

The Privileges and Pitfalls of Being a World Board Team Member

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In this brief paper I'm going to build on the presentation John Johnson gave yesterday, a presentation which emphasized that the Board for World Missions and the various administrative committees are a *team*. The particular slant of this presentation is to examine the tensions the administrative committees, each member of each administrative committee, in fact, experience as they seek to work as a team with the other administrative committees and with the BWM while at the same time they try to serve the needs of the mission fields and missionaries entrusted to their care. Sometimes administrative committee members are tugged in two directions at the same time. To whom do the committees owe their loyalty? To the BWM? To the missionaries and mission fields they are supervising? To both? What happens when being loyal to one might be seen as being disloyal to the other?

All of the above fit under the word "pitfalls" in the title of this presentation. These pitfalls are not insurmountable, but they do produce a tension that cannot be ignored as we seek to do our part in helping to fulfill the synod's biblical mission to "make disciples throughout the world for time and for eternity, using the gospel to win the lost for Christ and to nurture believers for lives of Christian service, all to the glory of God."

Privileges

Before we delve more deeply into the "pitfalls" of being a world board team member, however, let's spend a few moments talking about the "privileges" of serving our Lord in this way. Whenever I am at the Synod Administration Building for meetings, which at times seems to be almost weekly, I make it a point to get up to the BWM office if at all possible. I've told Gloria Hermanson more than once this is my favorite spot in the SAB, not just because there are very nice people working there, which there are, but especially because in a sense this is where the real action is. All four of the Gospels end with a mission commission:

- Matthew 28:19-20 – "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
- Mark 16:15-16 – "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."
- Luke 24:46-48 – "The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."
- John 20:21-23 – "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

More than any other area of the synod, world missions is in the front line of fulfilling the "Go with the gospel into all the world" mission Christ has given to his church. Those of us who are serving on the BWM or on a BWM administrative committee, therefore, are a highly privileged people.

- What a privilege, with our service in the world mission program of the WELS, to be so intimately involved in fulfilling *the* commission of Christ to his Church.
- What a privilege to be involved in this worldview-broadening work, as your committee directs its attention to bringing the gospel to people of different races, different cultures, different languages, different religions.
- What a privilege to be able to see first-hand the powerful message of the gospel at work, a message that transcends race and language and culture and other religions, a message that has the power to penetrate hearts and change lives and put people on the path to heaven—no matter who they are or where they live or how they live or what they look like or how they speak.
- What a privilege and awesome responsibility to be involved in the calling of missionaries, as the Lord uses you, members of his Church gathered together in Jesus' name, to extend to people divine calls to the mission field, calls that will change forever the lives of those who accept them.
- What a privilege to work directly with our missionaries, to get to know—and love—they and their families personally, to rejoice with them when they rejoice, to grieve with them when they grieve, to share in their hopes and dreams, to commiserate with them when some of those dreams fail to materialize.
- What a privilege to be able to get to know—and love—national leaders, pastors and others, most of whom the Spirit has brought to faith through the preaching of the gospel on the part of our missionaries.
- What a privilege to see the growth in some of these national leaders so that now they are beginning to assume the role of teachers of the next generation of leaders.
- What a privilege to be able to visit personally our world mission fields—to travel to places you may never have dreamed of traveling, to see first-hand the results of gospel preaching in various parts of the world.
- What a privilege to be a liaison, a “friendly counselor,” to a particular field that is a part of your administrative committee’s purview, to get to know in intimate detail, more than anyone else on earth with the exception of the missionaries themselves, the operation, the strengths, the weaknesses, the interpersonal relationships, the joys, the frustrations, of a particular field for which you cannot but feel a maternal and paternal care.
- What a privilege to serve as advocates of the missionaries and the fields over which you have been given oversight, to represent their cause at BWM meetings, to present their needs, to explain special circumstances surrounding the missionaries and their work.
- What a privilege to be advocates of world missions before the constituency of the synod, to be asked to speak about world missions at LWMS rallies, at conferences, and at other gatherings of God’s people.

I could go on, but I would assume this is sufficient to remind us that, no matter how much time it might take out of our week, no matter how much energy we must expend, no matter how many frustrations we

experience, we—all of us connected with world missions—are a most privileged people. My guess is that there would be quite a few people standing in line to take your place if you could no longer serve. Such a joy and rewarding experience it is to be a part of this team called WELS world missions.

Pitfalls

That brings us to the second part of this brief presentation—the “pitfalls” part. Should I perhaps have started with “pitfalls” and then proceeded to “privileges”? In some ways that may have made more sense, I suppose. The way this paper is constructed seems something like preaching a sermon that proclaims the gospel first and after that throws a wet blanket on the gospel by using the law to point out people’s faults and failings. Nevertheless, I hope you will agree as we move along into this section that this does appear to be the best way to approach the subject—to remind ourselves first of the many privileges we enjoy as members of the BWM team and then to look at ways by which we can make this team function even more smoothly and efficiently and effectively. To do this we need to examine some of the BWM/administrative committee pressure points, the tensions, the pitfalls that can impede the forward progress of world missions in our midst.

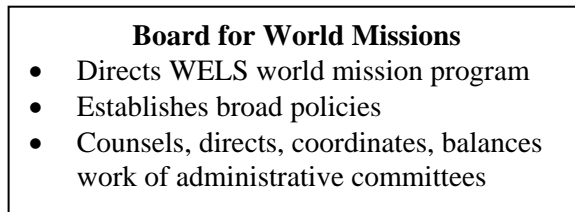
As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the major pressure points are where the authority and responsibility of the BWM as a whole and the authority and responsibility of the administrative committees appear to overlap. With our current structure, it is not easy, it is impossible, in fact, to totally avoid certain tensions between these two entities. The synod bylaws describe the functions of the board as a whole and of the various administrative committees in this way:

There shall be a Board for World Missions responsible for directing the world mission program of the synod and shall counsel, direct, coordinate, and balance the work of its administrative committees who shall be responsible to the board for the administration of their respective fields (sec. 6.16 [a]).

The administration of world mission fields shall be vested in administrative committees (sec 6.16 [e]).

The board is responsible for establishing the policies under which the administrative committees shall operate. Within the framework of such policies and resolutions adopted by the board, the administrative committees shall be responsible for the administration of their fields (sec. 6.16 [e]).

We might diagram the synod bylaw-prescribed relationship between the board and the administrative committees in this way:



Administrative Committees

- Administer world mission fields within framework of board policies and resolutions
- Accountable to the board

What are the kinds of policies the board may establish which would govern the activity of all administrative committees? At the risk of oversimplification, we could perhaps break them down into two major types: *housekeeping* policies, which my dictionary defines as “the necessary routine tasks that enable a system to operate,” and *philosophical* policies, policies that have more to do with the “why” of an organization than the “how.”

Housekeeping policies in most organizations will tend to be more numerous than philosophical policies. I don’t believe that the BWM is any exception to this. Under the heading “housekeeping” I would place policies pertaining to such things as

- moving to and from a field
- furloughs
- schooling of missionaries’ children
- procedures for requisition of funds
- budgeting procedures
- gathering and submitting statistical reports.
- methodology for requesting and carrying out capital projects

This, as any of you serving on an administrative committee know, is but a minute sampling of what might fit under the title “housekeeping policies.” In my version of the *World Mission Handbook*, which is probably not up-to-date, I count about 50 pages of forms that missionaries and administrative committees are expected to use when they come to the BWM office with various reports and requests.

Apart from the fact that at times these forms, or at least some of them, might be sort of a pain in the neck to fill out, most missionaries and administrative committees, I’m sure, would agree that it’s good for all of the administrative committees and the mission fields they administer to work within the same set of “ground rules.” It would not be a healthy situation if, as in Israel of old, there was no king in Israel and everyone did whatever was right in his own eyes. Not that there cannot at times be valid exceptions to policies; nevertheless we know it is good that in these “housekeeping” issues we’re all playing by the same rules.

It happens on occasion that an administrative committee unilaterally adopts “housekeeping” policies that differ from the ones by which the other members of the BWM team are carrying out their work. It’s not difficult to see the tension created, if, for example, one field should, without bringing the matter to the whole board, adopt furlough policies or policies for the schooling of missionaries’ children that are different from the policies by which everyone else is operating. It goes without saying that such deviation from policy needs to be dealt with if the BWM is to continue to operate smoothly as a team.

I would submit, however, that the more critical area, and more difficult to quickly fix if it gets out of kilter, is the philosophical one. Here, as mentioned above, we are talking about the “why” more than the “how.” Why do we send missionaries to other nations? We could probably give a number of answers to that question, e.g.,

1. We go because there are many people in other nations who do not know Jesus Christ as Savior.

2. We go because we know that Jesus Christ alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Light and that no one comes to the Father except through him.
3. We go because unless people hear about Jesus Christ they cannot be saved.
4. We go because we have the one saving message, the gospel of Jesus Christ.
5. We go to preach that message and teach that message so that the Holy Spirit can bring people to faith and eternal life.

We could stop there; but if we do so we are leaving out an important additional answer to “why.” I can’t say it better than the Apostle Paul; so, listen to him rather than to me. He tells young Pastor Timothy:

The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others (2 Tm 2:2).

Note the progression. Missionary Paul taught Timothy. Timothy in turn would now be teaching others (“reliable men”). But it doesn’t stop there. These “reliable men” who had been taught by Timothy (who in turn had been taught by Paul) would, as a result of Timothy’s teaching, “be qualified to teach others.” This is in keeping, isn’t it, with what Saint Paul writes elsewhere. Pastors, he says, are Christ’s gift to his church “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (Eph 4:12). If this “equipping the saints for the work of the ministry” is a key role of pastors in general, how much more critical isn’t it of missionaries in particular who will always remain somewhat as outsiders, living in a culture and speaking a language that is not their own. How critical it is that “reliable men” of the host culture become “qualified to teach others.” In addition, as this is accomplished, missionaries can move on to other areas where the gospel is sorely needed.

It is a passage such as 2 Timothy 2:2 that has led to two key BWM objectives:

To plant indigenous churches rather than long dependent missions; and

To establish programs for the training of a national ministry which is qualified to proclaim the Word of God faithfully and effectively in accord with Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

I don’t have to spend time with a group such as this to review what is meant by the term “indigenous church.” I’m assuming you are well acquainted with the four “selves” that result in an indigenous church, a church that will be self-administering, self-disciplining, self-propagating, and self-supporting.

If this is the philosophy under which the BWM operates, then it stands to reason that all of our administrative committees, missionaries, and national churches will be working toward that goal. Pitfalls, obstacles to moving toward this goal, can occur at all three of these levels. In a paper presented to the Latin America Missionary Conference, July 1998, in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, missionary John Strackbein, speaking about the *national church*, asserts that “it is important that we do not place gigantic obstacles in front of our people’s progress to non-dependency on a foreign church body” (i.e., to indigeneity). He mentions three such obstacles:

1. *“Ignorance of why the missionaries have the goals they do.”*
“That means,” Missionary Strackbein wisely asserts, “we will initiate programs that lead the national church to understand why we have the goals we do. These programs will little by little lead the nationals to pray for and work for independence also.”
2. *“Teaching nationals to look to the missionary or mother church as a source of income.”*
He writes, “If a standard introduced for buildings, national salaries, and outreach goes beyond the ability of the nationals to maintain, independence will be greatly impeded. By tying up

existing funds and missionaries, mission expansion will become more difficult. If we really want to get to a point where we can leave a field, then stewardship needs to be taught, not avoided, even if it is in the poorest of congregations. Prospective pastors need to be selected who do not expect to be paid in a manner that their congregations cannot afford but who rather are willing to live on the same economic level as their members.”

3. “*Lack of planning.*”

“One thing that helped us in Puerto Rico to plan,” says Strackbein, “was an assignment given to us at the 1989 Missionary Conference. The assignment asked: ‘If we missionaries could look into the future and see that God was going to cause a government to kick us out of a field, thus forcing the national church to become self-sufficient, what would we continue to do and what would we do differently?’ I honestly feel it would be a good idea for all missions to do this periodically. Once this study has been done, ask the question, ‘Would it be possible to make this the mission’s strategy?’ If it does not seem unreasonable, go for it and let God determine whether or not you will reach the goal.”

Not knowing why missionaries have come, over-dependence on the financial support of others, failure to make careful plans for the future—all of these can result in a national church walking in a direction at cross-purposes with the sending church.

Another pitfall that can hinder a unified team approach to world missions occurs if all of the *missionaries* are not on the same philosophic page. At the same 1998 Latin America Missionary Conference in Puerto Vallarta now missionary, at that time administrative committee chairman Larry Retberg, presented a paper on *The Missionary’s Attitude for Church Planting*. In this paper he lists some of the characteristics the committee looks for when calling a world missionary. Among them are the following:

- A person who is more interested in teaching the people to do for themselves than in doing for them.
- A person who has a strong commitment to lay ministry.
- A person who has the ability to lead from behind.
- A person who does not need the validation or affirmation that comes from a traditional ministry where the pastor is directly serving the people.

Retberg quotes from section 4.2, “Confessional Indigenous Churches,” in the *World Mission Handbook*:

Wherever the board conducts mission work it will seek to plant national churches that will grow up into their own identity and stand with us doctrinally and confessionally. World missions have sometimes been established with the assumptions that the mother church would provide permanent funding and that the expatriate missionary would be indefinitely responsible for the pastoral, teaching, preaching, and evangelism work. Strategies developed by missionaries and their parent bodies have more recently sought to establish independent national churches which are self-administering, self-disciplining, self-propagating, and self-supporting church bodies within their own culture. We are fully aware that no specific mission formula is mandated in scriptures. While methods themselves do not unite souls together in Christ’s church, it is appropriate that each WELS world mission pastor work toward the same goals with similar aims.

Commenting on that paragraph and the supporting *Handbook* paragraphs that follow, Retberg writes:

It is evident that the majority of the above tasks...will be carried out by the worker with a philosophy of ministry of missionary. In many cases he will be working behind the scenes,

giving the necessary instruction and training so that the nationals can get the work done. He will be the guardian so to speak, the parent who is teaching the child to become independent.

Retberg writes, “The missionary whose attitude is ‘I am a pastor. I was trained to be a pastor. It is my job to do all the shepherding. That’s what I want to do. I need a traditional ministry where I directly serve the people,’ is not going to be prepared for overseas church planting for the WELS. In fact, his attitude is going to be at odds with the worker whose attitude is: ‘I am a missionary. My job is to teach and train the people to do Gospel ministry for themselves.’ His attitude will also be at odds with the stated objectives of WELS Board for World Missions.”

Last summer (August 2000) at the World Missions Conference at the Schwan Retreat Center, Missionary Philip Strackbein illustrated the point Missionary Retberg makes in the above quotation by setting side by side two missionaries with very different philosophies of ministry:

Missionary A

- ❑ I have talents that God has given me.
- ❑ I have seminary training
- ❑ When I get to my field of service
 - I’m going to love the people
 - I’m going to do everything I can to use my talents to serve them
 - If someone asks for help, my answer will always be
 - ◆ Yes, of course I will help you...that’s what I’m here for
 - ◆ I’m here to serve you
 - If someone needs financial assistance and I have money that I can use to help him, I will do it.
 - I will tell the people...
 - ◆ You can count on me
 - ◆ I will always be here for you
- ❑ In his mind, the missionary who has this philosophy will always have the thought...
 - This is my mission
 - This is my ministry
 - Since the church body that has called me has an indigenous church policy, whenever I can I will try to invite the people I serve to participate and help me with my ministry

Missionary B

- ❑ The church body that has called me has an indigenous church policy. And I too understand that what will be best for the people I am going to serve in the long run is for them to become spiritually strong and able to do things on their own.
- ❑ Therefore, out of love for them, when I get to my field of service and when someone asks me to do something for them, I am going to prepare myself so that whenever possible I can give the following answer:
 - No, I’m not going to do this for you, for the following reasons:
 - ◆ God has given you many talents and abilities
 - ◆ I think you can do it yourself
 - ◆ I will be happy to train you to do it
 - ◆ I will be happy to do it with you as part of your training
 - ◆ But I’m not going to do it for you
- ❑ This is not my mission or my ministry. It’s your mission and your ministry which you have the great privilege and responsibility of carrying out to the best of your ability.
- ❑ My reason for being here is to help and train you, if that is needed, to carry out your mission and your ministry. I would be more than happy to serve you in this way.
- ❑ I’m not always going to be here for you, but then I don’t need to be because I know that you will be here to get the gospel out

to your own people, the people of your | country.

This is perhaps a bit of a caricature. Probably at least a little of the philosophy of Missionary B will be found in Missionary A and vice versa. But it does illustrate that the missionary himself, if he is following the beat of a different drummer, if he is tuned into a different philosophy, will make it difficult for the entire world mission enterprise of the WELS to be functioning as a team. Team members need to be not only cognizant of but in agreement with and working under the same philosophy of ministry.

That brings us to the *administrative committee*. You stand in the middle. You are accountable to the BWM and the policies it has established. At the same time you don't want to be the "bad guy" to the missionaries and national churches under your care and guidance. I am assuming that you are all on the same page philosophically, that you understand and are committed to the BWM's philosophy of working toward indigeneity and all that this entails. What are the pitfalls as you work with your missionaries and national churches? Let me name just a few that have come up in conversation with the Executive Committee of the BWM and the BWM administrator:

- *The pitfall of being such an advocate for your own field that you don't look at the long term and big picture applications of decisions you make.*
It's good, it's necessary, in fact, to be an advocate for your field, but it is just as necessary to remember that Jesus said, "The field is the world." We run into danger when our vision becomes tunnel vision and everything revolves around our own little world.
- *The pitfall of not wearing your "synod hat" to the missionaries and national churches when you need to.*
As you know, the way the BWM is structured the administration of the individual fields is not the responsibility of the BWM but of the individual administrative committees. If missionaries and/or nationals are not working in harmony with board-established policies, the administrative committees have to step in and address the situation. There is no one else in our current structure who is given the authority and responsibility to do so. If the administrative committee doesn't do it, therefore, it doesn't get done, and the progress of the entire world mission program of our church is hindered.
- *The pitfall of agreeing to programs and/or methodologies that may promise short-term progress but can easily produce long-term problems.*
Any number of scenarios come to mind. I'll mention just a few: becoming overly dependent on humanitarian aid which, unless it is handled properly, may bring in people but not build the kingdom; failing to channel the efforts of missionaries who may be producing results (and thus good numbers for the field) by winning souls for Christ on their own but who are not furthering the indigenous church policies of the board because they are doing this work themselves and not training others to do it.
- *The pitfall of making promises to missionaries and/or methods you don't have the authority to make.*
It is only natural that administrative committee members, who love and cherish their missionaries and nationals, will want to provide for their needs, even their wants. But they need to remember that they are part of a team and that therefore they can promise only in accordance with what the BWM in its policies has authorized them to promise.

- *The pitfall of establishing precedents that affect the entire mission staff.*
Again, this has to do with the team concept. Paul's "church as body of Christ" analogy in 1 Corinthians 12 applies. Whatever happens in one part of the body affects all the other parts. Likewise, whatever happens in one area of BWM work affects all the other areas.
- *The pitfall of poor planning or perhaps even no planning.*
An overly paternalistic approach to their work will result in administrative committees functioning more as hand-holding committees than truly administrative committees. Administration means management. A key function of management is planning. If each administrative committee is agreed on the philosophy of ministry of the BWM, a philosophy that aims to "plant national churches that will grow up into their own identity" as "independent national churches" (*Handbook* section 4.2), then they will want to be engaged in ongoing planning as to how to reach that goal and they will be expecting the missionaries and national churches to be doing the same. This will help the whole world mission enterprise of the WELS to be running on the same track and also to be constantly striving to be reaching the same goal.

How do administrative committees avoid pitfalls such as those addressed above? By constantly remembering their role, that they wear not one, but two hats, and that therefore, as they work with the missionaries and national churches, they never turn their eyes away from the entity to which they are accountable, the BWM and the philosophy and policies under which it operates. This may be an overly simplistic answer, but it is a start at least of assuring that we can continue to move forward *as a team* in the glorious work of bringing the saving gospel of Jesus Christ to the nations.

The privileges of being a part of the WELS world mission team are many. The pitfalls are not so many, and when recognized and properly dealt with, will prove to be only minor obstacles which will not impede the orderly advance of the gospel in our midst and in our time.

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that his ways may be known on earth, his salvation among all nations! (Ps 67:1-2)