

AGENCY PERSPECTIVES ON CHURCH MOBILIZATION

Three Leaders Share Their Thinking

Postings recently interviewed church mobilization leaders in three different types of organizations: Richard Flemming serves with FEB International, a denominational sending agency in Canada; Austin Graff is part of the church mobilization department of IJM (International Justice Mission); and Kelly McClelland heads up church resources with PIONEERS, a non-denominational sending organization.

Postings: What is the most exciting expression of agency/church cooperation you are currently facilitating in your organizations?

Richard: For me, it is church missions coaching. I am thrilled with the possibilities missions coaching has given us to work with churches over an extended period of time. In 2005, our organization embraced a “servicing churches” approach. We have since set ourselves up so that we can come alongside our churches and invite them to set their own direction that then becomes ours. In this way our churches participate in setting our agenda. We have been helped in missions coaching by the organization Sixteen:Fifteen. But we are only at the beginning of the process.

Over the years we have worked closely with local churches when there were “red flags” about a candidate or missionary, and it has been very beneficial. At times, in order to discern if our personnel had significant problems, we cooperated closely with their home churches. Working together was a tremendous help for us. In several cases, we had to bring the missionary home or end the candidacy, but the church was with us. Working over a period of time with a church results in greater church engagement and church ownership.

Kelly: For the past two years we have been focusing on what I call “contextual church partnership.” Just as in an overseas setting, every church has its own context, and we need to understand that context from the get-go. We have discovered that the most effective time for a missionary and agency to connect with the church is during candidacy and pre-deployment, so we invest a lot of manpower early on.

For example, we had a missions pastor attend one of our church forums, and that launched a deeper relationship. When I visited the church, they introduced me to other area churches, and now we have the beginnings of a church-based team comprised of members from that cluster of churches. That first church sent their youth pastor and an assistant to the next church forum. Then they told us, “We want to hand select people who have potential for long-term missions and we want PIONEERS to soak them in missionary life to get a world vision.

Two years ago, they sent about 25 people to spend a week here doing work projects, having fun, meeting missionaries, talking about needs and preparation, and praying for the world. This year they did it again. Now six people are coming for a more extended time. This church is, in essence, asking us to help them be proactive in selecting and equipping future missionaries before they even have a call.

Austin: In the past, churches have done a great job of evangelism and more recently with mercy ministries, but now IJM wants to challenge them as church communities to also engage in justice. Our goal is to mul-

tiply what we call “model churches” which have found creative ways to engage their whole congregation, not just a task force, in justice issues.

◆Perspective◆



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Kelly McClelland
PIONEERS

We have identified three steps of involvement: educate, explore, engage. We get lots of phone calls from churches that want to jump in and engage in the work, but before they engage, we encourage them to take their whole congregation through this education phase that begins by considering the biblical concept of justice and what it means to care for the oppressed. We provide a study guide.

In the explore phase, we ask them to investigate as a church what they have to offer, and that's not just finances. Many churches have lawyers, investigators, and counselors. We suggest they consider where they are already invested in a certain place via missionaries or short-term missions trips. Our tool, "As You Go," helps them put a justice edge on their trips as they travel internationally. While IJM doesn't get involved domestically, we encourage churches to explore opportunities in their local community.

Postings: Most agencies express a desire to serve churches. How does this work out for your organization in the day-to-day realities?

Austin: We view ourselves as consultants so we meet with churches and walk them through the steps of partnership. We also equip people to be advocates in their church. They go through a screening process and then are provided with three modules of training so they are equipped to present the challenge to their churches and help them launch task groups to focus on justice.

Richard: I find that churches appreciate it when we coach them to think strategically about everything they are doing to reach out. Following the model in Acts 1:8 ensures that churches will have outreach activities that will present a unified and well reasoned outward thrust into the world. Agencies get into problems when we pit "the ends of the earth" against "Jerusalem."

Kelly: I agree. We feel responsible to influence emerging churches and new church plants which are caught up with the get-this-church-going mentality and don't build their foundation to include missions. We are still working on how to do that, but one thing agencies can do is to help start-up churches put missions in their DNA.

At the other end of the spectrum, megachurches get a lot of attention and are easier for us to work with because they have dedicated staff who concentrate on our slice of the business. However, we want to have a heart for all types of churches, including those in the house church movement. That requires looking at the kinds of ponds the fish swim in, and dealing with them in ways that are relevant for them. We've got to listen a lot. Our bread-and-butter churches are

in the 400-700 attendees range, and statistics tell us they are declining. We need to be more creative in finding out how to serve them.

Richard: We don't have many megachurches in Canada, so we have a lot of churches that are still run by the congregation, not the staff. It takes a long time for a congregational church to pursue an extended missions process. More churches are asking good questions about accountability and productivity, and I find that encouraging.

Even though we have good people, we lack the infrastructure to properly demonstrate that the dollars invested are put to good use. We want to improve in this area so that we can provide better accounting to our churches, demonstrating to them that our people are doing the right job in the right way.

◆ Perspective ◆



"Our goal is to multiply what we call "model churches" which have found creative ways to engage their whole congregation in justice issues."

Austin Graff
International Justice Mission

Postings: What do you find to be your biggest hindrance to effective synergy between your agency and churches?

Kelly: We have two challenges. First, the external issue of connecting church and agency. Second, the internal issue of everybody in our agency, including field people, understanding our core value of the local church and sharing that passion. I believe we need to deal with both of those hindrances.

Churches are very busy. They are resource restricted, especially when it comes to people. They see us as one more busy thing to take on.

Austin: The mindset of churches is a challenge. A lot of churches are focused on evangelism or mercy, and don't see how biblical justice plays in. We want to mesh all three. Another challenge for us is that churches want personal connection. This is understandable, but hard for IJM. We can't

involve a youth team in a rescue effort, so we have to look for creative ways for them to engage. With coaching and training from our regional directors, some are assisting with things like after-care of those rescued.

Richard: We are committed to assist our churches to pursue their own missions initiative, but we don't have enough staff across Canada to get this message out. And we are still largely a traditional mission that isn't fully prepared to respond to lots of new church initiatives. We need to get ourselves up and running if we hope to facilitate more of these in the future.

Another challenge is the condition of our churches. Research tells us that 20% are growing; 70% are stagnating; 10% are in deep crisis. Missions is not at the top of the list for a lot of them. We need to get our churches healthy.

Postings: Has the recession impacted how you partner with churches? How are you coping?

Austin: We are asking churches to cover the expenses of our representatives when they go to speak and to provide an honorarium for the work. Since we cannot accept all of the invitations, we set this requirement to prove who is interested in investing in the work. If they can't do this, we provide other resources—such as an outline of a sermon on justice.

We are also becoming more proactive in asking churches to support the NGOs that provide after-care for our clients. A well written proposal is presented to churches that are ready and have the resources. We don't just wait for them to come to us.

Kelly: Our income has remained relatively the same while our numbers have grown by 10%, so obviously that puts a strain on resources. We have been forced to evaluate what we are doing and have eliminated a lot of things that were nice to do but had less impact. It's been good for us to step back and ask, "Is this the most important thing I can do at this time?" We are connecting more by phone, email, and virtual meetings.

Richard: We haven't seen any drastic shortages. In Canada, recession impact has been regional, and generally speaking, we have been less hit than the States. And our size is a plus: We have just 10 employees working in Canada. Several are part time and some work out of their homes.

One area where there is challenge is support raising. The cost to work among middle and upper classes in major cities like Paris or Tokyo is astronomical. It is hard to see how we can sustain those costs; we may be facing some significant changes.

Kelly: We have had quite a bit of feedback from churches about support issues. More churches are asking about start-up costs and questioning if those funding requirements really need to be so high because raising support is so challenging right now. On the positive side, it gives us an opportunity to connect with churches and explain the whys and wherefores of our financial structures.

Postings: Dream out loud a little. What would you like to see your collaboration with churches look like in three to five years?

Richard: We want our coaching to result in many partnerships that allow our churches to actively participate with oth-

ers in the spread of God's fame among the nations. I am excited to see us growing in the number of formalized partnerships with our churches, and I see this only increasing in the future.

◆ Perspective ◆



"We have set ourselves up so that we can come alongside our churches and invite them to set their own direction that then becomes ours."

Richard Flemming
FEB International

Another exciting aspect is helping churches to work together to partner in a third location. For example, churches in Quebec or France can get involved with Congolese churches that are also French speaking to work in some other parts of Africa.

Austin: Our vision is to have churches exposed to, understanding, and engaging in the issue of justice. We don't want this to be just a trend, but the norm for congregations just like evangelism and mercy ministries are. We want to be able to resource churches to engage more practically and hands-on.

To see this happen, we need to serve as a liaison between the church and the field office so that the relationship is beneficial to both sides. We don't want to initiate short-term trips that are a burden to our offices but rather help field groups that come alongside and meet a

practical need in a two-way relationship rather than a one-way street. That requires knowing the church, their passions, and their people. It will require additional regional staff—personnel we can't hire right now.

Kelly: Churches have way too many distractions that make it difficult to prioritize missions. We need to help them deal with busyness.

On the agency side, we face staff and resource limitations, and on sensitive fields, communications restrictions. Sometimes our people become so field focused that they forget that churches need to be involved. The missionary's role is to partner with their sending and supporting churches and engage them, but if they can't impart vision to the local church, it all breaks down.

So in the coming years, we want to sharpen our focus internally and externally. We want to have a core group of churches that really want to grow in missions. We want transparent relationships with them so that we are learning from one another and seriously pursuing partnership, and reducing the disconnects. Where we have differences of opinion, we need to be able to share our expectations and limitations, and find churches that want to do the same.

Our goal is to see our field and home staffs grow in their knowledge of the context of the local church and how they can serve it so that doing so becomes automatic. You could say that our church partnership team exists because church



partnership doesn't. We would love to work ourselves out of a job!

Postings: What has been an important "ah-ha" moment you have experienced this past year?

Kelly: We recently ran statistics and discovered that we have a number of churches supporting three or more units of our workers. Some churches have invested upwards of two million dollars in the people they have sent. How much do we really express our appreciation for the value of that investment? How can we help our staff go "Wow!?" Do we pray with church people when they call? Do we thank them for their assistance? Have we lost sight of the fact that they make all of this possible? I want to work hard to keep that vision in front of our PIONEERS people.

Richard: An "ah ha" moment for me was realizing that the process of working over a period of time with a church bears incredible fruit. It results in church engagement and ownership. I'm convinced that nailing down the vision is not the most important thing. Churches can have several different visions that can all be valid. The question is, "Is the church on board with the vision?" Without buy-in, the impact on the nations will be minimal.

Austin: A new development for us is more actively encouraging churches to develop tools that other congregations could use to educate their people on issues of trafficking around the world and how to engage. For instance, a church was working on a resource related to the custom of grabbing

property from a widow when her husband dies. Another church was passionate for children's curriculum, so they are helping us develop a justice curriculum for kids. Rather than taking the time of five or six of our staff, individual projects can be tackled by a church that has the passion and ability to do it well.

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