

Evaluating Our Mission Work: Mission Philosophy and Effective Church Development

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Note: During the last three months of 2020, I reposted some "Golden Oldies" on the front page of my website. I posted a few front-page articles from the past 12 years (about 150 front-page articles), selected from several thousand articles on my website. The articles I shared have not grown old – they yet speak to us today. May we read and apply!

I share my heart! We in churches of Christ, after revitalizing our mission emphasis after the end of World War II, now have a history of 60-70 years of international mission work. Yet, we have been slow to hear and apply the wisdom of our mission pioneers, many of whom have gone to their eternal reward. "They, being dead, yet speak." Will we listen?

What Is Your Mission Philosophy?

In 1978, 42 years ago, Dan Hardin wrote a significant book about mission work. The principles set forth in his book, *Mission: A practical approach to church sponsored mission work*, are frequently mentioned in mission seminars. The book is still available on Amazon.

In 1990, 30 years ago, as the Fort Gibson church was developing a vision for worldwide mission work, I briefly reviewed Hardin's book in the Fort Gibson church bulletin. That article appears below and is available on my website: http://www.bobyoungrsources.com/articles/4_0425.htm.

Every church involved in missions operates by some philosophy. That philosophy may or may not be studied, carefully thought out, fervently prayed, but it exists nonetheless. That philosophy may be influenced by both bad and good motivations, by both true and false ideas.

Dan Hardin describes three philosophies in his book *Mission: A Practical Approach*. One approach sees missions primarily as helping meet people's physical needs in this world--feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, liberating the politically oppressed. A second approach believes that as long as Christians exist in a certain location, missions is carried out by their presence and example. **A final philosophy, the one that Hardin upholds as biblical and legitimate, is an understanding of missions that "emphasizes winning souls, discipling, baptizing, church planting and nurturing."** The following "indigenous church principles" help identify the main ideas of this philosophy.

- 1. The missionary interprets mission primarily as church planting
- 2. Non-Christians interact primarily with unpaid indigenous church leaders like themselves
- 3. Leaders of local churches learn by doing; thus, the missionary is not present to protect from every potential mistake
- 4. The work is not limited to American churches' financial investment
- 5. Evangelism by the entire membership is facilitated
- 6. Churches multiply in extraordinary places
- 7. Growing congregations select and support their own leaders and evangelists
- 8. Discipline is the role of the local church

An indigenous church is one that is "self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating."

Listen to the mission experience of our brother, Dan Hardin! Does his description of effective mission work align with the mission work you are involved in?

Mission work is about planting churches. Indigenous Christians are the primary contacts with non-Christians; mission churches quickly accept financial responsibility for their own work. Such participation is natural because evangelism and growth is the work of the members who select their own leaders and evangelists. The result is churches that multiply in extraordinary situations.

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In September 2011, I wrote under the title, ***Effective Church Development: Building Strong Foundations***

Healthy church development in newly planted, not yet mature churches requires at least three steps. First, the church must develop biblical leadership which allows it to become self-governing. In the early stages, leadership may be supplied by a missionary or church planter, but healthy continuing growth comes when the church becomes indigenously self-governing. This is a great challenge, but an essential step. A team of mission workers may allow the church to have some semblance of self-government early on, but an initial organizational model dependent primarily on imported workers must be especially careful about failing to train internal, indigenous leaders. Reaching self-governing status occurs most naturally when one identifies and reaches "persons of peace", those with an inclination toward spirituality who serve as leaders in family or social groups. A factor that often has a negative influence on a church becoming self-governing is the hiring of a minister by an outside group such as a 'sponsoring' church. Such an arrangement opens the possibility of several negative influences. **First**, such a person, once empowered, often has little interest in developing leaders to share the leadership and power. **Second**, often such a person refuses to be accountable to the local congregation since his support comes from an outside source. **Third**, a subtle ambiguity or conflict often develops between supporting the development of a healthy church and supporting a specific person in ministry. **Fourth**, such hired persons often fail to deal with church conflict in healthy ways, choosing rather to move to other areas to work when difficulties arise. These possibilities, singly or in tandem, can work against developing self-governing churches.

A second goal is that churches become self-sustaining. This involves becoming self-edifying and being able to handle all (or most) of the regular expenses in the local church. Few churches will become self-sustaining until they are self-governing. This raises the possibility that the methods many supporting churches have used in mission work for years can actually work against the goal we wish to attain-to develop self-supporting congregations. Self-sustenance is rooted in local ownership which encourages and is enhanced by self-governance. When the church accepts responsibility for itself, that responsibility will generally extend to the challenge of being self-sustaining, including decisions about the methods and persons involved in ministry.

A third goal is that the local churches become self-duplicating or self-propagating. It is wonderful when US churches take ownership of the process of church planting in foreign mission fields. It is even better when local churches accept the responsibility for sharing the gospel, establishing new preaching points, and planting new churches. A church seldom becomes self-duplicating before it is self-governing and self-sustaining.

Churches interested in mission work and planting healthy churches that can plant healthy churches will do well to analyze the ways in which this process can best occur, guided by Scripture and observations and experiences from the mission field.

I pray that our churches will take to heart the great challenge of winning the world for Christ. I pray that we will be wise in the mission efforts we undertake and support, that we will do no harm as we encourage Christians and churches around the world to preach the gospel to every creature! I pray that we will be generous and wise, facilitating the spread of the gospel to the multitudes!