

INNOVATION IN CHURCH MOBILIZATION

One church, infused with excitement about its missions involvement, sends a steady stream of people to teach English classes among a largely unreached minority group in Asia, generously supporting the outreach with finances and prayer. Across town, leaders of another congregation bemoan the lack of missions interest and watch their missions giving plummet.

One missionary writes off the church in North America and declares short-termers a waste of time and money. Yet another cross-cultural worker in the same city enthuses about the growing partnership with her sending church and raves about the impact of short-term teams.

Involvement in cross-cultural outreach remains a biblical mandate for local churches, so what makes the difference? Evidence shows that innovative approaches to church missions mobilization—whether initiated by the church, a missionary or mission agency—can help propel local congregations into effective global outreach. And as these new methods spur involvement, they benefit the church as well as the project.

Change is transforming churches' global and local environment. The makeup of many communities is shifting as immigrants from around the world relocate next door. Email, cell phones and inexpensive travel connect us to almost anyone, anywhere. As the speed of life increases, church schedules get tighter and volunteer hours shrink, while at the same time, expectations for excellence in church programming and communications escalate. All of these factors and many others demand new missions approaches.

CHURCHES TAKE THE INITIATIVE

Local churches are reshaping their missions programs. In many cases, the name has changed to “global outreach” or “international ministries,” but the shifts go much deeper.

Sharing Who They Are. Once primarily designed for youth, short-term missions trips now are often geared for adults, families and intergenerational groups. Field visits can ignite relationships that release tremendous potential, even from relatively small congregations.

In 1997 Guy and Kelli Caskey moved to Houston, Texas, to establish Crossroads, a network of house churches built on an incarnational, cell-church model that has developed a community with people from very diverse backgrounds. Two years later they visited Ethiopia where Guy says, “God crushed us with a passionate burden for the nations. At first we thought maybe we were to pack up and move there, but eventually He led us to embrace a global/local vision that included Houston, Ethiopia and places beyond. We feel called to the nations; it’s the heartbeat of all we do.

“We focus on developing relationships in which people are discipled, not running a lot of programs,” Guy explains. “And discipleship can be reproduced anywhere, although it may look different in Ethiopia than in America. Our commitment to relationships gives us an immediate connection with our brothers and sisters in Africa. We connect instantly with Ethiopians as we tell stories of how God is changing lives and building churches through believers living out the gospel because their story-based culture predisposes them to respond to a narrative approach to presenting truth.”

Partnership is an important ingredient for Crossroads. While they go to teach what they have learned from their experience, the teams also have learned much from their Ethiopian counterparts. One dynamic congregation in Addis Ababa has multiplied to about 40 churches, and the pastor has spent significant time visiting Houston to learn and share.

Crossroads has become a training ground for missionaries, too. One missionary couple spent six months at Crossroads to experience and learn the cell model they saw so effectively being multiplied in Africa. The International Mission Board (Southern Baptist) regularly places interns there for hands-on exposure.

At least 30 people from Crossroads—one-fifth of the regular attendance—have served in Ethiopia, many of them several times. Leadership training, micro-enterprise development and ESL are key ministries. Equippers from the Houston church meet with current and prospective African equippers. Women reach out to train women.

While the pastor still shepherds the overall outreach to Ethiopia, much of the ministry happens spontaneously because the house churches own the vision and each cell recognizes its global role. Believers in Texas and Ethiopia have become close friends and partners. (Crossroads' website: www.xroadsonline.net)

Working from Their DNA. Local churches are defining who they are and who they want to become—adopting vision and mission statements based on their strengths and uniquenesses. Many congregations desire to apply these same qualities to their missions endeavors.

Mariners Church in southern California has been built with a creative, entrepreneurial spirit that carries over to their missions involvement. For example, the church's global outreach arm teams with their men's ministry to take business people on one- and two-week trips to lead business training seminars. Putting their nine-to-five skills to work for the Kingdom, Mariners' entrepreneurs teach basic business principles to believers with limited financial means, assisting them to identify new opportunities and develop strategic business plans.

As a direct result, 14 micro-businesses have been launched, providing funding and jobs to support local churches. Venture capital for these nascent enterprises was provided from a revolving loan fund spearheaded by Mariners.

Mariners harnesses its entrepreneurial instincts for missions in other ways. Last year their faith-challenging goal was to touch the lives of over one million people around the

world through their people and resources, yet not one penny of their annual missions budget (over one million dollars in 2003) comes from the church budget.

Several years ago, the global outreach team set up a kiosk on Sunday mornings to sell coffee and lattes with the proceeds going to underwrite missions projects. Soon the enterprise moved into permanent quarters, extended its hours and menu, and took on the management of the church's bookstore. While directed by staff, volunteers contribute hundreds of hours for the benefit of world ministry. (Mariners' missions website: www.global-outreach.org)

Adopting a Strategic Focus. Church leaders are increasingly dissatisfied with the “mile wide and inch deep” approach that has marked the typical mission program—dozens of diverse ministries each supported with a modest amount of funds and limited congregational ownership. In growing numbers, churches are seeking one or more strategic involvements geared toward a goal they feel will have major Kingdom impact. Adopting a people group, concentrating on the launch of a church-planting movement, or focusing on a specific type of ministry (such as leadership development) describes many of these strategic foci. For most congregations, adopting a strategic focus involves personally assessing needs and reaching out to meet them in a spectrum of ways.

First Baptist Church of Newtown, Pennsylvania, a suburban congregation of approximately 500, believed they could do more than just support twenty-some missionary units. Entering a major building program of their own, they wanted a partnership that would help churches in least-reached areas achieve a facility while also engaging their members in hands-on involvement. Discussions with TEAM, a mission agency with which they already worked, led to an invitation to consider partnering with two church planters in the process of establishing new congregations in Japan.

A survey team went to Japan to meet with the missionaries, evaluate the need and evaluate what they could contribute. Afterward a three-year partnership was launched with the understanding that the American church would provide a flow of short-term

teams to make evangelistic contacts, an English teacher to work on-site for one to two years, and some financial assistance. The goal was to see each church plant in their own facility with a realistic mortgage, a salaried national pastor leading each congregation and the missionaries transitioned out.

First Baptist sent 35 people to Japan over the course of the partnership, including a one-year English teacher. Several leaders from the Japanese churches visited Newtown and two groups of unbelievers from English classes were also hosted in Pennsylvania—creating opportunities to serve for those who could not travel to Japan. At the end of the project, First Baptist sent representatives to join the celebration of the opening of the second church building.

Both the American church and their missionary partners Ron and Amy Barber were eager to capitalize on what they had seen God do. Another partnership has been launched, this time including a mature Japanese church as the third partner in the church-planting effort.

“Trust, communication and chemistry were critical to our success,” explains Barber. “There are many benefits to this kind of close partnership, but I think they center on ownership. The partnering church can move beyond superficial contact with missionaries and missions to more significant understanding and participation. As a result, they pray differently and act differently.” (First Baptist’s website www.fbcnewtown.org)

Tackling Global Issues. Some churches want to participate in establishing strategy or set up partnerships directly with national churches and workers. Such initiatives are often led by professional missions pastors who are now employed by an increasing number of churches, but smaller churches ignited by a big vision can also have a huge impact. In some cases, larger churches are developing contexts in which smaller congregations can maximize their involvement.

In late 2002 the missions pastors of Mars Hill Bible Church (Grand Rapids, MI), Perimeter Church (Atlanta, GA), Mariners Church (Irvine, CA) and Wooddale Church

(Eden Prairie, MN) met in Rwanda with the HIV/AIDS crisis staring them in the eye. On that trip, they sensed a call to action that has resulted in a new initiative to address the African AIDS pandemic.

“It is a big, audacious dream,” Tom Correll of Wooddale Church admits. “But we are at least 10 years behind in addressing the problem. This project is all about churches being missional, about awakening to our role as the body of Christ.”

What is different about this effort is the commitment to direct engagement of three entities: churches in North America, coalitions of churches in Africa and mission agencies/humanitarian organizations. African churches bring the potential of a huge army of volunteers. Agencies can contribute the wisdom of years of experience in relief work. North American churches can offer finances and other resources. The challenge is how to connect them.

A cooperative effort of this magnitude is uncharted territory, and a multitude of questions must be answered to engage the potential partners and begin taking action. But these four churches are committed to creating an avenue for thousands of other congregations to answer the call to make a difference.

Developing Worldwide Networks. The “we/they” dichotomy between missionary-sending churches in the West and missionary-receiving churches in the Two-Thirds World is fast dissolving as local congregations discover a kinship regardless of where they are located. Sister-church relationships are multiplying with benefits flowing in both directions. While this may be a fairly simple reciprocal relationship between two congregations, some churches are developing worldwide networks.

Elmbrook Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is pioneering a new venture called the Global Church Partnership. Challenged by the emergence of high-impact churches in strategic cities around the world, Elmbrook has launched a global network with the La

Puerta Abierta Church in Buenos Aires, Brazil; the Nairobi (Kenya) Chapel; and the Glenabbey Church of Belfast, Northern Ireland, and will likely add a few others.

The four churches share a commitment not only to global outreach but also to culturally expressive worship and to strong, biblical exposition. The essence of the network is high-trust relationships. Each church encourages the others by sharing its cultural uniqueness in worship, by ministering in reciprocal relationships, and by jointly conceiving ways to further the local and global impact of each congregation.

The cooperative effort is proceeding slowly as relationships develop and is not Western driven. Annually each network partner sends three or four members to a meeting held at one of the churches. The willingness to invest time and money just to come together is considered critical. Recently a joint mission venture in Argentina involved young adults from each congregation. Another joint team is being considered to minister in Uganda, and a conference on worship in eastern Congo is on the drawing board.

Staff exchanges and shared internships are strengthening the ties. A couple from Elmbrook has begun a three-year assignment on the staff of the Nairobi Chapel, and interns from Belfast and Nairobi have come on short-term assignments to Milwaukee. The teaching pastors of the network are discussing the feasibility of publishing a commentary drawing on the cultural background of each contributor.

“Our network revolves around the value of sharing what each member brings,” Robinson emphasizes. “For example, the African church has much to teach us about the gift of suffering. And we are learning about prayer and worship from our global partners. Mutuality and reciprocity are the keys to success.” (Elmbrook’s missions website: www.elmbrook.org/harvest)

AGENCIES TAKE THE INITIATIVE

While initially hesitant about these new church initiatives, mission agencies are increasingly eager to explore new models of partnering with churches. Wrestling through

questions of control, competence and financing, agencies are discovering that true partnerships take work but also multiply the results.

Helping Churches Plant Churches. Focused historically around the work of long-term missionaries, agencies sometimes struggle to utilize short-term personnel. But some have developed highly effective programs.

Global Missions Fellowship creates dynamic synergy by pairing teams of American Christians with a national church in places like Russia and Colombia. The result after one week of concentrated evangelism? One—or more often, three to five—embryonic new churches that will be nurtured to maturity by the partnering national church after the Americans leave.

GMF staff lay the groundwork with the American church participants by meeting with the pastor and other church leaders, then presenting the challenge to the congregation. GMF's Church Mobilization Director Frank Banfill lauds the commitment of the associate staff—volunteers with extensive training and experience as trip leaders who contribute their time to work with churches, brief team participants, and lead at least one or two GMF trips each year.

Team members are trained via a series of self studies enhanced with video presentations and a final orientation at a central site or via phone. Once on location overseas, each American is matched with a national believer and, if needed, a translator. Throughout the week of ministry, the Americans transfer their evangelism skills and passion to their national partner. In the process, teams see people come to Christ and gathered into small house groups.

The key to long-term results is the commitment of the national church partner to investing time and effort to preserve the harvest. GMF looks for churches that share their vision and have enough people to follow up the new believers and provide pastoral leadership for new congregations.

GMF's innovative approach offers a win/win situation for both partners. When trained to use simple evangelism tools, believers from both cultures get excited to see how God uses them and want to continue to share the gospel in their own context. Both churches are challenged to focus on a strategic goal, to trust God to bring a church into existence and to continue a long-term relationship with the new group of believers.

While GMF has no overall statistics on how many of these church plants survive, they regularly receive updates such as the one from a Southern Baptist missionary in Colombia who reported that all 10 of the new works started during GMF campaigns in 2000 were still functioning three years later with an average attendance of 32 adults and 76 children. (GMF's website: www.gmf.org)

St. Paul's Congregational Church in Greeley, CO, supported missions but few of the 250 attendees were highly involved until Pastor Steve Oeffling and several other leaders went to Peru with GMF in 1997. Partnered with a local church, the team saw people saved and a new congregation formed.

"We came home incredibly excited," Oeffling remembers. "And now these Peruvian believers have become our dearest friends. We conduct annual campaigns together, establishing new clusters of believers in various parts of Peru. We love to dream, pray and share together."

Missions giving at St. Paul's quickly doubled, and over the years, the church's involvement in Peru has expanded to include supporting an orphanage, and sponsoring a medical clinic and annual leadership training conferences.

The missions outreach has changed St. Paul's, too. "Teams come back really excited," Oeffling observes. "Leading people to Christ and seeing firsthand the great needs create brokenness before God and deep concern for what He cares about. People come home

and ask, ‘Why can’t we do the same thing here?’ As a result, St. Paul’s is now in planting another church here in our own community.

“We are just regular people who care about the world as God does,” Oeffling concludes modestly. (The church website: www.stpaulsgreeley.org)

Giving Away the Task. Some mission agencies are actively encouraging local churches to take ownership of aspects of global outreach. Welcoming church initiative, they shift from “CEO” to “consultant” in the missions enterprise.

As director of mission partnership and involvement for the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) World Mission, Steve Hughey wrestled with how to involve Lutheran congregations in global outreach. He began to experiment with partnerships that allowed congregations and smaller mission societies to take ownership of the task. In 1996 he brought together representatives from 12 societies for sharing, and from that meeting came the Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies (ALMA) that now includes 65 of the over 100 separate mission agencies in the LCMS.

Individual churches or groups of churches are encouraged to consider mission needs and discover where God wants to use them, then form their own mission society, complete with registration as a not-for-profit organization. Hughey shares information with the new groups to help them learn from others and puts them in touch with the appropriate ALMA groups for assistance with issues such as funding, communication and strategic planning. ALMA groups meet annually with LCMS World Mission staff and missionaries to coordinate their efforts.

Many of these societies then develop a formal partnership with LCMS World Mission with a written agreement that defines responsibilities, explains relationships and clarifies accountability. They work with the missionaries and field directors to set strategy, but deploying career missionaries is usually left up to the LCMS World Mission. The societies field short-term volunteers, provide services, and supply materials and money

for the work. For example, one group, Orphan Grain Train, ships mission supplies for various groups. People of the Book Lutheran Outreach is coordinating a new church-planting effort for Pakistan in cooperation with 10 other mission agencies as well as LCMS World Mission.

A variety of strategic partnerships are offered as options for Lutheran congregations and mission societies. Five levels are offered from the #1 basic project or missionary support to the #5 level which initiates a work among an unreached group where the denomination has never before ministered.

Hughey observes, “This is a great way to both reach more lost people and involve the people of God in meaningful ways. It is a real win-win in that it avoids a ‘them and us’ mentality.” (The LCMS World Mission website: www.mission.lcms.org)

Serving Global/Local Outreach. Once typically referred to as “foreign” mission societies, agencies today are coming to recognize that their expertise in reaching across cultural and religious boundaries is of great value in helping churches reach immigrants in their own communities.

After a century of operation as a foreign mission, SIM began to apply their expertise to reach ethnic communities in North America. In 2000, they added an Ethnic Focus division designed to mobilize and equip churches to reach the burgeoning ethnic populations at their door under the direction of Dr. Gerry Johnson, former SIM church planter in Eritrea.

Their services fall into three categories. First, they offer feasibility and evaluation studies to local congregations considering the launch of an ethnic ministry. They talk to the pastoral staff, lay leaders and any ethnic believers within the church. Their critique not only assesses the church’s potential but also predicts problems they will face and suggests practical steps for initiating an ethnic ministry in that particular location.

Second, SIM Ethnic Focus team members offer pastors seminars on ethnic ministry. These one-day programs highlight models of successful church-based ethnic ministry and present guidelines for mentoring such ministries and how-tos for getting started. Specialized sessions offer expertise on international student ministry, children's ministry, outreach to Muslims and much more.

Third and perhaps most important, the SIM team provides ongoing church mentoring, coming alongside to walk a church through the process of starting ethnic outreach. Their guidance may include how to prepare the congregation, tips on becoming more "internationals friendly," training for ESL teachers, suggestions on how to advertise ESL classes, networking with similar ministries elsewhere and much more. There is a waiting list of churches who want this kind of assistance.

Currently the ethnic focus team consists of over 40 people, primarily former SIM missionaries, many with expertise in a particular religious or people group, or a specific type of ministry. One church they have assisted is Maranatha Chapel in Evergreen Park, just outside Chicago.

When former missionary Doug Banks accepted the call to pastor this Anglo congregation, it was with the agreement that the church would reach out to the large immigrant communities surrounding them. Within a 10-minute drive of the church were thousands of Eastern Europeans, Hispanics, Arabs and African-Americans.

Initially church members were supportive but a bit apprehensive. SIM personnel helped explain the concept and offered hints on preparing the congregation. They provided guidelines on doing demographic studies and suggested resources on sharing the gospel with Muslims.

As he prayed for God's vision for this congregation of just over 200, Banks felt led to outline a five-year plan that included the launch of a new ethnic congregation each year. Now in their second year, Maranatha has added a Hispanic congregation numbering

about 60 people and an Arabic-language group that has climbed to an average of 50 in attendance.

Banks likes to describe it as “one church with three congregations.” There is a unified pastoral staff, board and budget, but each group holds its own weekly worship with occasional tri-lingual services. They meet together for baptisms and missions conventions.

Recently Maranatha introduced International Sunday Night at the Park featuring a potluck supper that resembles an international buffet. Each week the congregations take turns providing dessert, music and a devotional, introducing the others to their culture. Games and activities create a setting for fellowship that melds people from different backgrounds but also attracts passersby. One evening a group of curious young Arabs approached the group, and a member of the Arab congregation was able to share his faith with them.

The early hesitations of the original congregation have evaporated. Now they work side-by-side with their Hispanic and Arab fellow believers in VBS and rejoice together over God’s blessings to Maranatha—such as the news that a Muslim recently placed his faith in Christ. (Maranatha Chapel’s website: www.mchapel.net)

IMPLEMENTING NEW MODELS OF MOBILIZATION

Churches, missionaries and mission agencies open to innovation have vast opportunity to plow new ground. As new methodologies are considered, important questions demand consideration:

- From a biblical perspective, who “owns” the task? The local church? The missionary? The agency? All of them? None of them?
- Which party should take the lead? Why?
- Do we have a kingdom mentality, or are we, perhaps unconsciously, focused on benefiting our own organization?

- How do we make a clear-eyed assessment of what we bring to the task?
- Are we sensitive to the priorities of the national church around the world and sufficiently appreciative of their current and potential contributions?
- Have we embraced the fact that the mission field is no longer “foreign” but local as well as global?
- Are we willing to take risks and adopt new approaches, especially as younger generations move into roles of service and leadership?

Written by Ellen Livingood
© DualReach 2004