

The Importance of Church Connections for the International Mission Board to Thrive

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The Apostle Paul writes to the local church at Philippi of his joyful prayers for them due to his partnership with them. He states in Philippians 1:3-5, “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.” Paul’s example of communicating gratitude, encouragement, prayers, and God’s work is a model that the IMB and its missionaries can emulate.

Nehrbass and Dunaetz presented an empirical study on the relationship between the missionary and the church. Using qualitative techniques, their grounded theory study was based on semi-structured interviews with 17 missionaries and church leaders. Their research aim was to understand why missionaries and churches “form, maintain, and dissolve relationships with each other” (2018). After analyzing the data, the most common theme that emerged from the interviews and appeared over 111 times was the impor-

¹ Kenneth Nehrbass and David Dunaetz, “A Multiple Motives Theory of Church and Missionary Relationships,” in *Missiology: An International Review*, 46, no. 4 (2018): 388-406.

tance of “personal connection.”¹

The IMB addresses the world’s greatest problem—lostness—with a missionary presence to share God’s good news of salvation among the lost peoples and places around the world. But, missionaries on their own are not enough. They need to be connected with the prayers, partnership, giving, and sending of other members from our Southern Baptist churches to support their ministries and strategies. The faithful prayers and sacrificial financial support of churches as they develop partnerships with missionaries and their ministries serve to encourage and inspire both the missionary and the local church.

In the past, the IMB’s Field Personnel Orientation (or FPO, that all new missionaries attend before being sent out to their missionary field locations) training staff encouraged the new missionaries to connect well with Southern Baptist churches. They were mostly encouraged to develop and deepen relationships with at least 3-5 Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) churches with whom they were in close contact. Missionaries were encouraged to stay in touch on the field through various communication avenues such as e-mail, sending out personal and ministry newsletters, sharing about the needs on the field, and asking for prayer.

Then, when missionaries came home on their Stateside Assignment (STAS, formerly called furlough), one of the main things they were encouraged to do with their church relationships were to visit these churches and deepen their relationship with them. IMB missionaries on Stateside Assignment (STAS) were also guided to speak at Global Impact Conferences (GIC) and other mission conferences hosted at SBC churches across the United States. During their STAS, missionaries were guided to designate a portion of their time on STAS for rest time, personal growth/development time, family time with relatives, and time to re-connect with their churches.

However, IMB missionaries were not obligated or required to visit a certain number of SBC churches while on their STAS. In addition, no one kept them accountable to find out if they were connecting while they were

home on STAS. They were just encouraged to do these things. Therefore, the IMB estimated that “almost 50% of the 47,000 SBC churches had no known connection to an IMB missionary.”² Missionaries were connecting with only the churches they were sent from in addition to a few others that they had contact with.

When Paul Chitwood became president of the IMB in 2019, he realized the current system of missionaries building relationships with SBC churches was not enough. IMB’s new president had formerly served as an IMB trustee and as State Executive Director for the Kentucky Baptist State Convention. Chitwood stated regarding many SBC churches not having a relationship at all with IMB missionaries, “We don’t have a resource problem; we have a relationship problem.” Furthermore, the reality at the end of 2019 was we had 47,000 SBC churches with about 3600 IMB field missionary personnel. Only 54% of these SBC churches were financially supporting the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering (LMCO).³

Chitwood implemented a new set of goals for the organization titled “2025 Strategic Objectives.” Two of these objectives related to the IMB and IMB missionaries working closer with SBC churches. The first of these was “To mobilize 75% of our SBC churches to prayerfully and financially support the LMCO.” The second objective was “To increase LMCO receipts 6% annually.”⁴

Thus, to implement these strategic initiatives, a new church connection paradigm for IMB active missionaries to connect and engage with all of the SBC churches began in 2020. The IMB Core Leadership Team, working in conjunction with each Affinity Group Leader around the world, decided to

² Caroline Anderson, “IMB Introduces Church Connections, May 2021, <https://www.imb.org/2021/05/10/imb-introduces-church-connections/>

³ IMB Staff Writer, “Southern Baptist Churches needed to fulfill IMB’s 2025 Targets, August 2021, <https://www.imb.org/2021/08/25/southern-baptist-churches-needed-fulfill-imbs-2025-targets/>

⁴ Ibid.

send one IMB career couple per each affinity group to the IMB headquarters office in Richmond, VA to serve a 3-year MAG (Missionary Assigned Globally) term. This position was called the Affinity Stateside Associate (ASA). The main task of each affinity's ASA was to work with their affinity leadership team and the missionaries within their affinity to help them connect on a quarterly basis with a portfolio of SBC churches they had been assigned based on their STAS zip code.

In addition, with the beginning of the IMB's Church Connections Initiative, Field Personnel Orientation (FPO) training staff collaborated with the ASAs to present and equip new missionaries to connect well with Southern Baptist churches. The goal of the IMB Church Connections Initiative is for each SBC church to have a relationship with an active IMB missionary unit (either a single missionary unit or a missionary unit that is a couple) that helps them to grow in their understanding of missions and hear firsthand stories of how God is working around the world. Churches also learn how to deepen their involvement in missions and become closer partners with the IMB.

Initially, this was begun as a pilot project for one year. This pilot project was officially launched in August of 2020. Ten percent of the active IMB missionaries on the field were asked if they would be willing to participate and assigned a portfolio of SBC churches. They were to reach out and connect each quarter with each of the churches in their portfolio. Missionaries recorded their engagements to allow the ASAs and the IMB Data Team to know how each missionary on the field was doing each quarter with their connection/engagement activity with their portfolios. After the pilot, the church connections initiative was then rolled out in two additional phases for all of our 3600 IMB active missionaries around the world.

In mid-2021, the second phase included all IMB missionary field

leadership. At first all long-term (career) missionaries were assigned 20 SBC churches based on their STAS zip code, and they could add other SBC churches to their portfolio such as those churches that were their home church, sending churches, praying churches, and partnering churches. The third and final phase was launched in late-2021 to include all remaining active IMB missionary personnel.

Most long-term missionaries have on average around 25 SBC churches in their portfolios. Mid-term (Journeymen, ISC, Masters, Macedonia) missionaries were initially assigned 10 SBC churches based on their zip code, and they too added other churches as well. Most Mid-term missionaries have on average around 10-15 SBC churches in their portfolios to connect with each quarter. In early 2023, the number of assigned churches to all new long-term and mid-term missionaries was increased. Long-term missionaries are now assigned 25 SBC churches, and Mid-term missionaries are assigned 15 churches. This increase came about because of the realization that there were still thousands of churches without a missionary assigned to them.

The church connection task for missionaries is to reach out and connect with all of the SBC churches in their portfolio at least once per quarter, and to record this connection/engagement every quarter. The IMB data team gives the ASAs the stats on how everyone in each affinity is doing with their connections tasks. This initiative helps missionaries keep track of their progress in connecting with all of their SBC churches on a regular basis. Another way to hold missionaries accountable to connecting well was for each IMB missionary to have a Guide goal that their supervisor could assist them with reaching each quarter. The ASAs also work closely with each of their Affinity Group Leadership Teams (AGLT) to coach them to encourage their affinities and clusters to connect well.

After three years, most of the affinities are seeing progress in terms of their missionaries engaging with SBC churches, but there are still some slow adapters who are learning and adjusting to connect with the churches in their portfolio each quarter. One challenge that many of the missionaries face is that they reach out and connect via email or telephone call efforts

with the SBC churches in their portfolio, but do not hear a response from the churches. This may be due to a number of possible factors such as someone not answering church emails or the telephone, or email addresses that are unknown being filtered out into junk mail boxes. Or it may be the case that pastors and churches do receive the emails, but are busy and too overwhelmed to make a personal reply. This could cause the missionaries to wonder if the church contact data is current and correct, or if the church has closed down since they are not receiving any response to their connections efforts. Communication and building a relationship takes time and trust.

It is important for the missionaries to continue to reach out, even if they do not receive a response from their churches, with the hope that eventually they will hear a response in the future. We also greatly encourage our SBC churches that if they receive an email or letter or postcard from IMB missionaries, that someone from the church would take the initiative to respond and help build a relationship with our IMB missionaries. This will help SBC churches to come alongside the IMB in the areas of praying, giving, going, and sending.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome about the importance of the local church and the missionary mutually encouraging one another. He states in Romans 1:8-12, “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God’s will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.”

The IMB’s Church Connections Initiative that began three years ago will continue moving forward. The hope is that this program will allow the missionaries and SBC churches to develop a thriving relationship with one another that is mutually encouraging to the church and to the missionary, resulting in even greater kingdom impact in addressing the greatest problem

in the world of lostness.

Jeff and Rose Waligora have served with the International Mission Board (IMB) since 1997. Jeff has a MA degree in Bible/Theology and Church History from the Wheaton College Graduate School, and Rose also completed her MA degree there in Missions/Intercultural Studies with TESL/TEFL emphasis. They both earned PhDs in Intercultural Studies/Missions from Biola University. They served amongst unreached people groups as strategy coordinators for evangelism, discipleship, church planting, and leadership development. They also supervised mission personnel and teams across the Asia Pacific Rim, and have experience in training, networking, and mobilization. Jeff and Rose have three adult children who grew up in Asia. Presently Jeff & Rose are on assignment at the IMB main headquarters office to coach and mentor mission personnel as they network and mobilize churches to help reach the lost peoples and places of the Asia Pacific Rim.