

**COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE CHURCH  
AND ITS MISSIONARIES:  
*SUPPORTING MISSIONARIES FOR CHRIST'S SAKE***

***BY REV HARPERT TROMP<sup>1</sup>***

**1 Introduction**

Starting in 1996 as pastor of a congregation of about 125 adults I faced the fact that 12 of them, that was 10% of the total, were not living in the Netherlands but abroad. From the founding of the church, it adopted a statement to be a mission orientated church with a high motivation to share the gospel with people in other cultures. I was the first fulltime paid pastor in the church, but the members of the church decided that my appointment should have no negative effect on the financial support of our missionaries. And so it happened! They increased their financial support and have been able to support the missionaries as well as me as pastor. To be the pastor of 12 people who live abroad was a special challenge. The advantage was that I knew most of them from another period when I lived in the same city, so it was also a meeting with old friends. I looked forward to this challenge with this personal aspect in mind, but also to working together with highly motivated followers of Jesus Christ.

The high motivation for mission in my church is not a self-developed vision, but a simple application of the education Jesus gave to his disciples. After his mission work of three years it was time for a multiplication of the workers and off they went: followers of Jesus telling about the Kingdom of God that has come. It was not a mission out of the blue, but a task they were carefully prepared for by Jesus himself. First they were chosen as a group where they had to live with the different personalities and backgrounds; later they had to form churches with all the new converts who accepted the words about Jesus they spoke. These born-again Christians also introduced their own culture and character.

It all seemed so easy in theory, but it turned out to be complicated in practice. And that is what it still is. Working and living with other people is a complicated matter. On the one hand we need it so much;

---

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Harpert Tromp is the pastor of an evangelical church in the Netherlands. He read this paper on a conference in September 2009.

on the other we are so unholy that we sometimes hate it. As often said: holy people sometimes behave like normal people! This is not a word of despair, but an important challenge for growth in spiritual life. There is no better way of personal change than living with other people.

## **2 Change to an organization**

The newly formed church we read about in the bible, in the book of Acts, wrestled with this God given instrument of growth. The missionaries themselves did – Paul and Barnabas – also the church itself when it had to change from an organism blown forward by the Holy Spirit to an organization inspired by the same Spirit. These tensions were multiplied when the missionaries crossed geographical and cultural borders. When a local church is small, it is happy and proud if one of its members is willing to go abroad and preach the gospel. All work together in the preparations and the raising of funds for support. How strongly motivated can a small group of believers be!

Later when the church grows bigger the necessity for an organizational model appears. Supporting every individual church member who wants to go to the mission field is a load too heavy to carry. Now the challenge to bring enthusiasm and reality together is there.

## **3 Book of rules does not always work**

This is work for the administrators of the church. In our church, they wrote an article outlining the steps candidate-missionaries should take before presenting their mission plans to the church leaders. They also wrote down the rules for acceptance, mentioning education, financial support and the quality of the spiritual life of the missionary candidate. All these carefully chosen checkpoints are very helpful in the process of sending people abroad.

However, in practice it works out to be more complicated. A missionary who works along with the rules we have written down is not a problem; but what to do when people choose another way? For instance: a candidate is not accepted because the leadership of the church is not convinced about his calling and his capacity to do the work he is willing to do. He still insists on going, and in fact goes. His friends in church support him and help him as much as possible. Now there is a strange situation requiring a wise reaction from the leadership of the church and its members.

Or, another situation requiring wise communication from us is when we pray for our missionaries. Once a month we pay special attention to the mission work of our church. In the Sunday service there is time for a presentation, or we take time to pray for all missionaries personally. We have a nice power point presentation with photos of all our missionaries which we show as we pray so no one will be forgotten. Our organizational model says we show only the officially accepted missionaries, but individual members ask attention for the not accepted missionaries. So during our prayers we sometimes mention also the names of those not in the photos.

Looking at this tension between organization and membership I have thought many times: let's skip the whole organizational model and just warmly support everyone as much as possible. But so far this has not happened because that decision will create other tensions.

But before this paper focuses too much on problems, questions and negative aspects of supporting missionaries, let me confirm that all of them are lovely and highly respected persons. There is no doubt about their high motivation to invest their lives for the sake of Christ and to have open communication with the church at home. So we regularly receive newsletters which are read with interest, partly duplicated in our church magazine and are a source for our prayers. When in Holland they visit our church, share their testimonies and most times meet with the mission board or one of the elders. So supporting missionaries normally gives much positive input in our church.

However, in the context of this conference it is still interesting to learn and think about some specific situations we have had to face in our support. An interesting question for instance is when does a missionary retire? Workers who have been supported financially throughout the years do not always build up a pension to live from in their older years. As young people they were called by the Lord and sent by the church to work among other cultures, and they left everything to preach the name of Jesus in this world - house, family and social security. These people are the real die-hards of the mission field. But at a certain time the mission board warned us as elders that the average age of our missionaries was becoming older and older. They asked what we wanted to do for this group at the age of 65, the age at which most people in Holland retire. Would we end up supporting a group of old people not able to walk without the help of a stick? Some missionaries told us they did not plan to retire; others said they looked forward to it.

We finally communicated that we would support till the age of 65, then every missionary would have to take responsibility for the years after his retirement. I am glad to tell you the Lord gave solutions in every situation.

There are also the children of church members who dedicate their lives to the work on the mission field. In some cases new church members coming from another city and church have children abroad; in other cases children of our own members have left our city and church to study somewhere else and afterwards have gone abroad supported by the church in their new city. So in private they are supported by the parents and maybe some friends, but not by our church. However, they have to raise funds; they need help when in Holland, and sometimes they visit our church or send us emergency call when there are problems on the mission field. Normally we pay attention in private, but sometimes we organize an offering for support. Our main focus is on emotional support for the parents and the children.

#### **4 Keeping the relationship well**

It is important to try to keep the relationship between the sending church and the one send in harmony. The geographical distance is the challenge we face. One of the aspects of support we wrestle with is how to check the work done on the mission field. In our own church we try to evaluate our work every year and that is already quite a job. But how do we evaluate the work of someone living abroad? That is why we ask every candidate missionary to be in relationship with a Christian organization before going away. We do not have the opportunity or the skills to evaluate the standard of the work, but we still like it to be done. The monthly contribution of money offered by church members has to be accounted for and we want an officially recognized mission organization to stay in contact. This is a clear and firm statement, but on the mission field things sometimes work out differently. One of our missionaries worked for a decade with a mission organization then stopped that ministry when the local people were able to do the work themselves. The missionary was not content with the support received from the mission organization. There had been a lot of miscommunication. He stayed on the mission field and started a new ministry, but without the support of a mission organization. The missionary was happy, but we were a little less happy. How to react? We

stopped our financial support but continued the relationship with the missionary and he kept his missionary status, although this is not possible according to our own mission statement.

To correct a person on the mission field is an interesting job. Normally missionaries are highly motivated for the work they are doing and are strong personalities focused on making individual choices. This is even stronger because they are called by God and that gives them a strong argument in discussions. It is a blessing when the missionary has a humble attitude and is open for other arguments. On the other hand the leadership of the church also needs to communicate humbly. Sometimes we think and speak as if we are the employer of the missionary while we only pay part of his salary. How much authority do we have if we pay, let us say 10% or 25% of his income? The missionary is not the employee of the church; he is a member sent abroad and supported as well as possible. Realizing this makes us humble.

## **5 We count our blessings**

When we have this humble attitude we are open to count our blessings. Sharing is one of the great blessings in the Christian life. We are living in a situation where we have more than we need and we have the privilege of sharing from all we have received. Sharing is a blessing for the church and opens doors for the Lord to give more and other blessings. Our prayers of thanks are multiplied in other prayers of thankfulness when we give our goods and out of our spiritual abundance. Across the world, voices bind together in praise to the One who gives it all to us.

Blessing is the bridge that is built between two cultures that have the intention of sharing the best with one another. Although we first tend to believe that the missionary is the stronger person in the communication it works out that both the sent one and the receiver are equal as persons and both have lessons to learn from each other. Focusing on the Arab world of today the main stream of information reaching the Netherlands is about war, terrorism, oil and problems. We watch it on television and are tempted to stay passive because the distance is so great and the problems so immense. But when a family from our church moves to this part of the world something changes in our attitude. In this Arab world we now know someone by name. If they stay longer they introduce other names to us and we feel very involved.

Through the years it has never worked out that a contact was made between our church and a local church in one of the countries where our missionaries are working. In fact, we never felt an urge to do so. It may grow as we travel more to our missionaries and have more intense contact with them in the countries where they work. It is already quite a challenge to stay in contact with churches in Holland with whom we have relationships so, at the moment we don't take any initiative to build relationships with churches abroad.

Maybe in the future such friendships will grow and one of the blessings can be that the Arab church teaches us how to live with our Muslim neighbors. With hundreds of thousands of Muslims living in Holland right now our cultural landscape has changed immensely in the last fifty years. The church in general, including our own church, has never anticipated this change well. We do not have contact with Muslims in our own city and we don't know if Muslims would feel welcome in our church. How much can the Arab Church teach us about this aspect of church life!

Let me mention a final blessing of having missionaries specifically in the Arab world today. Scripture teaches us about the special place Israel has in God's plan. Our Savior Jesus himself was a Jew. Reading about the history of Israel and the hand of God in this we automatically become focused on that country and feel its special place. Special is dangerous in the way that we can make a favorite of it, more important than its neighboring countries. Hearing and seeing the violence of these countries in these days we are easily tempted to choose our favorite and condemn the other. It is not as simple as it seems. The heart of the Lord is moved by what Israel is doing, but also by what is happening with its neighbors. When Jesus went to Samaria and Paul to Arabia both of them crossed cultural borders and showed us something of God's heart that we may copy to our own heart. The continuing temptation to focus constantly on Israel alone is countered by the fact that we support missionaries in the Arab world.

There will be more blessings, but we trust the Lord for these! More problems will come, but we continue. For Christ's sake it is worth it.