

Core Value No. 5

Working together: God's ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted to all believers. God's passion for mission is expressed through local communities of believers around the world. These communities make up the Body of Christ working together in harmony. Therefore we humbly acknowledge our need to work together with our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world in the task of mission.

As we consider our involvement with folks that are quite different from us, we have to discern where in the world God is calling us to serve. We certainly could begin by considering our historical relationships. This is not the place to review the history of Covenant world mission, although that would be an interesting and rewarding project. It is enough to say that we have present commitments for common mission with churches many of which came into being as they appropriated the Good News proclaimed by our missionaries. Here is the list of our current commitments in the order in which our involvement with them began.

China	1890 (- 1948) we make a special note here because we are now reconnecting with a significant remnant of folks who came to faith during that period as well as new initiatives in the present.
Congo (formerly Zaire)	1937
Mexico	1946
Ecuador	1947
Japan	1949
Taiwan	1952
Colombia	1968
Thailand	1971
Laos	1991
Germany	1991
Russia	1993
Chile	1994
France	1996
Spain	1996
Philippines	1998
Sudan	1998

Kenya	1998
The Fulani People	1998
Czech Republic	1999
India	1999
South Africa	1999
Argentina	2003
Brazil	2007

The above, it should be noted, are people and places served by the Evangelical Covenant Church in those efforts that are administered by the Department of World Mission. There are additional ECC missionaries serving in work administered by other mission organizations and more than a dozen more serving in countries that cannot be named or listed for reasons of security. Of course, the list would be significantly expanded if it included all the countries served by missionaries sent out by individual congregations.

With whom should we “work together?”

“Partnership” is a rather overused “buzzword” in mission discussions these days. It began as a way to try to describe how missionaries, mission agencies and programs could work harmoniously with the increasingly mature churches now found in what we once called “our mission fields.” It is not surprising that US and European mission folk would come up with this word. We are, after all, products of our culture with its ways and means. It is a rather industrial word, borrowed from business management theories and the practices of commercial enterprises. We find ourselves trying to organize shared mission ventures with sister churches around strategic planning with budgets, goals, objectives, action plans, timelines and carefully constructed MOUs (Memorandums of Understanding). Folks try to go along with us, but there is an inevitable clash of cultures.

The language and thinking of most of the non-Western world, particularly in the church, tends to be far more relational than that of its Western counterparts. They use relational terms like “family” or “brothers and sisters” more frequently and resist corporate or industrial terms like “partner.” In fact, some languages (like Spanish) do not have a specific word for “partner” and “companion” is the closest equivalent. It is, I believe, quite likely that we will increasingly move away from partnership language as we grow in our ability to work together with others in God’s mission. We will have to figure out common language to describe mutual expectations, but I suspect that it will be framed more like a covenant than an MOU.

With whom we will work in common mission is also undergoing significant changes. We certainly have a vital commitment to those with whom we share historic relationships. Yet how we will work together with them is an important matter for revision. When we began, almost 100 years ago, missionaries and

new believers did everything together. Now, churches are matured in many countries with structures, organizations and programs – and we are still tempted to do “everything.” But “everything that can be done” is not the missionary’s calling or vocation. Around the world, missionaries are struggling not only with what to do, but with what not to do, as well.

In the meantime, history has not stood still and we must address responsible and responsive changes that make sense for the present and the future. Modern Protestant involvement in world mission really began in earnest around the mid 19th Century. At the time, Protestants followed the similar imperial aspirations as those of the earlier Spanish Conquest. This period of Protestant mission is referred to as “colonial mission” as mission advanced in the company of imperial advances around the world. Since that time, Western mission has appropriately abandoned most of its colonizing aspirations. No missionary today would speak of “civilizing” native populations, for example, or argue that Westernization is a goal of mission. But one large piece of the puzzle is still the subject of impassioned debate. Is it the fundamental task of mission to “clone” its respective denominations around the world – complete with their historically and culturally conditioned “distinctives?” Is it our goal to establish Presbyterian, Southern Baptist, Methodist, Evangelical Covenant – or whatever – denominations in every country? Should we export the same divisions that define our ecclesiastical existence? Not to do so strikes some as denominational disloyalty. Yet the question remains. Furthermore, if we do not do mission in this way, what are the alternatives?

We will look at these questions in the remainder of this material and particularly as we look at the theme of the gospel in every culture.

Strategy and Responsiveness

People often ask us, “Where are you going in world mission? What is your strategy?” These are not simple questions to answer. First and foremost, however, is this. God’s great mission defines what we do and how we will do it. Mission that begins with a God who is a person is essentially character-driven. The love, compassion, mercy and justice of God are some of mission’s most important defining characteristics. Mission is more like a living organism than a program or an institution. A human body can be described by its parts or systems. So, we can talk about the circulatory system, the nervous system, the skeletal and muscular systems and so on. Yet all the systems are interconnected and, in a healthy human being, work together in amazing harmony. Furthermore, it is clear that a living human being is greater than the sum of his or her parts. So it is with mission. No one part defines the whole, yet all the parts are needed. So, for example, we think that strategic planning is needful. But strategy is a factor that lives in tension with responsiveness. It is responsiveness to the heart and action of God, on one hand, and responsiveness to concrete conditions on the

other. Here's a brief story from the "Covenant Missionary Prayer Calendar 2007-2008."

"War has been going on in South Sudan for fifty years! More than 2.5 million people have died, and more than 4.5 million have fled their homes and country. These words describe their plight: dislocation, disease, famine, suffering, fear, death, growing up knowing only refugee camps as home. In 1994 refugees began arriving in Sioux Falls, South Dakota and some began attending the Covenant church. Soon they organized the first Sudanese church in the Covenant. From there, word spread to other areas so that there are now 8 Sudanese Covenant Churches in North America, and in Africa more than 300 churches with 53,000 members." Page 43.

So what mission strategy brought this about? Certainly none that were devised by any missionaries.

What about our strategy today with Sudan and with our other historic relationships? Clearly, strategies must be obedient to God's purposes, in harmony with his character and responsive to fluid and changing conditions. God can and does act with infinite freedom and without consulting with us. When Covenant missionary Ken Satterberg (serving in Africa at the time) was asked, "What do missionaries do?" he replied, "We are surfing the wave of God in Africa." That's just hard to fit into models of management processes borrowed from business and industry – which is what we Americans dearly love to do. Well, we are North Americans after all, so we do plan. We strategize. We devise timelines and set objectives. We recruit, train and deploy personnel. We create budgets and seek funds for them, all within strict guidelines of professional and ethical accountability. But understand this: all of our strategies are "held loosely" and can be dropped like a hot rock when God moves or conditions change. In this, we remain true to our guiding tradition, the Bible, and allow God to set aside our cultural preferences.

Stories and such: Once upon a time, the apostles and the early church devised a careful strategy for the selection of personnel to serve in the distribution of food for the needy widows of the church. There were some fairness issues in this matter, so the choice of personnel to administer the program was crucial. Steven was one of those selected for the job. He, however, proceeded to make an impassioned speech to some religious leaders and was stoned to death, on the spot, for his efforts. He became the first martyr of the church. The story goes that the young Saul of Tarsus held the coats of those who did the stoning and approved of their killing him. Saul then began a career of persecuting the church. This did not end until the risen Jesus confronted him directly about it. He was converted and became the church's greatest apostle.

So, what became of the church's strategy for Steven? And by what strategy did Saul come into the picture? God acts in joyful freedom and the plans of his followers must be reshaped and sometimes just ignored completely.

You can read the whole story in more detail in Acts 6-9.

If we can't "squeeze" God or changing conditions into a strategic plan – then why plan at all? One mission theorist actually wrote somewhere "Paul's strategy was to have no strategy." Every now and then, both in the North American church and outside of it, someone will dabble in a counter-cultural alternative. In the secular world it would appear as "just go with the flow". In the church it appears as "make no plans and just let the Spirit guide you". Neither alternative is particularly authentic. We are, in fact, conditioned by our culture and even though God persists in going well beyond our plans and directions, it is not his intent to destroy our culture but to reveal something true about himself through it. This is a good thing because we can never simply "step out" of our cultural conditioning. We can acknowledge it, however, and make necessary corrections to its defects and shortcomings along the way.

Maybe we plan and strategize because of the "bicycle principle". That is, "only a moving bicycle can be steered". We do our best, then, to:

1. Stay focused on what we know about God's mission and character.
2. "Read" the conditions as best we can.
3. Discern what gifts and talents have been entrusted to us (what are our resources)
4. Get moving.
5. But let God steer.

The Importance of Knowing When to Let Go and Move On

Stories and such:

A few years ago, we helped plant a church in another country. In the beginning, we did everything. We were the preachers, the Sunday school teachers, the Bible study leaders, the worship and music team and the janitors. We were even the “facilities managers”. We brought hymnbooks, instruments and music stands, an overhead projector and screen, a coffee pot and cookies to our rented facilities every week in the trunks of our cars. Gradually, we got pretty good at what we did and that turned into a temptation. “Why let someone else do it badly when we can do it well? Isn’t it our gift?” The fact is that the new church had no chance to come to life until the missionaries “died” to many of their favorite activities. We had to let others do things badly so that they could learn how to do them well – which is precisely how we learned to do things well in the first place.

It’s a challenge to keep our commitments straight. Over time, our engagement in a myriad of good and worthy projects multiplies. We typically need to stop doing some good things in order to get on track with the best things. It is simply harder for a missionary or mission team to deal with apparent success than with failure. When we have done things well, we are often loved and respected for it. Gradually, that love and respect may come from an increasingly wider range of people – from one congregation to a cluster of area congregations, from a cluster to a whole country and from a country to a region of the world. The size of our circle of influence matters less than the common temptation that occurs at each supposed “level”. Beyond the healthy exchange of mutual love and respect, expressions of honor, admiration and appreciation can become addictive. We can begin to think of ourselves as indispensable and subtly persuade others that this is the case. It’s easy to spot the hunger for the limelight in, say, a young lead singer in a church music team. It’s quite another thing to identify the same hunger – disguised with more mature skill – in “advisory positions”, and memberships on “serious” national and international boards and committees – or on a whole mission team’s need to be in control of a younger church “for their own good.”

In the economy of God, engagement in mission is counter-intuitive. “Unless a seed falls onto the ground and dies, it will not bear fruit.” And, it is the plant that has just produced the most fruit that is the more severely pruned. In a

curious irony, the very best missionaries are usually remembered fondly, but people tend to say,

“The missionary did not build this church (or ministry or whatever...).
We built this ourselves, with God’s help.”