

Developing your church's global mission strategy

What are we aiming for?

Christian leaders are always in danger of being cowards, especially when it comes to asking our people to do something uncomfortable, risky or on the edge. Fear of getting some bad press can turn us into people-pleasers. At its heart, this is fear of man, which the Bible calls a "snare" (Prov. 29:25).

But we're servants of the Living God. *He* is the potter and we're clay. We're crucified with Christ, and we no longer live, but Christ lives in us. And, as church leaders, we shepherd our flock. So surely, therefore, **we ought to be thinking deliberately about deploying our people to fulfil the Great Commission** - however bold we, and they, will need to be.

Mission is a local-global continuum: it starts in our hearts, matters on our doorsteps and doesn't stop until the ends of the earth¹. **There is, therefore, both wisdom and consistency in establishing priorities for your church's mission involvement which are reflected both locally and globally**, such as reaching a particular people-group or working among people in a particular kind of need.

Why do it this way?

Let's begin with some foundational assumptions:

1. **Going global is not optional**

It may seem strange to have to say this, but many churches put more time into planning coffee after the Sunday meeting than into planning overseas or cross-cultural mission involvement. This would be good if Jesus had said the Spirit would give us power to be coffee drinkers in Jerusalem, but not Judea, Samaria or the ends of the earth, but He said something quite different (Mt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8)! We have a global mandate. Opting out is a denial of Scriptural authority.

¹ Steve Timmis (those words, or others to that effect)

2. **God has something specific for your church to do**

It is impossible to say it better than this: *“we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”* (Eph 2:10). Ephesians is all about churches demonstrating the glory of the gospel of unity, including breaking down dividing walls of ethnic hostility (2:14) and demonstrating the wisdom of God even to the heavenly realms (3:10) - the body of Christ following its head (1:22-23).

3. **Going / sending are not secondary after ‘we build ourselves up first’**

I’m convinced this little bit of error is one of the most powerful devices of the Enemy to keep God’s people on the sidelines while the world, literally, goes to hell: *“When we just grow as a body, then He’ll use us to reach out”*. Of course, there can be some valid elements within that thinking, but even a cursory reading of Acts or the Epistles surely makes clear that from day one (post-Pentecost) God was using the apostles and the churches they planted, just as they were, to extend the reach of the Kingdom by preaching, planting and doing good works.

We already are *“a chosen people, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, God’s special possession that (we) may declare the praises of him who called (us) out of darkness into his wonderful light”* (1 Peter 2:9,10). There’s no suggestion of waiting and becoming here. God declares us fit and ready for His purposes - and gives us a mandate that is intrinsically linked to our salvation and being His people.

4. **A global strategy is for your whole church, not a few ‘called’ individuals...**

Personal and specific callings exist, in my view (I discovered mine *after* a few years working cross-culturally.) But for God’s people, the call is out and has been since Jesus’ time. As others before have suggested, maybe our churches would be more healthy if we regularly asked, *“Who’s called to stay home?”*

When we are persuaded that local churches - like, and including, ours - are at the heart of God’s global mission, we’ll be willing to find out the role(s) He has for our own local church.

5. **...and so ‘whole-church commitment’ ought to, and can, be the goal**

Mission is for everyone in your church and leadership is about creating a culture in and for your church. A church needs to develop a culture where missional thinking is normal, and everyone understands they have a role to play.

My wife, Audrey, was working on a teaching conference for women in Albania. We would ask the delegates to pay something, but the hotel prices meant that some would not be able to make it without subsidies. We were wondering and praying about how the finance would come.

Then Audrey got an email from our sending church. A couple were celebrating their diamond wedding and asked that, instead of gifts, donations went to subsidise delegates to attend the conference. That couple gets it: even in your ninth decade of life, God has a role for you in global mission.

6. **Vision is Not Your Sole Possession, Mr Big-Shot!**

Vision doesn't just come from 'visionaries' with titles, offices (and iPads!) God can - and does - give His vision to simple, faithful people. A wise leader will see their job as discerning and gathering vision (even better in a team context) from wherever it springs up in their church. Pray, listen, learn and gather ideas. Publicly affirm those who gave them to you. Ironically, you'll usually find that people get excited by this process, and start sacrificing for 'your' vision.

See also forthcoming chapter 'Identifying a mission team'

Where do we start?

Pick a strategy. Any strategy!

The important (though often not obvious) thing about a global mission strategy is simply to have one. Just as Paul had a big vision (take the gospel to the Gentiles) which drove and shaped his approach, so too the big picture of God's vision for your church can and will shape your criteria for developing existing or new mission connections and partnerships.

The process of developing your church's global mission strategy involves implicitly or explicitly answering questions such as:

- What are church and mission for?
- What is the good news of the kingdom (for a particular people or situation)?

For some churches, it means using existing *local* vision as the starting-point to establish a strategy for *global* involvement: Is your church passionate about, preaching? Why not find out how you could serve Bible teachers in another country? Is a particular people-group well represented in your local area or student population? How could you serve those people in Christ's name both here and in their home country?

For others, thinking through a strategy for overseas mission can help to shape local focus and ministry priorities. This may mean assessing what priorities and areas of ministry are already represented among existing mission partnerships. Or this may be the opportunity for you to 'start from scratch' in evaluating how your church is particularly placed, gifted, equipped and enthused to reach people – home or away.

Radstock offers *Church Mission Consultations* for leadership teams, mission committees or whole church families to help in this process.

See also the forthcoming chapter: *'Auditing your church for mission'*.

Sometimes the best catalyst to working out what to do is simply to do something! Try some or all of these steps to 'godly activism':

- **Cash in the inheritance** - what is God doing in people's hearts and minds? Build on it. Fast!
- **Be a blatant opportunist** - what is simply waiting for someone to act? Take it, it's free.
- **Milk your relationships** - who do you know? How can they help you, and you help them? Ask!
- **'Fail forward': start badly** - *"anything worth doing, is worth doing badly to get started"*.
- **Frighten the 'old guard'!** If the 'we've-never-done-that-before' brigade like your ideas, think again; you're probably being way too timid.

Focus!

Once you've adopted a strategy, stick to it. Ferociously. Set some parameters for what you want your global mission to accomplish and use these as a filter through which all corporate mission involvement must pass.

I once heard a pastor from a small, rural church describing how his church had fostered a church-planting movement in a city in Central Asia: a tough place to do mission. He had enlisted not only his church, but also other local churches and even businesses to contribute. I asked him his 'secret': "Relentlessly say 'no' to things not in your vision." This pastor understood that his church could not reach the whole world, and so they would focus on just one city.

Conversely, a large, well-known and active church wanted to appoint a new member of staff, whose role would include giving shape to their church's global mission initiatives. One leader explained, "We have 25 missionaries sent out from our church, all over the world, fully-supported, with a surplus in our mission fund...and no idea what we're doing!" They were acutely aware that a lack of strategy, not of funds or willing people, meant that they were not being effective.

In many cases, a deliberate strategy for global mission involvement will help to establish a smaller number of deeper commitments, rather than an array of more transitory and potentially 'reactive' partnerships.

Warning! You may well get criticism for this. But fear of such criticism or of the implications – for individuals and for the church - of a deliberate approach to mission partners and partnerships can be the biggest obstacle to implementing such a strategy.

Also see 'What problems might we hit...' section below

Be non-strategic!

“Strategy is over-rated”, says Tim Chester, because the Holy Spirit is *“the great missionary strategist”*². Being fellow-workers with God calls us to be open to the ‘opportunism’ of following the Holy Spirit (cp. Philip in Acts 8) as a complement and check to all our strategising. This is God’s vision and mission before it is ours!

Identify pioneer / ‘apostolic’ people within your church and give them the room to explore opportunities. If you don’t feel like you have those people, why not look to partner with other churches who do have them, or are more pioneering as a whole? But almost certainly God has them in your church. (N.B. they may come across as restless, troublesome, and, if they’re young, a bit arrogant. But if you can shape them, they’ll surprise you with how much they get done.)

With criteria in place to shape your strategy, and the readiness to adapt and be flexible, pray and dream dreams! Step out in faith and allow God’s Spirit to lead where and how your church can be involved in His mission around the world. See your job as to lead and mobilise people to play their part in fulfilling the Great Commission.

Case-study: Stopsley Baptist Church (SBC) – Luton, UK

Tasked with developing SBC’s global mission involvement, Brian Jose consulted interested people, which included some with axes to grind, some with clear ideas, others with no ideas but very willing hearts.

From those ‘come one, come all’ meetings, a small group was formed, which combined those with big ideas and ‘worker-bees’. This team began to pray both for long-term ideas and short-term opportunities.

In God’s providence, the Kosovo refugee crisis hit the headlines not long after this, and there was a significant response of ‘what are we going to do?’ among the church. This global event – combined with some existing relationships with church leaders in Kosovo / Albania – led them to get involved alongside Balkan churches in responding to the immediate need.

Through that providential short-term opportunity, strategic relationships began to reveal the potential for long-term partnership. There were people and churches in Albania to whom SBC were keen to ‘hitch their wagon’ – an important factor as in someone else’s country, SBC knew they were not the ones to take the lead.

² Radstock Conference, 2009

From there, the SBC team has chosen to focus on three main priorities:

- ***servicing the poor***
- ***starting churches among unreached people***
- ***developing missional church leaders***

The preference is to partner where there are at least two of those three in view. As Brian puts it: "Bob Geldof may be better at serving the poor than we are – but he's not also church planting!"

In addition, SBC decided to limit further development to specific regions in order to keep focus. Historical connections, potential local-global links and growing interest across the church family were all factors in choosing where to direct future efforts.

Some short-term teams and placements were initiated to help explore other possibilities. Elders and Global Mission Team members were encouraged to be part of those teams, in order to help the church discern future direction. Other parts of the world were excluded so that the church could focus its efforts on these locations.

From vision to reality

As you arrive at a strategy, the next step is for it to be put into practice in terms of both long- and short-term mission involvement and activities.

With others on your leadership / global mission team:

- Ask, "*What's the most we can imagine God doing through us in the next 3 years?*"
- Tell people what you think God wants from your church.
- Set some goals to make it happen.
- Get scared you might fail publicly, and pray a lot!

Recognise that there will be different 'seasons' in the implementation of your strategy. In the early stages of its development or (r)evolution, it is good to have, and communicate, a spirit of exploration! Encourage people to get behind initial projects, trips and consultations with energy and enthusiasm, while waiting to see which of them will or won't lead to longer-term opportunities and relationships.

In the long run, short-term teams, trips and projects can be much better developed in the context of longer-term partnerships and initiatives. How about, for example, sending a team from your church to help lead a children's camp run by a partner church overseas? Longer-term relationships make a great context within which to develop a program(me) that furthers mission and discipleship for both/all churches.

What problems might there be (and how can we avoid them)?

Keeping the Strategy Fresh

The world is full of 'monuments' in the form of tired, less-effective organisations and initiatives that were once exciting and cutting-edge. Vision leaks, fades and just becomes out of touch with changing realities.

So make it a point to have an annual review, and a major re-think of vision every three years or so. You will probably find that some of what you're doing is still right on target, some will need refinement, and others just need to be learned from and stopped. Stopping something, however, usually treads on someone's sacred ground. If it is yours, it will require humility. If it is someone else's it may require sensitivity, envisioning and courage in the face of resistance or disappointment.

- **Review and renew:** What's working? What's not? Get an outside facilitator to help your team review this, so that you can participate in the discussion without dictating the terms.
- **Consider injecting new ideas:** This will help broaden commitment and keep you seeking after God. What's bubbling out there? What are people coming to you and talking about? Maybe it's time to do some new exploring.
- **Keep an eye on team chemistry:** Do you need to add or subtract people from the team? Probably.
- **Trust your team:** They're doing this for free (usually), or even at great personal cost. These people care and pray. Learn from, and lean on, them.
- **Do Ephesians 4 stuff:** Your job is to be an apostle, prophet, pastor, teacher or evangelist to equip your people for works of service. You equip, so they can serve.

'Put a carp in the tank'

Apparently, when live trout are shipped long distances in tanks, they become lethargic and when served at a restaurant, the taste disappoints. Someone figured out that putting a carp in the tank kept the trout active because the carp makes them nervous and active...

So get someone on your team who frightens you with their vision and activism. They're probably the voice of God to you.

When good people present ideas outside your church's vision

When an earnest, dedicated believer says they want to serve street children in Brazil, though your church has a focused commitment to the poor in Asia, how can you say "no"? Of course, there is a possibility that God is speaking to your church to initiate something new. But people often express genuine, but general, desires in terms that are concrete and specific.

As a church leader, you may need to help them discern if they could just as well be expressing God's call as part of your church's existing commitments. For others, it will be important to let people go with the church's blessing, encouraging everyone to be doing all they can for the gospel, while recognising that there are only some things the church as a whole can get behind.

Here are some alternatives we've seen churches use:

- Allow people to develop a team within the church and to privately recruit co-workers, finance, etc. After two years, if the work is still going, give it a profile corporately and in your budget.
- Just say 'no' (and seek to re-direct the person to something within the church's vision and calling).
- Consider sending the person - ideally with others - as part of a process to see if God is leading your church to a new thing (remember, vision is not always 'top down').
- Have various categories of workers and regulate levels of support and public profile accordingly.
- Link the initiative to another aspect of your church's process of making disciples and allow the initiative to grow in that context.

Our youth ministry has slowly developed links with the Philippines. It started from a fairly traditional "youth short-term mission" but has grown to incorporate, at various times, hosting Filipinos in our church to serve in the UK, and soon, sending a 'grown-up' ex-youth group member to the Philippines for at least two years.

Relationships with Agencies

Radstock's emphasis on the place of the local church at the heart of mission is sometimes misheard as a judgment on mission agencies. This is not the case. Our conviction is rather that if God has a place for our churches at the heart of mission, He is surely not looking for passive or delegated mission ('by proxy'). So in any mission partnerships – with other churches and/or agencies – look to:

- cultivate a whole-church commitment to mission, with people across the church engaging and contributing in different ways according to their gifts and opportunities
- develop true two-way partnerships with churches and missionaries – where the global mission involvement can influence and benefit the local church and vice versa.

Some agencies are more willing to engage in this kind of partnership than others. Your hopes for engagement might cause surprise, hesitation or even alarm. They may not be used to such active interest by churches. At the furthest extreme, churches can encounter a culture of agency 'experts' detached from any local church (sending or receiving). But we need to remember: missionaries aren't the experts, locals are.

On the other hand, even very traditional agencies can be very receptive to, or won over by, a consistent (and persistent!) desire to communicate and partner. When I was new in my job as my church's local-global mission pastor I was told by one agency, *"give us your money and your people and let us do the work"*. We didn't. Another very well-established agency, who initially barely let me get past the phone receptionist, eventually came back and told me how much they appreciated our church's engagement - and even asked us to host a national event for them.

As with any partnership, it is likely to take time to develop a relationship of trust and work out what different roles the church and any agency are best placed to play. The focus needs to be on what is good for the gospel on the front-line. The question is not about 'yes or no to agencies' but about whole-church commitment to mission.

Other resources

Radstock Mission Consultation (contact katy@radstock.org / kara@radstock.org)

Articles

<http://krishk.com/2012/09/disintegration-of-mission/>

<http://vinothramachandra.wordpress.com/2010/05/07/who-says-no-to-mission-trips/>