

Funding Missions: The Challenge of the '90s

Mission is changing in the local churches. Church-mission leadership must accept funding responsibility, while still looking for God to meet the needs. Four factors, when understood and applied correctly, are key to increasing mission support in contemporary North American churches.

by Douglas Christgau

Tom Telford, veteran ACMC representative to local churches, recently wrote a list of “what’s hot” and “what’s not” in local church missions. An item that immediately caught my eye on the negative list was: “giving to church mission budgets.”

Sam Metcalf is president of Church Resource Ministries, a growing mission agency based in California. Recently we discussed the potential for CRM candidates to raise support money from churches. Sam candidly shared, “If a CRM missionary has two or three supporting churches, I’m happy. But individuals are increasingly more reliable than churches as support sources for our people.”

Operation Mobilization recently published its financial gift sources in the 1993 Annual Report. Money from churches comprised just 28% of the total. But individual were responsible for more than twice that amount.

Perhaps Telford is right. However, the fact remains that churches have tremendous potential to support missions. If churches are God’s instrument for the completion of the Great Commission, as so many are rediscovering, there must be some way to prevent their continuing decline in financing the effort. The passion of most local church mission leaders is for missions, not raising money. Fund raising is considered a necessary evil that many missions advocates would rather ignore.

Regardless, churches are constantly solicited for donations from mission agencies and missionaries. The opportunities for growth in the Christian church around the world are many.

Local church leaders must find ways to improve financial mission support. It’s important that churches see the “big picture” of world evangelization, which includes paying for it. Let me suggest four matters that churches must address in order to fund the effort for completing the Great Commission.

The Best Funding Method

Missions funding methods vary in quality. The quality of the method greatly influences the effectiveness of fund raising efforts. Typical methods are:

1. Assigned from the general fund

Some like this approach because it provides “guaranteed” funding for missions. It makes mission funding an issue for the financial leaders of the church, not just a few missions enthusiasts. Two critical questions are:

First, how are the financial leaders of the church going to define “missions?” Hopefully a mission policy has been developed which answers this question. If not, church financial leaders might make some pretty broad applications of the term, leaving little for strategic missions to the frontiers.

Secondly, what percentage is assigned? Some years ago I attended a large church that gave 17% of their general fund to missions. Earlier, I attended a small church that gave 50% annually, including the year they built a new Christian Education facility. Mission leadership will work carefully and patiently towards increasing the percentage assigned to missions from the general fund so that missions get their fair

share of the resources.

2. Faith Promise

This approach was begun by A.B. Simpson over 100 years ago. It remains the method of choice for some of the healthiest mission churches in North America. In this system each member of the congregation prayerfully sets an amount he or she will trust God to enable him or her to give. While this emphasis on individual commitments may sound contrary to the values of the Baby Boomer sub-culture, Faith Promise giving makes mission support a congregational issue that is considered by every member. It stimulates spiritual growth because it teaches the meaning of “faith.” It encourages expectation and trust in the Lord’s provision.

Some 90% of Faith Promise commitments are realized in actual receipts. However, the proportion varies with how well educated the people are to the meaning of Faith Promise. Although financial leaders of the church may be edgy about how Faith Promise will effect general giving, the fact is that all giving tends to increase along with mission giving.

The simple act of separating mission giving from general giving has a positive impact, according to some church growth consultants. One claimed that giving will increase 25% when people are aware that a mission budget exists by separating it from the general fund. The Faith Promise system makes a clear statement regarding the separate status of mission funding.

Another advantage of Faith Promise is that it is submitted in writing

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on a printed form composed by church-mission leadership. The Faith Promise response can provide useful data which can be gathered without violating donor confidentiality. Such categories of missions commitment as praying and going can be included on the card.

Combined unified giving

This means that part of general fund goes to missions, but members may also give a Faith Promise to add to the amount going to missions. The usual intent of this approach is to combine the advantages of both these systems. It also provides a means (of funding) while churches transition into a Faith Promise program.

Individual designations

In this system the church approves individual missionaries, then encourages the congregation to designate support that is given through the church. This method recognizes the “ownership” idea that is so important for the younger generation. There can be a formidable bookkeeping challenge in tracking multiple individual giving in a large congregation. Park Street Congregational Church of Boston has used this system for years. About 4% of their budget is spent on record keeping to administer it.

Cooperative church consortiums

I coordinate a missions support consortium of 9 Connecticut churches which has funded missionaries in the last eight years. Missionaries supported through this consortium have raised their support in an average of 6 months, instead of the normal 24 months. An additional benefit is that when these missionaries return home on furlough, all of their support contacts are located within a 50 mile radius.

Although there are great advantages, consortiums require considerable initiative and administration by a church that is trusted by other congregations in the area. Consortiums are an intelligent alternative to the eroding church missions support base in North America.

Their efficiency can inspire younger donors who want to sense that their gifts are being managed in an effective way.

Balancing Mission Passion

Whether or not we care to admit it, there’s an element of politics and public relations savvy that enters into church mission financing. To schmooze or not to schmooze, that’s a question that brings *angst* to many local church missions leaders.

“Mission evangelism” in the church

I first heard Paul Borthwick, Missions Pastor of Grace Chapel, Lexington, Massachusetts use this term. It refers to events specifically planned to reach church people not interested in missions. No matter how mission minded a church is, there will always be a significant number who have not yet become “World Christians.” New people are constantly being added to the church who may have no previous education in missions. There also are the veteran church attendees who for one reason or another have little or no mission vision.

We need to go beyond serving foreign cuisine at mission dinners to create interest in attending mission events. For instance, the light drama from Caleb Team entitled “A View From On High” effectively complemented a Sunday morning missions message at our church. Although less than 15 minutes were devoted to mission preaching that morning, a strong impact concerning unreached peoples was evident. Scott Wesley Brown’s musical “Please Don’t Send Me to Africa” was performed by our choir with great success. The choir also learned some powerful songs drawn right from the “Perspectives on the World Christian Movement” course developed by the U.S. Center for World Mission. We need to remember that normally no more than 50% of church attendees will attend mission events beyond the Sunday morning service. Rec-

ognize this as a key time to vary methods to reach the broadest audience.

Mission personnel in non-mission ministries

The more people sense mission leaders are for the whole church, the more likely it is that the whole church will be for missions. It’s tempting to tell mission committee members to devote themselves totally to mission leadership. They may be asked not to get distracted or be over committed by getting involved in other concerns. If that’s the case, how do mission people rub shoulders with the “Christian in the pew” who need to be mobilized? It’s easy to become so exclusive in one’s involvement that a “missions sub-culture” develops within the church. The potential for expanding the base of missions support is eliminated because no relational bridges are being built with those outside the “mission in crowd.”

Driving away marginal donors

We must be very careful not to be so focused on missions that we lose perspective on what is important to most of the people in the local church. We need to make sure not to appear “weird” to the non-mission crowd.

Personally I know that I am tempted to be judgmental towards those not interested in missions. My attitude suggests, “I won’t respect your spirituality until you meet my minimum standard of righteousness, which includes praying for missionaries. “Biblically, this is not my judgment to make. People are going to judge if they sense they are being judged, and mission loses.

Strategic giving vs. public perception

Responsible mission stewardship involves a strategy, but not everyone in your church is going to understand it. The fact that only .5% of church spending goes to frontier missions may trouble us greatly, but most of the congregation don’t know what frontier mission is all about. There is a public perception of what is “strategic” held by people who know little about missions, but are

part of the church funding base. For instance, a child of a prominent church family going into a domestic campus ministry may be thought of as “strategic” just because of their church connections. However, the best educational effort concerning missions strategy is going to pale when compared with close personal ties of a long time member committing to a missionary effort that is broadly perceived as credible.

Mission Information

Ian Hay, former general director of SIM, wrote an excellent article that expands some of the points below in the Spring, 1992 issue of *SIM NOW*. Our convictions and the congregation’s must both be considered. *Communicate effectiveness, not just finances*

We need to be selective in talking about money. It’s better to talk about the results of the financial investment, the spiritual value that the money is, in effect—purchasing. We need to use generic church publications for missions reports, not missions newsletters read primarily by people already sold on missions. Consistently present the subtle message that the missionaries and projects on the church’s budget are achieving their intended purpose and glorifying God. People will remember this when they consider mission giving.

Gaining exposure for missionaries in non-missions programming also communicates effectiveness. We consistently try to place missionaries in speaking roles where missions are not the main concern. Retreats for men and women are a tradition at our church. Both have been addressed by missionaries who spoke on Christian living topics rather than on missions per se.

Mission finance presentations should also communicate effectiveness.

When we present the missions budget to the congregation, documentation is readily available for most questions. Our answers are brief, specific to the point and factual. Preliminary presentations to the finance subcommittee, the board of missions and the board of elders all serve as practice sessions. We have also scrutinized our report formats. We

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have agonized over how anyone would wade through our one hundred line item missions budget, and made several improvements in its readability.

Informing people of needs

For a long time at Black Rock we had only sporadically provided a report of mission giving needs. We also discovered that when we did print a report, the format was not understood by many, including two pastors!

If a need is clearly presented, the potential for the response of people is tremendous. At our church people still talk about the “Spirit of Black Rock.” This was a plane we purchased for Missionary Aviation Fellowship in Irian Jaya. Bolstered by the “can do” attitude fostered by that experience, the church has since purchased a duplex for furloughing missionaries, and a 900 acre tract of land which will be a training site for native believers in the Amazon jungle.

However, it can be demonstrated that informing people of needs can be tempered by emphasizing different spiritual truths. Calvary Church of Lancaster, Pennsylvania doesn’t share the specific needs of their missionaries,

believing true faith includes trusting the Lord to prompt people to give to the needs about which He is concerned. A weekly bulletin statement of the total dollar amount needed for missions has been enough information for this congregation of 1300 to increase their giving consistently, producing nearly \$1,000,000 for missions last year.

The quality and success of Calvary’s results can hardly be questioned, but there is Scripture to support high specificity in expression of need. Paul’s appeal in II Corinthians 8 and 9 include specific instructions of what he expected the people to do. So, consider the need of

people to be informed, without falling into the excesses too often typical of religious fund raisers.

Knowing the donors

Development professionals work hard to understand the funding potential of their constituency. I was surprised one day to discover that a friend who raised funds for a Christian school searched public records of alumni land holdings to help determine their ability to give. Although this may seem “too worldly,” research of mission giving is possible without violating donor confidentiality. Everyone has an opinion, but research provides facts.

Integrity and accountability

There is a real need to build checks and balances into our support system. We need to be careful that the authority does not rest with one single person. I’ll never forget a support raising experience in my early days as a “home” missionary. After presenting my need in just a few minutes to the pastor of a large church, he took out the church checkbook and gave me a significant donation. That amount was sent for my support every month thereafter. In that church the pastor was within the

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bounds of his authority to take such action. But I wouldn't recommend it in these days when the integrity of church financial operations are being scrutinized and for good reasons.

On the other hand, often a leadership group reviewing support requests is too cumbersome. Many churches can't even evaluate every personal request, especially when there's a time obligation to give a response. A church mission policy should establish both the support priorities of the church and guidelines for responding to numerous requests. This must strike a balance between efficiency and appropriate distribution of authority.

Love for Missions

When was the last time you heard of a Christian parent not supporting their child in missions? This is a "given" because we tend to support those who we love. The more people love missions, the more they will support it. Friendships with missionaries are key to congregations loving missions. Friendships foster trust, and trust means a great deal in missions giving.

The need for ownership is cited as a value of Baby Boomers, but it's true of virtually everybody. Why has General Motors successfully ushered it's Saturn into the highly competitive car market? It was introduced as a model of "ownership" management theory.

Missions must not be seen as belonging to a special interest group, nor just another program of the church. Our aim is not to have a great "mission church," but to have a "Great Commission Church," that has both local and cross-cultural evangelistic outreach. Dwight Smith, President of United World Mission, has explained this well in an APMC publication. Whenever I hear a person at Black Rock (my church) referring to "our program" or "their program" when referring to missions, music, youth or any other ministry, I know we still have a way to go.

What missionary is easier to love than one of your own members? A steady flow of member missionaries is the best way to assure that congregational mission giving keeps growing. In a small church this is almost automatically true. In a large church, it takes more work because few members in a large congregation are known by the whole body.

Some churches have grown to the point where they will support only member missionaries. The danger of this trend is in the exclusivity of the relationship. If there are problems in your church, what happens to the support for your missionaries? This is another reason to consider the consortium support agreement mentioned earlier.

As the Lord leads, we need to talk to people who we believe may be suited for cross-cultural or local ministries. Telling the fourth grader who wins the memory verse contest that he's going to be a preacher someday is not what I have in mind. Just be prepared to do something about the prayers you offer concerning potential missionaries in your church. This may lead to establishing your own missionary preparation program, even if its for just a few people. As Tom Telford has said: "Don't let people lay hands on themselves." When the Holy Spirit calls people to missions, His voice should be loud enough for others to hear as well.

Mission prayer should truly be our top priority. No one who loves God and missions would dispute this. We need to teach prayer as a priority over giving, as the *first* step to mission involvement for every member. It's important to provide a response mechanism to measure how involved your people are in praying for missions. If we record only financial support commitments, the subtle message is that money is the most important. If the priority of prayer is maintained, and if strong relationships grow between prayer partners and missionaries, giving is a natural by-product. God will honor our efforts to stress the priorities of mis-

sion involvement for the congregation.

In our love for missions, we also need to provide mission education options. According to Sunday School publishing giant David C. Cook, there are four prominent learning styles: innovative, analytical, common sense and dynamic. We should develop mission education programs and methods that employ each learning style. There are individual affinities for learning that cross sub-cultural norms of Boomers and Busters, etc. At various times of the year we could offer dramas, dinners, films, slide shows, videos, reading programs, formal educational courses, missionary guests, cross-cultural simulation games, prayer meetings, field trips, children's ministries, conferences, local outreaches and a host of other missions activities.

Missions education is stereotyped as boring, repetitious and archaic. It doesn't have to be that way! If quality and variety are maintained, more people will learn about missions. Quality giving will become one of a number of desirable by-products of this effort.

For some people there is no substitute for learning about missions that can replace being there themselves. There is lots of truth to the phrase: "Next best thing to being there." The most powerful source of missions motivation among Baby Boomers is visiting the mission field itself. Jim Engel's research report "Baby Boomers & The Future Of World Missions" published by Media Development Associates made that point very clear.

So we need to overcome the standing objections to short term trips—too expensive, or beyond the scope our church, and an added burden for missionary hosts, or that it takes work from the national—and plan one for your congregation. If your church can't do it, use the help of various agencies that will do it for you. Or, ask another church that is organizing a trip if you can join them. At the very least, recruit a few

people from your congregation to go with a short term program sponsored by a major agency. Short term mission trips not only excite people about missions, they challenge their Christian commitment in significant ways. Adults come home from missions trips with a “summer camp high” like that experienced by children. If properly directed, this inspiration can have great personal benefits both for the individual and the church’s missions ministry.

Mission trips don’t have to be limited to construction trips to Latin America—although that’s not a bad start. But wherever we go, it is true that a significant number of people in the church will develop a love for missions they could not attain in any other way except by participating in missions themselves on short term trips.

In spite of all the above, personal requests for donations may still be required. Mike Tucker explained this

concept in the Winter, 1987 issue of “Leadership” magazine. Too many church leaders think that asking for money is what the televangelists do.

Tucker’s point is that if we are willing to approach people personally for recruitment as Bible teachers and leaders of key committees, then why not also do it concerning financial giving? This doesn’t suggest special treatment for those with a giving heart. In fact, it is negative treatment if we won’t use the same approach to draw them into ministry. Tucker’s logic is sound.

Sometimes we have been short of Faith Promises at the end of our Mission Conferences. These circumstances have led me to write a few letters and make a few personal requests. Therefore, we should make more personal contacts with those who we believe have the gift and heart and means of giving for missions.

Conclusion

This article is full of ideas. Most of them require work and to be implemented in order to improve the mission giving in congregations and local churches. Frankly, Tom Telford’s appraisal scares me. But I’m not going to be intimidated by current trends and lack of giving on the part of local churches. I am, and I hope others with me are, going to act prayerfully and aggressively to overcome the obstacles. I believe God has placed us in churches to help them have a growing role in world evangelization. This definitely includes financially supporting the cause.

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