

RECOVERING THE MISSIONAL CHURCH



By Dan Sheffield

Summary

The author examines accepted practices regarding local church and mission agency inter-relatedness. A new, integrated model is discussed in light of present realities. The author suggests a model of missional church in which local church engagement in mission is empowered by the specialist mission agency rather than vice versa.

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Introduction

In his book *The Church on the Other Side*, postmodern writer and pastor, Brian McLaren says, “the bad news is that missions as we have known it appears to be in decline and will probably become a casualty as we pass to the other side [of the postmodern matrix].”¹ But what will emerge on the other side?

That Western society and, by extension, the Christian institutions which function within that society are in convulsion is a surprise to no one. But how are local congregations viewing their involvement in the mission of the Church in a postmodern, globalized context? And, in particular, how are mission agencies retooling in the face of more and more local churches engaging in international, cross-cultural ministries?

In modern history, the Western evangelical church has seen the mission task as primarily a sending activity. That is, there are needs “out there” for gospel proclamation and so we have “sent” gifted (at least in some cases) workers from “us to them.” We have set up specialist structures (agencies/autonomous or departments/semi-autonomous) to guide our sending activities. Local churches have had very little to do with the mission task beyond releasing workers and finances so the specialist structures could do their specialized work. The mythologized rationale for this model follows William Carey’s experience – if the established church won’t get involved in doing the mission task, then we will have to set up separate structures (“means”) to allow this to happen. And thus was born the modern missionary movement.

The outcome of this dichotomized approach to church and mission has come to mean that local churches and their leaders often have little understanding of the implications of mission for their own context. A Theology of Mission course is not required of M.Div students at our seminaries because that is seen as a specialized subject for those who have made the “second decision” to minister in a task-group rather than in a

¹ Brian McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000. p. 141.

nurture-group.² Global mission engagement is not understood as a logical extension of local mission engagement because we are not doing “local mission” – i.e., viewing ourselves as “sent” into our own communities.³

In our present context, however, we are being reminded that “the mission field” is no longer only “over there” – we, as Westerners, are also living in a post-Christian society to which the mission needs to be extended. We can no longer only “send over there,” we now need to “be sent” in our own social contexts. This is precisely where local churches are now scrambling to discover how to be missional churches in their own communities, as well as beyond.

Much of the previous half-century has been spent by evangelical churches trying to recover their place in a fast-departing Christendom. The Church Growth Movement and the emphasis on pragmatic methods, strategic planning and CEO-type pastors have all been attempts to find ways to remain relevant. We have not yet discovered how to be the church in a tribalized world where our voice and our professionalism has been marginalized to “just one among many.”

In this article I am seeking to portray a model of the missional church which is appropriate for our present context. A model that demonstrates integration of responsible engagement within its own local setting, as well as with the wider world – and the role of the specialist agency in empowering that engagement.

Mission practices – ancient and modern

Perhaps the most striking biblical model of a missional church is that of the Antioch church recorded in Acts 11:19-30 and 13:1-5.⁴ Just a cursory glance suggests that this church was founded by Christians who thought “outside the box.”

The Jewish believers reached out to the “different-other” – to Gentiles – to share the good news of Jesus Christ. At the same time we understand this wasn’t such a stretch because this intercultural witness was led by believers who had already lived and functioned in cross-cultural contexts (Cyprus and Cyrene).

Barnabas and Saul conducted in-depth teaching and equipping of the fledgling congregation. Ministry proceeded from the exercise of spiritual gifts. The congregation looked beyond themselves to share their resources with famine victims back in Jerusalem.

In 13:1 we have a picture of a multicultural leadership team waiting upon the Lord in Spirit-guided worship. In this context the Spirit is able to ask that Barnabas and Saul – two of the church’s key leaders – be “set apart” for a special ministry. That the leadership team responds positively to this direction is indicated by the speed with which the “missionary team” is sent out. The first mission ministry returns Barnabas to his home (Cyprus) and Paul to a likely area of familiarity (southern Turkey).

This synopsis seems to suggest a local church founded through relational engagement with, and proclamation to, a particular community; the development of healthy systems for nurture and ministry; and a Spirit-guided leadership team

² Ralph Winter, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission” *Missiology*, 1974, 2:121-139.

³ Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundations*, Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2001, p.211.

⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991. p. 43-44.

responding to God-given vision to reach out, first in relief to near neighbours and fellow believers, and then on to gospel proclamation in unreached areas.

Gary Burger, a Campus Crusade staff worker in a 1990 essay published by the International School of Theology presents another perspective: "this passage is commonly interpreted to teach that all missionaries must be sent by and on behalf of a local church to be legitimate. However, a more careful study of the passage will show this to be a questionable interpretation."⁵ Burger goes on to quote H. Cook from a 1975 *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* article:

The organized church at Antioch was not involved in the setting apart of Barnabas and Saul. It was only the mentioned prophets and teachers who were involved. There is no indication that these men were leaders of the church and/or were acting on behalf of the church... the Holy Spirit, not the church, sent them.⁶

This brief example suggests how viewing this text from a different paradigm has supported the disconnection of local and global, nurture and task.

In the modern era, William Carey's 1792 call for "the use of means for the conversion of the heathen," ushered in the Protestant mission societies and structures separate from local churches became part of mainstream practice. The first burst of mission societies (1792-1824) were largely related to existing denominational structures, serving as task-groups within a larger framework. On the heels of Finney and Moody Revivalism, the Keswick Movement, and the Holiness Movement in the mid-1800s, a new burst of mission societies were formed, largely by boards of laypeople functioning independent of any formal church structures.

In the post-WWII era there developed a whole new grouping of mission societies. Most notably, however, there developed a grouping of mission task-groups targeted at the North American context on the premise that the "home church" was no longer able to evangelize and disciple its own communities; specialist organizations were needed here as well. Van Gelder suggests that these "paralocal ministry structures are, in general, a reflection of deficiencies inherent within the understanding of the church's nature, ministry, and organization as defined in denominational ecclesiologies."⁷

Despite modifications and tinkering over the 20th century these are still the primary forms of mission activity based in North America: mission arms of denominational structures and independent mission societies directed by lay boards. Local churches, for all intents and purposes, have a limited understanding of their role as mission outposts and mission initiators.

It is now time to move toward a new model of church, or perhaps, it is to recover forgotten models, which enable God's people to be a transformative presence in their own communities and through intentional effort to their Judea's, Samaria's and the ends of the earth.

⁵ Gary Burger, "The Local Church and Para-Local Church: A Proposal for Partnership in Ministry." International School of Theology: Monograph Series, 1990, p.4.

⁶ H. Cook, Who Really Sent the First Missionaries? *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 12:233-239, 1975 in G. Burger, p.4.

⁷ Craig Van Gelder, "Understanding the Church in North America" in *Missional Church* (D. Guder, ed.). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. p. 74.

Recovering an integrated model

Missiologist Alan Roxburgh employs Victor Turner's ritual stages to discuss the significance of *communitas* in the liminal state – or “the in-between time.” As a society moves through the liminal state there emerges two responses to human relatedness – the development of structure or the development of *communitas*. In the development of structure during a liminal period “we are presented with an orderly social world, a recognized system of social control, prescribed ways of acting toward people by virtue of our incumbency of status-roles.”⁸ The development of *communitas* on the other hand, results in:

the formation of a new peoplehood, the constitution of a new vision for being a group. The basis of recruitment is no longer status or role function but identity and belonging within a group that, in some clear ways, stands outside the mainstream of the culture.⁹

The calls for a radically different form of church are not new, of course. In this “in-between time” in Western society, however, missional churches are emerging which are repositioning themselves as task-groups, as communities on a mission with the Spirit, responding to their contexts with authentic engagement. These missional churches are leveraging their own local intercultural ministries into international ministry engagement. And these new missional churches often have leaders rooted in a theology of mission and able to direct that engagement.

What's a mission agency to do?

Our particular challenge, for global ministry practitioners, is how to encourage the emergence of missional churches in the North American context which will function as task-groups in regard to intercultural and global ministry. As the new model emerges what is the appropriate role for a specialist community like present mission departments and agencies?

The most obvious examples of churches who have often thought of themselves as missional congregations are those doing ministry in our inner-cities. This, of course, has led to misunderstandings when their missional nature has not been understood or respected by both domestic leaders, who serve churches that view themselves primarily as nurture-groups, and by global ministry leaders mandated only to look across the ocean. These churches, however, may become our most likely candidates for re-founding a way of thinking about the character of the church. These churches may find their way more clearly to the reconnection of local and global ministry.

I would like to suggest a model which sees the local church as mission initiator and the specialist department as mission empowerer. The following example illustrates one scenario, amongst many similar, which reflects this inter-related approach.

⁸ Alan Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership and Liminality*, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997, p.50.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.52.

Local Church as mission initiator

A Free Methodist Church in Toronto is acting upon this new model. The church, located in what was once a Toronto residential suburb, is now surrounded by high-density housing in a volatile community dominated by Muslim Somalis. Several years ago church leaders began a journey of ministry with the Somalis, first of all through sports outreach and now, after-school tutoring, community conflict resolution and summer day-camp programs. These same leaders began a process of exploring their wider mission commitments.

The Canadian General Conference of the Free Methodist Church, in 2002, approved a goal to initiate new ministry in five Gateway Cities over the next decade. Literally, the day after they contributed their votes to that motion, the pastors of the Toronto church were approached by a Somali refugee regarding the possibility of partnering in the development of a health clinic in Mogadishu, Somalia – an identified Gateway City.

The church, in liaison with, and empowerment from, Canadian Free Methodist national leaders and the mission department of the Free Methodist Church in North America, has followed up on this invitation. The local church has interacted with former missionaries to Somalia from both SIM and Mennonite missions, as well as other NGOs and UN personnel in the region. An exploratory team composed of appropriately knowledgeable and gifted local church members, and a Somali leader, traveled to Somalia in 2003. This ministry opportunity is being funded and driven by the local church, which has a long-term view of their commitments and ministry implications, while being empowered and resourced by personnel from specialist agencies.

This example gives an embryonic picture of the kind of model I believe we should be encouraging. Local churches, driven by missional involvement in their own communities, take the next step of wider involvement in the global village. The diagram in the appendix gives a picture of the potential involvements of a church committed to seeing itself primarily as a task-group rather than a nurture-group – as a missional church.

Specialist agency as mission empowerer

But where does this model leave the specialist role of a denominational mission department or an independent mission agency? I believe that we need to re-tool as *empowerers* of local church initiatives.

In the past, specialist agencies, whether denominationally related or independent, saw themselves as the primary initiators of mission vision as well as the deployers of personnel and resources – after local churches had supplied those workers and resources to the agency. A key task of the autonomous mission body was to communicate that mission vision to the local church in such a way that workers and resources were pried loose from the local church. “We (the mission) are your (the church) hands in the world.” That may seem like an unfair characterization, however, in the present context this is the perception of many pastors, church leaders and congregational members. The model being proposed here suggests that the specialist agency needs to become the *actual* enabler of the local church’s “hands” in accomplishing the local church’s vision for their world.

How might the specialist agency empower local church initiatives?

- Can we not provide research and information that enables churches to develop their own vision and ministry goals?
- Can we not use existing denominational systems for screening personnel? Perhaps specialist cross-cultural training programs can be provided to local churches.
- Can experienced cross-cultural workers serve as ministry mentors to local church-driven initiatives?
- Can local churches not oversee cross-cultural ministry budgets and receipt their own donors, in collaboration with specialist knowledge from the agency?
- Can vision-casting, motivation and communication of prayer information become the domain of the local church?
- Can we aid in developing local church leaders, with cross-cultural communication skills, so that they can liaise with national church leaders?

Implications for an integrated structure

In their book, *Changing the Mind of Missions*, Engel and Dyrness arrive at several conclusions about the future direction of church-mission relations. They suggest that the reign of Christ “will be extended primarily through localized initiatives that infiltrate all segments of society.”¹⁰ They go on to say that “the local church will once again be affirmed as God’s chosen means for spreading the gospel through ministry that radiates outwards and multiplies from these cells of the kingdom.”¹¹ It’s all about the local church!

At the same time, Guder indicates that “the connectional structures of the church are needed to represent the missional unity that transcends all human boundaries and cultural distinctions.”¹² The crucial issue is the beginning point.

The movement toward missional connectedness should be centrifugal, starting from particular communities and expanding to the global dimensions of the church, the community of communities. God’s Spirit forms particular communities for mission in particular places and multiplies that mission by increasing the number of particular communities: the church moves from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and out to the ends of the earth. As this happens, the Spirit has shaped this church to become multicultural, multiethnic, geographically extensive, and organizationally diverse.¹³

I would like to suggest that there are several places where the specialist mission agency will have to think and act differently in regard to the empowerment of missional churches. We will need to **depend upon relational connections rather than structural protocol**. Missional churches are driven by gifted, passionate people who are not going to automatically look for “the proper way to do this.” Specialist leaders will have to build relationships with churches that are functioning in a missional manner, ready to provide

¹⁰ James Engel and William Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000. p. 178.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹² Guder, *Missional Church*. p. 264.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

resources when the relationship is activated. The mission empowerers who will be accepted as specialist resource personnel to local churches will have earned-status and will be respected as their ministry leadership is seen to flow from giftedness and passion. Authenticity will have more value than position or title.

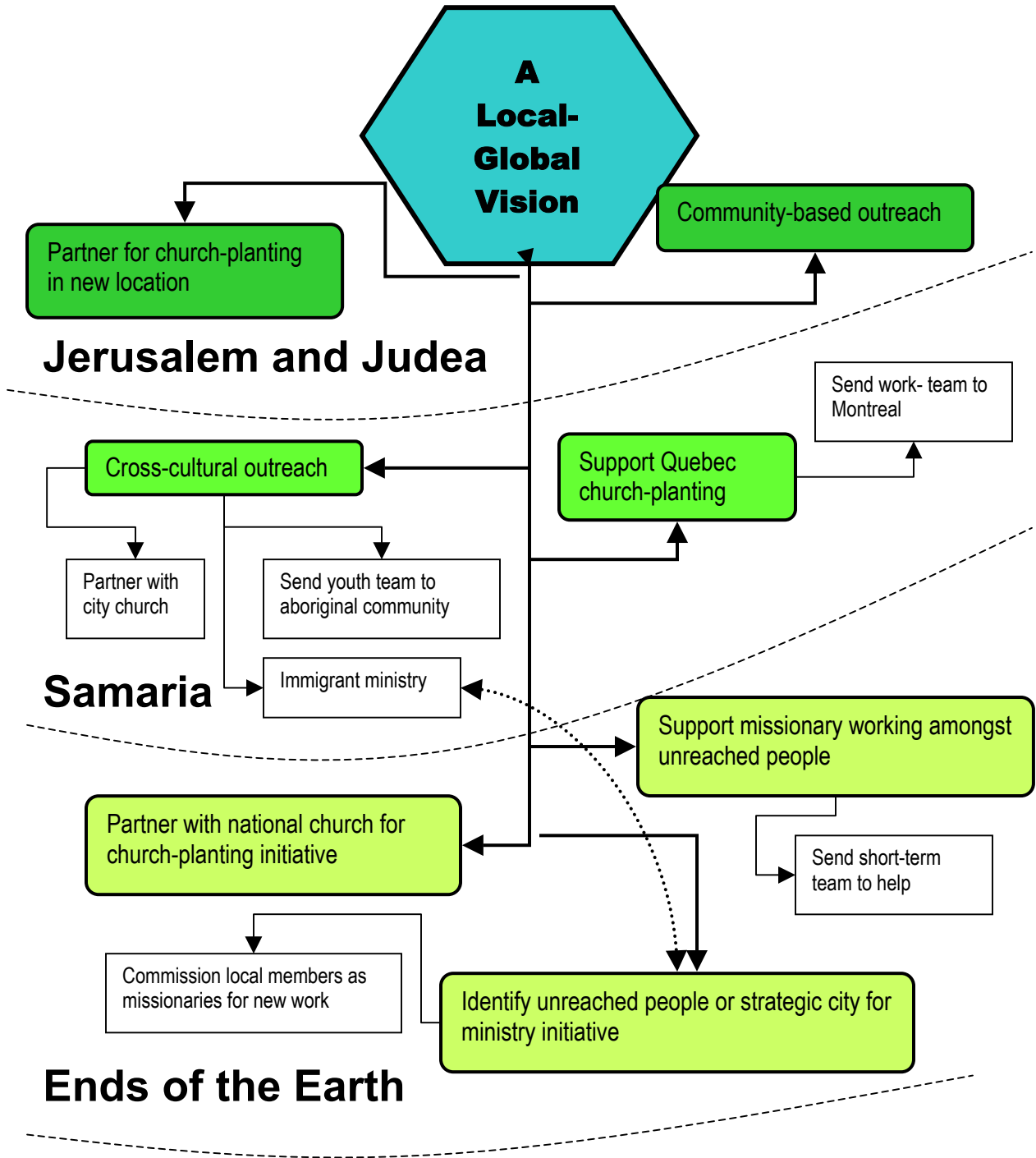
We will have to **accept a loss of control and value diversity**. Initiative and oversight revert to the local church in the missional model. Specialist leaders will encourage local churches by facilitating the contacts necessary for a new international outreach, rather than functioning as gatekeepers. We will have to recognize that the diversity of ways of going about cross-cultural ministry – which are inevitable – are important and valuable. Mistakes have been made by the specialist agencies and mistakes will be made by local churches. In the multiplicity of approaches, however, the Spirit is sure to be working.

Since specialist mission structures have a long history and perception amongst pastors and local churches, the movement to a mission empowerment model will place the onus on the specialist agencies to take the pro-active role. We can no longer be the “*ambassador of*” the local church, we must become the “*servant to*” the local church.

Conclusion

In this “in between” time, with so much disorientation and uncertainty, we have an opportunity to do something different. We can choose to scramble after emasculated ways to remain relevant, or we can begin to be a different kind of people, from the margins. Local congregations are beginning to function as missional churches, sent on a mission into their own context. And then, following the natural connections resulting from life in the global village, they are reaching out to their Samaria’s and to the ends of the earth as cross-cultural mission initiators. And, as this transformed model emerges, we cross-cultural specialists will have to transform both our philosophy of ministry and methodology to function as mission empowerers.

The Missional Church



(Dan Sheffield 2001)

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