A New Social Contract: Leaders Relating Church Governing Structures to Voluntary Societies

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Ordinary people are forming themselves into special-purpose associations, whether informal or as non-profit corporations. In this way the people of God are achieving durable and effective solutions for many of humanity’s root problems. Starting voluntary associations resembles the hoisting of many sails on a fleet of ocean-going sailing ships. Today hundreds of “crews” are hoisting the sails of special-purpose voluntary associations for the sake of achieving important tasks to which God calls His people, challenging evil, changing society.

Martin Luther did not recognize that Roman Catholic monasteries (like his Augustinian monastery) were the “sails.” Luther believed that the entire mission of the church should be centralized in church administrations. This led to a Reformation “ice age” in which there was no church ministry beyond northern Europe. At last, beginning in 1792, William Carey proposed that Christians form themselves into special-purpose associations—what he called “means.” With the adoption of Carey’s means Protestant workers began to change the world. In recent years, leaders in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod have encouraged their members to form themselves into ministry societies; many new initiatives have begun as a result of this new social contract, relating church governing structures to voluntary societies.

Social Contracts Compared to City Government

We can understand this desirable relationship between church administrations and voluntary societies by comparing it to a city government’s relationship to activist associations. In The Detroit Free Press, “Private Groups Push Detroit Ahead,” reporter John Gallagher writes,

To get something done in Detroit, you traditionally went to City Hall. In recent years, more and more you went to a foundation, a nonprofit agency, or a quasi-public authority. It’s a part of a trend that has seen Detroit’s civic-minded leaders evolving a
new model for operating a town chronically short of cash and beset with a fractious political culture (Gallagher 2008).

“Implied in that,” says Charlie Williams, a former top aide to Mayor Coleman A. Young and now president of an environmental firm in Detroit, “is that the government doesn’t do an effective job in terms of efficiency.” Many leaders, including those in city government itself, acknowledge that there really is little alternative given the bleak outlook for city finances (Gallagher 2008).

In other words, private citizen groups and Detroit’s city government are negotiating a new social contract. This is part of a trend observed by Stanley H. Skreslet in his article, “Impending Transformation: Mission Structures for a New Century.” Skreslet writes,

Numerous social commentators have pointed to the phenomenon of decentralization as a distinctive mark of economic and political activity today. This trend may be seen, for instance, in the push to privatize many of the functions that used to be performed by governments (Skreslet 1999).

There is a new social order afoot relating the citizen sector to the municipal government in Detroit and nearly everywhere in the free world. This is because, as David Bornstein writes in his book, How to Change the World,

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 [emphasis added] (Bornstein 2004, 8).

While governments must be held responsible for translating the will of the citizenry into public policy, Bornstein says, “they are not necessarily the most effective vehicles, and certainly not the sole legitimate vehicles, for the actually delivery of many social goods, and they are often less inventive than entrepreneurial citizen organizations” (Bornstein 2004, 8).

Why Church Administrations Must Recognize and Relate to Special-Purpose Associations

There are lots of “restless persons” in the church who want to “do something” to change the world. What will it take for Protestant churches—modalities—to recognize the indispensable contribution of, and biblical basis for, sodalities—voluntary special purposes structures?

Anthropologist Elman Service describes special-purpose associations—sodalities—and observes that they exist in all societies: “They cross-cut the residential segments of the society, such as households, neighborhoods, and villages, and unite them socially and politically in a new way” (Service 1978, 5–6). Protestants were late in learning the value of special-interest societies that are separate from the local church. Martin Luther believed in the church’s mission to the world. He said, “Before the last day comes, church rule and the Christian faith must spread over the entire world” (Vander Werff 1997, 11). But historian Stephen Neill says that Luther and the Reformers did “exceedingly little” to put his expectation into practice:

It is clear that the idea of the steady progress of the preaching of the Gospel through the world is not foreign to his [Luther’s] thought. Yet, when everything favourable has been said that can be said, and when all possible evidences from the writings of the Reformers have been collected, it all amounts to exceedingly little (Neill 1986, 222).

Luther and the Reformers adopted what Paul Pierson calls “the medieval model of the territorial church” (Pierson 2000, 813). Luther dissolved the monasteries “even though,” writes Paul Pierson, “monastic communities had been the primary vehicle of the Church’s mission since the fourth century” (Pierson 2000, 813).
The early Reformers came down hard on their members who tried to form themselves into ministry societies. In 1661, Justinian Welz advocated that Christian workers should be sent out under the auspices of a ‘Jesus-Loving Society’” (Welz 1969, 38-45). His bishop disapproved:

Dear Justinian, stop dreaming, lest Satan deceive you. Stay in the land, in the calling to which God has called you; do not think beyond your ability. … The Jesus Society sought by you has a nice appearance but is un-Christian, without command, promise, precedent, yes, clearly against God and our Savior Jesus (Welz 1969:102). All that is called for is for everyone to “mind his own door, and everything will be fine” (Bosch 1991, 252).

More than another century would pass before William Carey’s leadership would overcome the obstacles of the settled opinion of the established Protestant church. But he was fortunate to make his proposal after the year 1779, as the next section explains.

The Enabling Act of 1779

In 1779, Parliament passed an Enabling Act that authorized English citizens to organize public or private schools and associations apart from the authority of the Anglican Church. Robert Raikes (d. 1811) took advantage of this law in 1780 to organize a Sunday School. The Anglican Church disapproved; Raikes held his first classes in the kitchen of a Mrs. Meredith in his home town of Gloucester. It is “unlikely that anything like the Sunday school could have arisen without the legal sanction of the Enabling Act.” In Raikes we see the clear connection between a free society and the growth of independent religious organizations. Prior to 1779, “the philanthropy of Robert Raikes (or anyone else) would have been stifled by the laws of the country and the prejudice of those in ecclesiastical power.” English citizens began forming themselves into “little platoons” —Edmund Burke’s term for voluntary societies. Members of these societies devoted themselves to certain causes (e.g. abolition of slavery, prison reform, temperance, Christian overseas missions). These “voluntary forms of operation,” M. J. D. Roberts wrote, “once accepted as ‘safe’ by civil and ecclesiastical authority, were accessible by any who had the will to adopt them.” Working class people were transformed into activists through the instrument of voluntary associations. Too, English women organized moral reform societies, which “became the means by which women made a successful claim for recognition as legitimate participants in rational-critical debate.” An Age of Reform had begun. My findings indicate that when governments and ecclesiastical hierarchies validate the right of their citizens to organize for ministry, their citizens are empowered to change the world.

Today, more than two centuries after the Enabling Act of 1779 one may forget that the government had to act before citizens could form themselves into private companies:

No matter how much modern businessmen may presume to the contrary, the company was a political creation. . . . Businessmen might see the joint company as a convenient form; from many politicians’ viewpoint, it existed because it had been given a license to do so, and granted the privilege of limited liability. In the Anglo-Saxon world, the state might decide that it wanted relatively little in return: “these little republics,” as Robert Lowe called [the corporations], were to be left alone.

The legislation allowed Raikes and Carey and others to form themselves into societies despite opposition from ecclesiastical administrations.

William Carey’s Paradigm: “The Use of Means”

On May 30, 1792, William Carey preached, along with several others, at the Kettering meetings in Nottingham, Midlands, England. He took as his text “Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let
them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations; and thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles, and make the desolate cities to be inhabited” (Isaiah 54: 2, 3). Carey cited the “former undertakings” of the Moravians and Wesleyans and lavished praise on the voluntary societies that he had heard of, and cited them as precedents. There were the Moravians: Carey writes, “Have not the workers of the Moravian Brethren, encountered the scorching heat of Abyssinia, and the frozen climes of Greenland, and Labrador, their difficult languages, and savage manners?” (Carey 1792, 11). There was John Wesley’s work “amongst the Caribs and Negroes”; and there were the “former undertakings” of John Elliot, David Brainerd, the Danish-Halle center and the ministry training school in Leyden, 1722–1733 (Carey 1792, 11).

But it was the phenomenon of the private trading company that provided the model for which Carey was most exuberant:

Suppose a company of serious Christians, ministers and private persons, were to form themselves into a society, and make a number of rules respecting the regulation of the plan, and the persons who are to be employed as ministers, the means of defraying the expense, etc., etc. This society must consist of persons whose hearts are in the work, men of serious religion, and possessing a spirit of perseverance; there must be a determination not to admit any person who is not of this description, or to retain him longer than he answers to it (Carey 1792, 81-82).

On October 2, 1792, fourteen persons met in the home of Mrs. Beeby Wallis of Kettering, England. They organized themselves as the “Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen.” The Society was soon renamed the Baptist Mission Society (BMS). The BMS Board accepted Carey’s application to become a cross-cultural worker and the Careys sailed to Serampore, India in April, 1793. Soon “serious Christians” began “forming themselves” into societies in London, Glasgow, New York, Philadelphia, and Boston.

**Contemporary Leadership for Special Interest Groups**

A new social contract that establishes a reporting relationship between special-interest ministry societies and local churches and denominations is the desired symbiosis. Presbyterians in recent years have experimented with allowing freedom to special interest groups. In 1993 the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly adopted a policy to the effect that a local church or presbytery shall have the right to validate cross-cultural ministry agencies without needing to seek any additional authorization. This policy, called “Appendix A: Organization for Mission” authorizes the local congregation to promote the mission across the denomination. Here is the text of the policy:

Each and all governing bodies serve the mission of the whole church and thereby appropriately validate a ministry. Such validated ministry may be commended to other but does not require their concurrence or support (General Assembly 2008, 37).

This model serves as an example of a denominational program in which leaders affirm rather than resist the pluralism of the constituents. In a 1977 *Christian Century* article, Richard Hutcheson listed the following characteristics of an effective denominational leadership team:

1. Acceptance of the existence, within the denomination, of special-interest associations.

2. Integrated planning of a full range of ministry activities, substantively as well as nominally responsive to the intentions of various groups of donors.

3. Integrated promotion of a full range of ministry activities, together with acceptance of promotion by consensus groups of their own mission goals.

4. A guarantee that all designated contributions go to the cause designated.
5. A willingness to allow the constituency to affect the missional priorities of the denomination through its designated giving.

6. An intention to serve the needs and reflect the concerns of all groups within the constituency (Hutcheson 1977, 618).

Leaders following these guidelines would make significant changes in the typical unified denominational approach to organizing cross-cultural ministry.

Model Leadership for Church and Special Interest Groups: The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod

I believe the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) has pioneered a way for hierarchical structures to relate formally to the mission societies that their members are joining and funding. LCMS leaders have achieved unity in a pluralistic denomination by empowering its members to organize themselves into special-purpose structures that the central church recognizes.

Until 1996 leaders in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) were proponents of centralized mission planning and budgeting. No pastor or church member could initiate a cross-cultural ministry effort. But this has changed; since 1996 LCMS pastors and church members have formed a galaxy of ministry agencies. Ecclesiastical leaders, for their part, recognize and promote these agencies. The LCMS has even assigned a staff person to coach LCMS members through the legal process of forming corporations and opening bank accounts.

LCMS recognition of voluntary societies started out small. In 1996 the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod sponsored a meeting of twelve ministry agencies. These twelve subsequently organized the Association of Lutheran Mission Agencies (ALMA). The number of agencies grew to 52 agencies in 1999, to 65 in 2003 and 75 by 2008. These voluntary societies are doing specialized work with the official consent and promotion of the Missouri Synod headquarters, but without its control. Some of the seventy-five ministry agencies on the ALMA web site are:

- **Alaska Mission for Christ:** sharing Christ in the last frontier through the use of well trained laity, especially in areas too remote or sparsely populated to allow service by ordained clergy.
- **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 the Gospel to the Hmong people of North America and throughout the world.
- **Missio Dei Network:** providing theological materials to foster learning communities that encourage, form and equip ministry leaders for bridge-building in the 21st century.
- **Sudanese Lutheran Mission Society:** telling the Good News to the Sudanese who do not know about Jesus.
- **Tien Shan Mission Society:** Spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ among the Dungan people of the Tien Shan Mountain region of Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan) (http://www.alma-online.org).

Each Lutheran agency has its own board and its own by-laws. Each one obtains from the IRS its own Tax Identity Number in order to open up its own bank account. ALMA 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 ministry agencies. “In a time of financial limitations and in response to the initiative of many different cross-cultural ministry groups in the LCMS it makes sense to work closely with the independent Lutheran agencies,” said Steve Hughey, Director for Ministry Partnership and Involvement at the Lutheran church headquarters (Hughey 2002).
This LCMS structure serves as an example for other denominations. The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod has validated the right of its members to form “little republics.” “Our concern,” Hughey said “is to get the task of the gospel done” by partnering with small voluntary associations (Hughey 2002). In a pluralistic church such as the LCMS, members with ideas that interest only a minority of the entire church membership can work in harmony with church officials. This pattern should encourage other denominations to do likewise. Paul Pierson concurs: “Ecclesiastical structures (Presbyterian and Anglican) are suited for stability and stationary organization—not conducive to the frontier situation which requires more freedom” (Pierson 1985, 204). As long as there are new ministries to undertake, men and women must organize themselves into voluntary societies.

Conclusions

Leaders of good governments negotiate social contracts with special-purpose associations that their restless members organize in order to create durable and effective solutions for many of humanity’s great problems. William Carey proposed that Christians organize special-purpose associations because he was ambitious to “do something” to eradicate the root evils in the world, evils which he called “ignorance and barbarism” that are subjugating “our fellow creatures, whose souls are as immortal as ours” (Carey 1792, 68). Church leaders today will more readily mobilize their members to the imitation of Christ in overcoming evil with good, to solve problems hindering the advance of the gospel, by encouraging the initiation of special-purpose associations.

The tension between ecclesiastical structures and voluntary societies can be resolved by mutual respect and recognition. The day of centralized command and control is nearly over. Andrew Walls writes,

> From age to age it becomes necessary to use new means for the proclamation of the Gospel beyond the structures which unduly localize it. Some have taken the word “sodality” beyond its special usage in Catholic practice to stand for all such “use of means” by which groups voluntarily constituted labour together for specific Gospel purposes. 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 [emphasis added] (Walls 1996, 253-54).

The voluntary societies are merely cloth sails. Leaders: hoist them, and we can take our ships where our theology informs us that we should go. Hoist your sails, Presbyterians. Hoist your sails, Vineyard churches, Bible churches, Christian churches and Baptist churches, Sovereign Grace churches and Purpose-Driven churches, and all the others. Launch a hundred new mission efforts, and join the fleets of sailing ships that are already attempting “great things for God.”

References


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