

Projections and Challenges for Mission Today

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What follows are the principal points offered by Robert Schreiter at the conclusion of the USCMA 2006 annual conference. It is based on presentations and discussion at the plenary sessions, and ideas and suggestions offered in informal conversations.

What is presented here regarding the theme of the conference—short term and longer term mission—is divided into five parts.

Participants

- The overwhelming percentage of participants in short-term (i.e., one week to nine months) mission comes from youth, mainly under the age of 21. Their particular needs and aspirations have to be central to how the programs are designed and conducted.
- Over 50% of longer-term participants are between the ages of 21-25. As above, their needs and aspirations need to be the focus of our efforts.
- There are reports as well of middle-aged people (i.e., whose children are grown and themselves have taken early retirement) who are interested in both terms of mission. A generation ago, they (as Baby Boomers) exhibited some of the distinctive characteristics we are seeing in the Millennial age cohort today.
- The panel on October 2 gave a good overview of the four areas where these kinds of mission are being carried out: working with religious congregations (Medved), in twinning of parishes (Fischer), through lay diocesan organizations (Gonzalez), and in college or university-sponsored settings (Thomas-Morgan). Each of these brings its own strengths.

Programs

- The definition of “mission” has been stretched considerably over the past four decades. That is somewhat inevitable if the Church considers itself to be truly missionary: many different activities go into the work of mission.
- In developing programs for shorter-term and longer-term mission, it becomes important to be as clear as possible about what is meant by “mission” in each of them.

- Careful orientation of participants, accompaniment of them during the experience, and debriefing and theological reflection after the experience are all very important.
- In working with partners in the field, it is important to attend to the power differential between organizers and participants coming from a powerful country with many resources, and the potential fragility of those receiving the participants. It is especially important to remember that those who are powerful are often poor judges of the impact their power has on those who are vulnerable.
- Experiences of mission provide an important channel for the energies, aspirations and development of young people. Since most frequently those organizing the experience may be of an older generation than the participants, one must be aware of “implicit objectives,” i.e., objectives located behind the stated or explicit objectives. For example, for most participants at the conference—a generation or two older than the young participants—values such as openness, creativity, and the like will be more important than what might be the values of the participants—information, clearly explicit values, and guides to the implications of those values. There is a history why each generation gives priority to certain values. We need to keep in mind that our own histories are not the same as those of another generation.
- Much attention was given to how the short-term experiences were in many cases stepping stones to longer-term commitments. In that process we need to be aware that decision-making processes for a younger generation may be different from our own. All of this is especially important if we realize that the participants in this conference were nearly all older than the under-25 age group that was the focus of much of our discussion.

Infrastructure and structures of support

Three dimensions of infrastructure received a good deal of attention:

- *Program structure.* Orientation, accompaniment and debriefing are now part of nearly every program structure—much more so than would have been the case two decades ago. This is something at which we will need to continue to work.
- *Partners in the field.* U.S. missionaries in the field—especially members of religious congregations—will be dropping dramatically in the next two decades as the median age moves into the seventies. Partners in parish twinning programs are likely to be more stable. The same holds for partners of lay programs and in many of the university programs. Domestic mission programs will be more able to sustain these relations than many international ones.

- *Financial support.* As U.S. religious congregations grow smaller, they cannot be depended upon for the financial support they have been able to provide in the past. Forward-looking programs are already establishing alternative patterns of funding. All programs will need to look at the longer-range capacity of their donors to keep up the flow of necessary financial support.

Issues

Three issues for short-term and longer-term mission received special attention.

- *Field partners.* Field partners in religious congregations, if they are religious from the U.S., may be disappearing faces; alternative partners will need to be found. If those congregations are international, there may be new faces taking their place: religious from other countries. This can offer some real benefits of new horizons. It can also add a layer of multicultural communication.
- *International missionaries in the U.S.* An issue that emerged in the conference that had not been anticipated in the planning was the increasing number of missionaries from other countries coming to the United States to work, and what role they play, especially in domestic mission experiences, but also international ones. This is a topic that needs considerably more exploration.
- *Changing senses of the multicultural.* The multicultural or intercultural dimensions of mission experiences are undergoing change. Through much of the 1990s, to be multicultural meant recognizing and respecting cultural difference, and giving different cultures their own spaces in which to develop. It now is apparent (especially as conflicts grow in multicultural societies) that respect and recognition are only the beginning: patterns of interaction between the cultures must be given much greater attention.

Future Prospects

Four issues of future prospects emerged in the discussions, with a special concern about the role of the USCMA in exploring them.

- The USCMA already has a very full agenda. However, one thing that emerged in the conference that might be worth considering is setting up channels whereby parishes wishing to twin with a parish in another country might get access to information and help, especially parishes who have no such programs in their dioceses.
- Some research effort should be put into assessing the quality of short-term and longer-term mission experiences, that gathers stories of successes and challenges. This might be something for the USCMA to take up with the CNVS.

- Is there a need at this time to have a greater coordination among the more than two hundred such programs for mission in the U.S.? It would seem not, if by “coordination” is meant “centralization.” Channels of communication are always welcome. Part of the success of these programs is their face-to-face character. This is also one of the reasons that Pentecostalism has been able to spread so rapidly. Networking, therefore, remains perhaps the highest level of organization that is needed at this time.
- One specific need, however, that emerged is providing a means for diocesan mission programs to communicate better with one another. There is some of this going on in certain regions of the country, but not nation-wide.