

CAN WE AVERT A TRAIN WRECK?

How the Power of *De-Centralizing* Could Finance a
Hundred Presbyterian Mission Initiatives Now—
And Turn around Our Denomination

By Robert A. Blincoe

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Pasadena, CA

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This paper expands on the remarks I made to a gathering of Presbyterians at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta on October 20, 2005. In it I suggest a way forward that might be useful to the missional aspirations of the World-Wide Ministries Division and the many church members who are taking their mission initiatives outside the denomination. It occurs to me that my remarks may help make the case for negotiating a new order of structures in our denomination.

American Christianity, unlike European, has been voluntary, pluralistic, and competitive almost from its beginning. But only since the 1950s has “the logical consequence of this pluralism”¹ put American denominations on the defensive. What has happened is that the past order—in which a headquarters initiated and directed all funding through a unified mission budget—is not working any more. Today Presbyterian members and churches are funding their own initiatives, or joining with others to bring into existence new mission ideas that the headquarters did not or would not consider. By analogy, today’s Presbyterian members and churches are laying all manner of mission “railroad tracks” down which their ideas and their funding are moving. This is the “logical consequence of pluralism” and must result in a new “negotiated order” between the governing bodies of the church and its members. Until now the governing bodies have resisted the inevitable decentralization of

¹ Ross P. Scherer coined this phrase in his introduction to *American Denominational Organization*. William Carey Library, Pasadena, CA 1980

mission initiative and funding. This happened once before; students of 19th century Presbyterian history may remember that how the rise of independent women's societies brought a new negotiated order into existence, to the advantage of the Presbyterian Church and all its parts.

HOW PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN'S MISSION SOCIETIES OVERCAME THE OBJECTIONS OF THE BOARD OF FOREIGN MISSIONS

Following the American Civil War women's mission societies began funding all manner of new efforts; the frowning brows on the faces of Presbyterian board executives changed to hearty approval when these women's societies began to be regarded as loyal—and financially creditable. J. Arthur Brown put it this way in his book, *One Hundred Years*, a centennial of the Presbyterian Foreign Mission work, published in 1936:

When, in 1870, the Assembly's Board of Foreign Missions heard that some women in Philadelphia wanted to organize themselves into a missionary society to help it in its work among women and children, one of its secretaries from New York came to talk it over with a meeting of pastors and women convened for the purpose. The minutes recorded that the propriety of an independent organization was questioned, and that the opinion was expressed that the work could be more easily, cheaply, and better done through the regular agencies of the Church . . . While the Assembly's Board at first looked on with some misgivings, it soon welcomed the women's organizations as colleagues, and began to unload new enterprises upon them.²

The Philadelphia women organized themselves into the Foreign Missionary Society in 1870 and began publishing *Woman's Work for Woman*. Soon there were seven regionally based women's boards, all in addition to the General Assembly's Board of Foreign Missions. By 1879, women's societies, apart from the National Board, were supporting Presbyterian missionaries in Syria, Persia, India, China,

² Brown, J. Arthur, *One Hundred Years*. Revell 1936 p. 114

Thailand (Siam), Japan, Africa and Mexico, as well as among the American Indians.

Moreover, who would have worked among the immigrants to the United States, if the women had not undertaken this task? In 1881, The North Pacific Branch of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society was organized. Its work centered in Portland among Chinese women. The California Branch of the Philadelphia Woman's Foreign Missionary Society was organized in 1873; in 1889 it became the Woman's Occidental Board of Foreign Missions, being active in the mission to Chinese women in San Francisco. So, despite their begrudged beginning, women's societies contributed to the funding and sending of new missionaries. The General Assembly of 1875 voted that

inasmuch as the G.A. of the Presbyterian Church employs no one to represent and promote its interest in Foreign Missions in the West, the Woman's Board is authorized to carry on this work, using its own methods, independent of other control.

The General Assembly of 1889 agreed to transfer the support of all medical work³ abroad to the Women's General Missionary Society, though in later years the Board of Foreign Missions again undertook medical work. In addition, the Women's General Missionary Society assumed support of all unmarried women in the foreign fields—a responsibility that it continued to carry throughout its history.⁴

There is more. The 1893 General Assembly minutes state that "The Women's Societies have exceeded any figure hitherto attained, reaching the handsome total of \$329,889, while the Christian Endeavor Societies have nearly doubled their gifts." Brown marvels that from 1870 to 1920 30% of the total receipts of the Board of Foreign Mission were credited to the women's boards and societies:

The total receipts for the 50 years from Presbyterian women for Foreign Missions, were reported to be \$17,154,630, an almost unbelievable sum when one realizes that the gifts did

³ Rycroft, W. Stanley *The Ecumenical Witness of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.*, 1968, Board of Christian Education, UPCUSA page 81

⁴ *Ibid.*

not represent large plate collections, but the tithing of small sums and gifts of self-denial and sacrifice. Prayers were the secret of this magnificent giving.⁵

CHAPTER XXVIII ORGANIZATIONS

Presbyterians had been organizing themselves into special interest groups for decades, when the Presbyterian Church decided to establish a reporting relationship with them. So in 1902 the 114th General Assembly added a chapter to the Book of Order called “Of the Organizations of the Church: Their Rights and Duties.” The Chapter XXVIII organizations, as they were called, reported to the General Assembly and were regulated by—but not governed by—church boards. However, the chapter was voted out of existence at the 1991 General Assembly, when a few of the twenty-two reporting organizations—particularly The Presbyterian Lay Committee and the Presbyterians for Lesbian/Gay Concerns—seemed to the General Assembly to be too controversial. So the Church expunged the Chapter from the Book of Order, and the concept of a regulating, reporting relationship was eliminated. The Chapter XXVIII concept was helpful and should be re-introduced.

NEGOTIATING A NEW ORDER

Today members of the Presbyterian Church are laying down all kinds of new mission “tracks”. All manner of mission activity is running along these tracks. This activity is specific to the special interests of small numbers of Presbyterians. Their activities should be recognized by Church Central; it is time to negotiate a new order of relationship between the governing bodies and the people in the pews who are funding all kinds of missions. (The Lutherans have shown us the way; more about that later). If a new order cannot be negotiated, then the governing bodies will lay down its single track until it runs out of funds. There is a more excellent way.

Perhaps the crisis in our Presbyterian denomination is best expressed by Peter Goldmark of the Rockefeller Foundation:

⁵ Brown, p. 135

You have restless people seeking to deal with problems that were not being successfully coped with by existing institutions. They escaped the old formats and were driven to invent new forms of organizations. They found more freedom, more effectiveness and more productive engagement. That is a key terrain.⁶

Ours is a time of enormous opportunity for “restless people” who are making plans to do good and thus overcome evil. Let a hundred initiatives bloom! Restless social entrepreneurs must be welcomed by—and regulated by—the governors at all levels—session, presbytery, General Assembly, and Louisville. Private initiatives are multiplying—read Bornstein’s *How to Change the World*—but are seen as trouble by governors. Governors have plenty to do just keeping the existing machinery running. This is why Andrews Walls observed that the forms of sodality needed today may prove “disturbing”. Here is the context of Walls’ observation:

From age to age it becomes necessary to use new means for the proclamation of the Gospel beyond the structures which unduly localize it. The voluntary societies have been as revolutionary in their effect as ever the monasteries were in their sphere. The sodalities we now need may prove equally disturbing.⁷

In their role as governors, our denominational boards are disturbed by private initiatives, as they once were disturbed by the rise of women’s societies. But every year there is less money in the

⁶ Goldmark goes on to say, “Twenty years ago, for example, Indonesia had only one independent environmental organization. Today it has more than 2000. In Bangladesh, most of the country’s development work is handled by 10,000 NGOs; almost all of them were established in the past twenty-five years. India has well over a million citizen organizations. Slovakia, a tiny country has more than 12,000. Between 1988 and 1995, 100,000 citizen groups opened shop in the former communist countries of Central Europe. In the United States, between 1989 and 1998, the number of public service groups registered jumped from 250,000 to 400,000, a 60 percent increase. Given the long history of citizen activity in the United States, it comes as a surprise that 70 percent of registered groups are less than thirty years old.” David Bornstein, *How to Change the World* p 4.

⁷ Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*. Orbis 1996:253-254

central budget and fewer centrally-commissioned missionaries to govern. This is because “restless members seeking to deal with problems” are forming voluntary societies appropriate to their passions, collecting their money and experimenting on the peripheries. And, unless welcomed and regulated, restless people will start new, appropriate structures, without any regulation or recognition from the boards of the church. *This impulse of restless members to leave the existing institution is the crisis in our church today.* But in a new negotiated order the governing bodies would recognize and regulate—but not govern—these powerful mission forces at work in our church today.

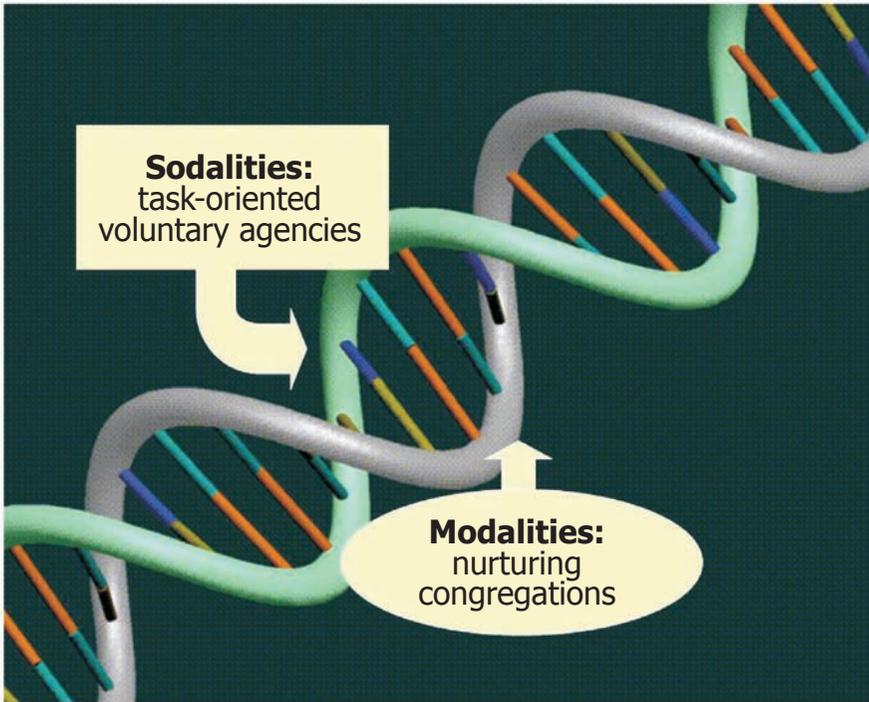
THE ESSENTIAL PCMS

The founding purposes of the Presbyterian Center for Mission Studies (PCMS), which began in 1972 as a Chapter XXVIII organization, are “analyzing the needs and opportunities for Christian Mission in today’s world” and “*suggesting additional methods and structures for mission.*” The PCMS promotes the regulation of such initiatives by our church. To ignore its message is to surrender to a divorce for irreconcilable differences. May it be said that we paid the price to save the historical church for her prophetic future.

THE ESSENTIAL DESIGN OF THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

I think the essential design of the healthy missional denomination is suggested by the double helix structure of a molecule. The dictionary defines a double helix as “the coiled structure of a double-stranded DNA molecule in which strands linked by hydrogen bonds form a spiral configuration”⁸. I am not a scientist, but the discovery that life’s essential design is a double helix seems an elegant analogy to the two essential parts of the life of the church, the sodalities and the modalities.

⁸ *The American Heritage*® *Stedman’s Medical Dictionary* Copyright © 2002, 2001, 1995 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Published by Houghton Mifflin Company.



Dr. Ralph Winter described 'the two structures of God's redemptive mission' in 1974. He wrote:

On the one hand, the structure we call the *New Testament church* is a prototype of all subsequent Christian fellowships where old and young, male and female are gathered together as normal biological families in aggregate. On the other hand, Paul's *missionary band* can be considered a prototype of all subsequent missionary endeavors organized out of committed, experienced workers who affiliated themselves as a second decision beyond membership in the first structure.⁹

These two parts, then, comprised New Testament the missional church. The *sodality* is the "voluntary task-oriented agency" and the *modality* is the "nurturing congregation". In Jewish religion, these two parts were, and are today, identified as the synagogue (modality) and

⁹ Winter, Ralph "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission". *Missiology* January 2, 1974.

the *khevrā*¹⁰ (sodality). As the singular of ‘helix’ is *helice* I will introduce this word to make the point that the two ministries are inextricably and elegantly entwined, yet separate and unequal in their effectiveness for particular ministries.

HELICE #1—MODALITY

“What we normally think of as the New Testament Church” is the gathered community whose purpose is worshipping, teaching, increasing in number, baptizing, appointing elders. The elders are responsible to “shepherd the flock”, nurture the believers, and guard the peace, unity and purity of the believers. The church is comprised of families. Call it the modality.

HELICE #2—SODALITY

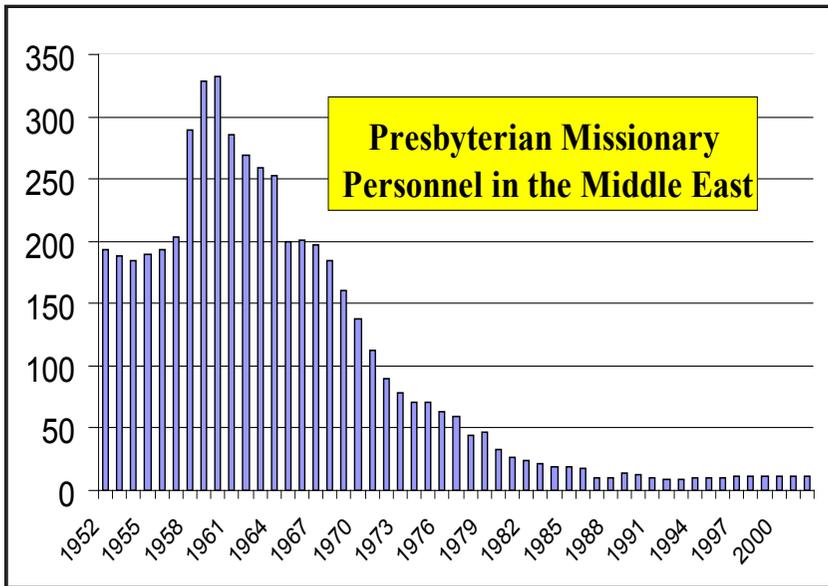
This is the task-oriented team of volunteers whose purpose is to accomplish a special assignment. It is comprised of adult members who are selected by leaders. Call it the sodality.

THE ESSENTIAL DESIGN FLAW

If you were an engineer at Cape Canaveral and you knew of a design flaw in the shuttle, you would be obligated to point it out. The essential design flaw in the mission of the Presbyterian Church is that the governing of the task-oriented voluntary societies—the sodalities—*has been retained by well-intentioned, but conservative, boards whose primary concern is the preservation of the modalities*. This means that the primary value of the boards—*strengthening the church where it is*—works against the freedom of church members who have ideas and funding to *initiate mission where the church is not*.

The unfortunate inclination of the governors to deny members who represent this or that minority idea from initiating their mission has brought about the precarious situation presented in this graph:

¹⁰ Do a Google search of *Khevrā* and see all manner of Jewish task-oriented agencies. The first century Pharisees, Saducees, and Essenes were *khevraim*.

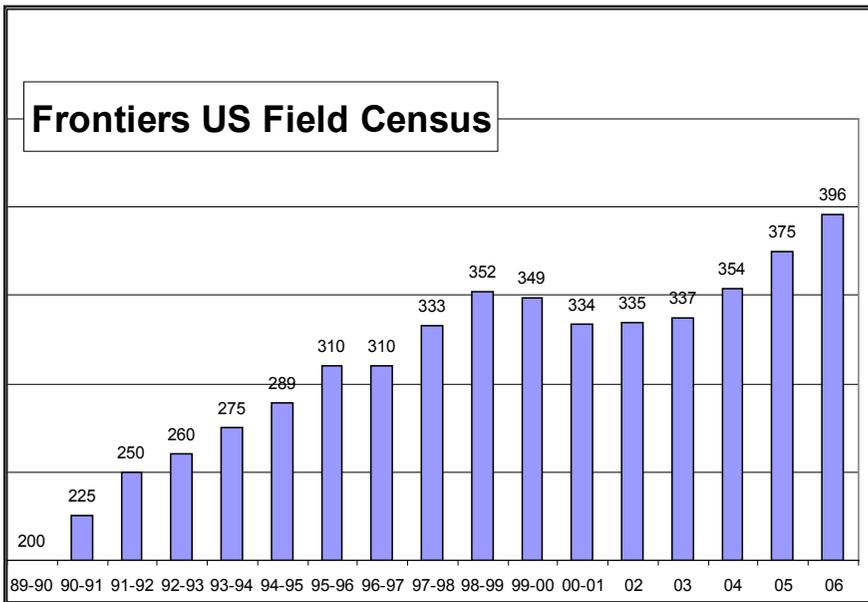


Since 1958 when the Presbyterian Church of North America reunited with the Presbyterian Church USA the number of mission personnel serving in the Middle East has steadily declined. (The same decline would be repeated in graphs of mission personnel in South America, South Asia, and other regions of the world where the Presbyterians have historically worked.) But this does not mean that Presbyterians are no longer going overseas. One reason for the decline is that congregations continue to send their members, without being recognized by the denomination's headquarters. There are probably an aggregate of 300 Presbyterian missionaries serving in six mission agencies that I can think of, representing \$2 million in Presbyterian funding (we have a proud history of ecumenism, after all.) If the Presbyterian Church recognized that it is in a 'joint venture' with these six agencies the knowledge of how much Presbyterian mission work is actually being done would more accurate and more celebrated.

A second reason for the decline, I believe, is that the World-Wide Ministries Division has defined mission narrowly as "church-to-church partnerships". This is meant to honor the overseas churches by giving them control over the presence of American Presbyterians who work in those countries. But it also places impossible burdens on

the small, ethnic minorities that often comprise the membership in overseas churches. What about the mission tasks in every country that remain unbegun? The lengthening decades in which all the initiative for mission overseas has been retained by church headquarters should be an evidence of the need for many new sources of initiative than can be centralized.

Meanwhile, Frontiers has been favored with an inverse situation:



Why the contrast? And what can be done to turn around the situation in favor of the Presbyterian Church? This is the essential problem that the Presbyterian Center for Mission Studies has been asking since it began. For example, the PCMS published Dr. Ken Bailey's paper, *A Tale of Three Cities*, which critiques the ebbing influence of Presbyterian mission numbers and proposes a way forward.¹¹

¹¹ Bailey, Kenneth E. *A Tale of Three Cities*, originally delivered as the Don McClure lectures at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Published by the Presbyterian Center for Mission Studies in 1988.

From my perspective, the double helix of the church has been damaged and must be repaired by the governors. How to repair it? By welcoming the initiatives being proposed by “restless members”. Welcome them and regulate them, after the useful pattern that has revived the health of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

LUTHERANS ARE LEADING THE WAY

The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), famously unified in doctrine and form of worship, and until recently centralized in its mission budget, has permitted a galaxy of de-centralized mission agencies to spring up from among its membership. In fact, we would have to say that the variety of mission initiatives calling themselves Lutheran—but neither initiated by nor directed by the church headquarters—is phenomenal. An initial 12 LCMS mission agencies met in the mid-90s to form the Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies (ALMA); that number grew to 52 agencies by 1999 and has grown again to 65 in 2003 and 75 by 2006! All of them are loyal Lutherans, doing specialized work with the official consent of the Missouri Synod headquarters, but without its control. Some of the seventy-five mission agencies on the ALMA web site (www.alma-online.org)¹² are:

- Apple of His Eye Ministries: Planting messianic congregations among Jewish people
- Friends of Indonesia: Helping Indonesian believers grow in body, mind and spirit, as well as partnering with them to share Jesus’ love with those around them.
- Hmong Mission Society: Proclaiming of the Gospel to the Hmong people of North America and throughout the world.
- Tien Shan Mission Society: Spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ among the Dungan people of the Tian Shan Mountain region of Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan).

¹² ALMA lists only those agencies that pay the annual \$85 membership fee and agree to work in cooperation with the member agencies and with the LCMS. There are 35 additional LCMS mission agencies that have not joined ALMA.

And on and on. Each of these was started by an inspired Lutheran in a congregation that got busy and incorporated a non-profit corporation with the state. Each society has its own board and wrote its by-laws. Each one obtains from the IRS its own Tax Identify Number in order to open up its own bank account. Once the new mission initiative has its 501(c)3 status with the state, the society can apply for Recognized Service Organization (RSO) status with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, or a partnership status with the LCMS World Mission—the mission arm of the LCMS. RSO status allows an agency to solicit funding and provides a number of privileges such as the opportunity to include its staff in the denomination's pension and health-care plan. Organizations with RSO status agree to an annual audit and promise to work in ways that support the aims of the denomination. Mission groups that seek a partnership status with the denomination's mission arm enter into a five to seven year agreement to work together in mutually beneficial ways. The agreement describes how the mission group the LCMS World Mission will work together to accomplish more effective outreach.

The denomination, through its partnership office, even advises the initiators on the process of incorporation, and ALMA provides a starter kit for setting up a successful mission agency. ALMA also helps new mission agencies effectively raise funds and communicate to Lutheran churches. Amazing!

The Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies hosts an annual gathering of its member agencies to help them network with one another and to interface with the mission staff of LCMS World Mission. It's a win-win for denomination and the mission agencies. "In a time of financial limitations and in response to the initiative of many different mission groups in the LCMS, it makes sense to work closely with the independent Lutheran mission agencies," said Steve Hughey, Director for Mission Partnership and Involvement at the Lutheran church headquarters.

One recent Lutheran mission will send Muslim background believers, who have come to faith while in the United States, on an evangelistic outreach to Muslims in other countries. This is being

done through a partnership agreement between LCMS World Mission and a newer LCMS mission society focusing on the Muslim world. As one staff member at the Lutheran Church headquarters said, "There is something supernatural occurring. With God's help, we have the chance to do something effective because a small Lutheran mission agency gives us the platform to initiate this mission to Islam." The structure is already in place—not in headquarters but in the Lutheran pews—to initiate this mission, thanks to the permission of a denomination which has taken the position that "Our concern is to get the task of mission done" by partnering with small "second structures" begun by its own members.

That is how mission initiatives continue to spring up through the decentralized structures of the LCMS. The pattern should encourage other denominations to do likewise.

Let a hundred initiatives bloom. The healthy molecule is a double helix of governance and initiative. Tampering with the DNA is producing a mutated Presbyterian church that it will not thrive. The time is short before lots of "restless members" with enormously important ideas leave the denomination. The governors can say, "We prefer to govern all the mission activity" or they can say "Let's negotiate a new order." The Presbyterian Center for Mission Studies recommends the latter.