

Mission Committees: The Crucial Link in World Evangelism

Ed Mathews

Abilene Christian University
Journal of Applied Missiology
Volume 05, Number 1, April 1994

How much can one person alone accomplish in taking the Gospel to the whole world? Very little! While individual church members are increasingly aware of the need, they are also acutely conscious of their individual limitations to do much about making disciples in all nations.

Thankfully, the Lord did not put the entire burden of mission on any one Christian. The responsibility of world evangelism is a shared obligation. The proclamation of the Good News is entrusted to all believers.

The church is like a chain. It can do its job because it has many links. Members of the body are linked together by faith in the One who empowers each of them. The mission committee is a crucial link in world evangelism. However, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. How strong, then, are mission committees in the churches of Christ?

I. Problem

Without any other organizational component for sending missionaries, the health of the mission committee should be a major concern of the leadership in the church. Periodic checkups are needed. Ignoring unhealthy signs can have serious consequences, can even be fatal to the mission effort of a local congregation.

- A. Statement of the Problem.** The underlying inquiry in this research project is: "In what administrative areas -- mission committee organization, missionary selection criteria, or mission budgetary procedures -- do churches of Christ have the most specific policies?" The assumption is that greater preparation to function as a mission committee ought to result in greater achievements in mission. Likewise, it is assumed that fewer preparations to function as a mission committee will result in fewer accomplishments in mission.

This investigation concludes that there is great potential for mission among the churches of Christ but a substantial need for preparing mission committees to do their job. As one elder remarked, "we are the most ill-prepared organization in the world responsible for doing the most important task in the world." Considering the data collected in this project, that assessment is accurate.

- B. Mention of Previous Research.** Various books and articles are already in print on mission committees. Dale Lundy, "Mission Management," *Firm Foundation*, Volume 97, Number 14, 1980, pp. 215, 220, in the first of a seven article series, focused on the need for a responsible entity -- a mission committee -- in the local church. C. Philip Slate, "An Evangelistic Committee in the Local Church," *Speak a Good Word for Jesus: An Introduction to World Missions*, edited by Joe D. Gray, Nashville, Tennessee: 20th Century Christian, Inc., 1980, pp. 120-124, comments on the purpose of mission committees. Paul Borthwick, "The Crucial Roles of the Church Missions Committee," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Volume 21, Number 3, July 1985, pp. 272-280, suggests various functions of the mission committee.

One of the most extensive research projects on mission committees to date is by Ralph Beck, "Church Sponsored Missions: Seven Components of a Dynamic Missionary-Sending Ministry," unpublished M.A. thesis, Pepperdine University, 1987. Beck identifies seven factors -- four attitudinal and three organizational -- common to thirty missionary-sending churches of Christ in eleven different states (a third of them in Texas). The organizational components are:

1. the use of mission consultants,
2. the utilization of a mission committee, and
3. a high level of congregational awareness and involvement in the missionary-sending ministry.

The mission committee component reported on the rationale, responsibility, size, method of selecting members, tenure of membership, ongoing education of membership, and frequency of meetings of the mission committee.

Another research effort of considerable magnitude is Alan Henderson, "The Role of Missionary Training Within the Selection Criteria for Missions Personnel in Churches of Christ: A Descriptive Analysis," unpublished M.A. thesis, Abilene Christian University, 1992. This study of mission committees is based on 160 congregations in the state of Texas. The primary focus included both the organization and budgeting of mission committees as well as the attitudes and activities of missionary selection.

C. Purpose of this Project. The following report deepens and extends certain aspects of previous research projects. There is enough overlap to study the commonality in the results yet enough uniqueness to move the missionary enterprise into new territory.

1. Commonality with former projects. This report asked questions that are answered in previous research: Do larger churches fully support more missionaries than smaller churches? Do larger congregations have mission committees more often than smaller congregations? Who decides mission committee membership? How often do mission committees meet? Does the committee have a written policy? What criteria are considered in selecting a missionary for support? The answers to these questions in past and present research will be compared to establish continuity and contrast.
2. Uniqueness of this project. Other questions were asked that have not been answered previously. What percent of churches of Christ have mission committees? What is required for mission committee membership? How many people serve on the mission committee? What officers serve on mission committees? Who makes the decision to support a missionary? How is the decision made to support a missionary? Where are mission funds allocated? This study is not an attempt to measure the accomplishment but to evaluate the preparation of mission committees in the churches of Christ for doing their work.

II. Methodology

This research effort began in September of 1993. It studied the policies for administering missions in the churches of Christ in Texas, particularly those policies that deal with mission committee organization, missionary selection criteria, and mission budgetary procedures.

- A. Sampling Method.** The book compiled by Mac Lynn, Churches of Christ in the United States, Nashville, Tennessee: Gospel Advocate Company, 1991, listed 2200 congregations in Texas. The researcher used a systematic sampling procedure. Every tenth entry in the list became part of the sampling frame (if the congregation had a membership larger than 100). Because churches with fewer than 100 members are not likely to be involved in missions, if the systematic sampling method selected a "small" congregation, the author merely moved down to the next entry on the list that was above 100 in membership. This procedure was repeated until the sampling frame was completed.
- B. Data Collection Technique.** A "Mission Committee Guidelines" questionnaire (See APPENDIX A) was sent to the "Mission Committee" of 220 churches in Texas with a stamped, self-addressed envelope between October 5 and December 8, 1993. By February 25, 1994, there were 74 usable questionnaires returned (See Figure 1).

This is a 34.74% response rate. The percent of the sample that responded was similar to the percent of the different sized churches in Texas (See Figure 2).

The sample adequately reflects the whole population. Additional measures to obtain a larger return of questionnaires did not seem warranted.

III. Results

A. Interpretations. The findings presented in this report are divided between those compared with previous research and those unique to this study.

1. Compared with previous research. This report coincides with previous research on almost every item investigated in common (See Figure 3).

The greatest variations occur in the frequency of mission committee meetings and the possession of a written mission policy. The former disparity is probably due to Beck reporting on churches that had fully supported missionaries for ten consecutive years while Mathews includes churches that had partially or fully supported missionaries for any length of time. The latter disparity is no doubt attributed to the small number of churches involved in the study, i.e., the actual difference is only a matter of three churches.

Considering the agreement of the three studies compared in this report, it is appropriate to conclude that this research project has criterion validity.

2. Unique to this study. This effort also plows new ground in seven areas unique to mission committees among the churches of Christ (See Figure 4.)

The conclusions drawn from these findings are troubling.

- i. Almost half of the churches that support missionaries do not have a mission committee. How are these missionaries supported spiritually and emotionally? The church is more than a check-writing entity. The body of believers at home is responsible for the care, guidance, and nurture of its messengers. When little effort is expended, little results should be expected. Almost half of the churches of Christ that support missionaries are only peripherally involved.
- ii. The requirements for mission committee membership are inadequate. Most of those on mission committees have not read a book, attended a seminar, or taken a course on missions. They have not visited the mission field nor led someone to faith in Jesus. The churches of Christ have minimal requirements for committee membership. It seems the elder (quoted earlier) was correct when he said, "We are the most ill-prepared organization in the world responsible for doing the most important task in the world."
- iii. Among the 54% of the congregations that have a mission committee, 18% do not have officers, 33% do not have a chairman, and 67% do not have a secretary. One wonders how serious the church is about taking the Gospel to the lost. Choosing, sending, and sustaining missionaries on the field -- so that responsible, reproducing churches are planted -- requires a monumental amount of work by the supporting church. There are no shortcuts, no quick and easy methods. Only a persistent, organized effort can advance the kingdom against the forces of evil on the mission field.
- iv. The churches desire to support emotionally stable missionaries, but only 7% use psychological assessment in deciding who to send. This is a risky procedure. A school cannot make psychological assessment a prerequisite for graduation. It is possible to have an academic degree in missions but not be suited for the mission field. Only the church can (and must) require assessment. This will save many people from the embarrassment of trying to do what they cannot accomplish. It will save the church from the disappointment of wasting money on aborted efforts.

B. Implications. There is much to do. Further research is needed, deeper commitment required.

1. Further research. Past and present studies still leave several questions unanswered.
 - i. How many churches -- which claim to support missionaries but do not have mission committees -- are actually supporting national preachers?
 - ii. What is the difference in member satisfaction in those committees that meet once a week, once a month, and once a quarter?
 - iii. Are mission committees with written policies more efficient?
 - iv. Would requiring a special training course prior to membership make a mission committee more successful?
 - v. What are the advantages and disadvantages of financing a mission program by a special one-time-a-year collection compared to financing a mission effort out of the regular Sunday contribution?
 - vi. How should a mission committee be organized for optimum productivity?

The list of questions is long. The need for further research is urgent. Churches are increasingly serious about doing a better job in missions. They can (and will) when better information is available to them.

2. Deeper commitment. Both past and present research suggests the need for deeper commitment to the mission of God, greater preparation for mission committee membership. These are lofty goals, worthy of the One who "will test the quality of each man's work," I Corinthians 3:12. The following recommendations are implied by the findings reported in this study.
 - i. For the sake of those being supported, all churches with missionaries should have a mission committee.
 - ii. Mission committees should write (and periodically revise) policy guidelines.
 - iii. Membership requirements on mission committees should be raised to a much higher standard.
 - iv. Members of mission committees should continually develop additional understanding and skill through reading books, attending workshops, and taking courses.
 - v. Mission committees must be better organized so that greater productivity can be gained.
 - vi. Psychological assessment of each missionary should be an absolute requirement prior to any support agreement.

When commitment to mission is deepened, when understanding of mission is broadened, the harvest of souls will increase and the number of responsible, reproducing churches will grow. May that day come quickly!