

Integrated Overseas Mission - All Saints', Marple

I would like to start off by saying what a privilege it is to us, as a family, to have All Saints' as one of our partnering churches and we feel that our relationship both with the church, as well as individuals within the church, has been a real source of encouragement to us. Often we are aware of a church's faithful prayer and financial support year in year out and feel, whilst home on assignment, that it would be nice to be able to offer something in return as a way of maybe helping the church to continue in its overseas mission partnership development.

I don't pretend to be an expert in church-mission partnerships but as we travel around the UK speaking to churches and through personal experience we start to see some of the struggles local UK churches have in relating to a ministry that is often out of sight. World mission is one of those elements of church life that seems to be, more often than not, a little harder to sustain profile and congregational vision. I am a firm believer that global mission as well as home mission is part of the church's DNA, and the challenge is to develop within the local congregation a balanced view and involvement that is both practical and sustainable of what is often referred to as the great commission.

Imparters and developers of vision

It's always very encouraging to see church leaders who have a passion and involvement in world mission. I don't think we always appreciate how important this is for the way a congregation understands or engages in world outreach. However, one of the main issues in many churches is that the minister is often pulled in so many directions that he or she isn't able to commit the time and energy needed to bringing world mission before the church in the creative and consistent manner that it requires. With this in mind I would like to suggest that finding a **champion**¹ for world mission would be a massive help to oversee this area of church life.

As well as having a passion for overseas mission this person would need to be able to communicate well and inspire people, but I would suggest that their main role would be to coordinate missionary-church links and seek creative ways to engage the church, which is often the greatest challenge.

Adoption and beyond

The idea of cells adopting missionaries is an excellent one and we have seen this model used in other churches, but one of the main frustrations has been to understand what this means in its out working and with this in mind I would like to suggest the following.

- No orphans please

We have always been thrilled at those groups who took it upon themselves to adopt the Gibsons, but I don't know if all the link missionaries have the same experience, I think it is important to mention the necessity of making sure that each link missionary of All Saints' does have a cell (or cells) who have taken the commitment to building a relationship with the missionaries. Ideally there will already be some kind of link there, but if not it just means the initial forming of relationships will take a little more effort on both parts.

- Reminders of being part of the body

Often the missionary has a sense of isolation as they serve in a context that is not their country of origin which is often compounded by the frustrations of having to work under stressful circumstances with very little emotional support. It's not that he or she doesn't have national friends, but it is the mutual understanding of where each other is coming from which is often lacking. I don't think I can emphasise enough the value of hearing from home. It gives the missionary a sense that they are not in this alone, that they are still part of the body of Christ and that the church in their home country is praying with them and for them.

- Two Way Communications

As with any relationship there is the need for a certain level of commitment by both parties and with this comes mutual accountability. As link missionaries this is one area we have not been great at, but will hopefully improve on as we re-establish links with the family at All Saints'.

Communication needs to flow both ways so, as the church family in the UK communicates with link missionary, link missionary communicates information, be it to do with ministry or personal, back to the given cell².

- When?

Time needs to be planned into cell group programmes that offer some level of continuity, for if something is inconsistent vision and passion can run the risk of dissipating. On the other hand, sustainability is also important. If we set our goals too high and try to do too much we run the risk of becoming either worn out or frustrated. With this in mind I would like to suggest that a cell commit one evening every two months³ focusing on their link missionary.

- What?

I don't think many would disagree that forming a partner relationship with link missionaries is a good goal to have. A relationship whereby those in the church have a sense of ownership in what their link missionary is involved in overseas. But how does one get to that point? It's often hard to think of how to connect with your link missionary, but I think one of the important things is to keep what ever you do engaging, meaningful, and be creative.

Here are a few very practical steps a cell can take to move in the right direction.

- Communication

- E-mail (it doesn't need to be an epistle. Sometimes just a quick "Hi, how are things? We are doing this, that and the other...")
- Letter (it's always nice to get real post. A picture to stick on the wall etc)
- Skype (speak to your missionary on cell night. Inexpensive with Skype)

Regular communication is essential but it doesn't happen automatically, even with the best will in the world. These simple things need to be planned and programmed in for both the missionaries and the cell group.

As I said, any relationship is two way. Make the time to let the missionary know what is going on in your life and what God is doing in your life. It's always encouraging to hear how things are with you and it makes the relationship more authentic.

[We also need to be aware that some mission situations are more sensitive than others and information may be hard to get hold of and communication may need to be done with great sensitivity so that the missionary and their ministry are not put in jeopardy.]

- Prayer
 - About the ministry. Purposeful communication should facilitate a good flow of information as material.
 - For personal issues. Sometimes you will need to read between the lines to pick up what some of the issues are. Remember, it takes time to build a relationship of trust.
 - If your link missionary is in a sensitive context, prayer is all the more important even if information flow is limited.
- Remembering events
 - Christmas
 - Easter
 - Birthdays

Find out what your missionary may miss that you could send over, or need that they can't get out in the field. If they have children it's often helpful to send things that are going to help keep the kids tuned into home culture.

P.S. Post is not always reliable and so it is always wise to check how long it takes for things to get there.

P.P.S. We ran a competition once to see how creative folk could be in sending out chocolate without it leaking everywhere in the heat.

- Visit your missionary on the field if appropriate

I'm aware that this is a considerable thing for a cell to even contemplate, but I know it's not completely outrageous as many All Saints' members have got to know Jenny Green and her ministry in this way. Maybe a cell could work on setting an All Saints' team to go and visit a link missionary. The feasibility of this would very much depend on the context of the link missionary and would need to be done in partnership with them. And keep in mind that projects aren't the only reason for making the trip. Make sure your missionary visits your cell at least once when home on assignment, more if possible. It's all about making a connection and growing a sense of partnership.
- Bringing your missionary before the church

Not every one is called to overseas mission and, due to geographical and cultural barriers, engagement in meaningful ministry overseas is often limited for most (unless God calls you to serve overseas alongside your missionary which is always a risk!!!) On the other hand, the missionary also has limitations to their ministry in that he/she is unable to bring their work before the home church on a regular basis which is vital for mobilizing the whole church in prayer. In this partnership each has an important role to play and to some extent each relies on the other to play their part.

Here are some thoughts on what this may look like and I am aware that some of these are possibly already happening.

- Periodically, depending on time available, a cell may be able to present to the church an aspect of the missionary's ministry and lead the church in prayer and praise.
- Maybe each month different cells could arrange the mission notice board to focus on up-to-date activities that are taking place in the field {could be co-ordinated with the above prayer/presentation).
- Periodically a cell (or members of a cell) could have input in the youth and children's work in a relevant manner, or at least provide information/motivation if appropriate⁴.

Summary

I'm aware that the above may seem a lot and cell leaders may feel this is just one extra thing to juggle, but any ministry should not become a burden. If time is programmed into the life of the cell in a realistic manner and the above suggestions are used to aid the process of developing authentic mission partnerships my hope is that this would become a joy.

For cell members to be engaged in world mission the way we go about it must be realistic, practical and engaging. The above list is by no means exhaustive, rather, we should think of other creative ways we can take this aspect of God's ministry and find how we can weave it into the fabric of church life. God has a heart for the nations and the body of Christ must seek to learn what role it has to play, Maybe not all are called to serve in far-off countries, but we are all called to be a part of what God is doing in His world and I believe that this is a great opportunity to do just that.

Mark Gibson, February 2010

¹ This is a term that our mission uses for someone who's role is to promote and develop a specific ministry on the field.

² Although prayer/news letters are vital I find more personal communication is needed for the relationship to have a greater level of authenticity.

³ This is only a suggestion and will need to be worked out by those responsible for cell programmes.

⁴ I believe that to engage the young people in world mission is so important as it could have enormous impact on the direction and values of a young person's life.