

The Strange Structure of Mission Agencies

## Part II: How Denominational and Mission Agency Offices Can Do MORE by Doing LESS

by Robert A. Blincoe

Arguably the number one problem in American mission structures today—a problem that accounts for declining donor dollars, strained church relationships, and demoralized missionaries on the field—is an overconfident home office making more and more of the decisions which should be made by field missionaries, congregations, and donors. When power is consolidated in the offices of denominational headquarters or mission agencies, the efficiency experts may have won, but donors (they want to designate) and churches (they want to have more “say”) and the missionaries (remember them?) watch from the sidelines. Here’s why it matters: Donors will divert their contributions to where they can designate; congregations want to recapture the Antioch church model of sending their own members<sup>1</sup>; and missionaries on the field know more than the administrators back home about how to achieve their organizations’ aims.

*Let’s look at these three constituencies, beginning with the missionaries.*

### ***Missionaries Know Better than Home Officers How to Achieve their Organization’s Aims***

In IJFM volume 18:2–4, Joseph and Michele C. presented a pattern of governing to which I also subscribe. Those articles—“Field-Governed Mission Structures in the Bible and throughout the Centuries.”—describe five cases, one being the success of the Catholic mission in China during its decades of de-centralized (field-governed) decision-making. In fact, “prior to 1622 the Roman Catholic Church had no mission-specific centralized administrative or supervisory structure to which Catholic missionaries were to relate.”<sup>2</sup> However, a major structural change took place in 1622 when Rome created a bureaucracy for the advancement and supervision of its missions. Joseph and Michele, quoting Christopher Hollis, write,

Any plan to dictate from Rome the details of Catholic policy in China was an absurdity. Men at Rome knew and could know nothing of conditions in China . . . If any success was to be achieved, there was no alternative but to allow the men on the spot, who alone could know the conditions, to take the decisions for themselves.”<sup>3</sup>

Refer to Joseph and Michele’s article to discover the sorry consequences that followed Rome’s decision to govern the missionary work in China from far away.

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Even godly, well-intentioned home officers suspect that they “know what is best” for the mission, when they really need to daily remind themselves to allow a “field-governed” process. To be “field-governed” is to follow the apostolic model of the so-called Antioch church: an apostolic band of brothers led by Paul and Barnabas were sent *off* from (though not sent *out* from) the church in Antioch. After that point, the apostolic band would report back to its sending church<sup>4</sup>, but made its own decisions under the guidance of the Holy Spirit regarding where to work, how to work, and how to solve peacemaking problems on the team. When it comes to governing the missionaries, the sending agency should expect reports and should enforce the regulations that are drawn up and agreed to by both sending agency and missionary band. The missionary bands are thus *under the regula* (to use the historic term) *that they themselves drew up and to which they hold one another accountable*.

### ***National Church Partnerships May Consolidate Power in the Wrong Hands***

There is a second, subtler control over field workers that home offices maintain. Here is the background: With the emergence of overseas “daughter churches” at the end of the colonial mission era, denominations and mission agencies rightly began to empower their national protégés. This empowerment—bringing about self-governing, self-financing, and self-propagating daughter churches—is what Rufus Anderson and John Nevius envisioned 150 years ago, and to which all mission agencies adhere today. The Presbyterian Church (USA), for example, boldly turned over to daughter churches all properties and authority within each country. In other words, our Presbyterian Church created national churches in the image of an American denomination. In addition, our Presbyterian Church endowed each national church with authority to decide *whether Presbyterians would or would not come to work anywhere in their countries*. No one foresaw

that this would be the death knell for Presbyterian work among the Muslims for the last four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Any church partnership ministry in Muslim countries that continued became constrained by the wishes of the daughter church (now called the partner church) that suddenly had “the say” over missionaries throughout the entire country. Minority churches in Muslim countries simply could not risk asking for missionaries to Muslims. The number of missionaries serving at the invitation of churches in Muslim countries reduced dramatically (see graph).

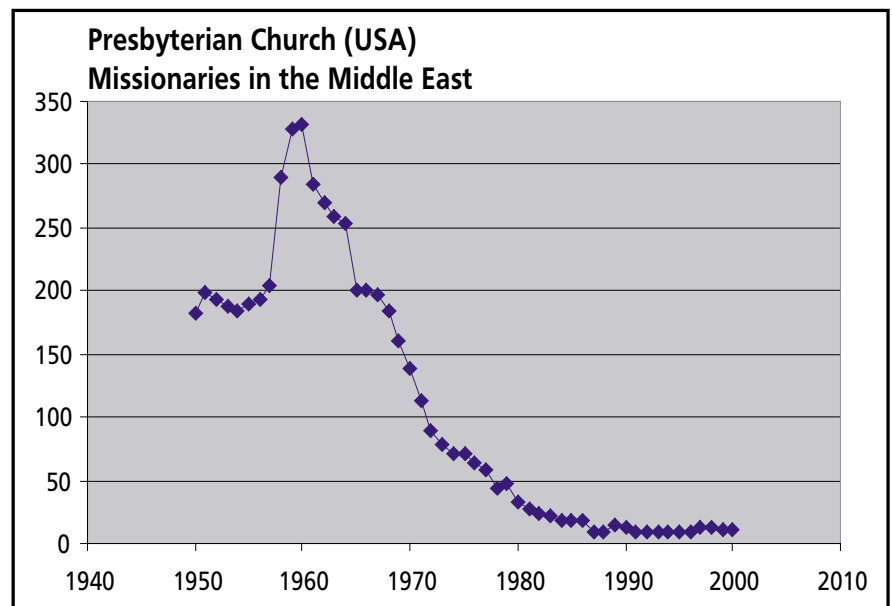
We have to find ways to witness to Muslims without endangering the Christian minorities who come from, say, a Hindu background and who have their reasons for keeping Muslims out of their churches. Thus the Church in Pakistan, comprised of several thousand former Hindus, could and has thwarted efforts by missionaries to work among the tens of millions of Pakistani Muslims. One can almost understand how a worked-up professor of the Christian seminary in Gujranwala, Pakistan, would threaten an American, saying, “If you send missionaries to work among the Muslims, we will go to the government and have them expelled from the country.” Throughout the Middle East, minority Christian peoples who were never Muslims

make up the membership of partner churches; they cannot or will not risk inviting missionaries to work among Muslims.

For the last four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the many Presbyterian missionaries who desired to tell the good news of the gospel to Muslims had to connect to other agencies.<sup>5</sup> The Reformed Church of America, Zwemer’s denomination, also deferred all missionary placement to the wishes of their partner churches. John Buteyn, director of missions for the Reformed Church of America, looked back at those decades with some regret. Buteyn wondered aloud whether “Focused groups of missionaries, not subject to the restriction of church partnerships, might have begun important new work in some sensitive places where our commitment to partnerships always required us to prevent such initiatives.”<sup>6</sup> Of course, the good news of the gospel is that our Lord daily gives denominations and mission agencies the chance to start over.

### ***Most Missionaries Grow the Church where it already Exists***

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 40% of all missionaries were sent to frontier mission assignments (“where there is no church”). These missionaries began daughter churches in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Today, 97% of all foreign missionaries work



alongside daughter (now partner) churches (see graph).<sup>7</sup> A century of success on the mission frontiers now acts like a brake, or silt, holding back the potential of tens of thousands of missionaries (and their partners in national churches) from turning their energies to the Task Remaining.

get them talking “partnership”. That means that the mission agencies will share the decision-making process with local congregations<sup>8</sup>.

Local churches talk a lot about “sending apostolic teams”, which is great, but I believe *they will always need the accountability offered by a partnering*

Shenango (Pittsburgh) Presbytery, gathered these voices together in the October 1997 issue of *Missiology*:

David Bosch said, “The church-in-mission is, primarily, the local church everywhere in the world.”

Charles Van Engen in *God’s Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* is clearly connecting ecclesiology and missiology, with the local congregation as the locus of missiological activity.

We see this renewed emphasis within official circles of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The 1993 General Assembly approved a document which states:

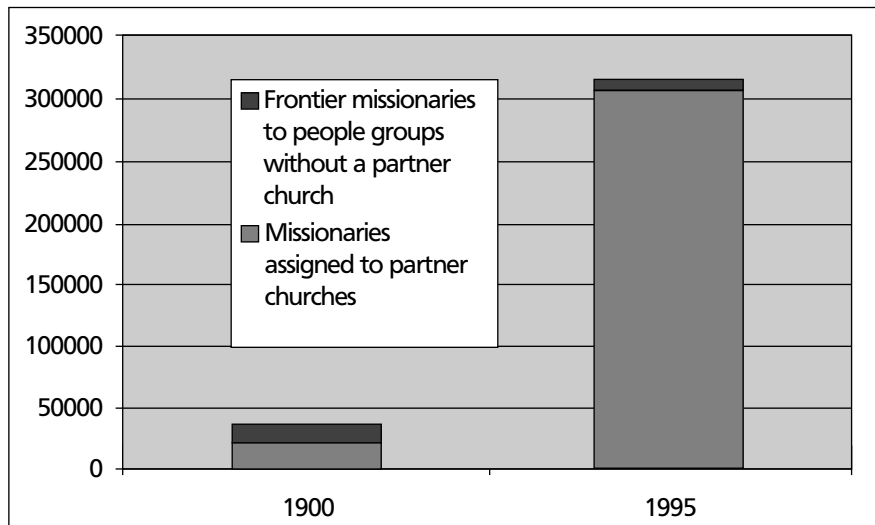
Replacing an earlier assumption that the General Assembly and its agencies did mission for the churches is a new understanding that the local congregation is a major agent of God’s mission, both in the local community and around the globe.

The 1994 Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly approved an overture from San Gabriel Presbytery that encourages direct involvement by congregations and presbyteries in the recruitment and funding of mission personnel.

Similar echoes are heard from those who study the sociological and organizational character of the church. These include Lyle Schaller (and 12 others that Dawson lists). These recognize that the cultural patterns existing today demand a more decentralized and personalized involvement in mission.

### *Silt Build-up: Why Mission Budgets Are In Trouble*

I apologize for this analogy, but only a little: The home office of a mission agency or a denominational mission board is like silt that builds up at the mouth of the river before it empties into the sea. Donors and local churches (upstream) are separated from the missionaries (downstream) by well-intentioned officers who consolidate the funds into a unified mission budget. In other words, mission execs ask donors to “trust the system” (ie. “Stop designating your donations”). The unenviable result: Donors find ways donate around the



Ralph Winter has written that these 300,000 “partner church” missionaries should not be re-deployed, but should stay where they are to influence their partner churches to take up the Task Remaining of frontier missions. Good idea. In addition, where should new missionaries go? Should they grow the church where it already exists, or go to where no church exists? Now is the time for mission agencies and denominations to start yielding more decision-making power back to the missionaries on the field.

### *Ready or Not, Here come the Local Churches*

The second constituency that home office mission agencies and denominations can no longer overlook is the local congregation. As Greg Livingstone, founder of Frontiers, says, “Mission agencies do not send missionaries; local churches do.” Successful mission agencies and denominations will open their doors to the sending churches—and donors—who will no longer sit idly by and “trust the system”. Creative thinkers such as Bruce Camp are linking local churches with mission leaders to

*mission agency* to prevent the number one problem in church-sent teams today: losing focus and re-defining their mission. One congregation that has made “church-based teams” a value to its members is Faith Church of Tempe ([www.fcot.org](http://www.fcot.org)), Arizona. Faith Church is proving that a church can send its own members, to an unreached Muslim people group, in partnership with a mission agency. A memo of understanding describes the rights and responsibilities for both Faith church and Frontiers, its partnering agency.

Are denomination offices ready to permit local churches to send missionaries? The question was easily answered until two decades ago: only the central administration could select, salary, and send missionaries. And only the central administrators could choose the location of overseas service (in partnership with the national church), or choose when the missionary would come home. But the missiology of centralizing the command in this manner has been questioned by many voices recently. David Dawson, Executive Presbyter for the

unified mission budget, and a number of new, de-centralized, smaller streams form a delta of donor initiatives. Ralph Winter writes,

By 1950, when the “unified budget” approach had gained widespread consensus among the denominations as a further step toward centralization, another vast new crop of powerful voluntary societies was being born, the money from individual church members somehow constantly gravitating to the specific.<sup>9</sup>

In a doctoral thesis on why denominational mission budgets are in trouble, Ron Rice found that the unified approach to missions promoted by church bureaucracies is collapsing because donors prefer to band with others of like-mind to designate their funds to a focused cause:

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century denominational structures began to assume more and more control over the formerly autonomous mission agencies, a movement which really reached full flower after World War II, with a generalized “mission of the church” and overall coordination by skilled managers.<sup>10</sup>

Do donors trust a system that separates them from their power to designate? Today’s managers need to learn from the mistakes others have made before them. Take the example of the Presbyterian Church headquarters’ attitude towards the women’s mission society movement. We can identify three stages in the rise and fall of this remarkable de-centralized movement that usually repeat themselves in the relationship between home office efficiency experts and donors.

### *The Rise of Women’s Societies: Confrontation*

When, in 1870, following the American Civil War, the Presbyterian Church headquarters heard that women in Philadelphia wanted to organize a missionary society to raise mission funds and send missionaries to work among non-Christian women and children, a director came from the New York headquarters to talk them out of it. The minutes record that the New York representative questioned the propriety of an independent orga-

nization and “expressed his opinion that *the work could be done more easily and cheaply, through the regular agencies of the Church*” (italics mine).<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, the Philadelphia women organized themselves into the Foreign Missionary Society in 1870, and began to publish *Woman’s Work for Woman*. They raised money at their meetings and designated it to send new missionaries. By 1879 dozens of women’s societies supported Presbyterian missionaries in Syria, Persia, India, China, Thailand (Siam), Japan, Africa and Mexico.

Moreover, women raised funds for missionaries to newly arriving immigrants. The California Branch of the Philadelphia Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society was organized in 1873; in 1889 it became the Woman’s Occidental Board of Foreign Missions, being active in the mission to Chinese women in San Francisco.

### *The Success of Women’s Societies: Commendation*

By 1880 and continuing for forty years, a full 30% of the entire Presbyterian Church mission revenue derived from these hundreds of women’s mission societies<sup>12</sup>. There were congratulations all around: The Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions wrote into the General Assembly minutes: “We cannot close this Report without noticing what the women of our church have done for the glorious cause . . . The efforts of these women of our church are worthy of all praise.”<sup>13</sup> “And later the General Assembly effused:

The gain has not been so much in money, as in creating a sympathy, diffusing knowledge on the subject, arousing enthusiasm and calling forth the prayers of God’s people, for our missionaries and their work. Even the youth and the little children in their mission bands are being instructed to love and pray and labor for the conversions of heathen children; and the heart of our Presbyterian womanhood has been quickened as never before to give the Gospel speedily to the millions of heathen women and children.<sup>14</sup>

In 1889 the General Assembly agreed to transfer the support of all medical

work abroad to the Women’s General Missionary Society (Rycroft 1968:81). Additionally, the Women’s General Missionary Society assumed support of all unmarried women in the foreign fields—a responsibility that it carried until 1923. (Rycroft 1968:81).

### *The Consolidation of the Women’s Societies: Decline*

In 1923, the Board of Foreign Missions began consolidating all the hundreds of women’s boards into a single board with a single budget dispensed by efficiency experts in New York. Dana Robert evaluates the result:

The dismantling of the woman’s missionary movement makes for depressing reading. In each case, women fought and resisted the mergers, but they were either powerless to defend themselves because they had no laity rights in the church, or else they were forced to accept compromises that slowed but could not stop the ultimate dissolution of their organizations.

Men argued against women’s missionary societies throughout their history based on pretexts that women diverted the attention of the denomination from the primary missionary task, that women did not know how to handle money, and that single women missionaries caused trouble on the mission field. As the women’s missionary societies became successful and incurred far less overhead than the general boards, arguments emerged that women were causing imbalance in the missionary effort, or that their successful fundraising was causing financial hardship for the general missionary board. But *not until the goal of efficiency reigned supreme in the 1920s did the centralization of denominational structures succeed in dismantling the movement*. The byproduct to the merger was that the male-controlled general boards took the money raised by the women. The male-run Board of Christian Education tried to seize women’s missionary funds by misrepresenting itself as a mission organization. As the women of the church tried to defend the integrity of their missionary work, years of hostility between women and the church bureaucracy resulted<sup>15</sup> (italics mine).

## Conclusion

Older denominations—Presbyterian, Southern Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist—as well as newer ones—Vineyard, Calvary Chapel, People of Destiny—have a choice to make. They can preside over a diminishing donor base while maintaining centralized control, or they can reconnect donors to missionaries and projects.<sup>16</sup> Donors join people, not organizations. Donors will contribute *around* a unified budget. They will seek out great causes which they can follow, like an investment, for “where their treasure is, there will their hearts be also.” **IJFM**

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Congregations need to partner with an existing mission agency, or create their own, as the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod has admirably done. More on that in IJFM 19:3.

<sup>2</sup>IJFM Fall 2002 Vol. 18:3 p. 110

<sup>3</sup>ibid. p. 112

<sup>4</sup>“From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the *ethne*.” Acts 14:26-27

<sup>5</sup>However, the Presbyterian Church has taken a corrective, de-centralizing step: the Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship, a validated mission of the PCUSA, now partners with non-government organizations in Muslim countries. And the Presbyterian Outreach Foundation promotes designated giving to projects. The initiative for mission to unreached peoples (Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists) is being placed back into the hands of donors, congregations, and missionaries, with predictable, positive results. (Visit [www.pff.net](http://www.pff.net) and [theoutreachfoundation.org](http://theoutreachfoundation.org).)

<sup>6</sup>Buteyn’s remarks were made at the Samuel Zwemer centennial, New Brunswick Seminary, NJ, Feb. 1989

<sup>7</sup>2001 Barrett, David and Todd Johnson *World Christian Trends* William Carey Library Pasadena, CA

<sup>8</sup>Visit Bruce Camp at DualReach.org.

<sup>9</sup>Winter 1980:210

<sup>10</sup>Rice 1978:5

<sup>11</sup>Brown 1936:114

<sup>12</sup>Brown 1936:134-135 <sup>13</sup>General Assembly minutes, 1880

<sup>14</sup>General Assembly minutes, 1884

<sup>15</sup>Robert 1997:303, 305, 306

<sup>16</sup>A hundred years ago Arthur T. Pierson, an early promoter of the Student Volunteer Movement, wrote, “It is our deliberate, prayerful, and mature judgement, that no one thing would do more to secure a prompt, permanent, and altogether unprecedented advance in missions, than the plan, now steadily growing in favor and in success—*of supporting individual missionaries in the field by individual contributions*” (Pierson 1900:285).

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