

Exploring the Future of Parachurch Groups - John Sweetman

After a century of growing parachurch prominence, the arrival of the “megachurch” has seen a shift in influence in the evangelical Christian world to the larger churches. How will this play out? This article outlines two options for parachurch movements based on New Testament models.

Organisations in the New Testament Church

1. The NT speaks often about the universal church (e.g. in Ephesians). Although there was no absolute leadership authority (except for Christ), the apostles and the Jerusalem church exerted significant influence.
2. Local congregations (usually small – we have no record of buildings or larger meeting places in cities) were foundational, although we don’t know much about how they related together. There appears to have been a loose network of leaders within some larger cities that would have had numerous local congregations (e.g. Acts 20:17, 21:18).
3. Leadership in the churches included both local church elders (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5) and across-church leaders like apostles, prophets, evangelists and even pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11) of whom Timothy is an example.
4. Some semi-autonomous mission bands were appointed by local churches (e.g. Acts 13:1-3) and others may even have been self-appointed (Acts 15:39-40). These bands often planted churches.
5. **SOME PRINCIPLES FROM THE NT CHURCH**
 - a. The universal church is expressed through the local church. The local church is the foundational arm of God’s ministry. All Christians should be linked to a local church or a local church network. Local churches should work together.
 - b. Structures were flexible. Some leaders had local-church authority and others appeared to influence many churches. The church grew through both local church ministries and semi-autonomous mission teams (parachurch groups?). In other words, there was no clear demarcation between local church and wider “church” ministry.
 - c. The authority of the apostles (and perhaps other leaders e.g. James) was recognised throughout the churches and mission teams, although they could be opposed (Gal. 2:11).

The Historical Organisation of the Church/Parachurch

1. **CHRISTENDOM**
 - a. The conversion of the Roman emperor and empire had considerable repercussions on the structure of the church. Orthodoxy and control became paramount in such a large church, so church systems and leadership structures were established, and flexibility was discouraged. Eventually, in the West, the church was centralised under the authority of the Pope. There was no need for mission bands, as Christian citizens within the empire needed teaching and training (provided by the local priest), but no longer needed conversion.
 - b. However, the decline in passion of the church led to reform groups (soon organised as religious orders) being established to maintain the purity of the church. These orders operated alongside the local churches and some became heavily involved in social welfare (within the empire) and mission (outside the empire). Both churches and orders came under the authority of the Pope.

2. REFORMATION/ENLIGHTENMENT

- a. The Reformation destroyed the centralised structure of the Western church. With the diversification of theologies and, consequently, church structures, the door opened again to a greater flexibility in structures. Combined with a growing emphasis on entrepreneurial enterprise arising from the Enlightenment, this eventually produced a burgeoning of non-local church structures including mission and parachurch organisations. These groups were determined to do what the local church could not, or would not, do.
- b. The rise of America (based on a free church, individual freedom foundation) as the Christian world power over the last century accelerated the development of entrepreneurial Christian groups working alongside the local church. Many Christian leaders, who saw their leadership vision blocked by the ponderous and introspective nature of some local churches, found freedom and flexibility in parachurch groups. In some ways, the leadership of the western Christian world swung from church to parachurch (e.g. the influence of Billy Graham, leader of a parachurch organisation).
- c. The latest church structural development of the modern era has been the rise of megachurches. These are local churches, with immense resources rivalling those of the larger parachurch organisations, led by Christian entrepreneurs. Because of their readily accessible support base, they can often achieve even more than parachurch groups.

3. POSTMODERNISM

Some of the influences of postmodernism that may affect church structure and organisation appear to be the breaking down of theological barriers between denominations and a greater desire for cooperation between local churches, the idea of a local church that is network based, not geographically based, and a more cynical, antagonistic culture in which the church ministers.

4. POSSIBLE 21st CENTURY REPERCUSSIONS FOR THE CHURCH/PARACHURCH

- a. The smaller (unless they have a niche) or less effective parachurch organisations will struggle to survive as local megachurches and large churches develop and market their own resources.
- b. The most effective parachurch organisations will probably form partnerships with the larger churches (and the parachurch structures that these churches develop).
- c. With less emphasis on denominational allegiance, the church playing field will become less clear. Churches will network more across denominations and independent churches will increase. A positive outcome may be a cross-denominational and cross-parachurch recognition of spiritual leadership.
- d. Denominational organisations will find themselves competing in the same “market” as parachurch organisations. (Many already do.)
- e. With the greater cooperation between churches and between churches and parachurch organisations, the demarcation between church and parachurch may become less clear. Large churches offer parachurch resources to networks of churches. Parachurch organisations may need to explore and support different forms of missional church if the churches are reticent to do so.
- f. The slowly growing antagonism of our society towards the church will reduce options for ministry and resourcing unless churches and parachurch organisations can develop forms and structures that overtly separate them from the hypocrisy and paternalism of the past.

The Nature of Parachurch Groups – Two Options

1. A SPECIALISED PARACHURCH MINISTRY

- a. Willmer, Schmidt and Smith (1998), who are very positive about the parachurch, argue that parachurch organisations are mainly a 20th century phenomena growing in an environment that encourages specialisation, resource development and entrepreneurial spirit. They therefore have no foundation in the Bible or Christian history, but are practical organisations designed to serve and resource the church in a unique environment. According to this train of thought, true parachurch ministries have four defining characteristics. They are non-profit, have a Christian mission statement, are independent of traditional churches, and have one or more specific ministries or services.
- b. Choosing this option clarifies the purpose and form of parachurch groups and allows effective specialisation without encroaching on local churches. However, this may inhibit effectiveness in a rapidly changing culture and church environment. It may limit the parachurch provision of leadership and ministry at a time when divisions between church and parachurch are diminishing.

2. A CHRISTIAN MISSION WITH BIBLICAL AND/OR HISTORICAL ROOTS

- a. What does a parachurch group have in common with the NT mission teams? The NT mission teams were determined to reach their world for Jesus no matter what the cost of opposition, worked with churches and under the authority of church leaders, but also planted and encouraged churches when needed.
- b. What does a parachurch group have in common with the religious orders? The Orders were determined to maintain a passionate, committed spirituality and to serve their world by meeting needs and preaching the gospel to those who hadn't heard, when the church couldn't or wouldn't.
- c. Choosing this option could lead to a defocusing of the traditional vision of parachurch groups and to unnecessary and destabilising conflict with the churches (some of whom hold on to a narrow perspective of the church). However, it possibly could produce a networked, passionate freedom (under spiritual authority) to contribute more effectively to God's kingdom.

Some Questions Raised by NT Models

1. Who are the recognised leaders (like NT apostles) in the church/parachurch? Could some of these leaders come from the parachurch? How would we recognise them? What authority do they have?
2. What group/church/organisation parallels the NT missionary teams in Australia (if any)?
3. Who can plant churches and how can they be supported if not linked to traditional denominations?
4. What can we learn from the NT about building God's church in an antagonistic environment?

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