



Qualities of Good Sending Churches

By C. Philip Slate

Introduction

- A. In 1927 the George Johnson, Virgil Smith and O. S. Boyer families went to Brazil with promised support from churches. The support never came for some of them, and eventually, discouraged, they became members of the Assemblies of God.¹ Since their time numerous missionaries have returned home prematurely, occasionally bitter, and often because they were either not selected properly or were poorly supported financially, spiritually, and emotionally. Churches must accept much of the blame for these results.
- B. Since the early 1970s I have been convinced that the weakest link in the missions/evangelistic enterprise of North American churches of Christ is the failure of the majority of them to qualify themselves as good sending agents, sponsors, stewards. If my analysis is correct, then the material in this class is critically important.
 1. In “church sponsored missions”, as contrasted with “society sponsored missions”, all the elements involved in supporting work in other places falls to the local church: selecting appropriate workers, multifaceted support (prayerful, financial, emotional, spiritual) of the personnel, understanding the kind of work to be done, realistic expectations and evaluations, and adequate return of personnel once the job is finished.
 2. Increasingly people who study global, cross-cultural disciple-making refer to churches as “stewards” of missions. In other words, global disciple-making is God’s work. Churches can only be good stewards of the responsibilities and delights God has placed in their hands.
 3. God did not make a mistake: churches are capable of learning to do what God gave them to do. It is a matter of intention and effort. Some churches “do not know that they do not know;” other churches “know they do not know,” but they do not know how to correct the problem.
- C. This class is intended to introduce churches to those qualities that a church should have if it intends to be a good sending agent, a good steward of evangelism at a distance from itself.
 1. The process can be learned. We have some exemplary “sending agents” in our brotherhood. But what makes them so?
 2. The bases of my thinking are found in Scripture, history of missions, and research.
 3. On these bases several qualities or attributes of good sending churches will be presented.

¹ See their stories in brief form in C. Philip Slate, *Lest We Forget: Mini-Biographies of Missionaries from A Bygone Generation* (Winona, MS: J. C. Choate Publications, 2010).

Body

A. Knowledge of the biblical mandate for the tasks involved.

1. The biblical mandate for the tasks involved is varied and large.
 - a. Worldwide evangelization is God's work through His people and His church, so it is important to know the heart of God in this matter.
 - b. The missions enterprise does not begin with Matt. 28:16-20, important as that text is. The beginning is much earlier. Nor is it either a fad or merely "a good idea." It is a part of what the church is in its very existence. Just as God intended to display His splendor, or be glorified in Israel, His creation (Isa. 60:21; 61:3c), so He desires to be praised through the church (1 Pet. 2:9-10). That is to be done through both righteous living (the life of God) and doing God's work of compassion and proclamation.
 - c. Many New Testament writers point to the Old Testament texts as the origins and roots of the work of Jesus (Matt. 1:1; Lk. 1:26-33, 67-79; 24:44; Acts 13:34, 47; 15:14-18; 28:23; Rom. 15:8-12; etc.) and His apostles.
 - d. Walter Kaiser has argued that "the promise" to Abraham appears in "every era of the canon" and is the chief organizing principle of the Old Testament. See the connection Paul made between his work and the promise to Abraham (Gal. 3:7-9).
 - e. Various valuable summaries of both Old Testament and New Testament teachings are available.²
2. The task of worldwide evangelization, like compassionate service and righteous living, must be seen in the context of the entirety of Scripture or it will be in danger of being treated as an optional nicety.

B. Sense of priorities among various activities

1. One way to summarize much New Testament teaching about evangelizing, bringing people into the kingdom of God, is to think of three elements:
 - a. Universalizing the message of God and Christ. God is the Creator of all people (Acts 17:26) and does not want any to perish (2 Pet. 3:9). The message is to go to every nation and tribe and people (Rev. 5:9-10).
 - b. Communicate so clearly and lovingly that people are able to make a valid decision about following Jesus (Matt. 8:19-22; Lk. 9:57-62). Historically, as today, people are capable of making invalid "Yes" and "No" responses to the gospel message.

² A valuable older collection of articles is Gerald H. Anderson, editor, *The Theology of the Christian Mission* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1961). A very abbreviated statement is in my *Missions Handbook for Local Churches* (Bedford, TX: MRN, 2008), chapter 1. A more extensive treatments is that by Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Missions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991). Very responsible, satisfying, and readable is Christopher J. H. Write's *The Mission of God : Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018).

- c. Strive for persistence of faith, for continuance of obedience and trust. Jesus is not looking for three-month disciples, but steadfast followers. This means follow up, steadfast teaching (Matt. 28:19-20; Acts 11:19-26; 14:21-23; etc.) and forming believers into churches where they can be nurtured into Christlikeness, holy living and Christian ministry (Eph. 4:11-16).
2. *Priority belongs to leading people to a valid conversion to Christ and then welding them into viable, spiritually growing churches that live to the praise of God's grace* (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14).
 - a. In some cases, in hard or hostile fields, a lot of pre-evangelism work must be done before people can be converted to Christ.
 - b. But when people turn to Christ they must be congregated, formed into churches to sustain their faith, and serve God meaningfully. This was a regular feature of apostolic evangelizing and the verdict of history. In some sense, every NT book has as one of its purposes that of strengthening believers.
 - c. As surely as this is true, then all good works that contribute to missions must be subordinate to or solidly related to this goal.
 - Bible translation, development of suitable hymns, and suitable literature are vital parts of the work; but they alone do not produce viable churches.
 - Culturally appropriate leadership training is critically important, but leaders must be taught how to develop churches as well as to evangelize or little will remain of the work in the future.

C. Various leaders will understand and lead the congregation in its prayerful, financial, and spiritual support of evangelization.

1. A valuable study of churches of Christ in the USA indicates that churches that do an exemplary job of evangelizing have elders, preachers, and missions committees as leaders of the congregation's interest in and support of evangelization at home and abroad.³
 - a. The task cannot be turned over to a few people who manage that slice of the budget. The church itself is to have a sense of ownership and stewardship so it will give cheerfully, pray diligently, and encourage steadily (Phil. 1:3-5; 4:14-18).
 - b. Leaders are to mobilize the church for its own work of support.
2. For this reason, the leaders need to educate the congregation in the biblical mandate to evangelize as well as to show compassion and grow in righteousness.
 - a. Such teaching needs to be in the religious education curriculum of the local church.
 - b. Preachers should periodically address this component of work by God's people.

³ Gailyn Van Rheenen and Bob Waldron, *The Status of Missions: A Nationwide Survey of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2002).

3. A useful little book⁴ on practical ways in which a congregation may “serve as senders” suggests six practical ways to provide support in the case where churches send out missionaries or evangelists:
 - a. Moral support through prayer and communication.
 - b. Logistics support: those practical things people in the home church can do to free up the missionaries to do their primary work.
 - c. Financial support: realistic, regular, and love-embodying support.
 - d. Prayer support: a whole battery of regular prayers is needed.
 - e. Communication support: missionaries need to receive encouraging communications in various forms
 - f. Re-entry support: helping long-term missionaries to find place in their homeland. This is a necessary element often overlooked.
4. It cannot be stressed too much that a church needs a group of committed people who will do for missions/evangelism what an education committee does for the religious education ministry in the local church.
 - a. It may be called a “missions committee”, an “evangelism ministry group”, a “missions/evangelism resource group” or something else.
 - b. Their tasks would be to study the issues involved in good evangelization (biblical, cultural, statistical, etc.), form a recommended policy by which the congregation can be focused in its efforts and present it to the elders for approval or modification, serve as resource persons for the elders, and to take the lead in the practical implementation of the ministry.
 - c. This group needs to be informed on an on-going basis and to take the lead in educating the church on this dimension of its work.
 - Such a committee needs to process books and articles, attend workshops, view media materials, and use resource persons.
 - It should become acquainted with various resources available to it, such as Mission Resource Network.

D. Seeks to become a missions-mobilizing church.

1. Van Rheenen and Waldron list six elements in their “profile of a missions-mobilizing church.”
 - a. Missions-mobilizing churches develop visionary missions leaders. They will look ahead and develop prayerful, thoughtful plans.
 - b. Missions-mobilizing churches seek God's guidance in prayer. As in other aspects of the church's life, prayer is vital.
 - c. Missions-mobilizing churches maintain high personal involvement in missions. Communicating, visiting, emotionally supporting, motivating the congregation and so forth are undertaken personally.

⁴ Neal Pirolo, *Serving as Senders: How to Care for Your Missionaries* (Emmaus Road International, 1991).

- d. Missions-mobilizing churches organize for effective missions decision-making. Good missions committees and elders work together to make informed and prayer-bathed decisions.
- e. Missions-mobilizing churches use financial resources generously and wisely. Some missions proposals should not be supported, but good ones should be supported generously and prayerfully.
- f. Missions-mobilizing churches carefully select and care for missionaries. Of course, in some cases churches may financially support bible translation, broadcasting and printing works that do not involve so much personal engagement with individuals; but where churches support individuals and families, they will select them carefully and care for them responsibly.

Conclusion

- A. In what ways may these qualities of good sending church be acquired?
 - 1. Insist on the church's hearing sermons and being in classes that give some of the biblical material on the worldwide tasks of the church.
 - 2. Pick a group of people—including elders or not—who will be charged with the responsibility of gaining deeper knowledge of the details involved in worldwide evangelization. They are to become the local church's chief source of information about missions/evangelism. Just as everyone does not need to know all the details of a good religious education program or a good compassionate service scheme in a local church, so here it is best to rely on a small group that puts for the effort to gain information for the larger body of Christians.
 - 3. Encourage all interested members, and especially select elders and members of the missions committee, to attend seminars, workshops and classes, and to read appropriate articles and books on the subject.
 - 4. Develop a strategic plan for the church to follow in supporting one or several aspects of worldwide evangelizing. Being intentional is very important if a church is to become a good sender, a good steward of God's mission for his people. Be proactive rather than reactive. This usually involves writing up a Missions Policy Statement that, when approved by the elders, becomes the framework within which the church will operate. This is a far better approach than that of sitting back and waiting for missionaries or missionary candidates to come by the church building to give a presentation; or, worse still, insisting on presenting every written and oral request for help to the entire eldership or missions committee. Having a clear policy enables a church both to turn down graciously requests that are outside the Policy and to give more focus to what the church decides to undertake.
 - 5. Do regular assessments of the church's involvement in evangelism/missions. Making good plans, correcting errors and solving problems depend on periodic evaluations.

God will bless a church that puts forth a diligent effort to do His will in the world. It is very close to the heart of God when His people put forth thoughtful and prayerful efforts to teach people about their Creator and Savior. Remember, Jesus promised He would be with those who carry out the Father's will of evangelizing (Matt. 28:20).

