giving" works against the personal attachment donors need with their missionaries. It can also be used as a club to bring agencies under the control of the churches, because money and power go together.

Proverbs 11:24, 25 is as true for groups as it is for individuals. Churches that stress giving directly to missions free their people for such giving and are secure enough to encourage funds to flow beyond the budget rarely lack funds to meet their needs.

Encouraging such giving also helps to alleviate the furlough grind by having more support generated in one locale. Churches that have a policy against soliciting their people are short-sighted. This only frustrates the missionaries and hinders people from experiencing the joy of giving.

Conclusion

Missionaries and agency leaders talk a lot about these problems, mostly behind closed doors. Few are willing to address them openly because they fear offending important sources of money and the people in the churches who control the purse strings. Agency leaders are often cowed by pastors who preach that agencies are either illegitimate, or are not equally "church" with their congregations.

If we are to continue to advance the gospel, the dynamic of healthy interdependence between modalities and sodalities--local churches and mission agencies--must increase. Anything less will result in the kind of abortive, wasteful efforts that have periodically hindered the worldwide expansion of the church.

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A Response

(In a letter to the editor of Evangelical Missions Quarterly, Tom Telford gives a thoughtful response to the article presented here. Both the article and this response are provided to provoke a thoughtful discussion of the issues involved.)

Dear Editor:

In "When Local Churches Act Like Agencies" (April 93 p. 142) Samuel F. Metcalf recommends "the dynamic of healthy interdependence" between churches and mission agencies. Unfortunately, the substance of his article attempts to discourage it. When I read it, I had the strong impression that he doesn't want churches "interfering in mission agency business."

As a Northeast regional director of Advancing Churches in Mission Commitment, an agency committed to mobilizing the local church for missions, I deal with scores of churches and see some of the problems that Metcalf has listed. It's true that churches occasionally try to control things. And the average missions committee does have godly but inexperienced people who know little about missions. Often agencies do feel hamstrung by the churches (which is a problem I think will get bigger). Some church prefield missionary training programs may be overambitious, undersupervised, and poorly thought-out. However, it is hard to imagine that this poses a greater problem than the current practice of sending so many ill-prepared first term dropouts.

Churches have good reason to want to mobilize their resources and do more for their missionaries, expect better stewardship, distrust institutions, and reform the system of deputation. Incidentally, Metcalf's preference for having 10 churches giving \$400 a month rather than two giving \$2,000 is very unlikely. The choices are more likely to be (a) one church gives 40 to 80 percent, with the rest made up in amounts from \$10 to \$200 per month, or (b) all of it made up in checks of \$10 to \$200 per month. In this case, (a) is much better than (b).

The section on how agencies have contributed to churches acting like agencies is Metcalf's strongest. It shows dramatically how agencies have gotten themselves into this difficulty, and it is the best refutation of his thesis. But Metcalf offers no concrete ways for agencies to resolve the problem. He simply seems to say, "Trust us while we try harder." This won't work in today's environment.

I agree that local churches need the expertise and professionalism mission agencies can provide, but many churches sense that they are viewed simply as the bankroll. The agency argument seems to be, "You've got all the resources and we have the expertise. Give us your resources and trust us. When you try to partner with us, you get in our way."

Both agency and church have to compromise. This does not mean mutuality in making decisions, in most cases. It's probably true that local churches should stay out of mission strategy, personnel supervision, and policy creation. However, local churches have the right to find out what and how their missionaries are doing, and whether they are being effective, well-supervised, and cared for. On the other hand, it's the local church's responsibility to develop a relationship of trust with the agency.

Churches need agencies. Few churches are equipped with all it takes to plan, prepare, strategize, supervise, and trouble-shoot for cross-cultural missionary work. At the same time, the resources and the missionaries come from the church, which is responsible to see that they are effectively used and conserved. Thus, church and agency must develop a relationship of trust and respect. The church must not overly interfere with the strategy, and supervision of the agency. However, the agency must not stonewall or conceal information from the church.

I see growing evidence of support for "the dynamic of healthy interdependence" between churches and mission agencies. Unfortunately, Metcalf's article implies that the local church is more of an obstacle than a partner in fulfilling the Great Commission. If the author's agency is involved in church planting, what kind will it plant? --
Tom Telford, Harleysville PA