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Abstract

A discussion of forms of mission careers in the emerging interdependency of the worldwide church. The focus is, in particular, on short-term international activity. *From an unpublished paper, December 11, 1998.*

From the author: I have been consistently supportive of a wide variety of *short-term* missionary activities since the earliest days of this terminology. The comments here, then, are reflections of a sympathetic participant, himself a long-time *short-termer* and bi-vocational missionary in over sixty countries across forty-five years. The reader is encouraged to consider the following criticisms as one more attempt to encourage responsible and well-articulated involvements of the people of God in Gospel witness and facilitation of the development of the church in the world.

Faith comes before rhetoric and prediction. In matters concerned with the mission of the church in the world, failure to put faith first costs dearly in terms of useless arguments, foolish prophecies, and rigid defensiveness. Especially in regard to non-doctrinal issues, the tensions and divisions that emerge are hurtful.

Recommendation 1. Comparisons of short-term and long-term mission operations and outcomes should be subordinated to the larger issues of the work of Christ through His church in the world. Forms of missionary deployment are not ends in themselves. While definitions are useful, much time has been wasted in various attempts to make a sharp distinction between short-term and long-term missions. It simply cannot be done; the variations and combinations are constantly proliferating.

Faith is a gift of God. It provides a foundation of grounded belief. This foundation enables people to see beyond their own experience and to allow God to inspire a lifelong search into the world which is and which is becoming. A faith-based and God-centered perspective of the future enables a constructive and minimally speculative approach to planning

Recommendation 2. All guidelines for the mission of the church should take a forward-looking view. For short-term missions, for example, the issue is much more a concern for what is needful and appropriate for collaborations with the emerging churches than for prolonging the habits and assumptions of the past two centuries of the "modern missionary era."

Faith enables God's people to anticipate change and to accept a lifelong unfolding of God's purposes and fulfillments of the call to the mission of the church rather than to take comfort from rigidity and to prefer the security of sameness.

Recommendation 3. The characteristics of missionary deployment in one period of church development, in one type of ministry, and in one set of socio-cultural circumstances should be instructive but not determinative to any other situation. Grave distortions of the church can occur when the future of missions is dominated by the presumptions of the past.

At the heart of the *long-term* versus *short-term* contrast is a variety of issues. Some of these reflect honest and godly concerns, to be sure, but far more are rooted in contentiousness and a habit of groundless dichotomizing. The worth of conversations about the short-term issues is negatively correlated with the time spent in arguments about definitions and assertions that the dichotomy is important.

Recommendation 4. The motive of any planning of contrasting forms of mission should be compatibility and complementarity. The competitive habit of asserting “better-ness” or priority should be constrained.

Gaining Perspective

To understand the changing forms of mission careers, it is important to look *back* and to look *ahead* at the relationships between the church and the world.

Problems from the Past

In the near past there has been a substantial increase of missionary activity in the post-colonial world. The church has become more evident and more evangelistic in many nations. This growth of the church owes much to the wide variety of missionary efforts which has marked the past two hundred years, often described as the *modern missionary era*. Nevertheless, four problems confronting missionary recruitment and deployment are deeply rooted in the formally organized “foreign” missions of the past two hundred years:

Colonial patterns of relationship continue to dominate mission strategy. Even in former receiving countries, e.g., Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Nigeria, Kenya, India, and Brazil, the tendency in many mission ventures is to set goals, determine deployments, and organize accountabilities with minimal input from the region in which the missionaries are to evangelize or develop institutions.

Recommendation 5. In most cases short-term missionaries, indeed all missionaries, should be deployed on schedules and for tasks jointly defined by the sending and the receiving communities. Many complaints are heard about the imposition of the short-term missionary on the schedule and lifestyle of the *career* missionary. This problem is no more serious than imposition upon the national church or the local leaders whose development is often impeded by outsiders who interrupt and usurp, however unintentionally.

Western assumptions about the church, its leadership, and its educational needs dominate. The strategies of evangelism and purposes of mission are reflective of the twentieth-century development of the churches in the modernized western world.

Recommendation 6. Although much of the world is becoming more standardized around the shared elements of modernization (mistakenly called *westernization*), respecting the cultures of people has never been more important. Whatever purposes, plans, skills, and values are carried into a situation by missionaries should be carefully adjusted, on site, to the realities of the local situation.

Emphasis on institutional enterprise and institution-planting has persisted throughout the “modern missionary era” and has strongly affected the practical aspects of *short-term* missions. The extensive deployment of construction teams and bunkhouse proliferators continues within short-term mission motives as a representation of this bottom-line-is-buildings sort of thinking.

Recommendation 7. What is needed is a paradigm shift, inspired by specific examples from the Acts of the Apostles. Institutions should be planned and developed by the church-in-place, not by outsiders. People should “count the costs” for themselves and seek help of the sort they determine, at times and in ways they deem appropriate.

The source of “real” missionaries is presumed to be Bible colleges and seminaries. Those who are called from other preparational backgrounds are typically relegated to the short-term category. This equating of formal education in Bible and theology to the readiness for deployment into long-term careers is dangerous although understandable. The lack of a truly biblical and responsibly theological orientation to the missionary tasks is predictably a severe handicap; but it does not follow that a formal education in Bible college or theological school will assure that the candidate is appropriately grounded for the missionary role and tasks.

Recommendation 8. The earliest missionaries of the church were itinerant, not long-term residents. The time has come for a break with the more recent image of the ideal missionary as a resident-in-place, holding multiple formal degrees, being expert in one local language, and having the intention of living out all of life in one field. Needs of today’s emerging churches far more often are better served by highly responsive and flexible encouragers who can provide specialized help for a short period of time and then move on to a similar role elsewhere or go back home.

Problems Ahead

A true globalization of the church is just around the corner. Just as likely, the breadth of the church and its increase in missionary spirit will de-center the western nations as the presumed source and supply of world missionaries. Further, the movement of Christians across borders for many different reasons is a trend persistently expanding—again, not limited to the churches of the west. International student mobility is steadily increasing; commerce, transportation, and communications are drawing many young professionals and technicians into international employment. The presence of Christians in the short-term and long-term international workforce is increasing far more rapidly than the numbers of Christians in missionary service supported by missionary organizations.

All of God’s people need experiences with the evangelistic and missionary tasks of the church.

Missions is not an option. The church that treats missionary outreach as a sort of miscellaneous activity that can be added when the funds are in the bank is a sick church. Mission agencies are often essentially passive and fail to help the churches directly. Other than to facilitate the way to a missionary career for those who are nominated by the churches or to try to help individuals who seek them out when the church doesn’t know how else to encourage them, the mission agency tends to keep at arm’s length from the churches. This tension has become worse in that the typical mission agency has been lukewarm-warm at best about increased interests of church members in short-term, exploratory, and tourist-like adventures in the mission field. While the number of people who have “seen missions first-hand” is rapidly growing, agencies—far more than churches—treat the trend as a sort of undignified nuisance rather than seeing the good that comes from it.

Recommendation 9. Mission agencies and local churches need closer relationships. The agencies can help the churches develop a keener awareness of the vast world in which the church is represented. The churches need the agencies to help them fulfill their responsibilities and motivations toward outreach. A special need at this time is for the mission agencies to be much more forthcoming and proactive in the encouragement and effective deployment of a broad variety of Christians in missionary endeavor.

Overseas Christians are under-utilized as missionaries. Not to suggest diverting people that God has called into other specialized service into organizational missionary employment, these internationalists should be made aware of God's call to all Christians and urged to develop effective personal witness wherever they are and wherever they go. Christians in so-called *secular* careers overseas rarely have the competencies and understandings of the Word that would enable them to engage in effective and appropriate witness and Christian nurture. Only a few churches and fewer missionary agencies have instituted creative procedures to help these people become better grounded for such bi-vocational ministries. Until the short-term emphasis emerged, these people were treated as non-persons by the mission establishment.

Recommendation 10. Since many of the most valuable short-term missionary deployments will likely be served by bi-vocational and second-career people, the need for appropriate means of helping Christian adults undertake and extend Biblical and theological studies is urgently needed. These people can rarely "go back to school," nor should they be expected to do so. New technologies of teaching and learning can be utilized. Especially seminar and short-course approaches have great promise. Could such means as the "Walk Through the Bible" experience and the course be adapted and augmented to serve the vast communities of overseas Christians?

Conclusion

Harmonizing short-term and long-term missionary deployments is important. Missionary activity of the church has always required multi-year commitments, especially from those engaged in the discovery and development of the bridges of evangelism and church planting. Similarly, shorter and more specialized commitments have been required of others, especially from those who respond to specific requests or initiatives as the churches become established and develop their own outreach.

The increasing dominance of hyper-orthodoxy, especially in Islamic regions and where other strong anti-Christian religious biases influence national policy and grass-roots resistance, has created a climate of resistance and dangerous obstacle to the expansion of Christian witness. In many situations major revision of the missionary organization and of the nature of missionary deployment is absolutely necessary if intercultural participation in evangelization and development of the church are to continue. Thus, various forms of "short-term" missions will be more important in the future than in the past. The coordination of all modes of missionary deployment is an important task.