

Missio Dei

Exploring God's work in the world

Money and Mission

A Discernment Guide
for Congregations

Peter Graber

Number 5 ■ Series editor: James R. Krabill



Missio Dei is published by Mennonite Mission Network to invite reflection and dialogue about *God's mission* in today's world. Some features in the series focus primarily on the biblical and theological foundations of the mission task. Others present ministry case studies or personal stories of attempts to be faithful to Christ's call. Perspectives represented reflect the passion and commitment of the agency: to declare in word and demonstrate in life the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, "across the street, all through the marketplaces, and around the world."

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Mennonite Mission Network, the mission agency of Mennonite Church USA, exists to lead, mobilize and equip the church to participate in holistic witness to Jesus Christ in a broken world. With offices in Elkhart, Ind.; Newton, Kan.; and Harrisonburg, Va.; the Mission Network supports ministries in more than 50 countries, 31 U.S. states and six Canadian provinces.

ISBN 1-877736-80-5

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Printed in the United States of America

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A Discernment Guide for Congregations

Peter Graber

Introduction

Money is often a touchy subject. It is certainly one that everyone cares deeply about. Perhaps Jesus talked about money more than any other issue because he knew our use of money and our attitudes toward money reflect our values. When he warned people that they could have only one master, it was not Satan who was the competing choice, it was money. The love of money is the ultimate confusion of ends with means.

The power of money over our lives is related to our desire for control and, especially in North America, to our strong bent toward individual autonomy. These temptations are not absent in the church, and we assume that they are at our own peril. It is because we recognize these personal temptations and know that our culture influences our financial behavior that we make an effort as God's people to understand how best to use what God has given us. When we talk about money and share counsel and discernment about its use, it begins to lose its power over us. This booklet is an attempt to engage that conversation as it relates to the mission ministries of the church, particularly those of the newly formed Mennonite Church USA.

The reflections expressed in this booklet come as the result of the many years I have spent as a congregational outreach/mission committee member in several Mennonite church communities, as well as the lessons and experiences I have gained during the last nine years working at a church-wide level for two denominational mission agencies — first, Mennonite Board of Missions, and more recently, Mennonite Mission Network — in congregational relations, partnership formation, and a variety of development functions.

Some of the trends identified in this booklet go beyond the specific sphere of mission activities and describe realities faced in other parts of the church. There is, for example, within Mennonite Church USA

increased competition for the church's resources in the arenas of education and publishing. Likewise, area conferences within the denomination face changing attitudes from their constituents about loyalty to church organizations. We have no choice but to recognize the fact that we are all in this together, as individual members, as congregations, as conferences, as agencies, as the Executive Board.

It remains for me to point out that money and mission questions are not the only financial dilemmas faced by congregations. Congregations struggle, for example, with how to design educational grants for students in their care, and whether such grants should include students attending other than Mennonite colleges. Congregations decide how much to spend on Sunday-school materials and other educational resources, from whom to purchase these materials and whether to make such resources available free of charge or require that members "buy their own." Congregations are also employers and must determine fair salaries and benefits for pastors and other employees, including whether to participate in denomination-sponsored health insurance programs. In addition, congregations are members of the larger church through membership in area conferences and must discern their financial commitment to that area conference relationship. While these and many other congregational money matters are certainly worthy areas of exploration, I leave the counsel on these issues to others more qualified.

Mennonite Church USA has adopted three primary "ends statements" intended to focus the denomination's efforts for the first part of its journey:

- ◆ to become a missional church
- ◆ to connect with and learn from the global church
- ◆ to cultivate and train leaders with a call from God and a passion for equipping the church

It is my hope that this booklet can make a contribution to our life as a church in these three areas: (1) by offering a missional perspective on money and mission; (2) by helping to create healthy financial relationships with global partners; and (3) by providing both mission and congregational leaders with a tool for discernment.

The booklet is divided into two sections:

Part A: A six-part essay on the relationship of mission and money in the current context of Mennonite Church USA, followed by discussion questions designed to facilitate group interaction around the topics covered in the essay.

Part B: A discernment guide for use by congregational leaders confronted with a broad range of requests for mission funding.

While the reflections in these pages include a brief treatment of issues related to local and regional mission funding, the primary focus is on the funding of international, cross-cultural mission efforts. However, many of the principles presented here can be readily applied to the funding of mission at local and regional levels.

Part A: Reflecting on Money from a Missional Perspective

Discerning God's mission in the world is one of the key elements of becoming a missional church. Out of that discernment will grow vision and priorities for congregational activity and commitments. These activities and commitments will include the full scope of church life, not only those commonly labeled as "mission." Money, then, will naturally follow the vision and priorities identified by the congregation and to which it declares itself committed.

Discerning God's mission in the world is one of the key elements of becoming a missional church.

While understanding how all of congregational life is "missional" broadens our definition of mission, it certainly does not exclude what we now think of as outreach, evangelism, church planting, service, and a wide variety of international mission efforts. To exclude these would be to tragically misread the major intentions of the missional church movement which, in fact, grew out of a deep desire to bring the vast learnings of international mission experience and perspective to bear on the North American context of ministry. To be sure, a missional understanding of the church will change how mission activities are shaped and how they are integrated into the life of the church. It will enhance and help us focus these activities, but it will not necessarily diminish them.

To begin our reflection here, we must say a few words about the relationship between mission and money, describing first some of the current and historical realities related to mission funding, and then conclude by offering a missional perspective on how congregations can face the challenge of making decisions about the financial support of mission.

1. Money: An Ally and Enemy of Mission

Money has always been both an ally of mission and its enemy. From the moment Mennonite churches in the United States called forth their first international mission workers, they also took up offerings for their support. One of the first and most important people appointed when

congregations determined to work together to send missionaries around the world was the treasurer. In a situation where “a few people are sent on behalf of the many,” money has been in the past — and still is today — an important bond of participation for those who remain at home.

At the same time, money has sometimes hindered the goal of cross-cultural, international mission efforts to build self-sustaining, indigenous communities of believers. The presence of money in the hands of some and not others has created unhealthy dependencies, dysfunctional patterns of leadership and power sharing, and out-of-balance partnerships in countless mission ministries across the globe.

Those of us who are part of the wealthy elite of the world (almost everyone living in the United States and Canada) have an enormous challenge to use money effectively in the service of mission. Some voices have called for a moratorium on mission initiatives because of the potentially negative consequences of unwise efforts. But our sisters and brothers in Anabaptist churches around the world do not share this opinion. They are wholly engaged in mission activities at a level unimagined by most of us and have launched new initiatives not only at home but in places around the world. Many of these churches desire to be partners with us, sharing leadership, insight, and cultural resources. If we in the United States can bring our money into these partnerships without needing to control the emerging ministries, that money is sorely needed and can make a significant contribution to extending Christ’s kingdom.

American Mennonite mission organizations have learned a great deal over the last 50 years about how to use money in situations of poverty, disaster and violence.

2. Wisdom and Money: A Time-Tested Recipe for Enhanced Ministry

The need for relief and development assistance coupled with mission activity is also a profound reality for many people in the world. North American Mennonite mission organizations have learned a great deal over the last 50 years about how to use money in situations of poverty, disaster and violence. They have learned to combine direct assistance with local development strategies and to use their global privilege and status to work against polices responsible for much of the suffering we see.

We are all learning to listen to mission partners outside North America as we develop vision for ministry.

Mennonite Central Committee generally receives an increase in contributions when there is a dramatic war or disaster that reminds us in North America of people suffering while we live in unimagined affluence. We can be thankful that MCC does more than simply forward that money to suffering people in sealed envelopes. Their long experience and seasoned understanding of how to use that money wisely in service to others is indeed a gift to us all. The fact that some of the money is used to inform us as contributors about the global reality and to connect us more closely to those who are suffering is one of the marks of that wisdom.

We also trust other Mennonite mission organizations to guide us in using our mission money. In the past, this trust was almost absolute. Mission boards and commissions appointed workers, made assignments and disbursed the money entrusted to them by the faithful members of Mennonite congregations who knew little about the theology or practice of cross-cultural mission, but knew that bringing people into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ was worth their time, effort and money.

In most cases, these organizations have served us well, making wise choices about how best to use money in supporting people, administering programs, and bridging cultures with the Good News of Jesus. Where mistakes were made, we have attempted to learn from them. The result is that we now have available to us as a church highly qualified Mennonite mission leaders with years of experience, ready to lend their wisdom to the use of money in cross-cultural ministries. As someone with little personal claim to such wisdom, having only come to the Mennonite mission scene in the last decade, I have been pleased to discover that Mennonite mission organizations and their personnel are held in high regard both within the church and throughout the broader mission community worldwide.

The growing maturity of the global church presents us with another piece of the mission and money puzzle. It is no longer possible or desirable to engage in cross-cultural mission in isolation from churches in and around ministry locations. We are all learning to listen to mission

partners outside North America as we develop vision for ministry. True wisdom must emerge from the shared vision of the global body of Christ. This will increasingly include several partners around the ministry table: churches culturally related to the location of the ministry, U.S. congregations, and the mission organizations that both represent these congregations and help facilitate the many necessary, multi-directional connections related to the ministry.

There is a significant movement in the United States for congregations to be their own mission agencies, bypassing less-than-responsive mission organizations and finding great energy through firsthand engagement in mission. As a partnership-formation specialist, I have seen tremendous energy, expertise and spiritual power released when congregations are more directly involved in mission. Congregations often contribute things to a given ministry that a mission agency could never bring. At the same time, congregations that “go it alone” are often prone to costly mistakes and lack the logistical resources and international connections necessary for the full enhancement of their ministries. The wise course seems to be a collaboration that makes use of all the wisdom and energy available, as each partner contributes out of its strengths to the overall health and well-being of the ministry.

I have seen tremendous energy, expertise and spiritual power released when congregations are more directly involved in mission.

3. Current Mission-Giving Patterns: A Complex Reality

In the early stages of North American Mennonite mission agencies (1900-1950), congregations and individuals who gave money to ministry initiatives were closely connected to the mission workers and the key decisions shaping their ministries. As the church and the organizations grew larger, some congregations began to understand mission as little more than generating and forwarding money to the organization, which carried out ministry “on their behalf.” The money in such instances served as a substitute for real engagement, rather than being an integral part of that engagement. This was of course not true for every congrega-

tion, but neither was it a particularly unusual development.

The last 50 years (1950-2000) brought other changes as well. Those who had created the mission organizations, and those in the constituency who knew and supported them, have for the most part either retired or passed on. Today, many from that earlier generation still find important and meaningful ways to serve, but in different roles as mission advocates, counseling younger leaders, and providing a significant portion of the funding that enables cross-cultural mission efforts to happen around the globe. Leadership of congregations and organizations has in the meantime passed on to a younger generation — one that does not feel the same level of loyalty to church organizations as those who had initially played a role in forming them.

At the same time, there has been an explosion in the number of mission organizations created to serve the Great Commission in one way or

Church leadership has today passed on to a younger generation that does not feel the same level of loyalty to church organizations as those who formed them.

another. Many of these are Mennonite-connected and many others are either inter- or non-denominational in nature and appeal. As Mennonites have moved more into the evangelical mainstream, their young people have discovered expanded opportunities for church membership and international ministries through numerous channels other than Mennonite churches, educational institutions and mission organizations. These engagements have often been encouraged and supported, understandably and legitimately so, by their families and congregations with both prayers and money.

While no definitive research has been done on these trends to date, the result is that much less of the money contributed to international mission efforts by Mennonite Church USA congregations is given through denominational and area conference mission agencies (Mennonite Mission Network, Eastern Mennonite Missions, Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions, and others). There is nothing necessarily regrettable or alarming about this situation, but such trends do clearly impact people's attitudes and understanding of cross-cultural mission, as well as their current and

future giving practices to global mission initiatives.

One place this is perhaps most frequently seen is when members participate in short-term cross-cultural mission trips. Such experiences are times of significant learning, often even life-changing events. Depending on the orientation and frame of reference given to the participants, the nature of what is learned can be dramatically different. These experiences usually involve a significant financial investment and are almost always followed by additional money flowing to the location of service. While the motivation for giving flows naturally out of relationships built and out of a new understanding of our North American affluent status, this money runs the serious risk of causing more trouble than good when done outside of a longer-term local ministry partnership based on mutual sharing and accountability.

4. Shifting Trends, Changing Times: Mission Organizations Respond

Mennonite mission organizations have not remained static or unresponsive during these many changes. They have developed a variety of ways for congregations and individuals to become more directly engaged in cross-cultural mission. These ways have included visits to mission locations, congregationally based support groups for mission workers, prayer networks, and full-scale partnerships with congregations for specific ministries in places around the globe.

Where this engagement has developed successfully, more money is given, cross-cultural understanding is increased, and expertise available in both the congregation and the mission organization is used effectively. It should be noted that as individual members have taken more responsibility for recruiting supporters and raising funds for particular ministries, they have drawn in colleagues and associates who are not part of Mennonite congregations. This means that the amount of money given to Mennonite mission organizations from people who are not Mennonite is today, as it has been for the past number of years, on the rise.

Congregational leaders are today facing decisions regarding mission funding that they have not faced before.

On the other hand, these changes have left many Mennonite church members confused about their relationship to Mennonite mission organizations and overwhelmed by the constant flow of requests for money coming from many quarters, both global and local. Congregational leaders are today facing decisions regarding mission funding that they have not faced before. The need for discernment has expanded, as has the need to be more familiar with the mission funding landscape.

For many Mennonites, blessed with a long family history in the church, there is a significant cross-cultural challenge to simply entering the life of the local neighborhood or community in which they live.

The many changes described here were not planned or executed by Mennonite Mission Network or any other organization. They simply represent natural cultural and generational trends. During the last 10 years, for example, Mission Network has developed and expanded its capacity to provide short-term mission learning experiences for Mennonite church members, mostly young adults and seniors. While we recognized the limitations and dangers of short-term experiences for both the participants and the local hosts, we also knew that Mennonites were seeking out these experiences in record numbers and that if our programs could not meet this demand, there were plenty of para-church organizations ready to step into the gap and accept applications.

In response, we have developed a variety of innovative programs that provide discipleship training in a short-term mission environment where local hosts have a high degree of control in shaping the learning experience. These programs are a major reason that requests for mission funding are coming at people from all sides. When one has cousins, nieces, nephews or grandchildren participating in these programs, it is likely that appeals for financial support will be shortly forthcoming. At the same time, responding creatively to this cultural trend has resulted in many effective, cutting-edge ministries. Refusing to respond would most certainly have led to stagnation and irrelevance.

5. The Global/Local Dilemma: It's about Vision, Not Geography

Cross-cultural mission is not only international. America today pro-

vides us with a rich diversity of cultures that challenge the church's ability to develop a whole new set of communication skills and adapt the gospel to "the world next door." In fact, for many Mennonites, blessed with a long family history in the church, there is a significant cross-cultural challenge to simply entering the life of the local neighborhood or community in which they live.

For many years I accepted the commonly held assumption that people were shifting their giving patterns from global to local mission. Then in 2000 I participated in a research project focused on Mennonite funding systems and discovered that this shift was a myth. There was indeed a shift taking place, but not into local mission. Instead, global mission dollars were being redirected into new and improved facilities and local staff costs. While new facilities and staff were often justified with mission purposes, the actual benefit of these added faces and features was experienced as mostly internal to the congregation. The percentage of congregational spending on behalf of those beyond the four walls of the church has, in fact, been on a declining trajectory for at least the last decade, if not longer.

Another shift taking place over the past 20 to 30 years has been in our changing understanding of the "home missions" mandate. Church planting was seen for many years as the work of the church-wide mission boards or commissions. When the limitations of this approach were recognized, the locus of responsibility shifted to area conferences. While that is where it remains today, there is significant movement once again to relocate the energy for church planting, placing it this time in the hands of replicating congregations, rather than area conferences. Whichever way this conversation goes, there will be funding implications for the broader church.

One way to look at local, regional and international mission funding is to focus on the relative amounts given to each. This emphasizes the inherent competition for funds between organizations representing these different geographic spheres and assumes that what one gains the other loses. In fact, experience teaches us that congregations engaged in a

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meaningful, positive way in one mission arena are likely to increase their commitments to other areas as well, rather than stealing from one to fund another.

A better way to approach this matter is simply to focus on the congregation and its participation in God's mission. It is my experience that when people align their hearts with the heart of God, their passion to contribute time, money and prayer far exceeds any request that I might make for mission dollars. When we focus as God's people on creating experiences that encourage this alignment of passion, we can expect financial support to meet the needs of the ministry that God has initiated.

Following this approach, the role of local, regional and global mission leaders is not to argue for their share of the mission pie, but to find ways to engage the hearts of people in mission ministries. This may create some short-term shifts towards a particular mission location, but in the long run, commitment and support to each of these areas of mission will be enhanced. We may yet see the day when mission committees work at helping each member to become personally engaged in some form of mission, rather than dividing up the mission budget among the many requests: local, regional and global.

6. Proactive, Prayerful, Priority-directed, Partner-oriented: Four Financial Characteristics of Missional Congregations

Missional congregations are *proactive* rather than reactive in handling their money and their mission. They exercise *prayerful* discernment and compassion together as a body. They know their mission *priorities*, and that makes financial decisions easier. They consider the future as well as the past. They say "no" to many worthy requests for money in order to say "yes" to those where money is tied to mission relationships that fully engage the congregation in God's mission across the street and around the world.

Missional congregations understand the importance of listening to *partners* outside North America as they form their vision for participating in God's mission around the world. They recognize that the mission visions that claim their loyalty and dollars need to grow out of cross-cultur-

al soil. They embrace with joy the challenge of living in a time when the gift-sharing connections of Mennonite World Conference offer them new opportunities to gain wisdom emerging from the global body of Christ.

Money is both powerful and dangerous. Most of us, living in the world's wealthiest nation, believe that our "camels will be able to pass through the eye of the needle" (Matt. 19:24). I pray that those of us surrounded by this culture of consumption and affluence will find a way to

work together, encourage one another, and discern as a community of faith how our money can best serve the cause of Christ.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What does it mean to be a missional congregation in your relationships with international mission ministries?
2. Have you had an experience in your congregation where contributed money hindered the mission of the congregation, caused unnecessary conflict or demonstrated unequal power in the congregation?
3. Do you think that it is possible to provide most of the money in a mission partnership without having most of the control? If so, what must be done for that to be a possibility?
4. What is your level of trust in your primary mission agency? What builds up that trust and what tears it down? What are the trust-building responsibilities of the agency, the congregation, and the individual?
5. Take an inventory of your group. List all the mission organizations/individuals that people in your group contribute to individually and through the congregation. What percentage are Anabaptist? Mennonite Church-USA related? Is that important?
6. How do requests for contributions make you feel?
 - ◆ Annoyed
 - ◆ Valued
 - ◆ Important
 - ◆ Guilty
 - ◆ Overwhelmed
 - ◆ Informed
 - ◆ Appreciated
 - ◆ Other _____

Do requests from organizations/people you regularly support have the same effect or are they different from new requests? How does giving to mission make you feel?

7. What is different about giving through your congregation and giving individually? Why do you do it?
8. If you were in charge of a denominational mission agency, how would you respond to the current proliferation of mission giving opportunities and giving styles?
9. Do you think mission committees should allocate funds based on relationship and engagement? history? “fairness”? Would basing allocations on relationship and engagement hurt or help primary mission agencies?
10. Is your congregation able to say “no” to mission funding requests from members?

11. Do you think congregations should support many different ministries so that there is something for everybody, or should they concentrate on several important efforts where deeper engagement is possible?
Does this depend on the size of the congregation?

Part B: Principles for Discernment in the Congregation

As congregations face new and more complex decisions regarding mission funding, they will need to adopt principles for responding to requests from many sources. The outline and questions below provide a beginning guide for congregational mission and finance leaders as they discern how best to use their financial resources in the service of God's mission. These guidelines cover situations related primarily to international mission initiatives, though some of the principles might also apply to requests for local or regional mission money.

1. Requests from friends and family members for ongoing annual support

Many mission agencies require mission workers to secure financial pledges to support their work before they begin an assignment. While certain individuals in a congregation often want to show their support in this way because of a prior personal relationship with the mission worker, this relationship is likely not a good enough reason for the whole congregation to pledge support for these workers.

In many cases there is little real congregational involvement in these relationships, even if there is some awareness of the ministry due to occasional visits and reporting. Small amounts of financial support for many such workers with "connections" to the congregation increase the number of colorful push pins on the world map in the church hallway. This may, however, create the illusion of significant active engagement in global mission via these ties to familiar faces in unfamiliar locations.

When a congregation pledges financial support to a mission worker, it ties itself to the future ministry of that person. If this relationship is to have any integrity, the congregation will need to be well informed about the nature of the ministry, the preparation of the workers, and the manner in which the worker plans to report and remain accountable to the

congregation. The congregation, for its part, will want to establish active communication with the worker, and at least a core group of supporters may wish to remain particularly well informed and praying regularly, not only for the worker, but for the local people who represent the future of the church in the mission location. If these steps are taken, the ministry of the worker will become a valuable part of the congregation's mission commitments. If not, then it may be best for interested friends and families to support the worker on an individual basis.

Some Questions for Discernment

- a. What is the nature of the proposed ministry and who will provide support and direction to the mission workers?
- b. How have the mission workers prepared for their assignment and who are the experienced people who have provided counsel along the way to help them determine whether their gifts and experiences are a good fit for the roles they'll need to play?
- c. How are local partners at the ministry location included in shaping the mission assignment?
- d. How does the proposed mission activity relate to the vision and purpose of the sponsoring congregation?
- e. Who are the other funding partners in this ministry and what is the length of their funding commitment? (In fairness to those being sent, the funding plan should never be left "open-ended" or the workers may well find themselves needing to return home before their term is completed.)
- f. How will the mission workers report to the congregation?
- g. Who in the congregation is designated to organize the support structure, communication plan and ongoing relationship with the mission workers?

2. Requests from church members interested in becoming international mission workers

A member's request for financial support is hopefully not the first time that the pastor and other congregational leaders are being made aware of the individual's call to ministry. An important assumption here is that members contemplating an international, cross-cultural mission assignment will have already discussed this prospect with their pastor and others close to them in the church, and that these spiritual companions have played an integral role in the discernment process leading to such a decision. The request for money is, in such cases, simply another step in a much deeper relationship of support and counsel.

Young adult members of the congregation who are away from their home communities for reasons of work, service or study provide a special challenge around this issue. Though perhaps nurtured for many years as children of the congregation, they are more recently experiencing significant growth and change away from home and may no longer have strong ties to the congregation. This means that for them, congregational discernment may begin, rather than end, with a request for financial support. Their request for funding can, in such instances, be a wonderful opportunity to engage the young person in a discernment conversation that will be helpful to both them and the congregation.

When international workers apply for an assignment through Mennonite Mission Network, the applicants' relationship to their congregation is always a key consideration, and potential workers are encouraged to engage their pastor and congregation in the discernment process.

Some Questions for Discernment

- a. How have the prospective mission workers included the congregation in their discernment and preparation process?
- b. Is the potential assignment related to the global vision and ministries of the congregation, or is it something that will be new to the congregation?
- c. Is the member pursuing the ministry individually with the blessing of the congregation, or does the congregation itself “own” the ministry and see the mission candidate as going out to serve on its behalf? (Either option is valid and acceptable, but clarifying this difference can be important.)
- d. What is the current relationship between the congregation and the mission organization that will administer the assignment? How will that relationship change with this new appointment?
- e. Have the prospective mission workers demonstrated spiritual maturity and passion for mission in their past relationships with the congregation?
- f. What is the nature of the proposed ministry and who will provide support and direction to the mission workers?
- g. Most of the questions provided in the previous section are also of interest in this case.

3. Requests from trusted individuals in the congregation who care deeply about a particular ministry

These requests often come from former mission workers or members with international connections who are soliciting support for people or projects for which they care deeply. If this is a connection that has potential for a long-term partnership involving the whole congregation, it may be a wonderful opportunity for the congregation to share money in a life-giving way. Otherwise, it is probably not wise for congregations to base decisions about where money flows on personal feelings and individual connections alone. Whatever decision is finally made, it is always prudent for congregational leaders to get a second opinion about the project from someone who is familiar with the project history, location and culture.

Some Questions for Discernment

- a. What are the details of the request?
 - ◆ How much money is involved?
 - ◆ For what purpose?
 - ◆ To whom will the money be sent?
 - ◆ How will the congregation receive reports on the ministry or project?
- b. Does the request benefit an individual family or a whole community?
- c. What is the nature of the relationship that sparked this request? How long have the parties concerned known each other and how much experience have they had together?
- d. Is there a church body or organization that can speak to the context into which this gift will flow and give counsel on the potential impacts?
- e. What is the possibility that this emerging relationship might expand into a long-term partnership between the congregation and the proposed project or ministry?
- f. How will the congregation be affected?
- g. What are the options available to the congregation and which is most appropriate?
 - ◆ Counsel the requesting individual against financial gifts.
 - ◆ Encourage the individual to give privately.
 - ◆ Offer an opportunity for the individual to share about the opportunity and solicit support from other members on a one-time basis.
 - ◆ Pursue a deeper, longer-term relationship for the congregation with this first-time contribution acting as an initial bridge to broader future involvements.

4. Requests from other congregations to join in a common mission endeavor

As congregations begin to be more directly engaged in cross-cultural mission, some are taking responsibility to be the “support center” for a particular ministry. When several congregations work together in such an effort, it can be an effective way to create ownership and participation without placing undue burden on a single congregation.

It will be important to clarify what kind of support is being requested:

- ◆ a continuing, regular monetary commitment
- ◆ a one-time financial contribution
- ◆ little involvement in shaping the ministry
- ◆ full participation in the ownership of the ministry

Some Questions for Discernment

- a. What is the relationship of the requesting congregation to the ministry?
Is it a full partner, a supporter, an advocate?
- b. What is being requested? A one-time gift? A long-term financial commitment? Joint ownership and support of the ministry?
- c. How does this opportunity fit with the mission goals of the congregation?
- d. Is this a good challenge for the congregation or something beyond the capacity of the congregation to support?
- e. Will other mission efforts be cut back in order to participate in this opportunity?
- f. What are the potential impacts on the relationship between the two congregations? (It could either be positive or problematic.)
- g. What is the nature of the proposed ministry and who will provide support and direction to the mission workers?
- h. Is there an experienced mission organization providing counsel or involved as a partner?
- i. Is there anyone in the congregation who will have the passion to provide leadership for this mission connection?

5. Requests from international partners

Requests of this nature have grown dramatically in number in the last decade and will almost certainly increase in the years to come. Electronic communications and relatively cheap global travel, along with the emergence of mature and astute churches around the world, are creating a web of relationships that is rapidly expanding.

Many North American churches and individuals have a deep interest and desire to share financial resources with these international partner churches and mission organizations. The need of the recipient is rarely in doubt. What is more difficult to discern is the ultimate impact of money on the situation. Experienced staff members at established mission organizations can give counsel to constituent churches about these relationships and the potential impact of financial sharing across cultures.

Some international churches have become quite sophisticated in their ability to do fund-raising in the United States. This is not necessarily inappropriate. North America does have significant financial capacity. Churches that work with U.S. church leadership to assure that their fund-raising has integrity and to develop long-term partnerships rather than simply generating cash are to be welcomed and encouraged.

Some Questions for Discernment

- a. Who is making the request?
- b. Whom do they represent and what other relationships do they have in the United States?
- c. Are they part of the Mennonite World Conference family of churches?
- d. Does the church body in that country or region sanction the request?
- e. What are the details of the request?
- f. What are the expectations for continued relationship and partnership?
- g. Are there any U.S. church organizations that have experience and counsel to offer in this case?
- h. Do other congregations (locally and/or regionally) have relationships in the same area of the world? Are they seeking financial support as well?
- i. How can any financial support be part of a healthy relationship based on sharing gifts with mutual respect and consideration?
- j. What are the power dynamics at play in this request?
- k. Many of the questions in prior sections may apply here as well.

6. Requests from para-church mission organizations

Para-church organizations exist for a variety of reasons. Some fill important niches not covered by denominational mission organizations. Some serve groups that don't have their own mission organizations. Some emerge as the result of one individual's vision and reflect the personal interests and agenda of that person.

Congregations must ask themselves what this organization offers that their primary church-related mission organization does not. There may be good reasons for engagement with para-church organizations along with the congregation's primary mission relationships. However, the congregation has a responsibility to determine who owns the organization, how the board is chosen, where its money comes from, how it is spent, what its theology is, and how it does mission. In other words, giving money to a para-church organization requires a higher level of diligence. The old saying is truer every day: "Wise Christians give with their heads as well as their hearts."

Some Questions for Discernment

- a. Do we as a congregation have adequate information about the organization, including statement of purpose, financial reports, ownership, board, and sources of support?
- b. Do we know other trustworthy people who have experience with this organization and could give us a recommendation?
- c. Is the proposed ministry something that is best done with this organization rather than with the congregation's primary mission organization?
- d. What is the organization's philosophy of cross-cultural mission and how does that compare to Anabaptist understandings of mission and the church?
- e. What kind of relationship is expected and for how long?
- f. How will this relationship help to accomplish the missional priorities and purposes of our congregation?

7. Primary mission agency requests — *General, unrestricted contributions*

Congregations are well served by relating to a primary mission organization that they own and control through their selection of the board of directors. For most Mennonite Church USA congregations, this is Mennonite Mission Network. It is the organization that is charged with providing them with mission education and information and for providing mission consultation and training in partnership with area conferences. Money given to Mennonite Mission Network provides these services along with a broad range of service learning opportunities for all ages.

A major portion of general contributions to Mission Network goes to support cross-cultural mission through workers and international partners in hundreds of locations. If each of these ministries had to raise funds individually, it would waste thousands of hours and dollars. General contributions allow representatives at the Network to respond to ever-changing situations with flexibility and compassion, rather than being driven solely by what is attractive to donors and supporters with more limited access to information.

Some Questions for Discernment

- a. Do members of the congregation understand where this money is going and how it will be used?
- b. Is your congregation in tune with the philosophy and purposes of the mission organization?
- c. Does the mission organization provide mission education and consultation services along with support for cross-cultural ministries?
- d. Does the mission organization report regularly on its activities?
- e. How does your congregation help members to participate in the work of this organization and feel ownership of the larger mission effort?
- f. How do you celebrate your general mission giving and consecrate it in worship?

8. Primary mission agency requests — *Special projects*

Each year Mennonite Mission Network authorizes a limited number of special projects and requests money for these projects from very limited audiences. Only the amount contributed is disbursed. These projects are time-limited and do not fit well into an annual operating budget. Some of them are capital projects for church buildings that congregations choose to make a part of their own capital improvement campaigns. Mennonite Mission Network supports this kind of first-fruits giving from congregations.

Some Questions for Discernment

- a. Are there natural connections for this project in the congregation?
- b. Is this time-limited project related to a longer-term ministry presence by Mission Network or other partners of the congregation?
- c. How can this project enhance enthusiasm for and understanding of global mission in the congregation?
- d. Does the project time frame fit with plans to raise the money?
- e. Will this project be funded by special offerings, special events or as part of another fund-raising effort? (Many churches, for instance, tithe 5 to 10 percent of their building fund contributions to build church facilities in other countries.)

9. Primary mission agency requests — *Support for particular workers*

Support for mission workers comes from many sources: employment earnings, general contributions, partnerships with other mission groups, congregationally based partnerships, congregationally based support networks and individuals.

Mission Network staff explores a variety of funding possibilities for workers who are accepted for an assignment that cannot be funded from general, unrestricted contributions. In the past, when there was not enough money to send a worker, the worker simply did not go. This still happens, but where there is significant congregational ownership in the ministry and support for the potential worker, congregations sometimes choose to share responsibility for funding the ministry without reducing their current mission giving. It may require considerable time and energy to broaden ministry ownership in the congregation to the point where its members are ready to assume this kind of responsibility.

Mennonite Mission Network does not ask workers to raise their own support. As support teams within congregations work to raise this money, other nearby congregations and related individuals often receive funding requests for particular mission workers from members of these support teams. When mission workers write letters or give presentations encouraging contributions to their ministries, it may seem as if the mission workers are raising their own support.

In fact, Mission Network bases deployment decisions on the coming together of a variety of funding sources: its own budget, financial commitments from other organizations, and contributions from congregations or area conferences that choose to take on this responsibility. Mission Network does not believe it is in the best interests of the ministry, the worker, or the congregation to make the raising of financial support the responsibility of the mission workers.

Many congregations are choosing to be more active in mission worker support through prayer networks, mission visits, and regular communication. This is good for the ministry, the worker, and the congregation, whether contributions are part of general mission support or of a special funding commitment by the congregation that expands the church's overall mission capacity.

Some Questions for Discernment

- a. What is the nature of the proposed ministry and who in the congregation will lead the process of building ownership for the ministry?
- b. What level of commitment can the congregation sustain? It is good to challenge a congregation to a new level of commitment, but not to have unrealistic expectations.
- c. At what level will this relationship be owned: by a small group, Sunday-school class, ad hoc group or the entire congregation?
- d. How can this relationship be developed so that other mission giving does not decline?

10. Primary mission agency requests — *Young people and others needing support for service learning assignments*

We can be thankful that many people — particularly youth and young adults — are choosing to participate in service learning assignments with MVS (Mennonite Voluntary Service), Service Adventure, RAD (Reaching and Discipling), DEO (Discipleship, Encounter, Outreach) and other mission training programs. These ministry opportunities are supported largely by local funds and general contributions, but it is important for participants and their congregations to also participate in the costs of the assignments. Ideally, this kind of involvement encourages more than a funding relationship between participants and their home congregations.

When a small congregation has several people participating in these programs at the same time, the financial expectations can stack up. What was intended as a gesture of support can turn into an unwanted burden. It is completely appropriate for congregations to sit down with participants and their families and determine how the family and the congregation will share in the financial support. Such support may include contributions from existing funds or fund-raising activities. Some congregations budget for this support to encourage members to volunteer for service learning opportunities. If more support is needed, some scholarships are available from Mission Network for most service learning programs. Congregations need to remember that while programs have routine requests and procedures, administrators are always open to making adjustments as they are able.

Some Questions for Discernment

- a. Have members in the congregation been part of the discernment process with the participant and his or her family?
- b. How will the congregation stay in contact with the participant during the term of service?
- c. Who is best equipped to discuss the financial need with the participant and family members?
- d. How much financial support should come from the participant, family, congregation and individuals solicited by the participant? How will the congregation help the participant work at these issues?
- e. How will the congregation recognize this term of service? A commissioning? A prayer of blessing? A time to report on the experience?

For Further Reading

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Money and Mission

A Discernment Guide for Congregations

Peter Graber

Some might think it would be wonderful if every dollar we give to “mission” resulted in the redemption of souls and bodies in direct proportion to the amount given. Some might think it would be wonderful if how much money we control and how much privilege we enjoy did not matter in cross-cultural relationships. Well, it might be wonderful, but it would not be true to life.

Not only is the landscape of money and mission full of land mines, but that landscape is changing rapidly before our eyes as mission organizations proliferate and the global church becomes a reality. Peter Graber is in a unique position to observe that landscape, having learned a good deal from his many years of observation. This booklet gives readers a chance to look over his shoulder and catch a glimpse of the money-and-mission landscape from his perspective.

In addition to Graber's introductory reflections here, more than half of this booklet is devoted to a practical guide for congregational discernment of mission-funding issues. These pages are suitable for duplication and discussion by church committees or councils. While Graber does not provide us with all the answers, he does give us a handle on the questions we need to be asking.

Peter Graber serves as senior executive for Missional Church Advancement at Mennonite Mission Network. This division acts as one of the hubs for missional church information, expertise and activities throughout the Mennonite Church USA system.

Graber joined the former Mennonite Board of Missions in August 1995 as a volunteer communication associate with a focus on family mission education. He was the first Partnership Office director and worked at building partnerships for cross-cultural mission during his last five years with MBM. He continues to work with the Mission Network at helping congregations and mission workers network in strong supportive relationships.

U.S. \$3.95

ISBN bar-code imprint area



Mennonite Mission Network

The mission agency of Mennonite Church USA

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Great Plains office, P.O. Box 347, Newton, KS 67114-0347

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