

# The Status of Missions in Churches of Christ

Co-authored by Bob Waldron, Executive Director of MRN and Gailyn Van Rheenen of Abilene Christian University, this just-released book reports the current status of missions in churches of Christ. Coupled with a description of the missions practices of congregations are theological and strategic guidelines to guide local churches toward effective missions involvement. Stories of successful missions churches make the book come alive!

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## Book Summary

By Gailyn Van Rheenen

In 1998 Bob Waldron and I began to envision how we might work together to equip local churches in the task of world evangelization. Bob had just become the executive director of the Missions Resource Network, and I was granted a semester-long sabbatical from Abilene Christian University to research and write about the role of the local church as a catalyst for world missions.

We both acknowledged the historical and theological perspective of Churches of Christ that the local church is God's sending agency for missions. Without a central missions agency, the local church must, therefore, understand that the world is lost without Jesus Christ, commit themselves to become God's missionary agents, and prepare themselves to make missions decisions in complex, cross-cultural contexts.

We also recognized that most local churches were ill equipped to make missions decisions having international ramifications and, therefore, tend to paternalistically superimpose their conceptions of church and Christianity upon other peoples. Although they verbally concur with the statement, "We have come to Christianize rather than Americanize," they may be unable to differentiate between the two.

Without the tools to evaluate and differentiate, leaders make missions decisions based upon personal whim and homespun knowledge. Consequently, the missions agenda is typically set by "good ol' Joe," a member who has experienced what is occurring in already existing domestic or foreign missions ministries and promotes the support of these efforts within the local church. Without the expertise to discriminate and weigh benefits, the same mistakes are repeated generation after generation. With a few notable exceptions, local church leaders have yet to incisively equip themselves to make domestic and foreign missions decisions.

Both Bob and I believed that focused training of congregational leaders would enable them to critically reflect upon and facilitate their churches' missions programs and thereby help their

local churches grow beyond the “good ol’ Joe” syndrome. We believed that the first step in this training should be a definitive study of missions in Churches of Christ. The result is a collaboratively developed book, entitled *The Status of Missions in Churches of Christ* and published by ACU Press.

The book is descriptive. It reports the findings of a random sample survey of 116 Churches of Christ and personal interviews with eighty mission leaders.

### **Survey Findings**

The survey revealed that Churches of Christ have a relatively high interest in missions. Forty-six percent of local churches indicated that their congregations have a “high interest” in missions, and an additional 41 percent believed that there is “some interest.”

The survey disclosed some fundamental activities that, if implemented, will help churches become missionary congregations:

- Elder involvement in missions decisions is directly correlated with perceived satisfaction with the congregational mission program.
- Missions is significantly enhanced when preaching ministers focus on God’s redemptive ministry! Effective missionary churches almost always have preaching ministers who communicate a biblical theology of missions and evangelism, promote local evangelism and world missions within their churches, and participate in outreach to the lost.
- Churches with the highest involvement in world outreach have a qualified missions committee to coordinate their efforts.
- Only 12 percent of the churches included a quarter on missions in their adult Bible classes. Only 27 percent of the responding adults had ever participated in a series on world missions at any congregation they had attended. Sixty-five percent of the adult respondents indicated that they had never studied a series of lessons on world missions.
- A high correlation exists between the use of a missions policy to guide decision making and satisfaction with the missions program.
- Most missionaries either make arrangements for their own health insurance and retirement plans or go without them. Only 15 percent of the churches provided health insurance for their missionary families and just 12 percent contributed to retirement plans.
- Seventy-two percent of all respondents to our survey reported that their members had participated in some type of campaign during the past two years. Surprisingly, despite language and cultural gaps, more churches that participated in campaigns chose foreign missions ventures (65%) over domestic trips (30%).

The most shocking finding of our study was the lack of focus on missions in our Bible class curriculums. Through theological reflection the church must learn about the brokenness of the world without Jesus Christ, how local lay and full-time evangelists and church planters serve as God’s representatives, and the necessity of sacrificially entering into God’s mission. How can Churches of Christ become a missionary people without a missionary theology?

### **Examples of Missionary Churches**

Although many local churches are unprepared to make international missions decisions, a growing number of local churches are making transitions to facilitate world evangelization. Their stories provide models for the new directions in missions proposed by the authors of this text. For example, how did a church in Birmingham rethink its mission philosophy and thereby become a missionary church that plants churches among unevangelized peoples? What happened when a group of young Christians in Dallas spent six months studying the theologies and strategies for becoming a missionary church and then made a proposal to their elders? How did a local church in Brownwood, Texas, develop the vision to contribute half of its budget to world mission? Why would an elder say, “Missions does not cost. It pays!”? What is the power of prayer in missions as described by the largest missions-sending Church of Christ in North America?

We believe that hearts will be stirred, motivations enhanced, and new directions determined as mission leaders of local churches read the stories of effective missions-sending churches.

## **New Directions**

The Status of Missions in Churches of Christ is not only descriptive but also prescriptive. Each chapter describes the current status of missions in Churches of Christ, then prescribes solutions. Chapter 2 on Missions Leadership illustrates authentic, transformative leaders formed by the kingdom of God and committed to God's redemptive purposes. The nature of Missions Strategy, discussed in Chapter 3, describes prudently prepared policies, prayerfully formulated goals, and painstakingly designed plans for world mission. Missions Inspiration, the topic of Chapter 4, gives forums for the teaching of transformative redemptive theology. These include sermons, Bible classes, missions emphasis weekends, campaigns, and periods of prayer for world missions. Chapter 5 on Missions Support not only discusses financial sources for missions but also philosophies for the use of money in missions. Chapter 6, discussing Missionary Selection and Care, presents preparatory steps in missionary selection, qualities of effective missionaries, and suggests a missionary selection process. The chapter also discusses types of missionary care, missionary benefits, and guidelines for evaluating and maintaining missionary health.

The last chapter begins with the words, "Would it not be wonderful for future generations to say, 'The first decade of the 2000's was the time that American Churches of Christ became a redemptive fellowship?'" The chapter challenges church leaders to conceptualize and prioritize God's missionary mandate for the local church. A profile of mission-mobilizing churches is presented. Missions-mobilizing churches are redemptive fellowships, who understand and prioritize the purposes of God in their lives and ministries. Believing that the world is lost without Jesus Christ, these churches equip themselves to communicate the gospel both locally and globally. These mission-mobilizing churches develop visionary leaders, seek to be formed in the image of God, have high personal involvement in missions, organize themselves to make effective missions decisions, generously and wisely use their abundant financial resources, and wisely select and care for their missionaries.

## **The Use of Qualified Resource People**

Local churches must recognize the need to use qualified resource people, especially those who teach missions or guide missions organizations, to help refine their missions program. Rarely will a church develop an effective missions program without first consulting multiple, qualified missions resource people. In fact, we know of none! The difficult task of missions requires that missions committees use outside help and guidance to write a policy statement containing their philosophies and strategies of missions. The need for expertise is seen in the following illustrations given by Becky Van Rheenen:

When children are young, they look to Mom and Dad to 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. Paradoxically, resource people are used for almost every aspect of church life other than developing a cross-cultural missions program.

Missions leaders sometimes try to sidestep the need for critical thinking and planning by claiming guidance from the Lord for their decisions. One wonders how often the Lord is blamed

for our failure to do the critical thinking and planning he expects from his church. Tom Telford, who helps equip missions committees for various evangelical groups, remarks, "Most churches I visit in this country have a very erratic approach to ministry. They're like the guy who shoots an arrow into the wall and draws a bull's eye around the arrow" (ACMC 1988, 32).

### **Can Churches of Christ Become a Missionary Fellowship?**

We believe that it is time that for Churches of Christ to become a missionary fellowship! The change will not be easy. In fact, it requires redirection—going against the flow—breaking some current trends of nominal involvement. It requires that we nurture and equip visionary leaders; depend on God and seek Him in prayer, meditation, and worship; create high personal involvement in missions; organize ourselves to make effective missions decisions; generously and wisely use our abundant financial resources; and wisely select and care for our missionaries. Emil Brunner's statement that the "church exists by missions like fire exists by burning" continues to be true. In a real sense mission is the very lifeblood of the church. As the physical body becomes weak without sufficient oxygen-carrying red blood cells, so the church becomes anemic if it does not express its faith. The church establishes its rationale for being—its purpose for existing—while articulating its faith. An unexpressed faith withers. A Christian fellowship without mission loses its vitality. Missions is the force that gives the body of Christ vibrancy, purpose, and direction.

Work Cited

Telford, Tom. ACMC 1988, 32.

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