

Who does mission?

Who does mission? God, of course. That should be obvious but it is easily forgotten. We always seem to be working on the assumption that we do mission. Especially Americans with our “can do” attitude easily fall into the trap of problem solving. We haven’t met a problem that we can’t solve.

But, as I have mentioned in other essays, this mission business is not about us. It is about the *missio Dei* – the “mission of God.” God has been busy since the beginning of time with his mission in the world and he invites us to join in.

But some have said that we are God’s “hands and feet.” God has no hands but ours. Not true!! Jesus told the Pharisees that if his disciples failed to give witness to Jesus as Lord, that the stones themselves would cry out. (Luke 19:40) Jesus alludes here to Habakkuk 2:11 where the wicked are warned that, even if no one speaks against their injustice, the stones will cry out against them.

So the first thing to say about “who does mission” is to remember that the only real answer to this question is “God.” The glorious and blessed bonus is that God invites us as partners into his mission. We are welcome as full partners. We just have to remember whose mission it is.

The church does mission

The church is not any individual. It is a “community of saints.” It is the “gather people of God,” joined by the Holy Spirit to worship and serve God.

We have had wonderful entrepreneurial individuals (from William Carey to Don McClure) who have, by their vision, sparked great surges of energy for God’s mission. These persons are the “prophets” of mission. They have a special gift from God to see what God is doing and head in that direction.

But ultimately they must pursue their calling in the context of the “community of faith,” that is, in a corporate setting. There is no room for Lone Rangers in God’s economy of mission. “To whom are you (humanly speaking) accountable?” is always a core question for a missionary.

So, if someone asks you or your church to support them in their mission work, your first question is: “Who are you?” That is, “How do you belong to Christ? How have you submitted yourself to the discipline of the church, which is the body of Christ? To whom are you accountable?”

Failure to answer these questions demonstrates an inadequate view of the church.

Church mission boards and para-church mission boards

The Presbyterian Church did not always have mission boards to assist its congregations in doing mission.

The early mission boards were voluntary groups like the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM) and the American Home Missionary Society (AHMS). In the early 1800's, if you were interested in mission, you would join these boards and "subscribe" (including regular financial contributions) to support their work.

But in the 1830's a Presbyterian minister, John Holt Rice, suggested a different understanding of mission boards. He said,

That the Presbyterian Church in the United States is a Missionary Society; the object of which is to assist in the conversion of the world; and that every member of the Church is a member for life of said Society, and bound in maintenance of his Christian character, to do all in his power for the accomplishment of this objective. (William Maxwell, *A Memoir of the Rev. John H. Rice, D.D.*, p. 390)

Rice made it clear that the "church" (humanly speaking) does mission. In 1837 the General Assembly agreed with this principle and it has been a foundational standard ever since. Does that mean that we can only "do mission" through church boards rather than other mission organizations?

Ralph Winter, who began as a Presbyterian missionary in Guatemala, is a visionary mission thinker. He describes mission organizations as consisting of two kinds: modalities and sodalities. That technical language can be explained simply as follows:

- Modalities: church mission boards like our Presbyterian World Mission office are located in Louisville, KY. Its director is Hunter Farrell. Another example would be our presbytery mission committee which arranges opportunities for local mission work.
- Sodalities: para-church mission boards like World Vision, Wycliffe Bible Translators, Campus Crusade, Youth with a Mission, Pioneers, Coalition for Christian Outreach, etc. These mission organizations are usually interdenominational and have self-perpetuating boards independent of the PC(USA).

Both of these are very important and both are needed in God's way of doing mission. The "church" board is foundational and the "para-church" board can challenge the church to be prophetic. But the para-church organization must show accountability too. If we give one of these boards a higher priority over the other we will probably end up in a distorted view of "who does mission."

The “church” means “a worshipping community where the Word is preached and the sacraments are celebrated”

There is a core principle of “who does mission” that I think has been missed for a long time in the Presbyterian Church. This gets a little technical and tedious, so let me state it simply here.

Mission is the work of the “particular church” (local congregation) that regularly worships (preaches the Word and celebrates the sacraments) together and is sent into the world by Jesus to witness to him in word and deed (do mission).

I would argue that we have thought that the presbytery, synod and General Assembly “do mission” for us. I think that this is a fundamental flaw in our mission theology and that it has caused us serious problems for many years. I believe that these governing bodies (like the para-church mission organizations) have a different role. They encourage, facilitate, critique, challenge, support, etc. the mission of congregations.

Before you read further, this may seem to be tedious, technical stuff that is far beyond your interest as a member of a mission committee...and you would be right! However, I believe that it is profoundly important, so I am going to give an extended defense of this position here. But, you may want to get on with it and skip all this historical and theological stuff. Fair enough! (And probably a sign of wisdom!) So you may want to skip down to the next section. See you there.

For those who are gluttons for punishment...here is my defense. I want to argue that (although I have not yet done the research to argue that this is John Holt Rice’s position), Rice is right about the church itself being a “missionary society,” as long as we understand the “church” to be the “particular church” noted above.

I believe the local congregation is the basic unit for mission. For far too long we Presbyterians have acted as if the governing bodies “do mission” and the congregation’s job is to cheer them on and send money.

This is not a new problem, but it has grown during the middle of the twentieth century. Over one hundred years ago Francis Wayland concurred when he said,

The tendency will be more and more for churches to turn over their missionary obligations to societies, for societies to turn it over to Boards, for Boards to turn it over to Executive Committees, and Executive Committees to Secretaries; so that, in the last result, the chief responsibility for the great work will rest on the shoulders of a dozen men." (Dawson, 1990, 127)

In order to make my case, let me simply show here, by extensive brief quotes, how broadly this position has been affirmed by missiologists. I will begin by one of the most important for me.

Lesslie Newbigin, the great missiologists of the past century said, “The Church is not so much the agent of mission as the locus of mission. It is God who acts in the power of his Spirit...[the] hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it.” (Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in Pluralists Culture*, pp. 119 and 227)

George Hunsberger, a leader in the “Gospel and Out Culture” project says, “the locus of the church’s vitality and mission is being reassigned to the local congregation...the mission and identity of the church takes place most essentially in the local congregation” (George Hunsberger, “Sizing Up the Shape of the Church,” in *Church Between Gospel and Culture*, p. 342 – 343)

Darrell L. Guder, dean of Princeton Seminary, put it this way,

I am persuaded that the center of the [interdisciplinary missiological] discipline must be the confessing, witnessing, faith-exploring particular community of faith – what we call “the local congregation.” (“Growing Evangelizing Churches,” in *Teaching Mission in a Global Context*, ed. by Tricia Lloyd-Sidle and Bonnie Sue Lewis, p. 146)

Sherron George, mission professor and missionary in Brazil, says this,

G. Thompson Brown calls the Presbyterian decision in 1837 to form the Board of Foreign Missions a “conceptual change” that demonstrated the belief that denominations are mission agencies. I believe the recognition of local congregations as mission agencies is another “conceptual change.” (Sherron Kay George, *Missiology* April, 2000, “Local-Global Mission: The Cutting Edge,” p.190, note 9; see also Sherron’s book *Called as Partners in Christ’s Service*)

Paul D. Borden, a Baptist regional executive says things like this in many places, “We assume that people leading middle judicatories must believe that the local congregation is the basic unit of mission in the world.” (Paul D. Borden, *Hit the Bullseye: How Denominations Can Aim the Congregation at the Mission Field*, p. 14)

James F. Engels and William A. Dyrness, put it this way, “...the attitude on the part of many missions executives and missionaries that the churches are simply the source of resources – money and personnel, or perhaps gifts in kind...The local church will be restored to its central role in the reign of Christ.” (James F. Engels and William A. Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?*, pp. 122 and 178)

E. Dixon Junkin refers to Catholic theologian Hans Küng (*Reforming the Church Today: Keeping Hope Alive*, pp. 52- 63) in critiquing the idea of the “church from above” (church bureaucracies) whose “leaders” try to persuade church members to adopt the leaders’ viewpoints and desires. But Junkin says that telling people what to

believe (and how to do mission and what kind of mission is appropriate) was never a good idea, is simply no longer going to be effective.

What we need most of all is a church membership that is determined to be church in the fullest sense of the word, and resolved to be church whether its leaders lead or not...Instead of continuing to expend such energy trying to make outworn patterns of institutional life serve us, it seems appropriate to devote more attention to the task of creating new forms of common life that may, over time, allow a new consensus to emerge. And it seems probable that the relearning of the meaning of Christian faith and life is most likely to occur in communities that are small enough to permit all their members to participate fully in the process of reflection, decision, and action.” (E. Dixon Junkin, “Up from the Grassroots: The Church in Transition,” *Church Between Gospel and Culture*, ed. by George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, pp. 308 – 318)

Edward Koster, a presbytery staff person, has argued that the failure to include people in the decision making process has resulted in lack of ownership. He specifically argues that the failure to include conservatives in committees has undermined the integrity of the committee system in the PC(USA). I think that this basic issue has destroyed the sense of “ownership” by congregations and, consequently, they have used their mission money in places that take them more seriously. (“A Source of Disconnect,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, March 28, 2005, pp. 16 – 18)

Enock de Assis, a Brazilian who has spent some time in the United States, is interested,

...to see how congregation[s] in US can work in partnership between themselves and with other congregations around the world in order to do mission. Denominational boards of mission and non-denominational organizations must understand that it is from the local churches that the things happen. It is from them that God calls individuals to serve him in mission here or far. It is the local church that supports the work of missionaries, mission strategists and others involved with the mission work. (“All Guests in God’s World: Congregations Doing Mission in Partnership ‘A Christian Around the World’ Perspective” unpublished paper)

Finally, David Bosch, one of the greatest mission thinkers of the past fifty years, put it this way,

For it is the *community* that is the primary bearer of mission. The project on the ‘missionary structure of the congregation’, launched by the WCC’s New Delhi Assembly in 1961 (a project which, however, to a large extent aborted), together with the rediscovery of the local church in Catholicism, are perhaps – from a missiological perspective – the most far-reaching contributions of the WCC and Vatican II. Mission does not proceed primarily from the pope, nor from a missionary order, society, or synod,

but from a community gathered around the word and the sacraments and sent into the world. (David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1991, p. 472)

If this series of quotes is not enough, I have written on this subject in other places. I consider it to be foundational for our structuring of mission today. You can check the bibliography.

The church needs partners

For those who have skipped my long-winded explanation, welcome back! Now I want to reflect briefly on a question before every mission committee:

If we believe that our “particular church” is the basic unit for doing mission and that we are to lead our congregation in being sent into the world (doing mission), where do we go for help in following that call?

In 1998 the Worldwide Ministries Division of the PC(USA) held a conference in St. Louis called “Congregations in Global Mission.” At the conference Marian McClure, the director of WMD, said, “Congregations do mission and they need partners.” This was a profound statement. It not only affirms that congregations are the basic unit for mission, but it recognizes that they can not do mission alone or in isolation.

What does that mean for your mission committee?

Again, let me state it briefly and then give a detailed explanation for those who want to read more extensively.

Essentially the issue for your mission committee is the term “partnership.” You can not do mission seriously as a congregation today without partners and support from those beyond yourself.

Some react negatively to our “denomination,” by which is meant the presbytery, synod and General Assembly. But I would contend (without trying to argue the point here) that this position is short sighted and simply “throwing the baby out with the bath water.” It is easy to criticize the PC(USA), but there is much that can be helpful to you in doing mission from the Presbyterian Church structures as well as from para-church groups. Both have strengths and weaknesses. They need each other. Look for help where you can find it and be willing to learn. This is, in many ways, the message of this whole series of essays.

This web site contains a listing of many resources. If you have any trouble finding what you need, the Shenango Presbytery Office staff is ready to help you make the connections that you need.

Now, for those who want more details on this matter of “partnership,” let me add a few more comments here. (I plan to write a future essay on the subject of partnership.) For others, see you at the conclusion!

Let me begin with a comment made by J. Andrew Kirk, a British missiologist. Kirk believes that we have a need for each other. He bases this on Romans 1:12 – that we might mutually encourage each other in the church. He asks if our congregations order their activities based on doing mission in the way of Christ and concludes, “It simply has no rationale beyond that.” (pp. 217ff)

Another example of this basic Christian principle is Paul’s reference to the church as the body of Christ in which the hand can not say to the foot, “I don’t need you.” We were made for community and are closer to what God intends for us when we live faithfully in partnership (fellowship, or in Greek *koinonia*) with each other. Others have suggested that the concept of a Trinity itself and the fellowship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is an affirmation of this principle that no one is independent unto him/herself.

In listening to each other it becomes more possible to avoid the domestication of the Gospel. That is, we can become “too local” and not see the big picture. In that situation the Gospel becomes an abstraction and our particular efforts to live faithfully can easily be distorted without the perspective that the whole body brings to the Gospel.

It has become popular to speak of this kind of interdependent relationships as “networking.” Networks are built on concepts of partnership. They may not be adequate for church polity (governance), but they can be very important for how congregations connect to the mission to which God calls them. Stanley Skreslet puts it this way,

...networking is *essentially egalitarian*. It assumes no fixed center. Networks do not need hierarchies and function most purely without them. Networking is thus rigorously horizontal in approach, rather than vertical, and is founded on the ideal of interdependent relationships.” (Stanley Skreslet, “Networking, Civil Society, and the NGO: A New Model for Ecumenical Mission,” *Missiology*, July, 1997, p. 309)

Marian McClure is right on target with her comment about congregations doing mission and needing partners. The World Mission work area of the PC(USA) has been developing its role in this way. A very significant cultural change has been happening in World Mission for a number of years. Local Presbyterian churches should utilize these resources and opportunities to connect to global mission.

Conclusion

Who does mission? God, of course, but he has invited us to be his partners in mission. This is a high privilege and we can not do it alone. Only the Holy Spirit

acting in the church can make mission possible. The Holy Spirit works through the myriad of partners provided to local churches because they are the basic units of mission.

I said earlier in the essay on the missional church that either your church is a missionary community or it is a mission field. Mission is not optional and it can not be done by writing checks. It is the personal and direct responsibility of your church.