

The Importance of Networking

C. Philip Slate

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How glad I am that this dinner meeting is taking place in Middle Tennessee! It isn't because this is my home territory, even though I live here now and did so for seven years during high school and college. But high school and college years were so long ago that some of my grandchildren regard them as ancient history. Fifty years ago this month I was beginning my sophomore years at Lipscomb College. There are other reasons for my wanting Middle Tennessee churches to know about Missions Resource Network.

During my Lipscomb years I received two or three significant influences that helped focus my attention on unevangelized territory. I had some teachers to stress it, teachers like Russell Artist (a biologist who had worked in Germany with Otis Gatewood), Batsell Barrett Baxter, and Harold Baker. I heard speeches from the likes of Otis Gatewood, people who were doing that work. I remember the opening line of one of Gatewood's chapel talks. With raised arm and clinched fist he said loudly, "Go east, young men, go east!" It was a take-off on Horace Greeley's admonition to young men to "Go west" in the early history of our country. During the Lipscomb lectures men spoke movingly about work in New England, the Philippines and other needy areas where we were underrepresented.

The Hillsboro church made a deep impression on me. For many years she gave over half of the contribution toward evangelizing outside the South, and the church thrived on it. At one point to accommodate their numerical growth, Batsell Barrett Baxter urged them to build a balcony rather than a new church building. He had just been to Korea and felt more workers needed to be sent out. That church subsequently asked Pat and me to be a part of their planting a church in London, England. We had a wonderful ten-year relationship with them. Their longstanding habit of thinking beyond the South impressed me. But, as I learned later, they were neither the first nor alone in that kind of emphasis. The Lawrence Ave. and its work in Nigeria was notable. The Granny White Pike church, originally called the college church, has a long history of supporting missions. Churches in Dickson, Fayetteville, Lebanon and many other places have done notable work.

Through the years many of our missionaries have come out of Middle Tennessee. (Show 1933 picture of missionaries). Among those in this 1933 collection of missionaries one sees J. M. McCaleb and Sarah Andrews worked in Japan for many years, and they came from Hickman County and Dickson. Several others in this collection came from surrounding counties. Not a few of them had roots elsewhere but studied at Lipscomb; and others, who did not grow up in Tennessee, studied at Lipscomb. Middle Tennessee churches have both produced and supported many missionaries through the years.

In 1941 the old Reid Ave. church, a church in Sparta, and perhaps one in Chattanooga got enough money together to provide meager support for a fine preacher named J. Edward Nowlin to work with a handful of people in Johnson City, TN. What a great thing for a church to do during time of war! Through that church's work both my mother and I became Christians.

God alone knows how much money even now comes out of Middle Tennessee to support evangelism. The possibility that these churches and resources can be better served is heart-warming to me. That is the big reason I am excited about their learning of Missions Resource Network

In my speech I wish to pick up on the "networking" aspect of the subject.

CHURCH SPONSORED MISSIONS

In churches of Christ we follow a policy called “church-sponsored missions.” Whether we should use missionary societies or not was thrashed out in the 19th century, along with subjects like instrumental music in worship, evangelistic authority and church governance. With us it has been a matter of principle that we evangelize through the church. Many people felt at that time—and even since—that the church is indeed responsible for evangelizing, but that since the churches were not doing the job individuals formed missionary societies to get the job done. But our forefathers stuck to their guns; it was a matter of principle with them. I share that view.

We are not alone in this approach. It is interesting to me that nowadays a number of Evangelical churches are turning to a church-sponsored approach to missions. Of course, through the years several large independent churches have sent out their own missionaries. Fifty years ago the Park Street Congregational Church in Boston supported over 100 missionaries by itself! The Church of the Open Door in Los Angeles did much the same. The APMC was begun a few years ago as a resource for churches. That acronym stands for Advancing Churches in Missions Commitment, and it is designed to help churches to do their missions well.

Even if church-sponsored missions were not a matter of biblical principle with us it would be a good approach. I have spoken to several Evangelical missionaries who had been sent out by missionary societies. As I described my experience with church-sponsored missions, specifically with the Hillsboro church, they salivated at such an arrangement. Some of them said that the only person who had contact with them was the field secretary from the society! They had no idea who gave the money on which they lived. Of course, all of our church-sponsored missionaries have not had ideal experiences, and some missionaries sent out by societies received adequate attention. But at its best, the church-sponsored arrangement has no reason to feel inferior or substandard.

The issue of efficiency. We must not be lured into thinking a church will do a good job just because it sponsors and supports a missionary by itself. Oh no. Churches can make a huge mess of things. But the answer to that situation is not to begin using missionary societies. Missionary societies can be as irresponsible as churches, and on a larger scale; they can make colossal blunders. Hudson Taylor went to China originally under the auspices of the China Evangelization Society. It was a disaster; people sitting in London didn’t know how to give direction to people working in China. Taylor returned to Britain and eventually started the famous China Inland Missions that operated on a very different basis. In 1998 Dr. Darrell Whitman, then editor of Missiology magazine, said that the missionary society for the United Methodist Church had almost twice as many staff members on Riverside Drive in New York as it had missionaries on the field! I don’t see that as efficient. Many such stories can be told. Don’t cherish the hope that societies will obviously do things well.

Nor are we to assume that things will be done well just because they are done by the local church. Any time an institution—business, humanitarian, governmental or religious—sends personnel to another culture to perform designated tasks there are certain necessary components in that enterprise: selecting appropriate personnel, providing a suitable level of financial support, providing appropriate emotional and logistic support, engaging in realistic evaluations of the work, providing trouble-shooting, and eventually bringing the personnel home successfully when they finish the task. That is the case in church-sponsored missions: all of the responsibilities for making the work go well fall to the local church. That is the nature of the beast. Smaller churches, of course, can provide funds, prayer and emotional support without having a lot of expertise. But churches that sponsor such work, that serve as supervisors, overseers or directors of such works need much more insight and savvy. Unfortunately, many churches do not know how to do that well, and that is why I am advocating the importance of networking among brothers and sisters. Kingdom work should be done well. Just because churches are self-governing does not mean they have all the insight and understanding they need to make wise decisions and to undertake all tasks. There is nothing wrong with seeking outside help from resource persons, whether they are individuals or congregations or other groups.

Networking. By *networking* I mean the sharing of ideas, learning from each other, and coordinating work so we will be more efficient. This can be done—because it is being done—without subjecting

local churches to the rules and regulations of a missionary society, without surrendering its self-governance under God.

This is not a new idea since it has been done by a number of churches. But since its benefits are so great I am affirming that too few churches do it. Here are a few notable cases. Four churches cooperated in supporting a team in Campo Grande, Brazil: Madison, TN, White Station in Memphis, Fayette, AL, and Golf Course Road in Midland, TX. They supported a four family team. Representatives from each church met several times with the team members and various resource persons who were knowledgeable about both missions principles and the work in Brazil. Everyone was on the same page in terms of objectives and support. The plan worked well. Fifteen years later a splendid, self-supporting, functional church was the product. The Central church in Amarillo has over the years acquired a broad knowledge of Brazil and has been a help to many other churches and missionaries in their work in Brazil. Their knowledge and wisdom have been shared with others. Through such networking many mistakes have been avoided and greater focus was achieved.

Perhaps it will be beneficial to outline specific benefits that come from such networking. The first area I would mention is (1) **Insight/wisdom**. Collectively, a great deal has been learned about evangelizing and missions over the years through both experience and research, by members of churches of Christ and others. In the nature of the case various initial questions need to be raised about missions activities: How should we go about the work in specific locations? Should we try to build churches through schools or begin by starting churches? What are the likely outcomes of bringing internationals to the USA for training? What qualities do workers need who plan to work in cultures different from their own? Under what circumstances, if any, should national workers be put on salaries from other cultures? How should works be realistically and fairly evaluated? What constitutes sufficient emotional and spiritual support of workers on the field? What is the place of medical, educational and agricultural work along side of preaching? Which are the best ways to train national leaders to carry on the work? Having finished their tasks, how can we bring workers home and help them to become productive in their original culture? These are heavy questions. Carrying on our work without learning some of the informed answers to important questions is tragic. Doing so is poor stewardship of sanctified funds and dedicated human resources.

Much has been learned about the support of nationals, and bringing them to the USA for education. But often churches carry on with their plans in willful ignorance of that information. Surely there is a better way! One church was talked into giving a salary of \$80,000 per year to a missionary who worked in the poorest country in the western hemisphere! Did they inquire of anyone else about support levels? Likely not. In a number of cases people have been sent to the field who were not emotionally equipped for the task. Some of them needed therapy to function in their homeland! Appropriate screening of missions candidates would have prevented such mistakes. Within our brotherhood we have a lot of insight to these issues. We have informed individuals, churches with rich experiences, and schools that offer many courses of study in missions and evangelism. Through networking it is possible to share these insights and reduce the number of uncertainties in the process.

A second benefit of networking involves (2) **Efficiency**. Efficiency flows out of information and insight, providing we take that insight seriously and act on it judiciously. This has to do with technique, with methods and know-how. People in our brotherhood have a lot of information on many types of situations that arise in our efforts to extend the kingdom of God. Permit me to mention two negative cases as illustrations. (a) In my evaluation of work in Guyana in 1999 I discovered a national preacher who was getting two full salaries and neither of the two churches knew the other was supporting him; and in addition to that the man was conducting a taxi business on the side. Evidently all the two supporting churches were interested in was the total number of baptisms per month or year. They asked no questions about developing leadership in the church or providing Sunday schools for children. If either one of those churches had asked someone who was going to Guyana to look in on the work that situation could have been stopped. But if they had asked a few questions of others involved in Guyana it is likely the Guyanese congregation could have been helped and perhaps a worker could have been salvaged. I blame the churches as much as I blame the man. He was disreputable; they were horrible inefficient in their involvement.

(ii) Take another case. In my evaluation of work in India I saw two preacher training schools in one rather small town! They were, of course, supported by USA churches who never bothered to ask about other schools, nor did they ask anyone else about the advantages and disadvantages of preacher training schools in that vast country. A little networking would have prevented some of those tactical blunders and wasted money.

Now look at a positive case or two. (i) Our opportunities to go into the Former Soviet Union came suddenly. Few of our people spoke Russian or Ukrainian at that time. We knew little about how to meet the new situation. To our credit, and for several years running, various workshops were conducted in which what had been learned was shared with all who would attend the workshops. That resulted in higher quality of work among those who payed attention to what had been learned. It resulted in better coordination among those who were making literature available, conducting campaigns, broadcasting messages, and doing follow-up. Of course, those who did not attend those meetings were simply operating on what they learned on their own. But the workshop attendees learned a lot from each other. They learned a lot of "do's" and "don't's" in the process. Others played the Lone Ranger and learned nothing from others.

Take another case. (ii) Every four years churches in Africa meet in a conference to report on their work and become better informed about what needs to be done in the future. They coordinate their own efforts so their work is more efficient in reaching unreached areas. Without official membership in a society, without voting, and without heavy organization they report on their work, discuss strategy, note their failures, and have fraternal agreements about who will work in new territory. They have much to show for their efforts. That is networking on a large scale.

(iii) Putting together missions teams should be a cooperative effort by the supporting churches, for both positive and negative reasons. Members from all churches involved in a significant way should get acquainted. People who specialize in building team relationships should be utilized in the team-building process. It is a painful and wasteful thing when a missions team breaks up after it gets to the field. It is much more efficient to surface and deal with both potential problems and strengths before the team departs than it is to let things move along on their own. There is nothing wrong with, and everything right with, using sanctified Christian wisdom in our efforts to do things right for God.

The third benefit that comes from networking is that it (3) **Promotes Brotherhood**. We need this both because we can learn a lot from each other, can coordinate our efforts, and develop a greater sense of communication and trust. I have seen elders from two or three churches across State lines develop love and trust in each other to the delight of all concerned. They learn from each other. Links of communication reduce misunderstandings.

I know of a church in New Mexico that took the initiative to approach a church in Alabama about a missionary the Alabama church was supporting. The unprepared missionary was paralyzed. He lived in a large house, was not learning the language and was obviously dysfunctional. He hired someone to go out and buy food for his family! The elders from New Mexico had visited the family they were supporting in Brazil and saw the plight of the languishing missionary family. They decided to do the brotherly and loving, thought risky thing of approaching the Alabama church. They did it discreetly and the Alabama church did not resent it. They investigated the situation and soon brought the unhappy and unproductive family home. It was an expensive mistake to send them, at least at that time, and it was a preventable mistake; but a sense of brotherhood brought it to a needed halt. I am glad one church was willing to approach another on the sensitive issue. Congregational independence does not entail congregational isolation.

Currently, we are trying to do this brotherhood thing in Rutherford County as we think about planting a new church. Ours is the fastest growing county in the State and the existing churches are not numerous or large enough to absorb the expected growth—75% increase in the next 16 years. So, we need perhaps two new churches located strategically. Rather than one church's deciding to plant a new church without discussing it with sister churches we have decided to process the matter among several churches and coordinate our thinking and efforts. We think that will produce a better sense of brotherhood, give us useful information, likely result in some type of cooperation and thus generate efficiency in our work. It is our hope that whoever decides to take the lead in this work will enjoy the

brotherly support of sister churches. It seems inconceivable that the brotherhood we are exhorted by Peter to love (1 Pet. 2:17) is a brotherhood with whom we do not cooperate.

The case for networking in the missions/evangelism enterprises is strong. The benefits are multiple with rich possibilities of doing kingdom work in better ways. Missions Resource Network is calculated to assist churches in doing their own work to the glory of God.

Conclusion

In 2001 sociologist Robert Putnam published a 554 page book entitled Bowling Alone. The subtitle was "the Collapse and Revival of American Community." The "revival" part is more of a hope than a reality at this stage. But this individualism in our society in general seems to influence the church as well, so that individual congregations move along with their work, having little contact with sister churches or informed individuals who might help them do a better job in many aspects of kingdom work: religious education, domestic evangelism among multiple ethnic groups, church planting, leadership development, compassionate service, and foreign evangelization. The church of our Lord is not to model its behavior after any national posture. A sense of brotherhood, of Christian community is an inherent feature of New Testament Christianity. Networking among fellow Christians is a way of utilizing that sense of community.

The late Donald McGavran, who was born in India to parents in restoration churches, who worked forty years or more in India and developed an emphasis on church growth, once said of us—churches of Christ—*a cappella*, church-sponsored missions, affiliated with Gospel Advocate, Christian Chronicle, and universities like Lipscomb, Harding, Freed-Hardeman, etc. Universities—have as good a chance as any church in the world, and a better chance than most to do effective, meaningful missions work. He gave three reasons for saying that. (1) We are large enough and have enough money to rise up and do an effective work without having to work through a lot of awkward administrative machinery. (2) We have "a message that will wash." In other words, we have solid convictions about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, sin, salvation, and other such subjects. People who have very tentative convictions about basics tend not to engage in proclamation. (3) We have a strong doctrine of the church. McGavran learned the hard way that just reaching individuals, or trying to build a brotherhood through village schools, did not result in a viable Christian movement. Only through planting biblical and culturally sensitive churches that can stand on their own before God can we expect solid and lasting results. People with a strong doctrine of the church stand the best chance of doing that.

We see our position as a result of following Scripture. But we do not need to reduce the effect of what we are by doing less than our best. Let us busy ourselves in the process of leaning on one another, helping one another, coordinating with one another rather than "Bowling Alone."