

The *problem* with success

By **Chuck Bennett**

Our Protestant mission enterprise is at a crossroad. Not because it has failed, but largely because it has succeeded. Oh, there's still lots to be done—still thousands of unreached people groups—but if William Carey were to come back today he would say we have succeeded beyond his wildest dreams.

In Carey's day there were hardly any Christians at all in Asia and Africa, while most Latin Americans were basically animists, under a thin Catholic veneer. Today there are hundreds of millions of Bible-believing Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Even a visionary like Carey probably never imagined that the efforts of only few thousand missionaries could produce such results. We have essentially reached the original goal, but we are creatures of habit, so we keep on doing what we have always done.

The way we've always done it

In an old colonial city in southern Mexico, I once lived near a Dominican church and adjoining mission compound that was built in the 1530s, right after the Spaniards first arrived in that area. Today I live in Northern California near several Spanish missions that were built in the late 1700s, fully 250 years after the ones in Mexico. Yet they are virtually identical—the same building styles, the same music and priestly vestments, the same tools, the same methods of

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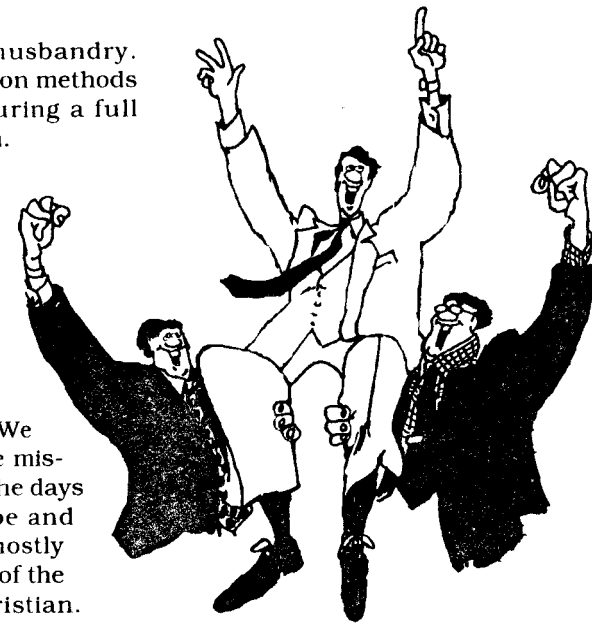
Much remains to be done, but we need to check our assumptions.

farming and animal husbandry. Spanish Catholic mission methods changed very little during a full quarter of a millennium.

Lest we judge the Spanish missionaries too harshly, let's remember that Protestant missions are also 250 years old—if we include the Moravians—and in many important respects we haven't changed much either. We still use terms like "the mission field" that reflect the days when northern Europe and North America were mostly Christian and the rest of the world mostly non-Christian. Today half of all Christians in the world, and perhaps 70 percent of all evangelicals, live in those traditional "mission fields," but we continue to invest 90 percent of our recruiting, training, and funding to send Western missionaries to pretty much those same fields.

Starting over

In 1993, Hammer and Champy's book *Reengineering the Corporation* burst on the business scene, and within a few months "reengineering" had become the favorite buzzword for organizations of all kinds. The



book's authors point out that virtually all business and manufacturing in Europe and America is based on two unquestioned underlying assumptions: (1) the principles of division of labor propounded by Adam Smith in 1776, and (2) the command and control systems developed by the railroads about 50 years later. Any company that manages to put aside these two deeply ingrained assumptions is almost literally "starting over," whereas companies that continue to follow the former assumptions will

probably not survive.

The question, they say, is not, How can we do what we do better (or) at a lower cost? Today the question is, Why do we do what we do at all? They go on to state that "the old way of doing business—the division of labor around which companies have been organized since Adam Smith first articulated the principle—simply doesn't work anymore. Suddenly the world is a different place."

Our unquestioned assumptions

Just as Western businesses are now reexamining two of their most basic assumptions, I believe we in the evangelical mission enterprise need to reexamine two of our own largely unquestioned assumptions:

1. The world is made up of a Christian West and a non-Christian rest-of-the-world that we call "the mission field."

2. The success of a mission organization is determined by the number of Westerners it manages to send out.

Of course, we rarely think about these assumptions, but they form the subconscious basis for many of our methods and policies. We continue to do what we know how to do. We've spent 200 years refining the process. As John Steinbeck said, "It is in the nature of man as he grows older to protest against change, particularly change for the better."

Carey and colonialism

A mere 16 years after Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*, William Carey went to India. Thus capitalism and the modern

Protestant mission movement were first articulated in the same country at about the same time. Carey's attention was first awakened to missions by reading *The Last Voyage of Captain Cook*, the Pacific explorer, and a book entitled *The Present State of the British Empire*.

Carey discovered that Christianity as he knew it was pretty much limited to northern Europe and North America. He correctly concluded that the only way to reach the rest of the world was by sending messengers from the Western world to the rest of the world, i.e., to what came to be called "the mission field."

Carey and those who followed in his train were able to reach and remain on their mission fields largely because of British (and sometimes Dutch, German, French, and Belgian) colonialism, just as Catholic missionaries had ridden the coattails of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism two and a half centuries earlier. Northern European colonialism—around which most modern Protestant missions were structured—collapsed between 1945 and 1960, a full generation ago. Surely we have had enough time to reengineer our enterprise but, like the business world, we are still prisoners of our 200-year-old assumptions.

Better buggy whips

Everybody talks about "new paradigms" these days, but the changes we have made thus far have been superficial—like e-mail, computer mapping, and better cross-cultural orientation for candidates. Fine tools all, but they do not address the heart of current realities. They assume we should

keep on doing what we've always done, only do it better and more efficiently. To employ an overused business metaphor, we are still trying to make better buggy whips for a world that no longer uses buggies. I believe it's time to honestly reexamine our basic assumptions about missions in today's world. We need to ask ourselves—to quote Hammer and Champy again—"If I were recreating this company (i.e. the missions enterprise) today, given what I know and given current technology, what would it look like?"

Our world and Carey's

In Carey's day there were virtually no Protestant (or evangelical) Christians in the entire Southern Hemisphere or Asia. Today there are known believers in virtually every country on earth, and the greatest numerical expansion of the Christian faith in all of history has taken place in Africa and China in our generation. To be sure, much of the money for our enterprise still comes from the Northern Hemisphere, but the growth and dynamism of the church has shifted to the South and the East. These trends are common knowledge, but our churches, mission organizations, and training institutions continue to focus most of their energy, creativity, and resources on funding and sending Westerners to the non-Western "mission field."

It is easy to understand why William Carey's mission strategy was Eurocentric in his day, but if he were to conduct his worldwide survey and define his mission strategy today it would almost certainly be radically different and include the many outstanding, highly motivated

Christians now available in the non-Western world. I believe one of the significant reasons why we can't let go of our own Eurocentric assumption is closely related to our tradition of personalized support.

In some ways our personalized support system is ingenious—it responds to the strong American distrust of institutions; it employs the most effective of all fund-raising methods—personal relationships; it encourages prayer support; it encourages prayer support; it camouflages overhead costs. (Missionary furlough expenses are rarely listed as organizational fund-raising costs, even though that's primarily what they are.)

Our image of mediocrity

When a mission, however, depends on personalized support for 80 or 90 percent of its total income—as many do—it becomes a virtual prisoner of a mere fund-raising method. Deep within the American psyche lies the unquestioned assumption that bigger is better, and this carries over into the world of missions. (I remember the different look of respect I started receiving from other Christian leaders when the mission I led passed the \$20 million per year level.) Since reducing the number of missionaries on personalized support would automatically reduce total organizational income—and this makes the mission leader look bad—there is a strong, built-in incentive to maintain and increase the number of Western missionaries, regardless of their effectiveness in the field. They bring their own support, so they are "free." Therefore, there is little incentive to maximize the use of their time.

As a consequence, a missionary on personal support who is known by his or her peers to be ineffective, insensitive, or even lazy may still be allowed to continue indefinitely because the mission saves nothing by letting that missionary go. In other words, the personalized fund-raising method permits and sometimes even encourages mediocrity. Such people—and we can all name a few—may not cost the mission immediate cash, but they do cost in other ways because they damage the credibility of the mission enterprise and turn off potential donors.

I believe it's common knowledge that most American Christians—even those in churches that are strong on missions—hold a stereotype of the typical missionary as a well-intentioned but somewhat naive person of limited ability who probably could not hold down a good job in the home country. The stereotype is unfair, but there are enough missionaries like that to reinforce the image of mediocrity.

Bias against efficiency

The leader of a ministry that does not depend on personalized support has a strong incentive to keep costs as low as possible by maintaining the smallest staff that can get the job done, and by employing the least expensive competent help available. By contrast, personalized support creates a strong bias against employing local people overseas. I'm sure you have seen, as I have, Western "missionaries" working full time in routine clerical or maintenance jobs overseas simply because they bring their own support, whereas a local person who might be far more effective at one-

fifth the cost would require the mission to pay hard-to-come-by cash. Commercial businesses would not allow such waste. We may rationalize that our standards are not commercial, but it's difficult to find anything inherently spiritual about unnecessary overhead.

Any way you slice it, when we use a high-priced Westerner to do a job that could be done better by a local person, at a fraction of the cost, that sounds like poor stewardship to me, and that's how most American church members view it when they understand the reality.

New measurements of success

I'm not suggesting we throw out personalized support. (I survived on it myself for 30 years.) It has positive benefits and it is deeply rooted in our evangelical subculture. In fact, Baby Boomers are demanding more—not fewer—direct personal relationships these days. Why can't we, instead, figure out a different way to measure success in the mission enterprise? Instead of assigning status to missions and mission leaders that send the most Westerners overseas, why not honor the organizations and leaders who accomplish the same task with the least number of high-priced, sometimes less effective Westerners?

Why can't we fight the stereotype of mediocrity by accepting new missionaries only when they meet specific needs, not just because they have full support and good intentions?

Why can't we declare war on stereotype-reinforcing terms such as "the mission field," when what we really mean is all non-Western countries?

Western missionaries are still needed

Today most local evangelism and church planting is being done by indigenous Christians. In all but rare cases, indigenous workers can do the job better than Westerners. That doesn't mean missionaries from the West are no longer needed, but they must be missionaries with a new mentality, new assumptions, and a different mix of talents and roles than in the past. I can think of at least three kinds of Western missionaries who will be in demand for a long time.

1. Technicians of many kinds with hearts of servants—computer specialists, linguistic consultants, teachers of church history and traditional theology, English teachers, public health specialists, pilots, etc., who can help train and solve problems, but only at the request of emerging churches and indigenous Christian ministries.

2. A relatively few unique, highly catalytic people who have been specially gifted and touched by God for effective cross-cultural ministry. This kind of person will always be welcomed. But they are rare.

3. A relatively few people who are gifted at interpreting the non-Western churches to the churches in the West, and vice-versa. These are special people who can link local Christians in isolated and minority situations with the worldwide church. People who can interpret their reality to us in the West.

Starting over

The fantastic growth and vitality of the church in the traditional mission fields makes it clear that it's time for Westerners to rethink their

role and and honestly ask themselves Hammer's and Champy's key question, Why do we do what we do at all? Pat answers like, "To spread the gospel," or, "To reach the unreached," or "To obey the Great Commission" will not do. Perhaps a better way the phrase the question would be, Does what we do and the way we are now doing it still make a significant difference? If we brought half our missionaries home, would it really matter?

Two examples of starting over

What does starting over look like? Every organization has its own dynamic, of course, so there is no single right pattern. But here are two examples of mission agencies that have started over in recent years.

Before 1950 the Latin America Mission had already handed over its churches in Costa Rica and Colombia to local leaders. During the 1970s it also handed over control of about a dozen institutions and parachurch ministries that had been started by LAM missionaries. These included a highly respected seminary, a hospital, a Bible institute, a radio station, a publishing house, bookstores, university student ministries, community development programs, an orphanage, day-care centers, and the Evangelism-in-Depth movement. The LAM continued to assign missionaries and channel funds to these autonomous entities, but only at their requests.

As some LAM leaders and board members anticipated, with no ministries under direct North American control and promotion, the number of missionary recruits declined and

income leveled off. There were other risks and disappointments as well. The seminary was taken over by people of a different theological persuasion. Some of the independent ministries failed to demonstrate the passion for evangelism that the missionaries thought they should have. However, all things considered, these ministries have matured and prospered far more—and touched far more lives—than they ever would have if they had remained under North American mission control.

The LAM still assists some of its sister ministries with funds and missionaries, but the mission has redefined its work to concentrate on evangelism and church planting in the major cities of Latin America. It has launched work among Hispanics in the United States, and is now releasing its Christ for the Cities ministry to become a separate autonomous organization, but linked as an affiliated project partner.

Eight years ago the United World Mission was small, unfocused, and traditional. New recruits were rare and income was not increasing. The board chose some drastic steps and invited Dwight Smith to be president. By his own admission, he was “change crazy.”

The board also implemented a member rotation plan to bring in new blood. With board support, Smith pushed for a new purpose statement that emphasized saturation church planting and the leveraging of resources through strategic partnerships with other agencies.

Smith says the mission has been almost totally changed and is “purpose driven.” Income has grown from \$2.8 million to over \$7 million. The staff has increased from 120 to

300, about 80 percent of them new. Only two of the original 12 members still serve on the board. Formerly, their missionary teams were widely scattered, with less than 30 assigned to Eastern and Western Europe combined. Today about 115 work in Europe and the former Soviet Union. Smith and the UWM took the lead in organizing a consortium of more than 50 mission agencies and large churches to target church planting in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Conclusion

We urgently need to take a new look at the unspoken assumptions that have undergirded our 250-year-old Protestant missionary movement. We need to do so not because our enterprise has failed, but because it has basically succeeded. In spite of all of our faults, foibles, and failures, we have been used by God to literally transform huge areas of the world. Much remains to be done, of course, but most of our old methods and assumptions are now almost irrelevant. It's time to start over. Do we have the courage? ♦

The editors invited a number of responses to the preceding article—they follow below. Readers are invited to send their responses to the editor for use in subsequent issues.

The problem isn't success, it's sticking around too long

By J. Robertson McQuilkin

Chuck Bennett makes several important points with which I agree. I was led to believe his article would answer the question: “What should we be doing?” Sort of reinventing the missionary enterprise. It seems to me the article proposes, rather, a couple of modifications in how we do missions and who should do what. Bennett no doubt agrees that the What? question has been long settled: the unchanging mandate to disciple the nations.

I must admit a sense of uneasiness with the author's suggested solution to the problem of mediocrity among missionaries. His call for fewer (Western) missionaries is not the only possible solution.

The mediocrity may simply be a call for some missions to be more responsible in screening and in holding missionaries accountable.

If they are not, they should not be surprised to find the sending churches moving in to exercise that responsibility. But there is another facet to the problem. I, too, was upset about mediocrity on the mission field, the handful of freeloaders I was yoked with, and wrote my pastor in America about it. He responded, “Well, Robertson, do you think every

pastor and church staff member in America is top quality, that we have no lazy people?” Actually, the beauty is that God gets his work done by the “weak things.” I guess that's God's divine joke—it certainly means greater glory for him to build his invincible church with the tools he has. My pastor helped me get things in perspective.

Bennett's solution is to send only certain types of missionaries, specialists to be exact. This would be okay, if he included the most important specialty of all, the original Pauline specialty. But in leaving out the pioneer church starting evangelist, Bennett makes the fatal error.

Apparently the assumption is that the job is mostly done and all that remains is the mopping up activity of the “nationals.” On the contrary, the basic problem stems not so much from our success at what we were called to do, but in sticking around after that evangelistic success to do the kinds of things a healthy church ought to be doing for itself. And if we focus on the pioneer task of crossing cultural barriers to reach the presently out-of-reach people of the world, the need for laborers—Western or non-Western—is greater than it was when Jesus first lamented that the harvesters are few. More missionaries, not less.

That is the specialty we need. And when we say cross-cultural we dare not assume that near neighbors are better at it than far neighbors. Israeli Christian missionaries may not be best for reaching Palestinians, Muslims in the former Yugoslavia will probably not be reached by near neighbors! This is true in much of our world. Furthermore, the need is so great among those who have no



Robertson McQuilkin

nationals to deploy, that no church can excuse itself and assign responsibility to another, even if it pays the bills of the other.

And that brings up another grave and as yet unsolved problem—the spiritually corrupting influence of the American dollar. Before we begin to renege on our primary obligation to go in person in obedience to Christ's command, and delegate the responsibility to others, presumably better qualified, we must find the solution to sending dollars in a way that will help and not destroy. The widespread spiritual corruption induced by American dollars in churches of India and Africa, for example, is a tragedy beyond assessing.

Yet prophets, both in the sending West and in the receiving South and East, sound the message to a rapidly expanding American audience: "Send money, not people." It is right for those who have to share with those who have not, but so far the American dollar has been a pollutant, producing a spiritual "welfare state" in nation after nation. This is a problem which cries out for creative minds to solve.

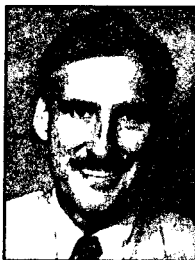
So, if Chuck Bennett will allow me to include "pioneer church-starting evangelist" on his list of needed specialists, and will agree that the supply of that specialty is woefully inadequate, that we cannot buy our way out of personal responsibility to join in finishing the original mandate, then let's join hands and get on with it.

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We can't hire gospel "butlers"

By Hans Finzel

I could not agree with Chuck Bennett more when he says we've had a tremendous amount of success in the global mission enterprise. However, I believe this article overstates our success when the author says, "We have essentially reached the original goal." If the



Hans Finzel

goal was to reach many people for Christ, then he is right.

But that's not the goal I am working toward. My goal is reflected in Matthew 24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." That, coupled with the Great Commission of Matthew 28, indicates we are not finished until we have created a disciple-making and reproducing indigenous church in every people group on earth. Until then, I think it's dangerous for the North American church to conclude that the rest of the world can finish the job.

Yes, it is erroneous to measure your success based on the number of Western missionaries you send out. That would be similar to the philosophy America used in waging the Vietnam war with Robert McNamara's famous "body count" approach. It's not how many missionaries we send from the West,

but how much progress we are making in disciple-making and church-planting among the unreached.

Chuck Bennett begins to touch the real issue when he says we have to challenge our basic assumptions and no longer keep on doing what we've always done. What bothers me is the growing group of people in our culture who attack any approach, assumption, or method that has been used for more than a decade. We are obsessed in today's culture with newness. We worship at the altar of change.

Ask anyone who works for me and you'll find I am a "radical change agent" who has questioned everything within the framework of CBInternational. But even as a "radical change agent baby boomer," I don't agree with the philosophy Bennett encourages, that "most of our old methods and assumptions are now almost irrelevant. It's time to start over." That, I believe, reflects the current obsession of the American culture to worship and value only what is new and different. Those who fail to learn from the mistakes of history are certainly destined to repeat them.

I continue to hear criticisms of personalized support, which many of us adhere to, and am waiting daily by my mailbox for news of a better way. Perhaps the author reflects his bias, because his organization bypasses North American missionaries to work with indigenous nationals instead. However, missions is not an either-or issue. We need nationals and missionaries. If we don't continue to send North American missionaries, within a generation we will lose all

personal interest in the Great Commission enterprise. We cannot just hire others to finish the job as our "Great Commission butlers." We must send our own sons and daughters in obedience to God's call. And yet I agree with the writer when he argues that we carefully place only the best and brightest North American missionaries into slots that are truly strategic.

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Changes are in the works

By Sam Metcalf

I am schizophrenic about Chuck Bennett's article. I'm torn between, first, saying a hearty Amen and, second, becoming defensive, because his critique is not carefully focused, and his indictment of evangelical missions is too broad. First, the Amens.



Sam Metcalf

Like Bennett, I've been distressed about some of the things he graciously, but unsparingly, critiques. He's right: Some agencies need to start over or fold up. There are too many missionaries who should be sent home. As long as the money rolls in, no one asks the hard question about what success and genuine effectiveness are. His outline of the three types of missionaries still needed is perceptive and accurate.

However, some weaknesses un-

dermine its credibility. His critique appears to be outdated in some respects. While we still need to confess much of what he says, a number of agencies have moved beyond Bennett's general description. Some are working to build new models.

The evangelical missionary enterprise is far from being monolithic. The biggest differences I see are between agencies born right after World War II and those started in the 1980s and 1990s. Bennett's two "unquestioned assumptions" may be true for older, traditional agencies, but certainly not for all.

"The world is made up of a Christian West and a non-Christian rest of the world that we call 'the mission field'" is an assumption foreign to me, and, I would guess, to most of my contemporaries who are the emerging leaders of younger organizations. I do not see much evidence that they operate subconsciously with the mind set he describes.

"The success of a mission organization is determined by the number of Westerners it manages to send out." How widely this assumption is accepted is more problematic and complex than Bennett explores. There are many criteria to be used, but counting those we deploy is still an important and valid measure of our effectiveness. One of the primary responsibilities of any agency is to deploy the right people into service.

Those who uncritically get on the "support the nationals" bandwagon become so critical of what Westerners do, and the high costs incurred, that they are inclined to throw out the proverbial baby with the bath water.

Yes, we need new paradigms, but this has been happening for some

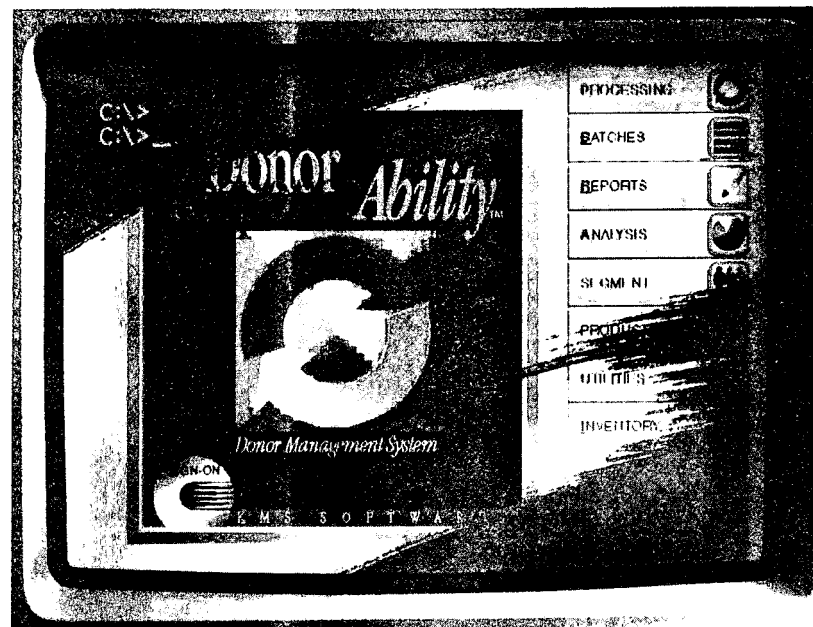
time. Bennett makes it sound like it hasn't. Many new mission agencies have been started, and many others reengineered, within the last 10 to 15 years.

I take issue with Bennett on his reasons for mediocrity. Mediocrity has little to do with personalized support. Allowing mediocre people to become missionaries, and to stay on the field, is a mission leadership problem. Mediocre leaders allow mediocre followers. The cure for mediocrity is having leaders with some intestinal fortitude.

Bennett's argument that we are biased against efficiency is dated. I don't know any of my contemporaries, or any of the new generation of organizations, who do what he talks about. The new agencies and leaders rarely send such "support" people overseas.

Bennett would help us by expanding his brief list of the three kinds of missionaries still needed. That's one of his most helpful insights. However, I don't think the three categories are equally important. I suspect we've sent far too many "technicians." In the future we must give more weight to those he calls "specially gifted and touched by God for effective cross-cultural ministry." He says they are "relatively few," but the need for such people is staggering. The right people must be recruited and sent in abundance. Mission leadership in the future must focus here. This is one of the major challenges facing missions in the U.S., in the face of the massive cultural changes exploding around us.

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