

What are some criteria that a mission committee might use in deciding which missionaries and projects to support?

One of the most important responsibilities that any mission committee has is how you lead your congregation in its missionary responsibility. Jesus told us that we *would* be his witnesses. (Acts 1:8) This is not an option that we may choose. It is a consequent of taking his name (Christians). The only question is “*What kind of witnesses will we be.*” Your mission committee is charged with answering that question in accountability to the session.

This responsibility is no “Sunday walk in the park.” Most committees receive countless solicitations by mail and personally for financial support for a myriad of “good causes.” How can you ever choose! Each one seems as compelling as the last. Adding to your dilemma is the political pressure (let’s call it what it is) to support the favorite cause of one of your church’s members or (more problematically) one of their relatives who is a missionary somewhere.

Compounding the problem is the constant pressure on the mission budget. When things get tight financially for the church, the first idea is to “cut mission.” Mission does not seem quit so pressing for those wondering how to pay the electric bill.

Leading a church in mission is not only about money and the mission budget. There are other important considerations. But, even though mission is *more* than money, it is never *less* than money. So I will outline here some things that your mission committee might consider in preparing the mission budget.

If you do not have some basic criteria, you will constantly be fighting the same battles. If you are not clear about where you are going, you will probably end up there! It is also important to have some guidelines so you don’t get jerked around by those political pressures that exist in every church.

First, another comment about “political pressures:” this is not an evil thing. Politics is about people and how they interact. Since the church is made up of people, we will always have to deal with these relationships. And when a daughter/son of the congregation receives a call to “Youth with a Mission,” no responsible mission committee can simply demean that request. After all, it was your church which told them that God does call people to missionary vocations! And the fact that they ended up at YWAM probably says more about our failure to offer them Presbyterian-related missionary vocations than it does about their naiveté or theological immaturity. In fact, many parachurch mission agencies demonstrate a more serious missiology (mission thinking about God) than do some mainline churches. Some parachurch mission organizations about which we can tell horror stories eventually mature and become quit respectable. So, in many respects, your mission committee needs to respond positively and supportively when these folks come asking for money to do mission.

Some criteria for your consideration (not in any priority order):

1) Number of projects

Many churches are finding that they have too many projects to support. There is no “perfect number,” but a few good projects is probably better than many over which you can not keep track.

2) Geographical distribution

Consider again Acts 1:8. Jesus said that his followers would be witnesses for him in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. That suggests a concentric circle of responsibility.

People at the ends of the earth have no personal knowledge of your church, but often the story is told of how a missionary arrived in a very remote village, preaching the Gospel, and the villagers asked, “Why did it take you so long to get here?” (see “Why do mission “to the ends of the earth?” Charity begins at home, doesn’t it?”)

So Jesus makes no distinction based on geography. Mission “across salt water” is no more righteous than mission in “my back yard.” But neither does mission in “my back yard” preclude responsibility for mission “across salt water.” Every mission committee should consider responsible geographical distribution of their mission dollars.

3) Parts of the world

Your committee might have a good balance in distribution and still be parochial in the places of support. We need to be in partnership with the emerging church in all parts of the world. Asia, Africa, and Latin America are the places where the church is growing the fastest, but they are all different, not to mention the vast differences *within* each of those areas. Every church should have at least one point of mission involvement within each of those continents.

But do not forget Europe! Lesslie Newbigin considered Europe and North America to be the most difficult and intransigent mission fields in the world today. Europe is especially secular. Is America heading in that direction? If we understand Europe we will have a better possibility of understanding America.

4) Type of mission

Is all your mission work concerned only with evangelism? Is all of it focused on medical missions? What bias is reflected in your

budget? This is a matter not simply of variety but of theological integrity. (See “What is mission?”)

A church’s mission should be holistic. It should address evangelism, church planting, racism, medical, education, social justice, poverty, hunger, the minorities and powerless (women, children, tribal), etc. Many projects are multi-faceted, but some have severe limits out of necessity or for lack of good missiology.

One area which you may want to consider is frontier mission. We don’t often think of this, but an overwhelming percentage of mission money from the west is spent in areas where there is already an established church that can relate to the local culture. Are you supporting work to establish a church where there is no church? Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship www.pff.net can help with this.

5) **Theological integrity**

This is a huge issue and it is related to the previous item. First of all, don’t think that you are ever going to get it perfect. No mission is “theologically pure” any more than any church.

Actually, the more you learn about non-western churches the more you will see that this is a bigger problem in the west than elsewhere. We tend to divide between “liberal” and “conservative.” The liberals focus on social action and the conservatives focus on evangelism. Which is right? Both! Any mission which does not address both is not authentic mission and is unworthy of the name

Now, that does not mean that every mission which you support can cover every theological dimension. Some focus on one part or another. Is this because of their context or an intentional strategy, or is it a theological bias not consistent with our Presbyterian and Reformed (our theological tradition) heritage?

A second dimension of theological integrity is “missiological integrity.” Does our give help or harm the partner receiving it? Is dependency created? Are we only concerned about feeling good about what we have done, without regard to the impact of our dollars on the partner church? For example, buying back enslaved children in the south Sudan may make us think that we are doing something vitally important, but it simply results in more taken as slaves and the price of redemption rising. Why would we expect slavers to respond in any other way?

“Missiology” also involves the integrity of the work being done. Is this a righteous cause consistent with the will and purpose of God? Does this advance the Kingdom or is it a bogus cause? Some mission projects are just “bad ideas” that are not faithful to the Gospel. How does your committee sort the “wheat from the chaff?”

This leads to a third dimension of theological integrity. Is there solid financial integrity? How do you know that there is fiscal responsibility exhibited in the use of this money? Just because we like someone does not mean that he/she is faithful in the use of money. This is a very difficult and culturally-conditioned issue that will be addressed in more detail in a future essay (see “Does our Money Corrupt and Create Dependency?”)

6) Presbyterian Church (USA) vs other missions

Should we support PC(USA) mission programs or independent agencies? The answer is “yes!” (I have yet to meet a congregation that supports only mission approved by the presbytery, synod, or General Assembly.) Actually, any mission approved by your session is “validated mission” according to Appendix A of the “Organization for Mission” (1995) of the PC(USA). That does not mean that it is godly work or that Jesus would be happy about your support. But the point is, authentic mission is surely not limited to the wisdom of the more inclusive decision making bodies of the PC(USA).

So the responsibility ultimately comes back to your mission committee and your session. That is a very serious responsibility which we assume before God. I imagine that this is one reason why you are interested in reading these essays...you want to be faithful before God.

I know some mission committees and sessions who feel alienated from the PC(USA) and will not, as a matter of principle, support any mission approved by the presbyteries, synods, or General Assembly of the PC(USA). I consider that to be an arrogant and foolish mistake which is harmful to the congregation and its faithfulness in mission.

With the exception of the Roman Catholic Church, there is no denomination in the world which has contributed more to world mission than the PC(USA) and its predecessor denominations. Mistakes have been and continue to be made, but the heritage and accumulated wisdom and relationships around the world are just too much to set aside.

One proof of this heritage is the number of Presbyterians who lead parachurch mission organizations. We Presbyterians are everywhere! And we can claim as our own many of the most astute mission thinkers (missiologists) around the world today.

So I would challenge those frustrated with aspects of the PC(USA) to claim the opportunities within our denomination. Yes, be discerning. Designate every dollar, if you must. (see “Should we designate everything that we give?”) But you are missing too much if you support only work unrelated to the PC(USA).

7) **Opportunity for relationships**

As I said earlier, a mission committee and session are to “lead your congregation in its missionary responsibility.” That does not permit you the luxury of doing mission by simply writing checks to mission projects or missionaries. Jesus did not say, “You shall *write checks* for mission in Jerusalem....” Personal involvement is *essential* to the missional church.

This is particularly true today for Americans who are looking for “hands-on” opportunities and volunteer possibilities. Most churches have mission trips for youth and adults. (see “What about mission trips?”) People support mission according to their personal interest.

Of course, you can not send someone from your congregation to every place that you send money. But if you do not have some relational dimension to your mission budget, interest and commitment will soon wane.

In Shenango Presbytery the mission committee has developed a list of Mission Focus Projects, each with a support group of persons from several churches interested and personally involved in that particular mission. These folks and their churches network with each other and invite new churches to join with them. These include partnerships in Mexico, Los Angeles, Sudan, New Mexico, Brazil, etc. Visits are made back and forth with these partners. Even if you are the only one in your congregation wanting to be involved, these groups provide the opportunity. (see www.shenango.org)

So when choosing a mission to add to your budget, ask yourself, “Can we personalize this in our church and can we have some direct involvement?” Can people of all ages have a sense of personal responsibility? When this happens, financial support is

more likely. But even more, you will be transformed through your involvement. (see “Why is personal involvement important for my church?”)

8) Persons vs Projects

Where should we put our money, into missionaries or projects? Yes! You are not doing mission *just* when you are supporting American missionaries. In fact, American missionaries are very expensive compared to those in non-western countries. Depending on their location it can cost over \$70,000 per year to keep them on the field.

It is still very important to have PC(USA) missionaries serving internationally, but our financial support should not be limited to this option. Remember, it’s not about us! It is about the mission of God (*missio dei* is the Latin phrase for this foundational principle). The question is not ultimately about how can we get more missionaries, but it is about how is witness to Christ best given? So be careful about this trap.

9) Amount per person/project

There is no simple answer here. It depends in part on the total dollars available and the number of persons/projects that you want to support. It also depends on the particular person/project and what is appropriate to give.

There must be flexibility. Something very important might come up later in the year and you will need a way to respond. Do not rule out a special offering, but there is a limit to the number of those too.

If you have a son/daughter of the congregation who is working in a type of mission and a place in the world where you are already involved, what can you do? It may be appropriate to give a token amount when you have reason not to make your usual commitment.

10) Pray!!

The nine criteria proposed above should scare the devil out of us and bring us to our knees every time our mission committee meets to decide on which persons/projects we will fund. Obviously, even the most informed and astute mission committee is going to make plenty of mistakes. If you hope to be faithful, prayer is the most important action to take.

These are only some of the most important criteria to consider. Many more could be listed. Personally I am not inclined to try to create a huge document which will cover every eventuality. This tends to make everyone rigid and legalistic on these decisions. I think that sometimes we spend all of our time on “policy manuals” so that we do not have to make the tough decisions in the gray areas. No policies will “protect” you, nor should they. Your mission committee and session are always dependent on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Nothing substitutes for prayer and faithful discernment of God’s will.