

The Strange Structure of Mission Agencies

Part III: Desired Symbiosis: Church and Mission Structures

by Robert A. Blincoe

Call it *Symbiosis*: “the intimate living together of two dissimilar organisms in a mutually beneficial relationship.”¹ Denominations are governing bodies that “grow the church where it is,” while small, scurrying “second mission structures” initiate all kinds of pioneering outreaches to “go to where the church is not.” My recent survey of 23 denominations and denomination-related mission agencies supports this idea.

I asked 12 denominations and 11 small denominationally related mission agencies—let’s call them “second mission structures”—how they start new mission initiatives. The question I e-mailed each of them was:

Suppose your office wanted to send missionaries to Muslims in a country where you presently do not have work—say, in Morocco or Iraq—how would your office go about doing this? In other words, how would you proceed to begin mission work in a new location?

I followed up most of the e-mails with a phone conversation. An intriguing pattern emerged: Each denomination—Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, Reformed—that has defined its mission as “partnering with existing national churches” has made room—at times unenthusiastically—for creative outside-the-headquarters structures that initiate missions “where there is no partner.”

Andrew Walls, perhaps the foremost missiologist of our day, has called this pattern the “fortunate subversion” of the church. Here is Walls:

The voluntary society arose because none of the classical patterns of Church government, whether Episcopal, Presbyterian, congregational, or connexional, had any machinery (in their late-eighteenth century form anyway) to do the tasks for which missionary societies came into being. By its very success, the voluntary society subverted all the classical forms of Church government, while fitting comfortably into none of them From age to age it becomes necessary to use new means for the proclamation of the Gospel beyond the structures which unduly localize it. Some have taken the word “sodality” beyond its special usage in Catholic practice to stand for all such “use of means” by which groups voluntarily constituted labour together for specific Gospel purposes. The voluntary societies have been as revolutionary in their effect as ever the monasteries were in their sphere. The sodalities we now need may prove equally disturbing (Walls 1996:247, 253-254).

How Lutherans Took the Lead

The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), famously unified in its doctrine and form of worship, has permitted a galaxy of de-centralized

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mission agencies to spring up from among its membership. In fact, we would have to say that the variety of mission initiatives calling themselves Lutheran—but neither inspired by nor directed by the church headquarters—is phenomenal. An initial 12 LCMS mission agencies met in the mid-90s to form the Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies (ALMA); that number grew to 52 agencies by 1999 and has grown again to 65 in 2003! All of them loyal Lutherans, doing specialized work with the official consent of the Missouri Synod headquarters, but without its control. Some of the sixty-five mission agencies on the ALMA web site (www.alma-online.org)² are:

- *Apple of His Eye Ministries:* Planting messianic congregations among Jewish people
- *Friends of Indonesia:* Helping Indonesian believers grow in body, mind and spirit, as well as partnering with them to share Jesus' love with those around them.
- *Hmong Mission Society:* Proclaiming of the Gospel to the Hmong people of North America and throughout the world.
- *Tian Shan Mission Society:* Spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ among the Dungan people of the Tian Shan Mountain region of Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan).

And on and on. Each of these was started by an inspired Lutheran congregation or group of congregations that got busy and incorporated with the state. The denomination, through its partnership office, even advises the initiators on the process of incorporation, and ALMA provides a starter kit for setting up a successful mission agency. ALMA also helps new mission agencies effectively raise funds and communicate to Lutheran churches. Amazing!

Once the new mission agency has its 501(c)3 status with the state, the society can apply for Recognized Service Organization (RSO) status with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, or a partnership status with the LCMS

World Mission—the mission arm of the LCMS. RSO status allows an agency to solicit funding and provides a number of privileges such as the opportunity to include its staff in the denomination's pension and health-care plan. Organizations with RSO status agree to an annual audit and promise to work in ways that support the aims of the denomination. Mission groups that seek a partnership status with the denomination's mission arm enter into a five to seven year agreement to work together in mutually beneficial ways. The agreement describes how the mission group the LCMS World Mission will work together to accomplish more effective outreach.

The Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies hosts an annual gathering of its member agencies to help them network with one another and to interface with the mission staff of LCMS World Mission. It's a win-win for denomination and the mission agencies. "In a time of financial limitations and in response to the initiative of many different mission groups in the LCMS, it makes sense to work closely with the independent Lutheran mission agencies," said Steve Hughey, Director for Mission Partnership and Involvement at the Lutheran church headquarters.

The most exciting Lutheran mission of late will send Muslim background believers, who have come to faith while in the United States, on an evangelistic outreach to Muslims in other countries. This is being done through a partnership agreement between LCMS World Mission and a newer LCMS mission society focusing on the Muslim world. [Would your denomination have the structure to send Muslim background believers from America to a Muslim country?] Steve Hughey, at the Lutheran Church headquarters is encouraged:

There is something supernatural occurring. With God's help, we have the chance to do something effective because a small Lutheran mission agency gives us the platform to initiate this mission to Islam.

The structure is already in place—not in headquarters but in the Lutheran pews—to initiate this mission, thanks to the permission of a denomination

which has taken the position that "Our concern is to get the task of mission done" by partnering with small "second structures" begun by its own members. That is how mission initiatives continue to spring up in the decentralized structures of the LCMS. The pattern should encourage other denominations to do likewise.

The Methodist Model

The Methodist Church sends missionaries only at the initiative of its partnering overseas churches. This works well enough in "growing the church where it is." However, Methodist partners in many countries—Muslim countries, for example—cannot or will not risk a mission initiative to the majority culture around it. In such cases partnership actually restricts mission initiative. Twenty years ago Gerald H. Anderson wrote a paper to his fellow Methodists, "Why We Need a Second Mission Agency." That brought into being the Mission Society of the United Methodist Church³. The Mission Society seeks to partner with others who share its burden:

for those who don't know Christ and are committed to reaching them, an effort which requires Christian nationals and missionaries working together.

The Mission Society of the United Methodist Church has 151 missionaries serving in 25 countries, initiating mission for the Methodist Church "where there is no partner." In the Muslim "stan" countries of the former Soviet Union, for example, the Mission Society initiated a ministry where the Methodist Church had no structure.

What emerges from restrictive denominations is the need for a second mission structure to initiate mission work where there is no partner OR where the existing national partner cannot or will not initiate a mission effort to the other, nearby cultures.

The Presbyterian Pattern

A spokesperson for the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) Worldwide Ministries Division says of initiating new mission work, "Our approach is generally to find a local church partner to work with in the new area. We

don't go in alone to initiate work." We hear in that familiar pattern of restrictive partnerships. However, he adds, "If there is no local church with which to partner, or if it is too dangerous for us to do so, or if governmental restrictions prohibit our working with a local church, then we would find a local Christian NGO." In other words, where there is no partner church, or where the minority church in a Muslim country cannot risk a mission outreach, other creative partnerships are being developed. This is a corrective action. Because previous to the 1990s, there was the familiar restriction on mission initiative, with disastrous results. In his book, *Merging Mission and Unity*, Donald Black recounts how mission in the 1960s came to mean only church-to-church relationships. In fact, for twenty years the Presbyterian Church did not use the term "missionaries," they were re-designated "fraternal workers." The term "fraternal worker" was accurate: the Presbyterian Church had no more missionaries.

This reduction of mission to simply church-to-church partnership effec-

tively ended all Presbyterian mission to Muslims, since no church in, say, Morocco or Iraq, would invite missionaries to minister the gospel to Muslims. In the forty-five years since Presbyterian Mission came to mean "church-to-church partnerships" the number of Presbyterian missionaries in the Middle East fell from 329 (in 1959) to 47 (1979), to 11 today. Small, struggling national churches in the Muslim world will not or cannot risk a mission to the majority Muslim peoples around them. Hence the need for small "second mission structures."

The Presbyterian Order for World Evangelization

Dr. Ralph Winter registered a second mission structure—The Presbyterian Order for World Evangelization (POWE)—as a "Chapter 28" organization of the Presbyterian Church in 1974. The POWE incorporated as a religious order in 1991 and is recognized by the Internal Revenue Service as a Protestant religious order. Its two purposes:

- "the evangelization of all the world's people groups, espe-

cially those which remain outside any active evangelistic effort."

and

- "The cultivation of a lifestyle which prioritizes world evangelization."

The POWE is not a sending agency but a lending agency; that is, Presbyterians who are called to work among unreached peoples "where there is no partner" can apply to be loaned through the POWE. Contact them at presbyterianorder@cox.net.

The Friends Formula

The Friends (Quakers) denomination in America is divided into six regions. Four of these regions send their own missionaries. "Regional offices do not have to ask permission of the national board," says Chuck Mylander of the Colorado-based national Friends office. For example, the Northwest Friends have been sending missionaries to South America for six decades; that work has matured to the point where Latinos are sending their

The Result of "Church-to-Church Partnerships"

One who foresaw the crippling result of "Church-to-Church Partnerships" was Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, Presbyterian missionary in the Arab world for four decades. In his booklet, *A Tale of Three Cities*, he offers a perspective on minority churches in the Muslim world that helps American Christians understand what he foresaw:

Let us imagine that America was not Christian and Japan was. The Japanese then come to the United States and establish a church among the Navajo people. After one hundred years the Navajo church is well established, and the Japanese decide to work exclusively in partnership with the Navajo in America. "We will do nothing within the fifty states except at your specific request and under your direct authority," the Japanese church promises.

After a period of time the following dialogue occurs:

"What about witness and service to the Hopi people?" ask the Japanese.

"The Hopi are our traditional enemies," comes the answer.

"Well, then, can we start work with white America?" say the Japanese."

"White America?" the Navajo reply. "White Americans took our land, killed our grandfathers and shamelessly broke the treaties they made with us. White America is not on our agenda."

"Very well," continue the Japanese. "Perhaps we can do something for the Eskimos."

"Eskimos," counter the Navajo, "are also native Americans. But our people look on them as inferiors. Our people will not be able to understand why resources available for the Navajo are being spent on Eskimos."

The deeper question then must be put to the Japanese. Is it fair to the Navajo churches to place on them the burden of providing the vision for witness and ministry for all of America? Would we want a similar burden placed upon us? (Bailey 1989:10)

This narrative could be adapted to mission fields wherever a mission restricts itself solely by the wishes of its partner.

How to engage in mission to, say, Muslims without risking that a local church will reject the idea? The Presbyterian Church (USA) has turned to mission societies to provide the partnering structure.¹ Some mission agencies with whom the Presbyterian Church (USA) partners are: the Arabic Communication Center, Middleeast Media, Pakistan Bible Correspondence School, Iranian Students International, Friends of the Kurds, Central Asia Development Agency, Summer Institute of Linguistics (Wycliffe) and the Wolof Church Partnership. In this creative way the Presbyterian Church maintains its commitment to partnering, but now looks for those partners in task-oriented structures that we call mission societies.

own missionaries. Accordingly, the Northwest Friends have turned their pioneering interests to the Muslim world, in a partnership with Frontiers. Here is the point: “We operate on the assumption that the Great Commission is our marching order,” says Mylander. “We do not have to partner with a host church in a country; we are free to begin new works among the unreached.” Because the Friends denomination has no self-imposed requirement to partner with a national church, it follows “as night follows day” that there is no necessity for a denominational mission agency to emerge among the pioneering Friends.

The Episcopal Paradigm

Everyone can learn from the Episcopal Church how a large, centralized denomination can benefit from its historic reliance on small, de-centralized mission societies to extend its influence “where there are no partners.” The Episcopal Church will consider sending missionaries anywhere, but only where, a local bishop makes an invitation. This arrangement works in most countries, but not among the “least reachable” peoples of the non-Christian world. Tibet, for example, where there is no bishop, or Morocco, where the bishop resides in England; how do Episcopalians initiate the Great Commission among the least reachable peoples? Enter the “fortunate subversion,” to recall Andrew Wall’s phrase. The *Anglican Frontiers Mission*, for example, [find them at www.afm-25.org] has identified the 25 largest unreached populations as its mission mandate. Directed by Reverend E. A. “Tad” Bordenave, the Anglican Frontier Missions is cooperating with the Southern Baptist and Interdev and with “all who are committed to the Task Remaining in World Evangelization.” Anglican Frontier Missions keeps the Episcopal Church headquarters informed of its activities, but is not controlled by the headquarters. So, if there will be Episcopal outreach to unreached Berber peoples in Morocco, or among Shiites in Iraq, Episcopalians can

partner with Anglican Frontier Missions.

A second Episcopalian mission agency is *Episcopal Global Teams* [www.ewmglobalteams.org]. How does mission initiative begin with Global Teams? Reverend Kevin Higgins says, “It happens when someone approaches us or we met someone at a church, and we or they say “let’s do it.” The process begins there.” Episcopalians (and non-Episcopalians) can partner with Global Teams “to see the heart of Christ in the skin of every culture.” There is no restriction on Global Teams missionaries from initiating mission “where there is no local partner.”

As with Lutherans, Presbyterians and Methodists, so also in the Episcopalian Church: a denomination that defines mission as “partnership with national churches” will create a need for smaller, particular agencies that will initiate mission among peoples without a church.

The Reformed Church of America

In the past there were “small second structures in the Reformed Church of America (RCA) that could initiate new mission efforts. Samuel Zwemer and James Cantine, formed a second agency—The Arabian Mission—after the Reformed Church of America (RCA) told them in 1889 that it could not help them get started. Four years later the RCA embraced The Arabian Mission as its own.⁴ Women’s mission groups in the RCA once formed “the small second structure” and initiated mission work. However, in the 1960s the RCA turned over the authority in other countries to its partnering national churches. There is no alternative within the RCA to this binding partnership. John Buteyn, director of the RCA mission during those days, says with some regret,

A smaller group of workers, with specialized focus, might have been able to initiate new ministries in some of those sensitive places, without burdening the broad constituencies of the Reformed Church of America.

Is there room in the RCA for “a second structure” for pioneers to once again “go and make disciples of all *ethne*?”

Conclusion

I do not think the architects of mission who rightly turned the mission over to national workers foresaw that this would disable mission initiatives among neighboring ethnic groups and, in the case of Muslim countries, 99% of the populations. Denominations owe to the Great Commission those “new means for the proclamation of the Gospel beyond the structures which unduly localize it” (Andrew Walls again). Learn a lesson from the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and let a hundred “small second structures” bloom. **IJFM**

References Cited

- Bailey, Kenneth E.
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- Walls, Andrew
1996 *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*. Orbis books, New York

Endnotes

¹*Symbiosis 1*: the living together in more or less intimate association or close union of two dissimilar organisms. *2*: the intimate living together of two dissimilar organisms in a mutually beneficial relationship.

²ALMA lists only those agencies that pay the annual \$85 membership fee and agree to work in cooperation with the member agencies and with the LCMS. There are 35 additional LCMS mission agencies that have not joined ALMA.

³Visit www.themissionsociety.org.

⁴Some mission agencies with whom the Presbyterian Church (USA) partners are: the Arabic Communication Center, Middle East Media, Pakistan Bible Correspondence School, Iranian Students International, Friends of the Kurds, Berlin Missionswerk, Evangelical Theological Seminary (Cairo), and Central Asia Development Agency, Summer Institute of Linguistics (Wycliffe) and the Wolof Church Partnership.