

Mobilizing Churches for Frontier Missions

by George Miley

Completing world evangelization will require a mobilization in both the “going” and “sending” of cross-cultural church planters on a scale broader than anything yet seen. One way to approach such mobilization is to think in terms of activating an army one individual at a time. On the other hand, if we could activate entire churches, the dimensions of this movement would expand exponentially.

In pursuing this thought, two clarifications are in order. First, thinking in terms of the total mobilization of churches does not inherently suggest bypassing mission agencies. More and more churches and mission agencies are crafting partnerships with integrity which affirm and release the grace our Father has given to both.

Second, words unfortunately carry meanings beyond those which a writer may wish to convey. Certainly “church” is such a word. When today’s Christians, especially in the West, hear the word “church,” the picture which comes to their minds is largely inadequate. It needs to be re-worked and elevated. The church is the most beautiful of God’s creations on earth (Eph. 1:22-23), filled with creative, gifted people (I Cor. 12:14ff.), and pregnant with unrealized potential. The principles of body life and ministry which empowered the 18th century Moravian community which gave birth to the most significant Protestant missionary thrust of their time are being sought after today by a small but growing number of local churches.

Why mobilize churches?

1. Ownership.

If you were to arrive at your church for Sunday morning services, only

to discover that your facility had been destroyed by fire the night before, you and the rest of the body of believers would be thrust into some degree of trauma. You would have to deal with the question, “How are we going to respond to this emergency?” As a church you would invest time, energy, skills and money which you had not previously planned to invest to provide the church with another appropriate facility.

Hearing of your misfortune, how might I as a brother in Christ respond? Certainly with empathy, and perhaps with prayer. Maybe even with some small amount of financial assistance. But the dimensions of my response would be small compared to what I could and would do if that happened to my church.

Why? Not because I am hardened or unresponsive or uncaring. It really comes down to the correlation between ownership and investment. The world is full of needs. Whatever we say, in the end we find a greater capacity to invest of ourselves and resources in the areas where we experience ownership.

Another word for mobilization is investment. If all peoples on earth are to be blessed of God, there must be significant, grassroots investment on the part of God’s people in the process... investment of time, energy, gifting and resources. And the key to my ability to invest is my sense of ownership.

In grappling with this issue as a leader in a mission agency, I remember a discussion with a fellow mission executive which proved to be a watershed experience for me. “George,” he said, “world evangelization is a problem. We missionaries have bought the problem. But the solution lies beyond the scope of our resources and competency to solve. Actually, it is not our prob-

lem. It is the Church’s problem.”

The key to world evangelization is decentralization. Imagine what might happen if we were to take the overall task remaining, divide it into small, definable, doable bits and pieces, and then authentically transfer ownership of these small bits to local groups of believers. Imagine these local groups made up of godly, gifted people, released to design innovative solutions for their part in the overall task.

2. Gifting.

For many years I directed the ministry of missionaries on the LOGOS and DOULOS ships with Operation Mobilization. The responsibility to staff a ship quickly confronts you with the need for a much wider diversity of gifting and life experience than those of us have who were merely trained in Greek, Hebrew and theology.

God has graced His people with a wide diversity of giftings. The overall process of planting living and reproducing churches among unreached peoples is a complex process. It calls for many diverse gifts. The total pool of giftings in the Body of Christ must be applied meaningfully to the task remaining.

The vast majority of believers will find their God-given roles in world evangelization, not in the going, but in the sending. It is in the sending aspect that their giftings will be brought on line. The sending process calls forth such gifts as: serving, teaching, encouraging, hospitality, giving, leading, showing mercy, pastoring, healing, helping, administration, etc.

Over 99% of all believers will not leave home and join a secondary organizational structure. The only way they will find meaningful ownership and participation is by finding it right

where they are... in their churches. If we can design opportunities for them to participate in ways they are called and gifted of God, they will pay for the privilege of taking part.

Those who will be called to go will find most unreached peoples living in social and political systems where the vocational role of “missionary” is not understood or trusted. Many will go in “secular” vocational roles such as: students, engineers, social scientists, investors, teachers, consultants, lawyers, doctors, business people, health professionals, etc. We might ask: Where might we begin to look for these kinds of goers? The obvious answer is... in local churches.

3. Groups.

Most believers will only find real ministry fulfillment in the context of group or corporate ministry. Expressions of Christianity are powerfully influenced by one’s surrounding culture. I remember an evening meeting in Germany where I was waiting to preach while another member of our team was ministering in music. She had just moved to Germany after years on the DOULOS, and had practiced for a week on her song so she could sing it in German. When she finished she sat down next to me, and while I was being introduced she leaned over and whispered, “They didn’t like it.” My answer was immediate. “You have not yet learned to read a German response.”

She had just come from intensive ministry in Brazil. Brazilian believers are very expressive. They may shower you with complements, even hugs and kisses, regardless of how much they liked what you did. But Germans might be moved to the depths of their emotions and never flinch.

We Americans have been formed by the culture of individualism. We hardly understand group dynamics anymore. This negatively impacts our ability to understand such realities as group life and group ministry. It contributes to our inadequate understanding

of the Church. When we were born again God placed us by His Spirit into a family. We tend to have real difficulty getting in touch with this reality.

We think of ministry as something carried out individually. But recall a list of ministry giftings, and it becomes clear that most of us are gifted to minister corporately. How does someone who wants to serve do so all on his or her own? What about someone gifted to teach, to administer, to lead, or to show mercy? It is as we are brought into the experience of “body,” and as the group begins to find its common purpose in God, that my individual gifting can be fully engaged. The giftings of my brothers and sisters can now be applied to the areas where I am inadequate without their contributions.

4. Teams.

We can think of group sending as being done by churches, and group going as being done by teams. Ultimately the commitment to effective mobilization confronts us with the questions, “To what end are we mobilizing? What is to be accomplished?” Reduced to its essence, completing world evangelization calls for a focus on establishing or planting churches among the remaining un-churched peoples on earth. The New Testament approaches this through the use of teams. There are at least four compelling advantages to team ministry:

—Diversity of gifting

Church planting among an unreached people is a complex activity. The overall process calls forth a wider diversity of gifting than any one individual enjoys by him/herself. But a group of believers working together has all the potential for applying such diversity to a common mission.

—Personal nurture

Church planting among an unreached people is also a costly activity. Living cross-culturally, weathering disappointments, doing spiritual battle all take their toll. Serving together with others allows for mutual encouragement.

—Character development

Working together with others is not always encouraging and supportive. It inevitably calls for a transparency and vulnerability which can be scary and painful. The commitment to work out relational differences in the context of Christian love is essential to the ongoing process of character maturation. How effective will we be in planting healthy churches if we cannot work together harmoniously with others?

—Modeling community

Godly churches are the most beautiful thing on earth! The Father has chosen the church as the bride for His Son. When a church is healthy, her beauty becomes a powerful evangelistic tool. One of the most convincing ways to expose people to Jesus is to bring them into contact with the believing community with Jesus residing in their midst. Teams can provide this opportunity, being thought of as churches in microcosm.

So what does all this have to do with mobilization? If it is teams we want to mobilize, how and where are effective teams developed? It is far more than several people being in the same geographic location. A team has a common purpose and a relational bonding, both of which are developed over time in an environment of deepening trust and honesty. Powerful teams can be born and nurtured in the midst of the shared life of community oriented churches.

5. The End Product.

The mature fruit of evangelistic ministry takes us beyond individual decisions to Christian community. The New Testament describes the Church as being more than a location where we go to attend meetings or sign up for programs. The Church is a family of relational commitments, a body of interdependent ministers. If churches are what we want to see established, how do we learn about healthy church life?

Not long after I went to India I came across a powerful church planting

movement carried out entirely by Indians. At that time there were something like 200 living churches scattered throughout India who were part of this work. I was especially struck, having just come from a seminary in the US, with how these Indian leaders trained their future pastors. Once young men with potential for church leadership had been identified, they were brought to a mature church and allowed to be part of the life of that body. They participated in early morning prayers, Bible study, open air evangelism, and served the body in the most simple ways.

These future church leaders remained until those overseeing their development felt they were ready to be released. Church planters and leaders were trained in the context of local church life.

The awesome calling upon Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles (unreached peoples), established in Acts 9, was not released until Acts 13. The years alone in the desert were an important part of Paul's preparation. But so was the time in Acts 11 and 12 when Paul and Barnabas ministered as part of the church at Antioch. Having both come from the outside, they were authentically grafted into the life of that body. During the season of ministry there Paul honed an understanding of the realities of church life upon which his church planting ministry, recorded in Acts 13 and onwards, was based.

Are we comfortable to send out church planters who themselves have little proven experience in vital church life? Churches can be centers of mobilization for church planting teams focused on unreached peoples. Church life is best learned in the midst of church life.

6. Commitment.

My wife and I once visited a wonderful missionary couple who had been working among Muslims for many years. We had known them during most of

that time, and wanted to learn about their ministry. Soon into our visit it was clear that they wanted to talk about their own personal needs. They were a hurting family.

In the course of our conversations about real human pain, we asked about their home church. "We are supported by 30 different churches," was their response. It was obvious that they did not have an authentic home church. During a time of personal

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need, there was no sending constituency to whom they could turn. They were alone.

All too often a missionary's sending constituency consists of a couple hundred names on a prayer letter list. This group has almost no capacity to respond meaningfully to the long-term personal needs which years of tough cross-cultural church planting can leave in their wake. If world evangelization is the responsibility of every believer, then those who go need sending communities who are as committed to them and to their mission as they are personally.

During the last gathering of the Antioch Network, as church leaders solved problems together, one of the issues we spent in-depth time discussing was the need for continuity in church leadership. The vision of a local church developing and sending a church planting team to an unreached people is not for every church. Specifically, church leadership must be as committed to this mission as the team is itself.

One leader told about the sense

of calling his church has for Bosnian Muslims. A congregation of barely 400 people, they have sent over 100 on short-term trips to minister to Bosnian war refugees in Croatia. As a result, a number of these Muslim people have given their lives to Christ, and a permanent church planting team has been formed. Their target is Sarajevo.

"We are sending our people into a war zone," he said. "As elders, we cannot guarantee their safety. Their commitment to Christ and His kingdom is obvious in their obedience. It is only right that our commitment to them and to this mission match their commitment."

In conclusion

A consensus is emerging that we are on the verge of mega-changes in how we think about and approach world missions. The number of new missionary candidates in many places is down. Giving to missions is soft. A maturing population of Christians has more and more difficulty in finding meaningful ways to connect with our traditional approaches. They want to participate and want ownership. They sense they also have something significant to offer. And they want to give it in the context of authentic relationships. I believe that if we will cultivate ownership of world evangelization within church fellowships, we will reap a mobilization explosion vast in its dimensions and awesome in its release.

George Miley ministered among unreached peoples in Asia, Europe, Latin America and Africa during 20 years with Operation Mobilization. He is now president of Antioch Network, a fellowship of local churches, who are developing church planting teams to unreached peoples.

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