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## REFLECTIONS ON MISSION STRUCTURES

Human bodies need skeletons. Imagine what would happen if you removed all the bones from a body..... Maybe you'd prefer not to imagine! However much we differ in some respects, basically all humans everywhere have the same number of bones, arranged in the same way. The skeleton gives us structure.

We need structures for social organisation, too, but these can be much more varied. The Bible records families, clans and tribes; villages, towns and cities; nomadic groups; groups of friends; groups with a common purpose – disciples, synagogues, armies; leaders and followers, kings and subjects; local congregations and missionary teams. In other words, while the human body has a uniform structure, differentiated only by male or female, social structures come in many variations. There are constants – for example, the family – clearly ordained by God; but most of them are a matter of culture, context, and purpose. They are simply a convenient, contextualised way of organising what we do, and God gives us the freedom and creativity to birth them, adapt them, discard them, create something fresh. We do not need to be captive to either Darwinian or Marxist social evolutionary theories. We can rejoice in diversity, and develop structures that reflect God's purpose and values for human flourishing.

Over the centuries, there have been many different structures to carry forward the missionary mandate of

God's people. There has been much wasted breath in a sterile debate as to the respective roles of "church" and "para-church." Often the issue at stake, however it may have been presented, has been a power struggle as to "who's in charge." It would be more helpful to rejoice that God's people can be organised in different configurations for different purposes, but in all of them they are manifestations of church. The local congregation is not the only legitimate expression of church, even if it is the most common.

Paul and Barnabas and their various companions were not "para-church" when they went on their missionary journeys; they were still "church," a microcosm of the called-out people of God, simply in a different configuration from a local congregation. In the same way, mission was taken forward by unknown numbers of unnamed men and women as they travelled as merchants or refugees or as intentional bearers of the gospel: they were being "church on the move," led by the Spirit. The same can be said of the monastic orders so key to church expansion over many centuries, and of the voluntary societies and mission agencies of the modern missionary movement. These communities of Christian men and women were and are "church on the move," purposeful structures through which to carry out Christ's precious command to disciple the peoples of the world.

Today, as we look freshly at context, culture and purpose, there will be



many varied configurations of church-in-mission. Let's embrace that rich diversity with thanksgiving, with respect for those who do things differently, praying that in our creative complementarity God's kingdom may become more truly formed on earth as it is in heaven ●

GLOBAL DIALOGUE, Responses from leaders of mission sending structures:

### What makes your mission singular in the global arena?

#### Richard Tiplady, ECM-UK

We are largest (but still not very large) interdenominational international mission agency focused exclusively on Europe.

#### Reuben Ezemadu, CMF, Nigeria

A holistic approach to missions became our distinguishing trade mark at a time when the popular gospel was skewed either towards soul-winning alone or to the materialistic extreme. CMF came on board the global mission arena when it was imperative that the receiving church in Africa should become a mission sending and supporting Church.

#### Silas Tostes, Antioch Mission, Brazil

It is an interdenominational Brazilian mission agency, sending Brazilians to the needy areas of the world.