

Issues and Trends in Missions Leadership Team Structure

by David Mays



The missions leadership team chairman of a local church called me recently and said that he dismissed his entire committee and is starting a new team from scratch. At a monthly missions pastors' meeting that I attend, "Restructuring the Missions Leadership Team" was a very popular topic of discussion. Many missions committees today are restructuring. What is driving this restructuring? On the surface, it seems to be occurring for at least three reasons:

- 1) The need for increased efficiency and effectiveness
- 2) The change in missions involvement from just giving money to more personalized participation
- 3) The breakdown of traditional committees because people are less willing to spend time in meetings, especially those they consider non-productive.

But below these surface issues are deeper, long-term changes in our society and in the Church, including the following:

A shift from homogeneity to diversity in spiritual heritage.

While the majority of a given congregation used to share a common spiritual heritage, today the people of most local churches come from very diverse theological, and even unchurched backgrounds. Missions leaders cannot assume a personal commitment to Christ and to his mission. They must help develop it.

A shift from an assumed common knowledge of missions and missionaries to a frequent ignorance of missions.

Fewer people understand the Biblical basis of missions, and how and why we do missions. This demands that missions leaders be educators.

A shift from church-as-central to church-as-one-of-many-priorities in the lives of church members.

When people's lives centered around church, serving on committees was understood and accepted. As people balance the many facets of their contemporary lives, they tend to limit their church involvement more strictly. Missions leaders face more work with fewer people willing to give fewer hours to the cause.

A shift from a short to a long and competitive church agenda.

Churches now run an ever-increasing number of ministries. More ministries mean more competition for staff and ministry funds. This complicates the recruitment and education process for missions leaders and missions dollars.



A shift from the mission field being distant, to being everywhere.

Whereas different-culture, unreached people used to live at a distance, today they live in close proximity to our churches. Same-culture ministries are also included as missions. This means that missions leaders have the dual responsibilities of helping the congregation to personally reach out cross-culturally and of supporting local ministries. This also complicates the evaluation and decision-making processes for missions support.

An increase in the ability and inclination to travel.

The relatively low cost of global travel makes short-term missions trips popular and valuable for education and exposure. This adds the responsibilities of planning such trips, and training and debriefing participants. It also adds new opportunities and complexities to developing and implementing missions strategy.

A change in new generations' preferred missions involvement.

We are witnessing the passing of the baton from the Builder generation (born through 1945), who gave generously to missions but were often passively involved, to younger generations who are eager for - and grow in commitment through - personal involvement, but who are weaker in giving. The missions leadership team cannot simply receive and spend funds. It must identify and provide personalized involvement opportunities while encouraging giving to missions.

In the past, the job of the missions committee has been either distributing missions funds (usually in independent churches) or organizing an annual missions event (often in denominational churches). Today, the missions committee that focuses exclusively or primarily on these two tasks is losing ground. Much more is required.

As we can see from the above, today's missions leaders face much greater challenges in areas such as developing a missions mindset in the congregation (and church leaders), overcoming missions resistance and stereotypes, finding fresh opportunities for personalized congregational involvement, and communicating over the din of many ministries. They are increasingly pressed to defend the missions budget and demonstrate results for the money and effort expended. The historical missions committee is rooted in an earlier era, and may not understand the current world or be skilled for its challenges.

Where re-structuring is occurring, it is doing so for either positive or negative reasons. On the positive side, re-structuring is the result of the church developing a vision or strategy for its missions ministry. Some new structure, and frequently new

blood, may be required to accomplish the new vision or to do the work more effectively.

On the negative side committees sometimes dissolve and are periodically resurrected because they cannot gather momentum. They can't gather momentum because people don't get to the meetings, the meetings aren't run well, very little is accomplished, and nobody objects very much. In such cases church leaders have not made missions a high enough priority that they recruit top people and insist on results as they do with other high profile programs.

I can think of two ways that missions leadership teams are functioning differently today:

First, committees are becoming more like working teams. I see less willingness to allow people to come to monthly meetings who simply want to give opinions and make decisions. Church leaders want individuals who will buy into the direction of leadership and pitch in and do the work. Task force leaders come to the meeting to report on 1) progress in their areas, 2) what remains to be done, 3) when it will be done, and 4) to make future recommendations. The rest of the team then gives input. I also see an increasing amount of

communication occurring by email prior to or in place of meetings.

Second, the busy-ness of our culture is making it difficult to get large teams together for meetings. Churches that are re-structuring missions leadership are tending to place the responsibility for big-picture decision-making in the hands of a smaller executive team of two or three. They then meet with the larger group periodically to cast vision, get input, and farm out specific tasks. For example, the executive team will decide what should be accomplished through next year's missions conference, the dates, the speaker, and possibly the theme. This decision is discussed with a larger team and further conference planning is delegated to a leader or group.

Perhaps your church has already evaluated its ministry structure in response to today's shifting sociological climate; if not, these may be starting points for adjusting your missions leadership structure and its practices, before it becomes time to "start over from scratch."

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