

THE CHURCH AT WORK:
A MANUAL FOR EXCELLENT
CHURCH-AGENCY RELATIONS

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Glossary	ix
How to Read This Book	xi
Foreword	xiii
PART ONE: THE CHURCH AND ITS STRUCTURES	1
1: Three Leaders and Their Dilemmas	3
2: How We Got Here	10
3: What Ministry Leaders Think of Each Other	21
4: Proposals for Resolving the Divide	28
5: What's the Fuss About?	41
6: The Church's Identity and Mission	46
7: Christian Structures	57
8: Individuals and the People of God	66
9: Practical Implications for Ministry Structures	71
10: The Trinity & Christian Relations	79
11: "But what about...?"	87
12: Self-Governing Agencies	98
13: Recommended Terminology	110
14: Denominational Structures	116
PART TWO: CHURCH-AGENCY RELATIONS	119
15: The Starting Point	121
16: Mission Alignment	135
17: Mutual Respect	141
18: Mutual Vulnerability	153
19: Empathy for Constraints and Risks	163
20: Strengthen the Local Church	167
21: Personal Relationship	179
PART THREE: ACTION PLAN	187
22: A Guide for Churches	191
23: A Guide for Agencies	201
24: Organizational Change	210
Appendix A: Paper by John G. Stackhouse Jr.	215
Appendix B: Sample Covenants and Related Statements	229
Notes	245
Selected Reference List	259
About the Author	277

15: THE STARTING POINT

When a newly-created agency tries to develop its first church-agency relationship, it is not starting with a clean slate. Even though the agency itself is brand new, it lives with the consequences of all the church-agency interactions that have preceded it and how those interactions have shaped the attitudes of pastors who are approached by the agency. In some cases this works to the new agency's advantage, and in other cases it works to its disadvantage. It all depends on a pastor's previous experiences with agencies.

QUALITY OF CHURCH-AGENCY RELATIONS

One thing that agency and church leaders do agree on is the quality of church-agency relationships in general. In my survey of more than five hundred ministry leaders, half of the leaders on both sides describe relations as "good," meaning that the relationship tends to be mutually beneficial. Only about 15% on each side say relations are "not good," meaning the relationship tends to be one-sided or competitive. The rest (about 35%) chose the middle, indifferent response. This means there is a lot of room for improvement, but it is encouraging to know that half the churches and agencies do have good relations, proving that the relationship can work. If you are currently not satisfied with your relationships, the problem can be solved because others have done it.

Some church and agency leaders treat their counterparts as a group and make generalized comments about them. For example, the 15% of pastors who say relations are not good often attribute negative motivations to agency leaders such as an unwillingness to come under another person's leadership or having too much self-interest. This small group of pastors also say there is a general lack of trust between organizations or (more benignly) they believe it is just a case of "we do our thing, they do theirs."

Agency leaders generalize as well. The 15% who say relations are not good often believe churches have their own agendas and want to do ministry themselves (sometimes due to empire building or denominational preferences).

The good news is that only a minority of leaders made such

blanket statements about the other party. Many of the agency leaders and pastors who commented said that regardless of their answer, the quality of relationship depends on the specific ministries involved. Rather than judging each other as a class, they judge on a case-by-case basis. This means that *individual agency and church staff members can make a difference* in the quality of their relations with the other. Each agency has a chance to establish its own reputation over time, but in establishing new relationships it will have to take into consideration the negative experiences some churches have suffered while working with agencies. They will have to demonstrate that their agency is local church-friendly. One easy way to do this is to have a clear statement that says how the agency views local churches. This could be in the vision statement, mission statement or an official position statement. This idea will be further developed in chapter seventeen.

STARTING POSITIONS

Churches wanting to work with agencies have a great starting position because agencies are eager to work with them and the only significant complaint that agencies have about churches is that some pastors do not accept agencies as a valid expression of the church. If a pastor is willing to accept their validity, the door is open to a rich and rewarding relationship because partnering with local churches is not just desirable, but a priority for fully 85% of the surveyed agencies. By partnering, agency leaders mean:

- Having specific mandates to support local churches;
- Only initiating programs with a church partner, or by giving opportunities for churches to expand their ministry through financial and volunteer support;
- Consulting with pastors/denominations in the planning process;
- Getting endorsements from ministerials;
- Having board representation from local churches/denominations;
- Providing services to churches without promoting their own programs (for example, educational material, sermon ideas, and pulpit supply);

- Placing new converts in local churches; and/or
- Giving accountability reports to churches.

Agencies, on the other hand, have a much more complex starting point. The good news is that pastors are far more receptive to working with agencies than agency leaders think they are, but agencies first have to stop shooting themselves in the foot. It turns out that the origin of most problems agencies experience with churches can be traced back to agencies and either their organizational practices or the behavior of their field staff.

Many pastors are wary of working with agencies because of past experience. Said one pastor, “Churches have some residual hurt. They feel that the relationship has been competitive in the past and think churches have gotten burned. I am surprised at how much hurt I hear expressed among pastors on this topic.” When an agency approaches a pastor, in many cases there will be some pre-existing distrust or suspicion to overcome.

Unfortunately, pastors have good reason to be suspicious of agencies. One agency damaged a church’s reputation in its community through careless actions. Several have taken churches for granted. For example, one pastor told of agency workers who had unexpectedly “shown up needing funds to fix their bus, or a place to hold a service and spend the night. They have left the congregation feeling *used*.” Others have damaged church property or equipment and neither told the church about it nor offered to pay for the damage when it was discovered. More than a few agencies have told people they do not need to belong to a church and some relentlessly pursue pastors for financial support even when it is explained their work does not fit the church’s priorities or resource capacity. A student ministry on a nearby campus ran a Sunday morning service, competing with the local church and preventing students from connecting with a church. Finally, some agencies rebuff churches when churches initiate discussion about collaboration, causing the churches to decide to just work on their own.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FIELD STAFF

Agency field staff can easily damage the relationship. A pastor

with pressures of his own tells of additional pressure from an agency. "The (worker) in our area is constantly questioning me about people in my church who would make good workers. Now, please tell me if you can, why I would want to see my best people off doing something when I am desperate for more workers and leaders to serve within the context of the local church?" The pastor has a significant need, yet the agency's representative was insensitive to the pastor's situation and thought only of the agency's need for volunteers.

Problems with agency workers are not rare. Nearly half (46%) of the pastors have had at least one bad experience with them and they have good memories. Most (84%) of these pastors were able to name a ministry (and a person) or describe the experience. I did not ask them to identify the ministry or individual, so the fact that so many voluntarily gave that information tells me that the experience made quite an impression on them! Bills were left unpaid by agency staff. Several times the agency workers actively worked in competition with the local church. In a few cases, the agency ran programs in a church but tried to get the youth to switch to another church that was "more evangelical." A fair number described situations in which an agency came to town and ran a program without even notifying local churches, let alone trying to involve them. Unreturned phone calls, poor theological training, moral failure and high pressure tactics were all mentioned.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THEOLOGY

Poor theology is a recurring complaint pastors have about agency staff. I want to highlight the importance of good theological thinking at the leadership level because the agency's leaders are the ones who create and shape the organizational climate for church-agency relations. The question must be asked, "How theologically literate are the senior leaders of Christian agencies?" Are they trained in Christian leadership? Are they properly equipped not only to provide Christian leadership but also to think theologically about their organizational policies and practices?

Since an agency is not a church, leaders are tempted to treat agency leadership very much like leadership of a secular organization, modified perhaps to manifest the fruit of the Spirit in how one treats people. However, there is a uniquely Christian aspect of agency

leadership: fulfilling the agency's responsibilities as an organization within the community of God's people. Given that the senior leader directs the staff and guides the board, this is the person with the single greatest influence on the character of the organization and who has the most power and opportunity to create an environment for favorable church-agency relations. Are they prepared for theological leadership? The research suggests often they are not, at least as far as formal training is concerned.

A demographic analysis of one hundred agency leaders showed that the typical leader is a middle-aged male recruited straight into the executive director (ED) position directly from secular employment, most often from a for-profit employer (a perfect description of me!). Half of the EDs have served on the pastoral staff of a local church at some point in their careers, and the great majority of this group still hold credentials with their denominations.

Fifty-three percent of the EDs had a formal theological education that included a certificate (18%), a diploma (22%), a bachelor's degree (24%), a master's degree (35%) or a doctoral degree (7%) (some had more than one level of education).²⁵⁰ However, in their opinion, whatever education they had was not a significant factor in the decision to hire them. They are equally split between believing the primary reason they were hired was because of their experience or because of their personal characteristics (or both). A few have completed formal theological education since becoming an ED.

The flip side of the statistics is that almost half of the EDs do not have any formal theological education, so unless they have picked it up through informal education, they may not be well-equipped to think theologically about the implications of their agency being a manifestation of the church at work. Almost one-quarter (23%) of the EDs had the combination of having no theological degree or certificate coming into their position, had never worked in a church, and were hired directly into the ED role (often straight from the for-profit sector) with no chance of being groomed by a senior leader. Only a few of these had any Bible college courses at all and only one had taken a course in Christian leadership. They could have done extensive personal theological study and they could also have had extensive volunteer experience with the agency, but from an objective standpoint, they have not had formal preparation for the specifically Christian aspect of their leadership role.

The agency leader is responsible for creating an organizational environment that sustains good church relations, yet considering their demographics, it is not surprising that many will lead Christian ministries relying for the most part on their secular training and experience. The problem is that secular leadership strategies and techniques generally focus on the welfare of the organization without much regard for the organization's place in the larger community. (Pastors can be guilty of thinking about their own churches this way too.) Without theological reflection, it is all too easy for agency leaders to reduce the role of churches to being nothing more than a resource provider or a means to an end.

Agencies should accept a graduate theological education as basic training for a good proportion of their leaders, and seminaries should broaden their courses to take into account the role played by specialized ministries. There is a real opportunity for providers of in-ministry programs in theology and Christian leadership.

SOLUTIONS

The problems outlined in this chapter are not new and solutions have already been suggested that are still relevant today. Keith Price (1983), Jerry White (1983), and Larry McKinney (1994) have done excellent work that highlights solutions to these relationship problems. Price's handbook, *Cooperating in World Evangelization: A Handbook on Church/Para-Church Relationships*, is still available free online from The Lausanne Movement²⁵¹ and provides an excellent series of questions designed to help you identify where you, as a church or agency worker, may be contributing to the problem. He then gives down-to-earth, easy-to-implement solutions. The five categories of problems he addresses are:

- Dogmatism about non-essentials and differing scriptural interpretations (matters of theology, conviction, terminology, tolerance);
- The threat of conflicting authorities (matters of validity, mandate, accountability, fear);
- The harmfulness of strained relationships (matters of attitude, prejudice, personality, fellowship);

- The rivalry between ministries (matters of goals, duplication, specialization, umbrella organizations); and
- The suspicion about finances (matters of fund-raising, publicity, overhead, overseas aid).

White's book, *The church & the parachurch: An uneasy marriage*, may be more difficult to access as it is no longer in print. His strategy is for each structure to recognize the place and contribution of the other in a spirit of positive appreciation and support. The theme of his suggestions is tighter integration through more selective financial support and greater recognition of joint personnel by churches. By financially supporting fewer agencies but giving those selected agencies more money, churches gain leverage to hold agencies accountable. Churches should emphasize lay ministry and when they have members who work for agencies, they should consider their agency work as part of the local church's ministry. White encourages personal relationships between agency staff and their pastors but says that pastors should not expect too much of agency staff due to their other commitments. He suggests that churches should not just provide resources to agencies, but consider how they might benefit from agencies too.

For their part, White says agencies should clearly define their purposes and goals so they can demonstrate effectiveness and accountability. Agency staff should be active in their churches, but might need to curb their natural enthusiasm to reform their own church. Instead, they should be sensitive to its needs and specific circumstances. They need to support their local church financially and be faithful to it.

White suggests that agencies have a position statement on the local church, have a doctrinal statement, and develop a plan for consistent communication with local churches. Agency leaders should give sound teaching on every Christian's responsibility to their local church and the fruit of the agency's work should be directed into a local church.

McKinney adds that agencies should not try to be all things to all people. The rationale is that no agency should serve all the needs of a Christian because this would replace the local church while presumably still serving a limited demographic.

THE REAL ISSUE: ACCOUNTABILITY

All of the previous issues relate to practices that can break an existing relationship. What often prevents a church-agency relationship from starting in the first place is that 59% of pastors believe the real problem with agencies is their lack of accountability. Pastors are reluctant to enter a one-sided relationship. Agencies seem unaware of how serious the accountability issue is for pastors. They agree that accountability is essential, but they think they already are accountable and so do not list accountability as a major problem. Instead, they think the main issue is competition.

Competition for money and volunteers was mentioned almost as frequently by both sides as a problem. Money was listed as an issue by 43% of the agency respondents and 48% of the church respondents. Competition for volunteers was mentioned by 39% of the agency respondents, while 40% of the church respondents said the same. Although these numbers seem to indicate agreement between pastors and EDs on these issues, the significant point is that EDs rated the two issues as the number one and two relationship problems respectively, but pastors think they are a distant second and third behind lack of accountability. But the real surprise is that while pastors think competition for money and people are the second and third issues *overall*, they do *not* believe they are significant issues for their *own* churches! In other words, they do not believe they have the problems with agencies that they think their peers have.

The statistics clearly show this anomaly. Competition for money is mentioned as a problem by 48% of the pastors, but only 7% of them think agencies are a major drain on their own church's income and many of the 7% believe that money going to agencies from their parishioners is funding work the church wants done anyway, so they are not concerned about it.

The small percentage of pastors who believe they have lost money to agencies apparently believe that the money that went to agencies would otherwise have come to their church, but there is good reason to believe otherwise. It all comes down to why Christians give donations. In 2000, Statistics Canada surveyed more than 14,000 Canadians on their giving patterns and religious beliefs. The report found a clear relationship between religious commitment and donating. People who attend services weekly make up 19% of the population but account for 47% of the value of all donations.²⁵² An update survey of 21,827 Canadians in 2007 shows that weekly

attendees are now giving even more.²⁵³ The significant point for pastors who think agencies take money that should be going to their churches is that (aside from their church support) religious donors support the same kinds of charities as other donors (medical research, compassion, relief etc.). In fact, people of faith contribute more to secular charities than secular donors do! This suggests that church members support their churches to the level they feel support is needed and then give beyond that to the specific causes for which they have compassion, such as shelters and relief work. Since no church does everything that is charitable, no church should expect to receive all of its members' donations.

If Christian agencies disappeared, there is no guarantee that their donation revenue would go to local churches. Probably the religious donors would think they have already supported their churches sufficiently and shift their donations from Christian agencies to secular charities doing the same kind of compassionate work. The local church should not feel it has lost revenue to specialized ministries.

Many of the 93% of pastors who did not feel agencies were a drain on their church finances say there is no lack of money, just a lack of good stewardship education. White reported in his 1983 survey that 80% of the pastors said agencies were *not* a major drain on their church's finances,²⁵⁴ which validates the result reported above. The myth that there is competition for money has been a myth for a long time.

The same holds true almost as strongly for volunteers. Forty percent of pastors say that competition for volunteers is a problem. However, if a member volunteers with an agency rather than their church, 78% of pastors say service with an agency is just as acceptable as service within their church. There are qualifications, though. Many pastors were happy just to see their members working "for the kingdom." Some see external service as an extension of their church's ministry and are therefore okay with it. Others thought the service would be acceptable so long as their church benefited from it (for example, the worker can train others) or if it fits the vision of the church. Showing a vestige of the clergy-lay hierarchy of yore, some pastors want a role in helping their members decide where to volunteer. For these pastors, their support depends upon which particular agency the member wants to volunteer with. A few want to support their church members by commissioning or commending them to do the work on behalf of their church (as we saw the Antioch church do in the case of

Paul and Barnabus in chapter eleven). Finally, in spite of the question's wording, a strong minority of the 78% said they would still want the person to be involved in some way in the local church's ministry.

It is clear that money and people are not the hindrances people think they are. *Lack of accountability is the sole significant problem according to the pastors.* If an agency can demonstrate to churches that it has an accountability program in place, it will have gone a long way towards establishing the basis for a positive relationship with churches.

THE GOOD NEWS!

Now the good news! In spite of the problems just mentioned, agencies actually have an overwhelmingly receptive audience among pastors and they should not hesitate to approach churches to investigate how they might work together. What they will have to do, though, is overcome the initial wariness of the pastors and establish that they are safe for churches to work with. Once satisfied that it has the potential to be a good relationship, pastors want to work with agencies because agencies have three characteristics that are very helpful to churches: 1) their wide geographical scope; 2) their ability to combine human and financial resources from many churches and apply them to specific issues with greater overall efficiency and effectiveness; and 3) agencies help churches overcome denominational divisions so that the larger church ends up being more faithful in unity.

Both agency leaders and pastors agree that the top three contributions from agencies are specialization, ability to reach non-Christians, and innovation, (with unity being a frequent write-in response by both sets of leaders). Regarding specialization, a pastor said agencies are to churches what boutiques are to department stores. Other pastors likened agencies to medical specialists, special military forces, and "zodiacs zipping off to deal with situations while the tanker continues on its course." That being said, several of these pastors made the point that specialists can only exist because of the generalists who support them.

Many pastors see agencies as the "church in another form" or as "God's people wherever they may be." Some pastors believe that "those who are doing the work of the church are the church," regardless of the organizational structure they use.

Another reason why pastors are willing to partner with agencies is that agencies can take risks that most pastors and church boards would be unwilling to take. In addition, they can act faster and they can be more responsive. “Parachurches are vehicles that gifted individuals use to provide a *specific* form of ministry that is not easily done in a structured organization run by a pastor and board,” wrote one pastor. They think agencies represent churches in areas where churches cannot work individually (e.g., closed countries). Pastors also see agencies as an effective means of sharing God’s gifts, recognizing that his gifts are given to the church as a whole. Many think that no individual denomination or church is likely to have all the gifts that are needed for every potential ministry that the Lord wants done. It takes churches working together (facilitated perhaps by agencies) to assemble the gifts needed for some specialized ministries.

Several pastors consider their members who work for agencies as a contribution from their church to the global church. In return, agency workers are gifts to their local churches as they share their experiences and provide their churches with more options for members to engage in ministry. Denominational ministries provide the same benefit of sharing gifts between churches, but on a more limited basis within their own denomination.

Most pastors have had some contact with an agency. Almost three-quarters of them have used an agency to provide a service or a benefit to their local church and a similar percentage has conducted a ministry in partnership with an agency (such as a short term mission trip). These pastors believe agencies can make a long term contribution to their churches because they offer specialized ministry opportunities. Pastors themselves may even volunteer for agencies. One pastor said he was “invited, from time to time, to speak and do presentations at local parachurch events” and he appreciated being asked to help.

Almost three-quarters of the pastors affirm the theological legitimacy of self-governing agencies, but in line with the wariness that has already been noted, the pastors usually said their affirmation was contingent upon an agency not undermining the local church. The percentage of affirmers could be higher than my survey indicated. It turns out that some of the pastors who did not affirm agencies believe that nothing can be independent within the body of Christ (e.g., no Christian is ever truly independent from the body).

As already noted, legal independence does not mean or require relational independence. So if that distinction had been made in the question, this group may have affirmed agencies too.

Pastors say the relationship is good when both sides focus on building the kingdom and supporting the church (either universal or local). Agency leaders who say relations are “good” tended to comment only that there is still room for improvement.

Pastors say the keys to a successful relationship include:

- Good relations between local agency representatives and pastors;
- Recognition of the church as the primary place of Christian association;
- Mutual trust, accountability, and transparency; and
- Agencies working in partnership with local churches whenever that is an option.

There is a very high degree of agreement between pastors and agency leaders on the ingredients of a good relationship. Both groups agree about the need for accountability, real relationship, and a kingdom perspective. Furthermore, they both frequently say churches and agencies are part of the body of Christ and they should be known for their love for one another. There certainly appears to be a desire for good relations on the part of most ministry leaders.

THE PERSONAL TOUCH

Pastors tend to form opinions about agencies based on the agency’s representatives. Having a local representative (whether employed or volunteer) is basic to having a relationship. After referring to two agencies with local representation, one pastor said, “Parachurch ministries, other than those mentioned above, do not seem to offer much in the way of community.” Another pastor said that, “many of the local groups are doing a great job of partnering with the local church.... The larger organizations...come up with plans they try to impose on the church rather than consulting with the church and finding out what life is really like in the trenches.” He concluded in another answer, “I prefer to work with local organizations that I can get to know.”

Agencies must choose their field staff carefully because they make or break the relationship. Pastors value agency workers who come “in a spirit of humility” and who work hard to understand their church’s unique issues. “Our way or no way” is not acceptable to pastors. As reported earlier, half of the church leaders have had a bad experience with an agency worker, but far more (82%) have had at least one positive experience with agency staff (many were saved because of an agency’s evangelism ministry). Almost 90% of those with a good experience were able to name a specific agency and/or person that was involved (again, this information was not requested) or describe a specific example of a positive experience.

Add to this the fact that three-quarters of church leaders have had a positive prior experience using an agency’s services. Not only have the pastors personally had good experiences with agencies, but so have their churches. Pastors should therefore be quite receptive to those agencies that prove themselves church-friendly. Since both pastors and executive directors agree agencies have something to offer churches, it is just a matter of the agencies connecting with the pastors who want what their agency can offer.

ACCESS TO CHURCHES

In what may be a case of thinking the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, most agency leaders (81%) believe specialized ministries that are affiliated with a denomination have easier access to their related churches than agencies do. For example, many denominations have an affiliated relief and development arm that is controlled by the denomination. The agency leaders think these ministries have an open door with churches in the denomination.

A leader of just such an affiliated ministry has a different view which is not so rosy. She says that even they have competition from other ministries of the same denomination. In addition, although they have the in with their churches, their churches come to them first to see what they can do and then they go and shop around to see what agencies have to offer. At conferences, agency leaders tell her how generous her denomination’s churches are, yet she thinks her own denominationally-affiliated ministry does not get much of the benefit of this generosity. She noted that there is less denominational loyalty than there used to be. Even though her ministry has a leg

up on agencies because they have a built-in relationship with their denomination's churches, the ministry still faces the same relationship issues that agencies face.

The interesting thing is that while 81% of agency leaders believe pastors prefer affiliated ministries, the pastors are *evenly split* on whether or not affiliated ministries have the advantage over independent agencies.

Pastors who prefer affiliated denominational ministries do so because 1) they are accountable; 2) they share common beliefs; and 3) they have an existing relationship upon which to build. A good accountability program will deal with the first issue. Some theological differences can be set aside if the agency's program doesn't need to bring up those differences (so compassion ministries may find it easier than evangelism or discipleship ministries to work with a wide cross-section of churches if there are theological or doctrinal differences between church and agency). The third point about pre-existing relationships simply means an agency will have to work harder to get in the door. It doesn't mean they can't knock. Depending on whether the denomination has a similar ministry or not, an agency might be able to get a denominational endorsement that would help open church doors.

Pastors who give every ministry an equal chance evaluate partnership options based on their merits, regardless of denominational status. They are quite willing to shop around and "buy" whichever service best suits their needs.

Only 10% of agency leaders feel churches tend to be closed to working with their organizations. Most agency leaders find them open, but with some reservations. They recognize denominational governance structures influence a church's openness to agencies as does the personal attitude of the pastor.

In the end, accountability and personal relationship are the clear requirements for a successful church-agency relationship. These are two of the six foundational principles for excellent church-agency relations that are discussed over the next six chapters.