

## Starting Out Strong How to begin well as an agency-based church mobilizer

by Mike Pollard

When I came into my current position with Arab World Ministries almost nine years ago, I came out of a local church background, not a full-time missionary position. My predecessor became ill shortly after my arrival, and, due to no fault of hers, my training for this new job totaled about four hours. So much of my start as a mobilizer was shaped by trial and error. It's my hope that sharing what I've learned will keep you from wandering through the woods needlessly!

The key question for new mobilizers in mission agencies is, "What/Whom are you trying to mobilize?" Your answer will drive what you do and how you do it.

Here are the presuppositions that shape my personal answer to that question:

- The local church is God's primary vehicle for world evangelization.
- As part of para-church organizations, we are to come alongside churches and serve them—genuinely.
- It's not wrong to want local churches to partner with our agency. It's not wrong to have a heart for a particular type of ministry or region of the world.
- Balancing the previous two convictions is a difficult tightrope to walk that requires a lot of wisdom. (Even if I wanted to help every church I encounter, if a church needs expertise in a region I don't know well, I am not the best person to help them.)
- In our interaction with churches, we want to be cognizant of current realities. And regardless of whether we have earned the reputation, many churches assume that when we call, we are seeking their money and people without much effort to understand their needs and vision for missions. This opinion is reflected in statements like these from pastors:

"I don't like to work with most mission agencies. They tell us what to do and impose their methods on us. 'Working together' means doing their program. If they truly are 'para-church,' it seems that they would want to understand

what God is calling us to accomplish, what's important to us, how we move and make decisions."

"[A particular mission agency] just wouldn't let up. I believe in their ministry, in fact, my parents were missionaries with their organization. But their persistence made it clear that they saw us as a means to help them meet quotas tied to their fiscal budget. They just don't know how to move with us. I would give again and again under the right circumstances, but I'm not comfortable with their current methods."

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My conviction, then, is that we should be seeking to mobilize authentic church missions vision and nurturing healthy implementation of that vision. Along the way we discover churches whose vision intersects with our agency's. We do that by resourcing and encouraging them in a way that maximally moves them ahead in missions according to their vision. This process builds trust. As we bless churches in a way that honors

God, He will send several churches across our paths that are genuinely primed to partner with our agencies.

In order to prepare for that process, here are key steps for a mobilizer's first year or two of ministry:

### ***Get to Know Your Agency Well***

If you previously worked on the field with your organization, you likely know well your agency's work in that particular region. But you need to know as well as possible the whole scope of your agency's work.

Above all, get to one or more fields quickly. Spend time meeting missionaries. Ask them about their experience with local churches. Seek to understand their theology of the local church and the role they believe churches should play in missions. Begin to identify the top five or 10 most local-church-friendly partnership opportunities that your agency can offer churches.

What about your organization's history positions you to do ministry well today? What are your agency's core values? Which ones are currently embedded in practice and which are more aspirational? What are the ramifications of your doctrinal statement—which churches could work well within the guidelines of such a statement and which ones couldn't?

### **Get Prepared Well**

Don't be afraid to spend the time it takes to be well prepared to resource churches.

Steve Strauss, director of SIM-USA, said at a conference, "What we are not praying about is what we are not dependent on God for, but rather what we are dependent upon our resources for." We need to understand our inability to find the churches that we are best primed to serve. Block out plenty of time to pray regularly for key partner churches, your missionaries, your agency, and for personal wisdom and discernment.

Become a voracious reader. Read widely about missions, not only about regions where your agency works. Read regularly about the American church's key issues and trends.

Plan ahead how you will use your time. For me, it is very easy to spend too much time either in administration or in interaction with churches. Plan strategically how to balance your time so as to pay attention to all facets of your job description—interaction with churches, administration, personal fundraising, personal preparation, etc.

Go visit various types of churches occasionally on Sunday mornings without an agenda of trying to meet with a missions leader. Simply sit in the worship services of churches that differ from your home church. Visit "Gen X" churches, inner-city churches, and others that will give you insight into church issues and trends with which your own church may not be wrestling.

Develop or locate resources for the questions you will get from churches. A key question I hear regularly is, "How do we decide between all of the support requests we get?" What is underneath this question is a need to develop a strategy for missions in that church. How would you help a congregation like this begin such a process? What sample materials do you have from other churches as to how they have dealt with this issue?

### **Get to Know Key Contacts Well and Network Widely**

The current Verizon Wireless commercial shows a herd of technicians following every customer, demonstrating how powerful its network is. Their slogan is, "It's the network."

The most valuable thing that we bring to our mission agencies is the network of people we know. This includes key contacts in churches as well as folks working in other para-church agencies. For example, I've become good friends with the Nashville area director of the US Center for World Mission. I usually teach in local Perspectives classes, thus gaining access to local churches in a neutral venue that serves them.

We need to get out regularly and meet a host of people. The trust we build through these meetings is everything. In the first year, sit down with as many key contacts in key churches as possible, primarily asking questions and listening. Your aim is to cultivate a reputation of being a reliable resource with churches' best interests at heart.

Those churches already related to your agency are the best place to begin. Once when I was doing a study for our agency, Bruce Camp urged me to ask a dozen or so missions pastors, "When you think of AWM, what three adjectives come to mind (either positive or negative)?" I've found it to be

such an excellent question that I still ask that of every missions leader I meet in a church for the first time.



Develop a first-year strategy for how you will meet churches. A number of avenues are possible, depending on your style.

- **Regional/National missions mobilization conferences.** I do not attend missions conferences unless I am speaking because my best interactions come through workshops rather than standing at a booth. But when I do set up a display at a conference, I rarely stay there, choosing instead to mingle with participants and get to know people informally. Make sure that the literature you distribute at your booth invites churches into active partnership, rather than simply tells them about your agency.

- **Networking meetings.** For example, missions networks meet in many cities around the country. Some exist exclusively for church missions staff. Tap into city-wide missions networks anywhere you can.

- **Events that you sponsor.** Perhaps you can offer an event aimed at serving churches, such as teaching about Hinduism, developing a church missions strategy, or reaching local Muslims. I would start out with half-day events and would hold them only in cities where your agency has larger clusters of churches with which you already have relationships.



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- **One-on-one visits.** Secure meetings with key missions contacts at churches. When I do this, I always give a clear and honest purpose for seeking such a meeting. And I prefer to meet in a casual place where I can treat them to lunch or coffee.

The first time is almost always for the purpose of becoming acquainted with the missions ministry of a church that partners with our agency. I rarely ask for anything during a first meeting, and spend most of my time listening and asking questions. Two of my favorites are, "What is encouraging you about missions in your church?" and "What are your church's primary challenges in missions?" Their answers to these questions speak volumes about what they believe constitutes success for their churches in missions.

When I meet with churches, I usually give them some kind of a generic resource (not published by my agency) such as an APMC MAP (Missions Assessment Profile, a tool with which churches can gauge their missions effectiveness) or a CD by David Mays (such as his CD on short-term missions resources).

As you interact with churches, begin to assess (1) their current, general missions involvement, (2) what next steps they could take to advance in missions, and (3) what you could do to help them take those steps.

### Begin to Develop a Longer-Term Strategy

As you assess your agency's current church relationships and your key church partners' interest/desire/ability to partner more deeply with your agency, begin to develop a longer-term strategy to move ahead in mobilizing churches.

Define what successfully partnering with churches will look like. I developed a grid that describes different phases of church partnership with AWM, how a church would typically relate to AWM during that phase, and how we would serve churches at various levels of partnership in a way that moves them ahead in missions and increases their passion for the Arab world.

What kind(s) of churches are mostly likely to be attracted to your agency? Are you satisfied with your organization's typical level of church involvement? If not, what must change in how you relate to churches? Is your agency prepared to make such change?

A strategy will include such things as:

- Changes that need to occur in the home office and on the field, as well as how such changes will occur.
- Additional staffing needed to carry out the strategy.

- How current partner churches will be served, and how future partners typically will be engaged.

### Potential problems

As you begin your new ministry, you may have to deal with some of the following challenges:

- **What if others in your agency have a different view of interacting with churches than you do?** While key leaders may affirm a service-oriented approach, others in your agency may not. How you deal with this situation will depend much on your style and how change-friendly



your agency is. Though I've given my fair share of mild rants at staff meetings, I've largely tried to win the unconvinced by showing them working models of my philosophy of relating to churches and the fruit of such an approach.

- **What if others in your agency who interact with churches do so in a way that undermines a service orientation?** When this happens, I have sought to clarify and resolve differences directly with the other person. When that hasn't worked, I have brought the issue to our leadership team.
- **What if your agency's missionaries expect you to relate to churches in the same way your predecessor did?** My predecessor was a dynamite fundraiser and did so in a very affable way. She was always finding churches to support our missionaries. At the time she held the job, that's what many in the mobilization field did. The scene has changed, however, and I've had to begin re-educating our missionaries about the current necessity to partner with churches. I've done so by (1) going to the field and doing education segments about the American church scene, and (2) speaking to candidates at candidate school about the new realities.
- **What if working out of your home is difficult?** Maybe you, like me, work out of your home rather than in an office in your agency headquarters. I also have two young children who are always eager to show me their latest drawing or have me resolve their current argument. It's

easy and inevitable for home life and work life to blend. If that's your case, then you might find what I do helpful. I track my hours (sometimes it's an educated guess) so I can be sure that I'm not taking advantage of blurring home and work life.

Also, I'm prepared when home life interferes too much, to drive over to the library or coffee klatch and hang out there with my laptop. A local church donated office space to me



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until they needed it back for Sunday school space, so I'm on the lookout for available space in a nearby church or a businessman's office.

It's a privilege to be used to help energize the church for greater missions love and involvement. As Ralph Winter once described it, "Rather than trying to put out a fire by myself with a bucket, I'm waking sleeping firemen."

My hope for you is that your first year out of the chute can be a more strategic one than mine was. May God bless your efforts as you seek to truly love and serve the Church.



*Mike Pollard is director of church connections for Arab World Ministries US. Before coming to AWM, Mike served for almost five years as an associate pastor and spent six years as the communications coordinator for AWM.*

## Advice from Other Mobilizers



**Dick Ackley, SIM.** People are unique and they are relational. The best thing a mobilizer can do is improve his relational skills. Remember everything your mother taught you: kindness, respect, friendliness, etc.

Ask God to help you truly care for people as individuals and encourage them in their spiritual journey. Pray with them over the phone. Take them out to lunch. Listen and pray with them. Our passion is to see our worthy God glorified in each life. We do that by relating to them as individuals and genuinely caring for their spiritual wellbeing.

I've found nothing helps me do those things better than praying individually for people I am trying to mobilize or assist in mobilization. My intercessory prayer list is lengthy. Praying for a number of people takes time, but it keeps them on my mind which reminds me to consider their situation more carefully. Do they need a call? Do they need a visit? Or do they need some space? We can become pushy, or we can become negligent if we're not tracking people as individuals. Praying is a great aid for that.

Microsoft Outlook is a helpful tool. Using flags, categories, note fields, and calendar features, I am electronically reminded when it's time to touch base again.



**Tom Telford, United World Mission and formerly AWM.** When I think back over 30 years of mobilizing, it was all about being a good listener and developing relationships.

Listening is so key. You have to take time to hear what people are wrestling with and help them solve their missions issues.

I did some cold calling on churches, and the churches which wanted help are the ones where I worked to develop relationships. John Bennett, former head of AWM, gave me some good advice when he recommended that I give attention

to churches with a new pastor. A time of leadership change is often a good point at which to approach them.

You also have to be a networker. Have a list of experts and resources to which you can refer people. For example, if someone wants to do better short-term trips, know the person who has produced the best material on sending teams.



**David Hall, WEC.** I would recommend that one of a mobilizer's early priorities be investing in your candidates. It is much easier if they embrace a church-oriented approach from the beginning rather than to have to change their paradigm later. Give your appointees tools and training that enable them to resource their sending churches to do missions more effectively. Challenge them to go to the field with a mentality of looking for ways to partner with their churches back home.

Invite the leaders of candidates' sending churches to come when they are appointed. It's a great way to develop personal connections that can enrich your relationship throughout the appointee's entire ministry. And you can challenge the church to help own the task of building the financial/prayer support team for the appointee.



**Richard Flemming, FEInternational, Canada.** If you are committed to serving churches, then it stands to reason that you must be prepared to offer churches 'services' that may not be directly tied to the interests of your particular mission agency. This implies that you need to develop a missions

awareness that benefits churches in the accomplishment of their mission task. As well as possessing a general knowledge of missions, I would suggest that a mobilizer develop significant proficiency in at least one aspect of the missions enterprise. Become an expert in an area that's



relevant to churches and equips them for greater kingdom impact. Here are just a few examples:

- Assist churches in developing their personalized vision and strategy for mission.
- Alert churches of the ins and outs of international partnerships (particularly as they relate to dependency issues).
- Guide churches in the selection and training of their own missionary candidates.
- Equip churches to serve cross culturally.



some of the felt needs in the church, even beyond missions. For example, I share SIM's Scripture Prayer Guide as a way churches can



**Ray Hutchinson, SIM.** Mike's article is very practical and encouraging. I would emphasize: Provide them with resources that help meet

strengthen their prayer ministries. I have also been able to serve churches by doing the best I can to attend meetings, provide materials, address a subject, and intervene on personnel issues as requested without pushing some kind of agenda. I have discovered that serving churches in this way results in building trust.

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