

Partnership in the Mission: Missionaries and the Local Church

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Introduction

I suspect my story is a bit different from most. I was not raised in a Christian home, and I knew nothing of the gospel until a 12-year-old seventh-grade classmate in Ohio told me about Jesus. Though I fought against his evangelistic efforts, I ultimately decided to attend church one time with our neighbors—who just happened to be Southern Baptists. I did not know it at the time, but that first visit to a church would lead to a lifetime of Southern Baptist involvement.¹

That church gave a large percentage of our offerings to the Cooperative Program, the Southern Baptist mechanism for supporting missions and ministries.² They did not necessarily explain it well, and they did not connect us enough with missionaries we were supporting—but they did prioritize bud-

¹ Some of the autobiographical material in this article first appeared at <https://chucklawless.com/2024/06/a-thank-you-letter-to-southern-baptists/>.

² <https://www.sbc.net/missions/the-cooperative-program/about-the-cooperative-program/>

get giving toward the Cooperative Program. I at least had some knowledge of the CP when I started pastoring at age 20.

In fact, I quickly became a recipient of Cooperative Program dollars. The 19 people in that small country church in Ohio could not afford a pastor. I would have gone there simply because I wanted to preach the Word, but the church was a Southern Baptist congregation—which meant they had access to financial help. My first paycheck in ministry consisted of funds from my local church, our local Baptist association, our state convention, and the Home Mission Board (now NAMB). I was hardly getting rich, but cooperation and coordination allowed me to get started in ministry without needing another job. That level of cooperation and coordination has marked my ministry since then.

My goals in this article are fourfold: (1) remind local church pastors and leaders of our Great Commission responsibility; (2) remind missionaries and missions workers of our privilege because of the generosity of local churches; (3) encourage missionaries who may feel alone today, and (4) say “thank you” to churches and cross-cultural workers who are getting the job done. In those directions, I now turn.

Reflections of a Pastor and Professor

I served as a full-time pastor in two churches for a combined fourteen years prior to becoming a seminary professor. I loved serving the local church, and I have great memories of those days. As I reflect on those years, however, I now see so much I could have done better, particularly regarding missions support.

First, I did not adequately fulfill my responsibility to push my congregation toward the global call of the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). My friend David Horner, who led a globally-minded church for decades, wrote these words that still convict me years later: “A vision for becoming a missions-shaped church must begin somewhere. . . . if the pastor has no sustained

interest in or passion for missions, a vital component of church life will be neglected, and I might add, to the detriment of the people and the spiritual health of the congregation.”³

I fear I was guilty of this kind of neglect as a pastor. I preached the text of Matthew 28:18-20, but I suspect I treated it more as the end of a book rather than as a launching pad for missions.

Second, I should have done a better job of explaining our denomination’s method for supporting missions. I had a general understanding of the Cooperative Program, and I learned by association that Southern Baptist churches generally give toward that effort. What I did not fully recognize was that the CP gave my small church an opportunity to be part of a much greater global gospel effort; I failed to help them see that though they gave fewer dollars than larger churches, their sacrifice still supported thousands of missionaries.

Third, I failed by not regularly introducing our members to missionaries. Both churches I pastored gave at least 10 percent of our undesignated offerings to the Cooperative Program, but I failed in the same way I think my own home church failed: I did not help our members connect with real people and the real ministries we were supporting. Frankly, I did not know enough about missionaries on stateside assignment (“furlough” back then), and I knew nothing about how the International Mission Board home staff could help me. Hearing from our missionaries was thus infrequent for my congregation.

Fourth, as a pastor, I neglected to *call out the called* to step into ministry. I was prepared to talk to folks who initiated a conversation with me, but I did not challenge believers to consider that calling in the first place. Even in the few years when I taught the annual international missions study in December, I simply told the stories of others; I did not exhort members to

³ David Horner, *When Missions Shapes the Mission: You and Your Church Can Reach the World* (Nashville, B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 14.

ask if God's story for them included missions service. My guess is that I did not realize that was my responsibility, and I may have been hesitant to send out our best even if God did call them. I know better on both accounts now.

I began Ph.D. studies at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary at the end of my fourteenth year of pastoring. There, two missions professors—both who had served with the International Mission Board—pushed me to open my heart more widely to involvement in missions. Their Word-based challenge to make disciples among the nations and their contagious passion for missions changed my perspective in ways I would never have imagined. My heart began to break over lostness because of two professors who themselves had been missionaries and were still serving as seminary professors, recipients of the generosity of Southern Baptists through the Cooperative Program.

Now, as I write this article, I am beginning my twenty-ninth year as a seminary professor. I have also just passed my sixteenth anniversary as a stateside worker with the International Mission Board. I have the privilege of helping train potential and outgoing missionaries, and I am humbled and challenged by their faith and obedience. I listen with open and amazed ears when they tell me of God's call on their lives, often to go to places of great darkness and significant risk. All of us—professors/trainers and missionaries alike—get to do what we do because Southern Baptists give to this work. We do not know their names, and they do not know ours, but we share this work with these faithful believers. As a veteran recipient of their generosity, I pray I am stewarding their investment well.

Suggestions for Missionaries

I love missionaries, to whom I now direct this article. I honor you as my heroes. Working with you is one of my greatest joys. Thus, I trust you know that I speak to you from a heart of gratitude and service. With that background in mind, here are my encouragements to you.

First, love the local church. I have been studying the North American church for more than 25 years, and I confess it can be frustrating to see how inwardly focused they can be. At the same time, though, I often think about the apostle Paul's approach to the believers in Corinth. At the beginning of 1 Corinthians, Paul told them that he always thanked God for them, knowing God had gifted them and would complete his work in them (1 Cor 1:4-9). At the end of the letter, Paul concluded with the most intimate closure of all of his letters: "My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 16:24). He started the letter with thanksgiving and ended it with affection—and everything in between says, "You are an absolute mess!"

Even when it is messy, the church is God's plan—his "means to accomplish his work."⁴ Believers may not always follow faithfully. They may give more attention to buildings than missionaries may like. They may, in fact, be woefully ignorant of the global map—but they are still God's people. Perhaps foundational to the church being God's plan, the church is the bride of Christ. We best serve in partnership with them when we are grateful for them and love them.

Moreover, members of the local church make it possible for you to obey God's plan for your lives without worrying about funding. Through their sacrificial and generous giving to the work of missionaries whose stories they often do not know, church folks graciously support field work. The IMB may budget your support, but the funds come from local churches who love you—and who welcome your love in turn. I, too, get to serve the Lord in my various roles because of generous Southern Baptists.

Second, pray for the local church who sent you. Even if they have not always ministered to you as much as you might wish, they need your support. Intercede for the pastors, asking God to give them a heart for the nations. Pray their leaders will not succumb to the wiles of the enemy. Pray they will call out the called and send others to the field. They may never know you are

⁴ Daniel L. Akin and R. Scott Pace, *Pastoral Theology: Theological Foundations for Who a Pastor is and What He Does* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 150.

interceding for them, but I am certain they would be grateful for the prayers of missionaries who walk faithfully with the Lord. Your prayers can make a difference on both sides of the ocean.

Third, keep your prayer supporters informed about your work. I have not walked fully in your shoes, but I suspect it is easy to overlook supporters in the States when your focus is on the unreached in front of you. I can tell you from experience, however, that there are believers waiting and ready to pray for you. Many of you already have recruited those prayer warriors, in fact—but they do not always know the best way to pray for you. A simple, concise communication regarding your needs can address that issue.

We want you to know that you are not alone. Southern Baptists around North America are praying for you—some of us interceding for you on your birthdays. Many of us give to our local church trusting that some of the funds will help you do what God has called you to do. We have your back, and we want to encourage you in any way we can from a distance. Do help us intercede for you with intentionality and focus by keeping us informed of your needs.

Fourth, plant healthy local churches. In my assessment, healthy churches both reach the lost with urgency and train the saved with conviction. They evangelize and disciple, recognizing that each one feeds off the other. They so ground believers in the Word that those believers turn there for guidance; as I have written elsewhere, “churches built on scriptural truth produce believers who aren’t afraid in the storm.”⁵ You have the opportunity to help address the problem of unhealthy churches by planting healthy churches from the ground up—so, do it well in the power of God with the support of prayerful believers undergirding your efforts. Plant churches with the help of the church.

Finally, delight in the local church on your stateside assignment. Here, I turn full circle to the first point in this section of this article: love the church.

⁵ Chuck Lawless, *Disciplined Warriors* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 37.

Those 19 believers in the first church I pastored may not have been discipled well, but they loved me as their pastor, tolerated me when I was unwise, and pushed me to do whatever God wanted me to do with the rest of my life. I love the local church because they loved me first. I pray you delight in the church, too, and will enjoy serving alongside them, telling your story, and challenging them when you are stateside.

Conclusion

Mark Dever has written that the church is “God’s instrument for bringing both the gospel to the nations and a great host of redeemed humanity to himself (Rev 5:9).”⁶ It is indeed that, even with all its imperfections and flaws. God uses messy churches uniting with other messy churches, as Gregg Allison has reminded us, “for the purposes of cooperative and more effective ministry, the sharing of resources, mutual accountability, and the like.”⁷ Together, we reach the nations and raise up others to follow after us. Together, we lock arms to march into the darkness. Somehow, it is all quite beautiful.

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⁶ Mark Dever, “The Doctrine of the Church,” in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 603.

⁷ Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 32. Kindle Edition.