

Monthly Missiological Reflection #9

"Can Local Churches Effectively Select and Care for Missionaries?"

It can generally be said that missionary societies exist because missions leaders of local churches are unable to understand and implement world missions. I have often heard the question "Can local church leaders with a limited understanding of missions and the world effectively strategize for world missions?" The answer to this question depends on the equipping of the local church to implement world missions.

I know that local church leaders of my fellowship would not consider hiring a preaching minister without interviewing him, checking his references, listening to a tape of a sample sermon, and hearing him preach before the congregation. Seldom, however, does such screening take place when the same congregation selects missionaries. In our survey of 116 Churches of Christ, Bob Waldron and I asked, "What kinds of screening did your congregation use to select your missionaries?" Sixteen percent of the churches reported using no screening whatsoever. Forty percent evaluated prospective missionaries only on the basis of interviews; 25 percent did doctrinal screening; and only 6 percent used psychological testing done by professionals.

While local preachers will remain in their own cultures ministering to people with whom they are familiar, missionaries will minister in foreign cultures, and frequently will have to learn to speak another language in order to communicate effectively. Paradoxically, selection of local preachers is done with much care, while missionaries are frequently selected haphazardly. I suggest that missions leaders must select their missionaries with the same care that they select local ministers.

Personal Relationship in Missionary Selection

During the Spring semester of 1999, I was on faculty leave to write a book guiding churches to become redemptive fellowships. Before beginning to write, my wife and I interviewed leaders of 75 local churches and taught a number of seminars equipping churches to become redemptive fellowships. Our interviews consistently revealed that the major criterion in missionary selection is a personal relationship with someone in the congregation. Stated in other words, most missionaries in Churches of Christ receive support primarily because of the recommendation of a relative or friend within the congregation. My wife and I, in fact, were supported by our home congregation in Arkansas and significantly helped with our working fund by a few Oklahoma churches, who knew us personally when I served as campus minister for the church in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. We applaud churches who home-grow their own missionaries but urge that the missionaries selected are qualified for the task.

Frequently support of national preachers begins after personal contact by campaigners or other American visitors, who experience first-hand church work in another culture and want to help. When the language and culture are vastly different from their home culture, however, these campaigners or visitors typically have little basis to judge the validity of the work and the authenticity of the national church leaders hired.

In our seminar to empower local congregations to become redemptive, missionary churches, my wife and I perform a skit that we call *Good Ole' Joe*. Joe is a local Christian businessman, who has just returned from visiting a very poor African country. While there, he met a Brother Okongo, who introduced him to the opportunity to support students in his Christian elementary school. "Just think," Joe says to the chairman of the missions committee of his local church, "it takes only \$25 to support one child for a month. These children, according to Brother Okongo, will become the missionaries to their people! How many children do you think we can support?" The missions committee, touched by Joe's request, is unable to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of this

approach and commit a substantial sum to the support of Brother Okongo's students. We then debrief the scenario by asking, "What does this missions committee (and church) *possess*? What do they *lack*?"

Following the skit and discussion my wife Becky describes the need for expertise in missions decision-making:

When children are young, they look to mom and dad, who can take care of all problems. Mom can put a band-aid on a skinned knee; Dad can serve 7-Up to a child with an upset stomach. However, when the cut requires stitches or the child has a high fever, more expertise is needed. The child is taken to a doctor who has expertise in these matters. When my mother passed away, my sisters and I did not ask her neighbor, who regularly watches L.A. Law, to deal with the legal arrangements of the estate. We, rather, went to an office with the sign *Attorney at Law* above the door. In the same way, missions committees need to rely upon people with expertise. A missions committee must learn how to select missionaries who themselves have expertise and expect them to receive adequate equipping and direction to be successful in the missionary task. The mammoth task of making effective missions decisions requires special expertise.

Preparatory Steps in Missionary Selection

Selecting qualified missionaries is best accomplished after completing three vital steps.

First, church leaders must become learners who seek to understand the basics of missions. Specifically, missions leaders must *understand the process of missions* so that they are able to answer the following questions: (1) How does a new missions work take root and grow? What should missions leaders of local churches expect to have occurred in their particular field after five, ten, and fifteen years? (2) What occurs as a new missionary adapts to a new culture and begins to settle in? Why do many missionaries glamorize the new culture, then reject it, and finally adapt to it? (3) How should money be used wisely in missions? Is it wise to support the students in Brother Okongo's Christian school in Africa? What are strengths and weaknesses of this approach? How can we help national leaders without creating dependency?

Missions leaders should also *develop the skills to nurture prospective and current missionaries*. Missions leaders must always ask, "Who might become a future missionary in our church fellowship? How can we encourage and guide them? How can we encourage and strengthen our current missionaries? How does our congregation help missions works in poverty areas without creating dependence? (Note the bibliography of [Resources for Missions Leaders of Local Churches](#) on this web site.)

Second, missions leaders of local churches must write their understandings into a missions policy. A missions policy serves a number of purposes in an effective missions-sending church.

- Writing the policy permits thoughtful evaluation of critical issues.
- The policy prevents decisions based on leaders' charisma or personal whim.
- Because the policy provides the rationale for decision-making, thus avoiding confusion, inconsistency, misunderstanding and hurt feelings.
- The missions policy defines the specific responsibilities of both the local church and missionary and builds trust by allowing the congregation to understand the direction being taken by the church leadership.
- The missions policy provides consistency and eliminates the need for "reinventing the wheel"

each time new missions committee personnel are added.

(Adapted from ACMC 1987, 7)

Third, the missions committee, working with the elders and resource people, continually evaluate their process of selecting, supporting, overseeing, and caring for their missionaries who are opening new areas of the world to the gospel. Reflection and learning never end!

The Story of the Preston Road Church of Christ

Five years ago the elders of the Preston Road Church of Christ in Dallas, Texas, empowered a group of young leaders to put together a missions program for their congregation. These Christians, recognizing that preparation was the foundation of everything that would occur for years to come, gathered what they considered foundational reading materials in missions. This newly formed committee spent six months studying this material and learning from experienced missions resource people. Seeking to develop credibility with their elders, the committee worked diligently to package a missions vision for their congregation. After viewing a PowerPoint presentation describing how missionaries begin church planting movements with many lay leaders growing to become church leaders, the elders exclaimed, "Thank God! This sounds like something out of the Bible, unlike anything we have ever done!" Today the Preston Road church is supporting three families, all part of ground-breaking missions teams, working to open new areas of the world to the gospel. They also plan to significantly expand in years to come (Chambers and Reed, 1999).

I began this discussion with the question, "Can local churches effectively select and care for missionaries?" The answer is obviously both "Yes" and "No". If churches go through an extensive process of learning (like the Preston Road church), they are very capable of selecting and caring for missionaries and working with them to develop a vision and strategy for their area of the world. Without training, however, local churches are likely to make innumerable mistakes in cross-cultural missions, without realizing it. I urge local churches to use multiple resource people in learning about missions, developing missions guidelines for their local church, and reevaluating their missions plans and procedures.