

# Church-Mission Partnerships Reaching the Last Frontiers

by Edwin S. Walker

**B**aby boomers, people born between 1947 and 1964, are moving into church leadership. Churches that have boomer leaders are no longer willing to be silent participants without significant input into the missionary process. They can become a force for missions if local churches and mission agencies will work together in true partnership. But are the agencies ready to change and grasp the challenge? In other words, are they willing to give the churches a larger role in world evangelization, beyond finances and prayer?

In itself, change is neither friend nor foe. The danger lies in our failing to understand the times in which we live, so as to plan and proceed with biblical discernment. We need to be like the sons of Issachar, "...who understood the times and knew what Israel should do..." and like David who "...served his generation according to the will of God.

Prophetically, missiologist David Hesselgrave declares that "...the greatest obstacle to preparing for tomorrow's mission is an inability or unwillingness to face all of today's facts squarely and openly."<sup>1</sup> Naisbitt, in *Megatrends*, tells us that "The most reliable way to anticipate the future is by understanding the present."<sup>2</sup> Today's rate of change is so fast and persistent that our world will be substantially different by the year 2000. Engel and Jones, in their study, *Baby Boomers and the Future of World Missions*, make this statement:

The great challenge is for an all-new partnership between local churches and mission agencies. Some radical readjustments will be required. As this crucial step is taken, there is reason to be optimistic that the North American Church will play a pivotal role in helping AD 2000 plans become a reality.<sup>3</sup>

According to Engel and Jones, a cru-

cial component to the future of missions is for there to be partnerships between local churches and mission agencies. This is because baby boomers are a generation with different values. They have an entrepreneurial spirit, but distrust traditional institutions. They look to the local church to affirm the right of the mission agency to exist. Because of the values of the boomer generation, meaningful partnership between church and mission is timely. Not only is it timely but it also can restore to the local church its biblical role in missions.

This article will point out how an in-depth partnership can restore the scriptural role of the church as well as how several important benefits accrue through applying this approach. This article is a call for a new paradigm in church-mission relations in order to see effective evangelism through church planting among all the peoples of the earth in our generation.

## Churches and Missions

It has been said that "the Church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning." Dynamic mission outreach is one of the vital signs of a healthy local church. Churches are not only the goal of missions but also the means of accomplishing that goal. Missions—the story of redemption for all peoples through Christ—is the thread that ties all Scripture together into a meaningful whole (Luke 24:45-47). Missions is therefore not limited to a few Bible texts but permeates the whole of God's Word. It is especially in Matthew 28:18-20, the Church's evangelistic mandate, that our Lord brings special attention to bear on the scope of missions.

In this mandate our Lord makes an announcement ("all authority in heaven

and earth has been given to me"), issues a command ("therefore go and make disciples of all peoples"), and then makes a promise ("surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age"). The basis of this mandate is the lordship of Christ: "all authority" over spiritual/demonic powers, and also over all earthly human authorities, including governments. His promise to be present until the end of the age assures cross-cultural disciple makers that they will have His supernatural enabling and guidance.

The goal of the mandate is found in the command to "make disciples of all nations" (peoples, Greek: *ethne*). The command is buttressed by three present participles: "going, baptizing, teaching." These participles not only define the task but also show its scope and primary function. As we go ("in going") we are to win people to Christ—this is evangelization. "In baptizing" we are to unite believers together—this is starting churches. And "in teaching" we are to give the whole Word to the whole person, within the total socio-cultural context of the congregation being formed. Biblical disciple making therefore includes evangelizing, forming congregations, and teaching people to obey the whole counsel of God. The ultimate goal of missions is the glory of God in His Church, made up of saints from every tribe, tongue, people and nation. So it is very clear that the Church is both the means and the goal of missions.

If this is true, we might ask: Where then do mission agencies fit in? In Acts we read that:

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of

Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit..." (Acts 13:1-4a NIV).

Here we see the beginning of the first missionary team being formed. As we read through the rest of Acts, we note a distinction between the structured local congregation and the structured apostolic band. Thus we can state that biblically (as well as historically), God has raised up organizations and structures to assist the churches in fulfilling God's mission purpose of "making disciples of all peoples."

Seeing the task in this biblical perspective requires a great depth of meaningful partnership between churches and mission agencies. Seeking symbiotic church-mission partnerships would demonstrate, in today's world, the principles illustrated in the New Testament. Mission agencies should actively invite churches of the Body of Christ to be partners together with them in the task of world missions. While praising God for His mercies and blessings through mission agencies over the years, we ask ourselves how much greater the impact might have been if there had been a greater church-mission partnership over the years.

Unfortunately, the mission involvement of many evangelical churches, when compared with their potential, seems little more than tokenism. There are churches that take their mission involvement seriously, but see their role as having only one dimension: Financial support. Mission agencies tend to look to the schools for candidates and to the churches for prayer and monetary support. As important as these are, we might ask whether financial and prayer support on the part of the churches is the only role for the churches in missions? Should local churches not be

involved in preparing potential church planters? Still, how can church-mission partnerships be worked out practically? Each sending church is unique. Churches differ from one another in doctrinal emphasis, philosophy of ministry, size, wealth, biblical knowledge, spiritual health, evangelistic zeal, social context, cultural background, and affiliation. Furthermore, mission-field situations vary considerably: urban/rural, developed/underdeveloped, receptive/resistant, pro/anti-Western, holistic/dichotomistic, etc. Therefore, no single pattern can be laid down for partnership, and flexibility must be the mode. It may be best for some churches, at their present stage of development, simply to progress within their role as givers and intercessors. However, the ideal to which all should try to attain is to become churches that are pro-active in growing competent missionaries from within their churches.

### Church Planting

The fundamental task of missions is church planting evangelism among the unreached peoples of the world. The preparation of potential missionaries for this task calls for a practical contribution that neither a training institution nor a mission agency can provide as effectively as can a local church. Theological schools may teach the biblical doctrine of the Church; mission agencies may present an ideal picture of the Church they hope to establish overseas; but only personal involvement in the life and ministry of a healthy local church can adequately and practically equip the potential missionary.

To be learned, church life must be lived, which is more "caught" than "taught." People who have never experienced healthy church life and ministry in their own culture, but seek to plant healthy reproducing churches in foreign—and perhaps hostile soil—are at a decided disadvantage. All of us tend to reproduce what we have experienced. Adequate local-church experience is

crucial to the preparation of an effective church planter even a cross-cultural one. In the spiritual and practical preparation of many missionaries, at least in the past, institutions and para-church organizations have played a more important role than have local churches. For this reason, it seems that these workers have tended to plant institutions rather than churches even when they may be sent out as "church planters." If we correctly understand the mandate of our Lord in Matthew 28, to make disciples by going, baptizing, and teaching; that is, by planting churches, an important key to the missionary problem has been resolved.

Mission agencies that take church-planting evangelism seriously should therefore want to work in partnership with local churches in the selection and preparation of potential missionaries who have experienced a healthy, balanced church life and ministry.

What are some characteristics of a church that can become a seedbed for missions? Besides being Christ-centered, Bible-based, promoting sound doctrine and life, a healthy church structures its times of being gathered together in a way that balances worship, fellowship, prayer, and teaching of the Word. A healthy church when scattered has vital and dynamic witness, service, and a prophetic voice in its community demonstrating God's supernatural presence, power, truth and love.

Such a church is relational. It is a congregation that knows and worships their Lord intimately and is totally committed to Him, especially on the leadership level. From these relationships with God and each others, the church develops the values that drive it. Missionaries are best formed by churches that are value driven, and so filled with the love of God, that they reach out, even cross-culturally, in loving sensitivity to a lost and hurting world.

Healthy churches have leaders characterized by servanthood, stewardship, and shepherd concern. Such

churches make sure that its converts are carefully disciplined, involved in ministry so that their spiritual gifts may be recognized, affirmed, and put to work in the life and outreach of the church to a hurting world (Eph. 4). It is a church with the philosophy that ministry is more important than structure. Such a church frequently rethinks and adapts its ministries, to better “serve (its) own generation according to the will of God.” Our observations indicate that a missionary candidate from a church that is rigid and legalistic about its work seldom makes a healthy cross cultural adaptation

### The Church Organic

The church that grows the best missionaries models a philosophy of ministry that is *organic* rather than organizational or institutional. In an organic church, the basic value is not keeping people under control, but training and equipping them so that they enthusiastically own and apply the church’s purpose and values. These purposes and values grow out of a living relationship with Christ linked with His Body. Leadership of the organic type church is based on interactive spiritual influence, rather than hierarchical line authority.<sup>4</sup> In the organic church fellowship, growth and maturity of the members is considered more important than “programs.” Of higher value than the preservation of institutional rules and programs is the glory of God in the church, manifested in Spirit-led diversity. The orientation of ministry is toward process (“go... train... release”) rather than product (“come... attract... hold”). Unity is based on mutual ownership of values, not on organizational controls.<sup>5</sup>

Organic church principles are easily transferred cross-culturally, whereas the cultural baggage of the missionary with an institutional or program-based orientation is a disastrous

handicap and open to fatal mission error. An organic approach frees the planted church to grow and multiply as the Spirit leads groups of people to live out the Word of God in their own cultural context. Although an institutional-type church may grow to a large size in its sending context, its institutional controls, when transferred abroad, often hinders the emerging church from being led by the Holy Spirit in a way that is in harmony with the local context.

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Another characteristic of an organic church that is a seedbed for missions is that it loves the lost and is or becomes burdened for the unreached. This may be the reason why Antioch, not Jerusalem, was the seedbed for missions in the New Testament. Jerusalem believers by and large evangelized Jews. The church of Antioch, however, reached out to Gentiles, as well as to Jews. (see Acts 11:19-21). With the current internationalization of the cities of the world, urban churches have a built-in training laboratory for cross-cultural missionaries in their own communities and need to follow the Antioch model. The mission purpose of the Church demands that churches reach out to the various people groups of their city.

In spite of our imperfections, let us be the churches God wants us to be, and produce missionaries who, if not perfect, are adequately equipped, who are capable to be effective cross-cultural workers who have practical skills and a sound understanding to do the task. It makes good sense to ask candidates to demonstrate that they can and have done the job in their own culture and language, before thousands of dollars are

invested to send them abroad. A positive ministry experience at home could save them from burn out when as new missionaries they face initial failures in the initial phases of their work. Those who have never adequately tested their spiritual wings in ministry at home can find early rejection by people of another culture more than they can bear.

### Mission-Church Partnership

But what about the cross-cultural dimension of the task? How does a local church and a mission agency begin a partnership in growing potential church planters and sending them out cross-culturally? To begin with leaders of the church and representatives of the mission agency meet to set goals. They share their burdens and visions. From

among the unreached peoples of the world, they decide which one(s) they will seek to reach together. They form a plan to select and prepare workers to do the job.

A large, urban church with many resources may wish to accept a whole city in an unreached people as its responsibility and prepare an entire team to plant a cluster of churches in that city. A rural church may not wish to tackle a city, but linked with other churches, may want to target an unreached tribal people. A small church may not be able to send and prepare a whole team and fully support them, but do want to prepare a couple to go to a country where a mission team is already at work, and link up there with an experienced missionary or gifted national to reach an unevangelized people of that country. In some communities, like-minded churches could form a consortium and accomplish together what none of the churches could do by themselves alone.

There are almost endless possibilities of working together. For example Worldteam has a generic contract for such a partnership that can be tailor made

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to fit needs of any church and mission agency in the context for church planting ministry.<sup>6</sup>

Partnership of this kind not only meets the desire of the baby boomer constituency in our churches to have meaningful involvement into the missionary process, but also has the potential to restore the church to a more biblical role that produce synergistic powerful results. This new paradigm in church-mission relations could avoid, or substantially eliminate, some of the problems often confronted in the traditional church-mission approach. Some of these are:

Lack of experience based training in a church context produces too few competent church-planting missionaries.<sup>7</sup> Volunteerism has tended to encourage the appointment of candidates who might not otherwise be selected.<sup>8</sup> Too many missionaries drop out.<sup>9</sup> Strained relationships between church and mission agency are avoided. Too many unhealthy churches are planted that do not have the potential of reproduction under national leadership due in part to missionaries without adequate church life and ministry experience. Another problem is appointees' spending long periods of time in support raising. Related to that is the problem of churches supporting many missionaries with very little focus in purpose or prayer.

An important by product of forming joint ventures between churches and missions is that it is breaking one of the major barriers in reaching the last frontiers with the Gospel. The problem is that with the traditional pattern, both churches and individuals for the most part support missionaries and not the agencies, leaving the agencies without the needed resources to research, plan, recruit, train, deploy and mentor a new team of frontier church-planting workers. Frequently starting a work in a new city or people group often costs the agency \$25,000 to \$50,000 before the first missionary is even sent. When the church and agency work in tandem

the start up cost is largely removed because the focus is on reaching an unreached people with the Gospel and not so much on the support of a missionary. This has a great influence on how churches allocate resources. A mission partnership unites churches and agencies in a common purpose to penetrate the remaining final frontiers.

Agencies traditionally finance their operations from two sources of undesignated gifts and "ministry funds" deducted from the support of their missionaries. Also the projects and programs on the older fields are well represented by missionaries on "home assignment," raising additional support from their supporting constituency. Therefore, some agencies with little difficulty can financially continue to multiply workers, and even start new ministries, on already established fields under the traditional approach. However, this approach often leads to problems, like:

—Institutionalization of ministry makes closure policy financially difficult for the agency.

—Paternalism and creating a climate of dependency on foreign skills and resources frequently develops.

—Long term expatriate leadership hinders the development of national leadership of emerging churches, or/ and often undermines the missionary vision of the national church.

It's time to break out of old patterns and begin to develop a healthy new missiology that is both biblical and timely. It is important that churches and agencies move towards substantive joint ventures to reach the last frontiers and complete the task of world evangelization in our generation. Only with the right people, coupled with the right support, sustained by divine guidance and enablement, can we fulfill our Lord's mission mandate, i.e., to start multiplying churches on new frontiers so that our Lord will be glorified among all the peoples of the world. This

is best done by churches and mission agencies working together in partnership.<sup>10</sup>

### Endnotes

1. David J. Hesselgrave, *Today's Choices for Tomorrow's Mission*, Academy Books Zondervan, 1988.
2. John Naisbitt, *Megatrends*. Warner Books, 1982.
3. James F. Engel and Jerry D. Jones, *Baby Boomers and the Future of World Missions*, Management Development Associates, 1989.
4. Paul Thompson, *WorldTeam Institute Notebook*, WorldTeam, P.O. Box 143038, Coral Gables, FL 33114, 1989.
5. Ibid.
6. Contact Worldteam for information on the "Partnership Agreement Contract"
7. Ron Fisher, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (EMQ), "Why Don't We Have More Church-Planting Missionaries?", Vol. 14, No. 4, October, 1978.
8. David J. Hesselgrave, EMQ, "What's Wrong With Taking Volunteers?" Vol. 10, No. 3, July 1979, and Joseph Bayly, *Eternity, Out of My Mind: Lone Ranger Seminars*, October 1882.
9. Craig Hanscome, EMQ, "Predicting Missionary Dropout", Vol. 15, No. 3, July, 1979.
10. Ed Walker, *Church/Mission Partnership, A proposal for Joint Team Preparation and Church Planting Among the Unreached*, Worldteam, 1992 edition. Note: This booklet originally written in 1983 gives additional useful data.

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