

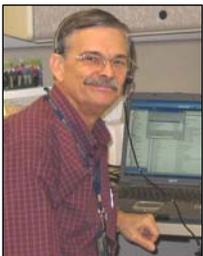
PASTORS' FORUMS

Agency-Sponsored Conferences for Local Church Leaders

A number of mission agencies have held events specifically for pastors and/or the missions leaders of local churches. Postings recently interviewed the church mobilization directors of PIONEERS and SIM about their programs, and talked to several pastors who had attended these events to get their feedback.

PIONEERS' Church Partner Forums

Kelly McClelland



PIONEERS has a two-pronged goal for our forums. First, we want to hear what is on the hearts of the church. To phrase it another way, we want to take the pulse of the missions movement within the church so that we know where the church at large is going.

Second, we want to identify where individual churches are in their missions development. Are they ready to partner, or do they just need help defining where they are and where they are going? We work to uncover what we as an agency can do to assist these local congregations to move forward in missions, and if we determine we aren't the best resource, we can refer them to someone else.

Sometimes churches are surprised that we are more interested in listening to what they have to say than in promoting our agency message. But the purpose of these forums is not to promote PIONEERS. We want to consider roles and responsibilities of both church and agency so that both entities can adjust expectations accordingly.

Forum invitations are extended to churches that send and support PIONEERS missionaries or who are considering sending and supporting one of our workers, although we welcome others on a space-available basis. Our target is to have no more than 50 participants at each forum. We invite senior pastors and missions pastors, and encourage them to bring other missions team personnel with them. The ideal is to have a senior pastor come and bring the church's missions team, but we welcome all who have an influence on missions in their local congregation.

In advance of the forum, I sent participants a series of about 10 newsletters with lots of logistical information. They also receive a book on PIONEERS and a personal note of welcome from our president.

Participants pay their own transportation costs; they are PIONEERS' guests for everything else. We believe this is one way that we can "bless them back" for what they do for us and our missionaries.

Forums begin on Tuesday evening with an informal dinner with our president followed by general introductions. Wednesday is a full day of interactive sessions that include presentations (where everyone is free to stop the speaker in the middle and ask for clarification), panel discussions, and small groups. The topics are ones they have suggested in advance.

At meals, and even during sessions if they choose, participants can connect one-on-one with our department leaders. We always have a "missionary in residence" there as well as a field or regional leader who can explain how his/her field interacts with churches.

One of our most strategic and interesting sessions helps participants analyze their congregation's "missions maturity." Working in small groups, each church completes a self-assessment we developed. Lively discussion around the tables stimulates creativity. At the end of the session, an interactive panel discussion answers questions and provides encouragement.

On Thursday morning, an all-staff devotional time is led by an area or regional leader followed by a short presentation and Q&A time about a hot-button issue they see as important for both the field and the church. This session always provides insight into the field leader's perspective and inevitably is one of our highlights.

The forum concludes with lunch on Thursday, although participants are welcome to extend their time here as our guests. Some take the opportunity to bring their family and go to Disney World before they return home.



Dick Nelson, missions pastor of Fellowship Bible Church in Rogers, Arkansas, participated in one of PIONEERS' Church Partner Forums and shares his experience:

Our church supports PIONEERS missionaries, and I learned a lot about the organization's ethos when our church did a retreat for all of the PIONEERS missionaries in Indonesia last summer. But when I received the invitation to the forum, I realized that as a missions pastor, I had visited only one agency's headquarters, even though I believed it was an ideal way to get to know the organization better. PIONEERS made it easy. The church covered my airfare, and PIONEERS did the rest—even picked me up at the airport.

Prior to the forum, they asked what we wanted to discuss, and because I was intrigued by the concept of church-based teams, I suggested the topic be added to the agenda. At one of our sessions, we had a very provocative discussion that covered the positive and negative aspects of fielding a team from one church. It wasn't a lecture but a "What do you guys think?" roundtable discussion. They even produced a handout with additional resources.

The diversity of participants at the forum was valuable: people from big churches, little churches, charismatic churches, and more formal churches. We were encouraged to meet individually with PIONEERS staff, so I met with the person who heads up missionary care because this is a huge priority for our church. The discussion was very stimulating. It was so encouraging to discover how much they really wanted my input about the workers from our church.

The PIONEERS personnel spoke truth and gave information and resources, but you never felt they were there to push PIONEERS, but to try and help people like me be successful. I would love to go back and take others from our church.



Sandi Kistner, missions pastor at Countryside Christian Center in Clearwater, Florida, reports on the impact of attending two of PIONEERS' Church Partner Forums:

When we heard about the PIONEERS' forum, we saw it as a way to escape the mentality of our own four walls and be exposed to the perspective of the agency and other churches. The program provides a broad view all the way from the mega-church to the "mom-and-pop" size congregation.

My assistant and I were blown away by all we learned. The forums entirely changed my opinion of how to serve our missionaries, and heightened our awareness of how much love and concern they need. We realized that we need to build the relationship between the sending organization and the church so that we can pool our resources. Whether it's a ministry or a marital issue, we need to address it together. I came back with a better understanding of what a sending

organization does and the benefits of sending missionaries with an agency.

I liked the program's diversity. There were speakers, worship time, team building in groups, and projects and questions to work on.

I know that organizations often have meetings for their missionaries, and I wish they would allow church leaders to attend also, even if we have to cover our own expenses. We want to hear from our agencies what is going on and how they are taking care of people on the field.

SIM's Pastors Forums

Les Unruh



SIM's pastors conference is a two-day event with lots of discussion. We initially laid out the schedule with relatively long breaks and meal times, but discovered it worked better to make the sessions longer and just include lots of interaction with each presentation.

SIM limits attendance to approximately 15 and offers the program twice a year. If there are more applicants than spaces, we schedule another a few months later. The program is designed for pastors and missions pastors, and they are encouraged to bring spouses, although not all do. Invitations go out via email.

We work very hard to have an ethnically diverse group, and the diversity provides a valuable dynamic of its own. We have watched racial reconciliation taking place within the intimate group environment.

Each forum has featured largely the same content, although SIM is considering offering an "alumni" conference that would address different topics. The core conference includes a session addressing the vision of SIM, and Steve Strauss, SIM's US director, presents a seminar on the changing face of the global church. The Hispanic pastor of a nearby, multi-ethnic congregation speaks on how to develop a multi-cultural church. A Muslim-background believer presents a session on Islam, and Steve Harling, chairman of SIM's board and a mobilizer with WorldVenture, speaks on how to develop a missional church.

SIM ministry network people interface with the participants in some sessions and at meals. Regional directors are encouraged to come if several pastors from their area are attending.

For two years, SIM also sponsored a retreat for pastors at the YMCA of the Rockies in Estes Park, CO. We thought the beautiful setting and very reasonable cost would make it easy to fill the lodge, but it proved hard to recruit pastors to attend. This year, SIM is moving the program to Branson, MO, where it will be more accessible to many SIM supporting churches.



Haman Cross, Jr., pastor of Rosedale Park Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan, reflects on one of SIM's forums:

The face-to-face interaction builds relationships and allows a pastor to hear the heart of the agency as well as the heart of missionaries and other pastors. The typical pastor's passion and commitment need to be updated, and the forum provides a healthy environment in which to deal with cutting-edge issues related to making a global impact in missions.

The forum gave new life to me. After 35 years of ministry, I was grappling with questions related to the impact of modern-day missions efforts. It was like a breath of fresh air to hear that someone is thinking creatively.

Relationships are extremely important. African-American leaders get on board because of "who" not "what." If there is no relationship, we are not as motivated to be involved. In this case, I attended because my friend Phillip Nelson [SIM's African-American mobilizer] said I needed to be there. And it was really, really good!

This year our church is planning to bring in the pastors from four or five of our partner ministries to sit down for several days and talk about what we can do together that we can't do individually. I will be using what I learned at the SIM forum.



Matthew James, pastor of Trinity Bible Church in Rock Hill, South Carolina, adds his thoughts:

For the average pastor, it is all he can do to keep his head above water week to week with preaching, administering financial and human resources, and trying to make a dent on the church's immediate circle of influence. We might not readily articulate it, but, although we believe in missions, we don't feel we have the capacity to make a significant investment.

However, when a mission agency reaches out to us with a reminder that the biblical mandate rests with the local church and that a partnership with the church is necessary for God's blessing, it elevates the office of pastor in an almost irresistible way. It pushes us to take a sober look at what we

can do to meet the need of the world, even if we only have five loaves and two fish.

My passions were stoked and my creative energies refueled at the forum. There is no substitute for seeing a current example of the theory in practice. The diversity of the forum—in ethnic, racial, and geographic terms—was especially beneficial. It called my attention to the fact that I am part of something bigger and reoriented me to what really matters.

There was also significant take-away value. SIM gave us free books and put in our hands bibliographies, a list of useful websites, a PowerPoint presentation on CD, and an audio sermon. These things keep stoking the fire! If I can go home and raise up a flag bearer or champion in my church, I can put these resources into his/her hands.

Other Church Forum Ideas

Golf Retreat for Church Leaders. Biblical Ministries Worldwide holds pastors summits similar to the ones described above, but they also sponsor an annual four-day golf retreat called "Keeping on Course." In addition to playing a lot of golf, pastors benefit from sessions on spiritual health, ministry, goal setting, and relationships.

Missions Pastors Retreat. WorldVenture's Northwest staff sponsors an annual missions pastors retreat to which other agencies are welcome if they help to subsidize the cost. Held in a comfortable but fairly remote setting, the Wednesday noon through Friday afternoon program includes a nationally known speaker as well as panel discussions. Spouses are welcome.

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