

The Awesome Potential for Mission Found in Local Churches

George Miley

God is releasing the potential of His Church into mission as never before. Now more than ever, He is summoning forth the awesome beauty and capacity that He has deposited among His people worldwide.

The responsibility for world evangelization has for too long fallen on the shoulders of too few. Seeing Jesus proclaimed, trusted and worshiped among all the earth's peoples is a complex undertaking. It is a process which calls forth the full diversity of spiritual gifts and practical expertise resident among God's people. It beckons the participation of every believer.

The greatest resource of the local church is her people. We are God's treasure, placed together in the community of the redeemed. And the unique, God-given potential within each one of us becomes even more effective when it is blended together and expressed in harmony with the unique, God-given potential of our brothers and sisters.

Local churches contain the broadest spectrum of spiritual gifts and life experience found among God's people. Gifts of administration order and facilitate the energies of the visionary. Gifts of discernment protect against unwise investment of strength and resources. Ability to shepherd and heal frees people for productive ministry. Entrepreneurs, when their skills are focused on kingdom ends, create enterprises which are channels for kingdom extension. In fact, the whole range of vocational expertise is a vast kingdom resource when designing entry strategies among unreached peoples.

Some churches make significant contributions to missions, either by pooling their finances as a denominational family of churches or by applying portions of their budget to support individual missionaries. They have members who faithfully pray for these missionaries and encourage them in any way possible. This is wonderful. It's exactly right for many churches.

But other communities of believers (churches) yearn to do more. The facts of the world inspire great dreams. When it becomes clear that world evangelization will be completed only when new efforts are born to plant churches among unreached peoples; and when it is known that there are specific peoples which are still without a church, some-



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thing fires the imagination of people hungry for more hands-on and active missions participation. They find themselves wondering if they can do anything to help bring about the yet non-existent churches. As they turn themselves to pray for God to do what only He can do, they find that their thoughts are locked on what *they* might be able to do. They yearn to express who they are in the process of fulfilling God's mission.

Quite often this apostolic zeal is expressed in the traditional ways. But sometimes churches as a whole come to recognize that God is entrusting them with a specific part of the task. A focus emerges toward a particular people group: to do whatever it takes to bring about a church planting movement among that particular group. This strategic mind-set can permeate a congregation, calling forth a sense of corporate, church-wide embracing of a task.

When something forms with a God-given hope, it becomes a matter of shared ownership by the whole church. Ownership triggers investment. Instead of finding a few more donors, we see churches full of co-owners of the mission. They can see the end result and savor its value. God summons all the innovation and time-tempered wisdom of scores of people, from all walks of life.

I've seen local churches take on an assignment from God for a people, for a place, a city, a language or a tribe. The distinctive is that the church carries more than just an ambition for the fruitful work of a missionary. The body of believers carries a sense of holy trust from God, that God has given them a holy task that they are to pursue to completion.

Years ago a church in the northern suburbs of Atlanta sensed God's call to the Muslims of Bosnia. They had been in an extensive process of seeking Him about their missions involvement. They were committed to playing a strategic part in the completion of world evangelization. They were also focused on the multiplication of churches, both at home and among the unreached. In addition to starting churches in Atlanta, they aspired to play an active role in starting churches in Bosnia. To do so just seemed to be expressing who God had really made them to be.

They sought counsel from their denominational mission leaders, from other mission agencies, and from a few national church leaders in the region. In front of their church building they installed a marker which cemented the fact that, as a fellowship of believers, they were "On the Road to Sarajevo." When civil war broke out in 1992, they saw it as an open door from the Lord. They began sending teams of their people to live and minister in a refugee camp filled with refugees fleeing their target city. From these teams of short-termers has emerged godly, competent leadership and a growing long-term team of church planters, working in fellowship with and submission to the emerging Bosnian church. The national leadership testifies that workers from this church are some of the most effective and respected in the country.

Pursuing a people-group focused mission is a complex process. Every church is different. Each people group requires a unique approach. There is no standard formula for how a church is to pursue this effort. There are scores of ways that it can be done well. But it can also be done poorly.

People Group Focus Pursued Poorly

Even with the best of intentions, a church might go about this poorly. Here are some of the factors a church should be careful to guard against:

1. *An independent attitude.* Churches contain awesome potential as springboards for launching kingdom initiatives. But a motivation to show what we can do all by ourselves, or that we don't need anybody else, is unworthy of the gospel. God is not in the business of blessing an independent spirit, which can be rooted in pride and selfish ambition. Where God is at work in power, there is humility, an esteeming of the other as better than ourselves and unity.

2. *A failure to count the cost.* Any commitment to kingdom advance among an unreached people will be contested by Satan every step of the way. This is not a casual activity, not something to be entered into lightly or unadvisedly. Are we prepared to pay the price that our dreams may cost us?

If a church is going to commit itself to church planting among the unreached, especially if it is going to send some of its own people to do this (and thereby place them in a spiritually, emotionally and physically vulnerable place), the permanent leadership of the church should be as committed to the initiative as those who are sent forth.

3. *A short-term mentality.* Short-term mission trips, done well, can yield wonderful results. They can give people a much deeper understanding of the task remaining among unreached peoples. They can fire vision, quicken prayer and catalyze commitment to more permanent engagement. But any short-term activity finds its greatest value when it exists, not for its own benefit, but as an integral part of a long-term process. This allows the fruits of the short-term mission to be evaluated, and the good to be preserved and channeled. The mission effort of a local church inevitably fails when they set out thinking that a people group can be reached in a year or two.

4. *A lack of training.* A local church can be a wonderful environment for informal mentoring in evangelism, discipling, serving and character formation that is so crucial in

church-planting. Jesus trained His disciples in the context of real life, where principles of walking with God could be observed and passed on through intimate life contact between teacher and pupil. Still, no local church has all the resources and experience needed for the mission field. The Body of Christ is bigger than any one of us. Churches must seek the best blend of formal, informal and non-formal mission training for their

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workers, and this pursuit will ultimately lead them into relationship with other members of the great commission community.

5. *A lack of proper care.* Healthy local churches are richly endowed with the potential to care for their people. Throughout the fellowship there are those who are motivated to shepherd, protect, care and heal. But this need must be recognized from the start, and plans laid as to how long-term care will be provided. We cannot afford to be casual or naive in this area.

People Group Focus Done Well

I've seen churches do this well. Here are some outstanding features found in such churches:

1. *Learning to pray.* Churches that have been successful in missions have learned to wait on the Lord. They have learned to be still until they have heard what God has to say and have tested His guidance. These churches schedule prolonged times of intercession, praying not only for the missionaries they support, but intentionally for the people group they are trying to reach.

2. *Committing for the long-haul.* Churches that do well in missions often plan for decades of service. There is a commitment to remain with a mission project until a flourishing church movement has been planted or Jesus returns—whichever comes first. This long-range planning allows time to do things well. It provides time to plant dreams for the future in the minds of the children and new directions for retirement in the hearts of middle-aged couples. It gives time to form steady partnerships with other churches and mission agencies.

3. *Taking ownership.* When everyone in a church takes ownership of a mission project, there is a prolonged investment on the part of both church leaders and members. Short-term mission efforts no longer stand alone. When church members travel on a prayer journey visiting their people group, or spend time encouraging their missionary workers, they know they are investing in the future of both their own church and their mission work. Their vision is refueled and the entire congregation is renewed.

4. *Utilizing Structures.* Churches who push on toward fruitful church planting do one of two things regarding structure. They form a new mission organizational structure,

rooted in and springing forth from the shared life of the body of believers. Such structures are bonded to the church relationally, and serve as easy avenues for the expression of the spiritual gifts and vocational expertise of the members. Or, a church develops a vital partnership with an experienced mission agency. In either case, some organizational entity serves as a conduit for the release of the group's vision, energy and capacity.

Mission to unreached peoples requires apostolic structures. Local churches are primarily pastoral structures. The local church is designed to nurture its members. Its focus is on protection, continuity, avoiding risks and bringing its members to spiritual maturity. This type of structure is called a "modality." An apostolic structure is designed to carry out the mission of extending the Kingdom. It focuses on initiation, plans on taking risks and perseveres against great odds. This type of structure is often called a "sodality." Modalities can forge vital partnerships with sodalities. They can also give birth to new sodalities.

A church in Indiana prepared a team for church planting among a Muslim people group in Central Asia. In order to carry out their mission, they formed a separate apostolic structure. They created a 501(c)(3) corporation. The senior pastor and other church leaders were on the board, which was chaired by a business person who was a member of the congregation. They also invited other mission experienced people to serve on the board who were not members of their church.

This organization has served them well. It has provided the basis for engaging this people group as medical and educational professionals. It has allowed the church to ac-

cess resources beyond their own fellowship, and it has provided them access to counsel beyond themselves.

A growing number of local churches and established mission agencies are forging effective partnerships. Mission agencies are approaching churches where vision is alive and asking how they can serve the church's direction. Churches are identifying areas where they need help and are enlisting the experience of the agencies. Written partnerships are being crafted in the context of careful communication and planning, identifying the areas of responsibility the church will carry and the areas where it will rely on the agency. When done well, everybody wins through this kind of beautiful humility and submission to one another in love, especially the unreached peoples. And Christ is honored as His people serve, submitting to one another in love.

We see people-group focused mission efforts from local churches emerging all over the world. Indian churches are sending their own to other parts of India. Central American churches are launching teams to North Africa. Churches in Minneapolis are sending their own to Central Asia. It's a thrilling hour.

We have so much to learn from each other. Churches can learn so much from other churches, and from mission agencies who have labored cross-culturally in some cases for generations. And, yes, these same agencies can be profoundly enriched by working together with churches. Mission agencies who embrace a high view of the local church will see their own efforts strengthened and their influence expanded for the glory of our Lord and the advance of His kingdom throughout the earth.

Study Questions

1. Miley says that mission to unreached peoples requires "apostolic structures," which are not naturally found within local churches. How then does Miley see the potential of local churches being expressed?
2. Miley says that "people-group focused mission" is not for every local church. Why is this important?
3. Evaluate Miley's idea that a sense of ownership results from sharing in a God-given hope for a people group.

