



Bridging the Church/Parachurch Divide
Presenters: Scott Harris and Jerry White

The End and Future of the Church / “ParaChurch” Relationship A Call for Generous Partnership

by Scott Harris and Amy L. Sherman

I. Introduction: Ending a Broken Model

God is on a mission through his Son Jesus to make all things new. His envisioned scope for restoration is both personal and universal and he has invited his disciples to join him in his Kingdom-advancing mission.

The current, largely dysfunctional state of church/“para-church” relationships is a major hindrance to the effective work of the Body of Christ in Jesus’ Kingdom mission in our day. For decades, Christian congregational and nonprofit ministry leaders have decided to live with this dysfunction, putting up with merely transactional “partnerships”—or worse, disrespecting and disdaining each other.

This is tragic, unacceptable, and urgently in need of reform for at least three pressing reasons. First, it grieves Jesus, who treasures unity and who does not share our complacency over the current state of affairs. Second, it represents enormous opportunity costs: imagine how many more lost, hurting people could be reached and served if congregations and ministries linked arms more effectively. Third, it demeans the Church’s witness, and this at a time when her credibility in the eyes of nonbelievers—and even some believers—is declining.

The present brokenness has several sources, but it is not insurmountable. Perhaps some pastors will always view the “para-church” as unnecessary or inferior, while

some nonprofit ministry leaders refuse cooperation, exasperated as they are by internally focused congregations. Our research and interviews with a variety of Christian leaders, though, revealed various “middle ground” views between these extremes. The common thread in these was the recognition that **congregations and ministries are incomplete without each other**. This is a starting ground for healthy, win-win alliances.

II. Three Biblical Themes for Constructive Reflection

Three biblical themes provide a constructive framework for reflection and thoughtful application in fruitful, collaborative work between congregations and ministries:

- **The Missionary Nature of the Church.** What is the Church and what is her purpose? The answers are found in the grand biblical story of the *missio Dei*, God’s activity throughout history to make all things new. God, who created a world of shalom, has been committed to its restoration ever since humanity rejected his benevolent rule in the Garden. The Church finds her purpose and identity within the *missio Dei*. The Church is both *called* by God and *sent* by God.
- **The Modal and Sodal Structures of the Church on Mission.** Christ’s Body takes two expressions in the New Testament: modal (gathered) and sodal (scattered/sent). The modal ecclesia is open to believers of all ages and was meant to reveal Christ’s beauty and lordship through counter-cultural living and authentic, loving community. Complementing these local

fellowships were sodalities, smaller fraternities of comrades marked out by a sense of high commitment and particular purpose. The apostle Paul's missionary bands were examples of such sodal expressions of the Body. Today these look like mission agencies and the plethora of Christian nonprofit ministries working to proclaim and demonstrate the Kingdom here in the U.S. and throughout the world. God's design is for the modal and sodal expressions to cooperate in fruitful, interdependent ways to accomplish both the Great Commission of making new disciples and to help existing disciples to mature.

- **God's Manifold Gifts to His Body for Mission.** To equip the church for building up believers for works of service as they live into God's mission, God gave the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers (Ephesians 4:11). Jesus beautifully embodies all of these "APEST" gifts. Taken together, these gifts help congregations to mature toward greater Christlikeness and unity. They also represent God's equipping grace to sodalities for their missional labors. A truly holistic ministry in Jesus' footsteps requires *all* of these gifts. Crafting mutually respectful partnerships between modalities and sodalities requires that each charism be honored.

III. New Language

In light of these three themes, **we urge that the Christian community drop the word "para-church" from its vocabulary.** That term too often connotes both inferiority and a too-sharp sense of otherness instead of interdependency. What has been called "para-church" is instead a vital expression of Christ's Body, one with complementary and essential functions within God's redemptive mission. Continued use of the term, and the old assumptions underlying it, hinders the fruitful partnership God desires. Rather than speaking of local church and "para-church," we recommend using the terms "congregations" and "ministries" to describe the modal and sodal redemptive structures God employs in his mission.

IV. A New Framework: Generous Partnership

Our research revealed that when the relationship between congregational and ministry leaders is marked by a manifold spirit of generosity, highly effective, fruitful partnership ensued. The positive missional partnerships we observed:

- Recognize the lavish generosity of God and allow that reality to forge joyful confidence rather than a fearful "scarcity mindset;"
- Embody other-centeredness by focusing primarily on the needs and interests of the ultimate beneficiaries of the Kingdom activity rather than those of either partner;
- Deeply appreciate one another's God-given giftedness and respect one another as joint stewards of God's assets for advancing God's mission;
- Adopt an open-handed posture, letting go of egos and turf; and
- Embrace a holistic, dynamic, interconnected understanding of "missional discipleship."

V. Promising Practices

In addition to these attitudes, we also uncovered certain *common practices* in highly effective partnerships. **We urge congregational and ministry leaders to assess their own current modes of operation against these promising practices and to take practical steps to move into greater alignment with them.**

Practice 1: Eschew the scarcity mindset

In God's abundant economy, reality is not zero-sum. He supplies the necessary finances and people to get his mission done. As the missionary Hudson Taylor famously said, "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply." God is greatly pleased when we turn away from fear and from competing for what we deem to be limited resources. Living out our trust in Jehovah Jireh, the God who provides, means:

- Congregational leaders must be *openhanded* with their congregants. As pastors equip the saints for ministry, God will call some to serve inside the local congregation, and others, outside it. Pastors need to be openhanded with their flock, trusting God to supply the needs of the congregation when members decide to volunteer at a local or global ministry.
- Ministry leaders must embrace a *cause* mentality over an *organizational* mentality. God typically raises up many organizations to advance any one particular Kingdom cause. Ministry leaders must acknowledge that they are *one* player, and comprehend their individual role within this larger ecosystem. Whenever the cause is advanced, even when that has nothing to do with one's own organization—or even comes at some cost to one's own nonprofit—godly leaders rejoice. They know the end goal is not their own agency's success, but the flourishing of the ultimate beneficiaries that the cause targets.

Practice 2:

Invest intentionally in volunteer assessment and deployment efforts

Congregational leaders need to provide effective systems that help congregants to discover/examine their gifts, passions, “holy discontents,” APEST giftings, and the dimensions of their vocational power. We can't expect congregants to steward well that which they don't recognize they possess. Several assessment tools are available for congregational leaders to use for free or at low cost.

Many ministry leaders need to improve in the arena of volunteer deployment. Nonprofits typically focus on the direct-service volunteers needed to execute ministry programs. This focus is necessary and understandable, but too narrow. It fails to recognize the wide array of vocational skills, experience, and influence volunteers possess. By better leveraging these, the nonprofit's mission can be advanced in deeper or additional ways. When these assets go untapped, the beneficiaries of the nonprofit's cause lose out.

Practice 3:

Partner in synergistic disciple-making

The modal and sodal structures of the church are both needed in the mission of bringing people into relationship with Jesus. Congregations, and ministries of all different topical foci, are meant to cooperate in holistic service that ensures that spiritual as well as physical/emotional needs are addressed. Both are also necessary to the work of growing believers in maturity. Cooperating effectively in these works will likely mean that:

- Congregational leaders must address the ways their current practices bifurcate discipleship and mission rather than seeing them as two sides of one coin. Too often “discipleship” unfolds inside the church's four walls through information-laden classes while “mission” unfolds outside, through serving opportunities in local or global communities—but with little or no reflection on those experiences. Jesus's model was different: he apprenticed his disciples through teaching *and* missional engagement. And just like Jesus' first followers, modern-day disciples need to spend time hearing, reading, and discussing *and* to spend time going and doing!
- Ministry leaders, meanwhile, share with congregational leaders the responsibility of discipling their volunteers. Yes, the volunteers are there to help staff shoulder the work of the ministry in the cause it has taken up. And yes, the needs of the beneficiaries of the various programs are paramount. But God also calls leaders to steward well those he has brought them, expecting them to consider not only what they want *from* their volunteers, but what they want *for* them. That means being committed to those volunteers' spiritual formation, helping them reflect on and grow from their engagement in mission.

Practice 4:

Commit to investing in mutual support

God has designed congregations and ministries as joint stewards of his assets for advancing his mission. Each has a vested interest in the strength of the other.

We must grow up, putting internecine conflicts behind us and demonstrating mutual support and submission. Neither the modal nor the sodal expression of Christ's Body is complete in itself. Both are needed for the *missio Dei* and both need each other. Simultaneously, each has complementary callings and functions that should be respected and celebrated. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you." (I Cor. 12:26). The Lord is grieved when leaders think of their own gifts as superior to another's or lack the humility to understand that *all* the gifts are vital for the Kingdom's advance.

All congregations and ministries have some opportunity to share a resource with one another, whether that be staff with particular expertise, facilities, money, or relational connections. Well-endowed congregations may also have opportunity to serve as capacity building intermediaries for their local nonprofit ministry community, supporting training to strengthen leaders and organizations. Similarly, ministries with deep roots and strong reputations in particular neighborhoods may have opportunity to partner with church planters seeking to plant in those communities. Church history is replete with stories of modalities creating sodalities and sodalities birthing modalities. This is how orphanages, anti-slavery and missionary organizations, hospitals, schools, Bible translation agencies, missions and church planting movements got their start. God's people and His creation is transformed wherever this gathering/scattering rhythm flourishes.

VI. Conclusion: Striving Side by the Side for the Gospel

For far too many decades, Christian leaders have lived with serious dysfunction in the relationship between the modal and sodal expressions of Christ's Body. This must end, for the sake of Christ's honor and the Church's witness. **We must forge a new future of strong, hardwearing partnerships between congregations and ministries that are sufficient to the enormous challenges we confront in today's missiological context.**

In this paper, we've discussed the broken model between the church and parachurch. We've also shared our thoughts about the way forward. In spite of the challenges, there are many beautiful examples of generosity and partnership; these need to expand and flourish.

Reflect on three biblical models:

- *The missionary nature of the church*
- *The gathered and scattered rhythms of the church (modality and sodality)*
- *God's good gifts provided to His people for mission*

Reframe language

- *Do away with the term 'para-church'*

Embrace promising practices

- *Eschew scarcity language*
- *Marry volunteer mobilization with disciplemaking efforts*
- *Invest in mutual support for deeper relationship resulting in community transformation*

Much is at stake. A world in need calls out. No one entity could possibly respond adequately. Too much opportunity for multiplied capacity—and subsequently greater impact—has already been lost in the internecine "church/para-church" squabbles within Christ's Body. Satan, alone, is the victor when the Body is full of disdain and disunity. Christ longs for his whole Church, in all its given giftedness, to follow him in faithfulness, humility, and zeal, engaging with him in his restorative work. It is time to strive afresh in unity, side by side, for the advance of the Gospel in our tumultuous times.

For the full draft of the paper visit mif.org/generous-partnership.

Dr. Amy L. Sherman is a Senior Fellow at the Sagamore Institute. Scott Harris is Vice President of Church and Global Engagement at Mission Increase (MI). Congregational and ministry leaders can contact MI for information on workshops and conversations for taking the next steps in more fruitful partnering.