

Outreach/mission in American congregations—a critique and recommendations

By Rev. Dr. Diane C. Kessler*

Because of the relative ease and modest cost of international travel, Christians from North America now frequently venture to other parts of the developing world. When they do so, they may meet poverty and need on a scale with which they previously were unfamiliar. Sometimes these encounters are interpersonal and transforming. The result is that the North American Christian traveler may return home with the laudable determination to make a difference in the particular situation he or she has encountered. The convert then brings this story to a local congregation.

Thus begins a positive impulse that translates into a phenomenon occurring with increasing frequency in North American congregations—the twenty-first century trend toward particular and idiosyncratic mission. For example, a couple goes on an eco-tourism excursion to Central America. They have a chance encounter with a local pastor who is operating an orphanage, and who tells them about the challenges of sustaining the project and the plight of the children. They visit the orphanage. They are deeply moved by the youngsters whom they see. They decide to do what they can to help, and return to their home congregation with the story and with an appeal to “adopt” the orphanage as an outreach project. They enlist a small group of people who respond to the appeal. The group returns to the orphanage the following year with a gift of money and a willingness to help in particular ways for a week.

This trend is especially common among congregations with a non-hierarchical ecclesiology. It is buttressed by a policy of some outreach committees to channel contributions only to organizations or projects where a member of the congregation is engaged directly. The forthcoming centenary of the World Missionary Conference, “Edinburgh 2010,” which will consider “Mission in the 21st century,” has provided the opportunity to pose questions both about the strengths and the problems with this approach to “outreach,” as it frequently is called. The purpose of this article is to raise some concerns about this trend, to offer guidelines for an alternative approach, and to stimulate dialogue about the phenomenon.

The impulse for mission is rooted in the Gospel mandate of the risen Christ to “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.” (Mark 16:16 NRSV) The term “mission” encompasses both Christian witness to the saving and transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to individuals, and to the responsibility of the church to carry the healing and reconciling love of God to every realm. Congregations seek to transmit this mandate faithfully in a variety of ways, only one of which is through “outreach/mission committees.” My intention is to shine a lens on this specific aspect of congregational life—not to suggest that it is the only way that the impulse to mission is lived out.

As I pondered whether certain elements of the American character contribute to this approach, I returned to a study by Robert Bellah, et al. titled *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.ⁱ The authors recall the nineteenth century French social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville who identified “individualism” as a notable characteristic of American culture. As Bellah, et al., observed, “The inner tensions of American individualism add up to a classic case of ambivalence. We strongly assert the value of our self-reliance and autonomy. We deeply feel the emptiness of a life without sustaining social commitments. Yet we are hesitant to articulate our sense that we need one another as much as we need to stand alone, for fear that if we did we would lose our independence altogether.” (pp. 150-151) To this description of American culture, I would add the honorable tendency toward a pragmatic, can-do, fix-it mind-set; a friendly, courteous demeanor; and a quality of innocence or naivete, often accompanied by a positive view of human nature. This positive perspective, however, does not extend to institutions.

Americans are, indeed, ambivalent about the value of institutions, particularly ones that seem remote—either because we take their infrastructures for granted (in the case of government), or because we rarely have direct contact with them (in the case of state or national denominations or ecumenical entities). In a recent article by New York Times columnist David Brooks, he observed that “Americans have lost faith in their institutions. During the great moments of social reform, at least 60 percent of Americans trusted government to do the right thing most of the time. Now, only a quarter have that kind of trust.”ⁱⁱ Our wariness of institutions, governmental and voluntary, seems to increase in direct proportion to their distance from direct experience. Americans swim in a sea of voluntary associations, including churches, but as one pundit observed, “If it ain’t local, it ain’t real.” This ambivalence makes its way into the approach to mission in many American congregations.

The local, particular, anti-institutional approach to mission has both strengths and weaknesses. Some positive values are:

- Some good gets done somewhere to the probable benefit of some persons in need.
- The initiators of the mission/outreach project enlist the support of other members of the congregation, thus educating others about another country, culture, and/or situation.
- Those who are directly engaged may find that their own spiritual life has been deepened and transformed by encounters with “the other”—with other forms of worship, ways of expressing faithfulness, or capacity for hospitality despite the lack of material resources.

Potential problems include the following:

- Such projects often are launched without consulting denominational or ecumenical leaders/organizations who may have a more comprehensive

overview of how a particular need fits into a wider context. Without such consultation, the initiators may not understand how the need they have identified compares with competing claims within, or beyond the region. Thus, although their mission initiative does some good, perhaps it could have accomplished far more if targeted in a different way, or if combined with other existing efforts.

- Significant economic resources may be expended by members of the congregation who make subsequent visitations to the site of the mission project. It would be helpful to conduct an independent study assessing the degree to which these travel funds deflect money that otherwise could be used more fruitfully.
- The opportunity to support initiatives that could have ripple effects beyond the particular project may be lost.
- Perspective about the underlying reasons for problems may not be explored. Thus, opportunities to make systemic changes—perhaps through public policy remedies—may be missed.
- Opportunity for ecumenical cooperation often is overlooked. Yet by engaging in a mission with churches of other traditions—or even of other congregations within their own tradition—Christians could make a powerful witness to the real, though not yet complete, unity we share through our baptism, at the same time that their work could have a multiplier effect.
- By bypassing well-established, highly respected, experienced religious agencies that have been dedicated to witness and service for many decades, the capacity of these agencies to channel assistance where and when it is most needed is being undermined.
- By limiting outreach to organizations or projects where a member of the congregation is engaged directly, the potential for outreach is confined to the relatively few members of the congregation who are willing to serve on the mission/outreach committee. These few people, in fact, are expected to do “double duty” by being engaged with another initiative—a potentially burdensome expectation in a time-deprived society. This heightens the idiosyncratic nature of a congregation’s involvements.
- If congregations make significant and sustained commitments to denominational or ecumenical structures, when disaster strikes, congregations *already* are doing something because they have been supporting the agency with on-the-ground contacts, experience, and capacity for a quick response. This opportunity also is lost by limiting outreach to organizations or projects where a member of the congregation is engaged directly.

Because a local, particular, anti-institutional approach to mission has far more weaknesses than strengths, I suggest a different template.

Over the years, the churches together have sought to develop criteria for mission. When the World Council of Churches held its fourth assembly in Uppsala (1968), the assembly offered three guidelines: “1. Do they place the church alongside the poor, the defenseless, the abused, the forgotten, the bored? 2. Do they allow Christians to enter the concerns of others, to accept their issues and their structures as vehicles of involvement? 3. Are they the best situations for discerning with others the signs of the times, and for moving with history towards the coming of the new humanity?”ⁱⁱⁱ These guidelines are helpful at the macro-level. In a local setting, the following might be a set of criteria that mission committees could use to consider the most fruitful approach to their work:

- Maintain a balance of local, state, national, and international funding and/or initiatives each year, to remind the congregation that it is part of “the whole church for the whole world.”
- Explore possibilities for engaging cooperatively in mission with churches of other Christian traditions, or with people of other faiths, by contacting similar entities in neighboring congregations. Could the initiative be used as a “teaching opportunity” to remind the congregation that it is part of the whole Body of Christ, and that this mission is a reminder of the unity Christians share; or to remind the congregation that it is people of faith who share certain common values promoting the well-being of humanity?
- Consider whether a particular project could have ripple effects beyond the immediate aim.
- Evaluate how a proposed initiative compares with competing claims for the time, attention, and funds of this congregation.
- Consult with religious agencies—denominational and ecumenical—to determine whether these causes already are being addressed, and how the participation of a local congregation could help. Some questions to ask: could the agency staff provide helpful information, or guidance about where the information could be obtained? Can these agencies offer a perspective about the proposed plan? Do they have established relationships in the country/region of the intended gift, which might be an appropriate channel for the support? Should support of these agencies (dimensions of the churches’ life together) be part of the congregation’s mission, as well?
- Mission should be accompanied by education. Members of the outreach/mission committee, or other members of the congregation, could be enlisted to do a little research, now made easier because of widespread availability of the internet. For example, if a congregation is supporting or housing homeless families, what is the extent of homelessness in the region? What are some of its causes? Could changes in state or national public policy improve the situation? If a congregation has a relationship with a project in another country, what is the

history, culture, religious environment, political situation of that country? How does United States foreign policy hurt or help this situation? Should advocacy accompany mission in this situation?

- Mission should be accompanied by prayer—prayer that the Holy Spirit will guide decision-makers; prayer for recipients of mission; prayer that the offering/witnessing congregation will be attentive to the gifts and talents of recipients; regular prayer by the whole congregation for situations and people highlighted by the mission.

These are a few suggestions for guidelines that outreach/missions committees could use to make their choices in a more comprehensive manner, drawing on the experience and expertise of well-established churches and ecumenical agencies with which congregations are connected. This is not to suggest that denominational and ecumenical agencies operate at maximum efficiency and effectiveness 100% of the time, but when things do go wrong, when problems surface, the odds are greater that a built-in system of oversight will catch and remedy problems that may occur. Christians exist *in community, for community*, and they should conduct their mission mindful of and benefitting from these relationships.

Jesus said, “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matt. 25: 35-36, 40 NRSV) The impulse to mission/outreach is Biblically-based and faith driven. Mission, however, should be rooted in a holistic understanding of the nature of the church. This includes the local congregation, but congregations exist in relationship with each other, and also embrace the whole people of God. I hope that, by drawing focused attention to this aspect of congregational life, the positive impulses that drive congregationally-based mission/outreach will be affirmed and strengthened.

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ⁱ Robert N. Bellah, et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

ⁱⁱ David Brooks, “The Tea Party Teens,” in the New York Times, January 5, 2010, p. A17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement, 2nd Edition, Edited by Nicholas Lossky et al (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), “Mission,” by Philip A. Potter and Jacques Matthey, p. 786.
