

## The Church and the Parachurch

American evangelicalism seems to be more deeply characterized by “parachurch” ministries than by local congregations. One may debate whether particular congregations (especially those affiliated with traditional denominations) are truly “evangelical,” but the question is never asked of groups like Campus Crusade for Christ, Young Life, Navigators, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Youth for Christ, or Focus on the Family. Along with missions organizations like TEAM, GEM, CAM, and GMF, these “parachurch” ministries epitomize evangelicalism as a movement of conservative Christians who are more interested in outreach and engagement with society than in doctrinal precision or denominational affiliation. Since the believers who take part in such ministries are themselves members of the universal church and usually also participate in local congregations, it may be more appropriate to speak of the “para-local church,” which White defines as “any spiritual ministry whose organization is not under the control or authority of a local congregation.”<sup>1</sup>

For example, I have been affiliated with a ministry that began as the “Life Ministry” of a local Presbyterian church. However, the leaders decided that they would be more successful in accomplishing their goal (establishing maternity homes in the Dallas area) if other churches were brought into the effort, so they incorporated “Dallas Life Ministries” as a separate, non-profit organization, making the move from a “local church ministry” to a “para-local church ministry.” It now functions “alongside” or “next to” local churches.

Examples of para-local church ministries may be suggested as far back as independent monasteries, but nobody disputes the fact that their numbers have mushroomed in the twentieth-century United States. There are several reasons for the trend.

- Finding limited opportunities for ministry within local congregations, increasingly well-educated women and laymen opted to form their own missions or religious societies.
- The individualistic, entrepreneurial spirit of American free enterprise encouraged people to strike out on their own.
- When the “mainline” denominations were caught up in “modernism” (aka “liberalism”), the more conservative believers took their energies and their financial resources elsewhere.
- United States tax laws have been very generous to non-profit organizations.

Most of us have been involved in para-local church ministries of some sort before coming to seminary. If you weren’t involved in one then, you are now, for Dallas Seminary is a para-local church ministry. Functioning independently of any local church or denomination, we demonstrate the common strengths and weaknesses of “the parachurch,” which is often regarded as a mixed blessing.

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<sup>1</sup>Jerry White, *The Church and the Parachurch: An Uneasy Marriage* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1983), 19.

Take a moment and reflect on both strengths and weaknesses of the para-local church ministries with which you have been involved. What do they do well? What are their liabilities?

STRENGTHS:

WEAKNESSES:

You really will get more out of this if you complete your own list before reading mine, but I can't stop you from reading on! Here are a few of the typical strengths and weaknesses of para-local church organizations (hereafter abbreviated "PLCs").

**Strengths:**

- Focus. PLCs are able to direct their efforts toward a single task. They do not feel obligated to fulfill the broader mission of the church, which they gladly leave to others. One evangelistic PLC used to describe itself as "the evangelistic arm of the body of Christ."
- Effectiveness. With more limited objectives, well-trained staff, and (often) significant financial resources, PLCs are generally very efficient and effective in ministry. They are increasingly seen as "the professionals" in particular fields, with local churches relying on the PLCs to fulfill certain aspects of the church's mission. (For example, some local congregations refer almost all of their pastoral counseling to outside Christian counselors.)
- Evangelical ecumenism. PLCs encourage inter-church cooperation to stage events (like Billy Graham crusades) or perform tasks (like training, sending, and supporting missionaries) that are beyond the capacity of most local congregations.
- Picking up the slack. PLCs often pursue areas of ministry that local congregations have either abandoned or never pursued (e.g., JAF Ministries, the disability outreach of Joni Eareckson Tada).

**Weaknesses:**

- PLCs may train people to serve in the local church, but they have also been accused of drawing the most talented individuals away from local churches.
- With so many PLCs relying on financial contributions, they are often accused of drawing financial resources away from the local church.

- PLCs have no real accountability to anyone but themselves. Some may join financial watchdog groups like the ECFA, but they still represent, as Stephen Board put it, “religion gone free enterprise.”<sup>2</sup>
- Without accountability, PLCs can too easily become personality cults.
- PLCs lack biblical precedent, which may not be seen as a major problem, but that means they also lack biblical guidelines. If one maintains that local church elders should all be male (on the basis of 1 Timothy 2), does that restriction also apply to the boards of PLCs? Should PLCs even have boards? Do those board members function like church elders or like the directors of a corporation (assuming a difference)? One cannot resolve such questions by direct biblical citation.
- The focused approach of PLCs may cause them to misunderstand the broader needs (and broader mission) of the body of Christ. PLCs are so influential that such errors may easily be multiplied.
- PLC staff members often give local churches the impression that they want nothing from them but financial support. Their training, accountability, and ministry all reside in the PLC.
- By working alongside a wide range of churches, most PLCs have fairly open (i.e., weak) doctrinal standards.
- PLCs, like local churches, often replicate one another’s efforts unnecessarily.

It does not seem at all likely that the PLCs will be brought under the authority of local churches anytime soon. How then might these weaknesses be addressed?

### **Some Suggestions**

Those of you who are involved in para-local church ministries can do a lot to change the reputation of those ministries in your local churches.

- Get involved in the church as a real member. Attend the church regularly. Participate in the ministries of the church, even in areas outside your “professional expertise.”
- Pastors and staff members may be intimidated by your presence. Go out of your way to encourage them in their ministries, seeking to be a positive influence rather than a resident critic.
- Build relationships within the church for ministry and mutual encouragement, not for personal financial support.
- Support the church financially.
- Submit to the leadership of the church. You will still be accountable to the appropriate authorities within the PLC for your ministry within that organization, but you are accountable to the local church for your personal and family life and your ministry within the church.
- Recognize that your ministry aims are more focused than those of a local congregation. Do not expect them to give as much attention to your priorities as you do.

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<sup>2</sup>Stephen Board, “The Great Evangelical Power Shift,” *Eternity* 30:6 (June 1979): 17.

- Help the church leaders understand your para-local church ministry. Involve them in it, if possible, and help them appreciate its contribution both to the local church and to the broader body of Christ.

Those of you who lead local church congregations can work positively with the PLCs. Here are some suggestions.

- Take the initiative to get to know PLC staff members or participants who may be in your church. Try to understand their ministries, and seek to minister to them and their families.
- Call on the PLC members to help the church in their areas of expertise. Do not see them as rivals or competitors, but as co-laborers who can enhance the ministry of the church.
- Pray regularly with the PLC members.
- Do not expect the PLC members to make the local church their primary area of ministry. Recognize that they have other commitments and responsibilities.
- Communicate clearly with PLC members regarding potential financial support from the church as a whole or its members. Make sure they understand relevant policies regarding requests for funds.
- Recognize that you are not obligated to support or endorse every PLC in which church members are involved. Communicate clearly any doctrinal or practical concerns you may have with a PLC, and guard the church's theological commitments.

“... clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for ‘God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (1 Peter 5:5).

### **Additional Reading**

Attached to this lesson are two articles. The first is William Carey's "An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens," from 1792. It has been very influential in the establishment of denominational (and non-denominational) mission agencies, which gave rise to the modern "parachurch" movement. The second article, "Return to Your Roots," by Martin Murphy (from his web site, titled "Reformed Forum"), is strongly critical of parachurch ministries. Murphy argues that they are usurping the unique responsibilities and privileges assigned to the church. As you read these articles, attempt to identify and interact with the central concerns of each writer.