

How to Foment a City-Wide Missions Movement: Lessons from Singapore

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Singapore is a small country. It sends few missionaries. But if you calculate the number of missionaries sent vs. the number of Christians back home in the churches, it's a different story. The churches of Singapore in the early 1990s were (and probably still are) sending out missionaries at twice the rate of the churches of North America. In other words, if the churches of North America were to send out missionaries at the same rate as the churches of Singapore, the missionary force from North America would immediately double.

That is despite these facts: (1) the churches of Singapore have less money than the churches of North America, and (2) the missions movement of Singapore is much younger than the missions movement of North America. Singapore began sending missionaries only in the 1970s; America sent its first foreign missionaries in the early 1800s. (Keep this in mind the next time you hear someone say, "We can't keep on sending more missionaries; the money just isn't there!")

Singapore is a city, an island, and a country in Southeast Asia. In the 1970s and 1980s the Lord moved and Evangelical Christianity grew rapidly in the country, especially among the young, English-educated Chinese and Indians. Even by 1980 the churches of Singapore were generally young, zealous, evangelistic, growing, and relatively wealthy (by Asian standards).

In that year a group of Singaporean pastors, missionaries, mission agency leaders, and other Christian leaders came together to form the Singapore Centre for Evangelism and Missions (SCEM). They shared a common vision for Singapore as a strong missionary-sending country, and wanted to work together to see that vision come to reality, by God's grace. The founders and leaders of SCEM came from many denominations and organizations, and included many who were well-respected in the wider Christian community. SCEM was set as the missions arm of the Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore, and developed to provide services like EFMA/IFMA (a national missions association), APMC (helping local churches do missions), and the USCWM (missions mobilization, education, resources, and services).

It's a complicated story how the Lord worked so that SCEM met the my family, and came to invite us to come and help them. It turned out to be a good arrangement. My Singaporean colleagues, who well understood the local churches, missions movement, and culture, led the way, generated the ideas and framed the plans. On loan to SCEM from our mission agency, CBInternational (then the Conservative Baptist Foreign Mission Society or CBFMS), we were available to help with the implementation.

I believe in the value of city-wide or regional mission centers. Such ministries can take various forms, but share some common and essential functions. They may or may not have a physical office, location, or staff – though more can happen if they do. Their presence provides a way for the most missions-active Christian leaders to have the broadest possible impact. If the question

is, “How can we foment a vital city-wide or regional missions movement?,” the short answer is, “Organize and develop an effective city-wide or regional cooperative missions center”.

I believe in inter-organizational and inter-church cooperative ministry for missions mobilization. It honors our common Lord, and upholds the ideal of Christian unity. It also allows the resources of one to be shared with many. It provides a way for churches or denominations that are strong in missions to help those that are weak. It provides a way for mission organizations, mission needs, mission information, mission speakers, and mission vision to touch the entire Christian community of a city or region. What happens in missions, and in frontier missions, from any given city or region can be strengthened, enhanced, expanded, and multiplied.

We saw that happen in Singapore. SCEM made a strong, positive difference in the missions movement of that country (and is still doing so today). By the early 1990s we could see that every new missionary going out from Singapore – and there were many – had been helped along the way by SCEM. We did some things well. We made some mistakes. There are things we should have done but didn’t. Let me review our experience and make recommendations under the following “how-to” plan.

1. Gather the right leadership.

SCEM had the great advantage of an excellent membership and Executive Committee (ExCo). They also had a full-time worker on loan from a mission agency (me). I think both were necessary. Before I came, the ExCo was hindered in what they could do, due to limited workforce. On the other hand, it would have been terribly difficult for me to do SCEM-style ministry without the ExCo’s ideas and backing.

2. Meet people.

The first thing I did in Singapore was meet each of SCEM’s ExCo members, in a series of face-to-face, one-on-one meetings, usually over a meal. In these meetings, they typically would say, “Oh, you need to meet [so-and-so]!” ... then name a pastor, mission agency leader, missions professor, or Singaporean missionary – usually giving many such names. So I followed their advice and kept on meeting people. In fact, I never quit.

I made it my practice to have lunch with someone every day. This cost me a lot of time. Between transportation back and forth and unhurried time together over a meal, it blew a big hole in the middle of every working day. But it turned out to be a wise investment. There is no substitute for personal, trusting relationships in fostering inter-organizational cooperation, and there are no shortcuts in forming them. Later on, when a pastor or leader received something in the mail about a SCEM event or activity they could say, “Oh yeah, SCEM. I know Michael. I had lunch with him.” It made all the difference for their response.

3. Start a newsletter.

SCEM began this only later. We should have done it from the start. We could have actively gathered good news, ideas, and information from the Singapore missions movement, from

missions and churches and missionaries, and spread it around to instruct, inspire, and encourage all.

For example, I learned of a 300-member local church that sponsored 320 Indonesian church planters in a very-well-organized church-planting movement among Javanese transmigrants in south Sumatra and Riau, Indonesia. Few other churches in Singapore knew about this work until we wrote about it in the SCEM newsletter. Our newsletter also promoted SCEM projects and events, as well as other missions activities not directly connected with SCEM.

4. Organize events.

SCEM organized a lot of mission events. We had events for pastors, to help them get missions vision. We had events for local church mission committee members, to help them do their work better. We had events for Singaporean mission agency executives, to provide for networking, continuing education, and spiritual growth. We had large-scale, three-day, city-wide mission rallies attended by as many as 2,000 people, with well-known international speakers. These “World Heartbeat” events were especially geared for potential missions recruits, and included altar calls for commitment to missionary service.

One of the best things we did was in follow-up from our World Heartbeat conferences. All who came forward at the altar calls filled out forms that included questions about their local churches and about mission agencies they were interested in. We sent copies of these forms to the respondents’ local churches, with cover letters encouraging them to help their member along in missions commitment. We also sent copies to each mission agency that respondents listed, with cover letters encouraging the local mission representatives or recruiters to follow up.

Then we organized Follow-Up Retreats for potential mission recruits. In the course of a weekend retreat, each participant would draw up a 10-year plan that would have them, at the end of that time, as long-term missionaries in another country. We said, “Maybe God wants you to be a career missionary, and maybe not. But if he does, let’s see what the process would look like.” Messages and workshops explored spiritual issues and the call, relationship with the sending church, short-term mission experiences, training, education, how to choose a mission agency, financial and practical issues, pre-field orientation, on-field orientation, and language and culture learning. At various points in the weekend we brought in missions-active pastors, representatives from Bible colleges and seminaries, mission agency representatives, and Singaporean long-term missionaries who had been through the whole process, to meet with participants one-on-one and explore possibilities.

These retreats were powerful. Vague ideas about missionary service suddenly turned into concrete plans. We saw a very large percentage of our Follow-Up Retreat participants end up in missionary service. Some were overseas within months after the retreat.

I would advocate organizing mission events for all sectors of the Christian community – children, youth, students, the elderly, intercessors, professionals, musicians, artists, and so on. We were unafraid to pack the schedule with a lot of activities. Each event spread missions vision to someone new.

Many of our events piggybacked on the occasion of a good missions speaker or expert coming to town anyhow for some reason. If a mission organization had someone coming, they would often contact SCEM and we would organize a joint event. If one of the larger churches was bringing in an outstanding speaker for their missions conference, they would often contact SCEM and we would organize a joint event, so the larger Christian community could benefit.

SCEM's experience would support the idea of event-by-event activities over on-going fellowships. We tried, for example, to have a regular monthly fellowship of mission committee members from various churches around the city, with a different program each time. It petered out. The better pattern was to do specific events from time to time, with a special speaker or topic for each.

For most SCEM events we started by forming a circle of co-sponsoring churches, denominations, or mission organizations. Usually the co-sponsoring agreement involved each party sending one of their leadership staff to the planning meetings, and helping with the work. Each promoted the event in their own circle of contacts or mailing list. We generally planned around break-even budgets. If there was a shortfall, the co-sponsors would each chip in to cover the obligations. If there was an excess, the planning committee would decide together what to do with the money. They often agreed to let SCEM apply the funds toward a future event of the same kind.

5. Sponsor 'Perspectives' courses.

The Perspectives course has been used by God in many countries to make a dynamic impact for missions, and specifically for frontier missions. It delivers a strong package of well-planned content that gives a powerful boost to the missions vision, understanding, and action of many sectors of the Christian community: goers and senders, leaders and supporters, givers and intercessors, pastors and laity. Beyond that, it delivers a personal impact to hearts and lives that is often life-changing. The Singapore-modified Perspectives course organized by SCEM was held in conjunction with the very-popular evening school program of the Singapore Bible College, which turned out to be an effective and fruitful partnership.

6. Have membership open to all.

There were many Christians in Singapore excited about what SCEM was doing for missions, once things got rolling. Membership provided a direct way for them to connect and belong. Allow for membership by individuals, churches, schools, denominations, or Christian organizations of various kinds. Have annual dues, but also encourage donations beyond that minimal obligation. Earnestly seek new members from all sectors of the Christian community – Charismatics and traditional Evangelicals, all ethnic groups, all denominations.

Attach some specific benefits to membership. Maybe a stripped-down email version of the newsletter can be available to anyone, with a fuller version (with pictures, on paper) available only to members. Maybe members can always be invited into co-sponsorship of events, and there

can be some special events open only to members. Allow members to buy books and resources at a discount.

An organization like SCEM can play a key role in bringing a spirit of unity to the Christian community in a city or region, but only if it constantly maintains a positive, supportive, affirming attitude toward all churches and all ministries. Be affirming of every good thing people are doing for Christ or in missions. Remember, you don't have to speak against one thing in order to speak for another. One can speak up for and advocate the priority of the frontiers, for example, without insulting all other mission work. One can say good things about the Charismatic churches without criticizing the traditional Evangelical churches, and vice-versa. This is important.

Also, don't fret about the issue of competition. There were times when people would complain about how others were "treading on SCEM's territory". I would point out that there were a lot of Christians in the city, and it would take a lot of events, projects, and activities to get them all informed and mobilized for missions. SCEM sought to maintain a "let 1000 flowers bloom" attitude, and to trust the Lord for his overall supervision of things.

7. Develop an organized corps of volunteers.

There were people in Singapore who were keen on missions, maybe planning to serve overseas, who came to many SCEM events. Others took the Perspectives course and wanted to continue active involvement in missions afterwards. This is an area where we could have done much more. It would have been great to have a better-organized band of volunteers who helped with SCEM events and projects, and who were also involved in an on-going missions discipleship ministry.

8. Have a resource center.

Stock missions books and resources. Take and sell them at missions events from book tables. Develop a library with books, reference books, periodicals, journals, videos, DVDs, posters, children's resources, and files on world mission. This requires some space. SCEM's office moved from my home, to a shared space with another mission organization, to an old school that housed a number of Christian organizations, to its present space in a restored, historic 'shophouse'. At each location, part of the office has included a missions resource center.

9. Support local cross-cultural ministry.

SCEM could have done more on this point. We could have researched and published information on the peoples of Singapore, including smaller groups, and the status of evangelization in each. Some churches were reaching out to foreign students in Singapore, including those visiting from the People's Republic of China, and SCEM could have helped, encouraged, and expanded such ministry. Some Singaporeans were interested in serving God in Thailand, for example; SCEM could have helped them serve God among the many Thai guest workers in Singapore.

10. Put up and maintain a website.

We served in Singapore in the pre-Web era. Today this is basic. The key word here, and the key challenge, is “maintain”.

11. Network with other centers for world mission.

SCEM hosted CentreCon '88, a meeting of representatives from Centers for World Mission from several countries. It was an exciting time as we shared ideas, encouraged each other, and learned from each other. In the same way that churches and missions in one city or region can stimulate and help each other to serve God better, so also centers for world mission in a wider area, or globally, can be a blessing and help to each other. More than that, they could work together in ways that could have a powerful, global impact for the the reaching of the unreached peoples.

12. Hold to the priority of frontier missions.

SCEM served the entire missions movement of Singapore, but always advocated the priority of the frontiers. Most missionaries are most eager, and most able, to recruit new workers to their own fields. Thus new missionaries tend to go where missionaries already are. What about those places where there are no missionaries, no churches, or even no Christians? Regional or city-based centers for world mission should do research, learn about, teach about, and advocate the needs of such frontier fields. In the mid-1990s (and since) SCEM worked diligently to help churches adopt unreached people groups. It became a major focus of the organization, and rightfully so.

13. Respond to opportunity and do strategic planning.

In my time with SCEM, we did better with the first item than the second. Churches and missions would come to us with ideas, especially for events, and we would almost always say, “yes!” That provided for a full schedule of mission activities in the city, which was a good thing, but kept us running hard, and thus distracted us from taking the time to ask some of the bigger, more important questions – like “What would lead this city to have a maximum impact for world missions?”, or “What would need to happen for Singapore to send large numbers of good workers into frontier mission fields?”

Note that such questions can be asked from both the positive and negative directions. Ask, “What are the present strengths of the missions movement here, and how can we maximize them?” Also ask, “What are the sticking points? What things are holding back missions involvement from our churches? How can these issues be dealt with?” In Singapore, for example, a big issue was the education of children. The Singapore education system is distinctive to that country, and operates at a very high level. It is difficult for students to jump in or out of it along the way. Thus, many Singaporean missionaries would return home when their children began school, and then end or delay their terms of overseas service. This was a problem that SCEM might have helped solve, by bringing together interested churches, missions, Christian teachers, and other resources.

Conclusion

The Lord moved my wife and I from Singapore to a new ministry in 1992. SCEM is continuing its good ministry, and others also are helping the missions movement of that city. SCEM has changed, Singapore has changed, the missions movement of Singapore has changed ... not to mention that the world has changed. I am not qualified to speak on SCEM's present ministry. I'm sure they, and other missions leaders in the city, have learned many important lessons since my time there.

In the total missions task, some things are best done by local churches, some things are best done by mission organizations, and some things are best done – in fact, can only be done - by inter-church, inter-mission centers like SCEM. Only where there is an effective center for world mission can any city or region do all it could do, and should do, for the cause of missions. We know that because we have now seen the impact of ministries like SCEM, the USCWM, the Centre for Mission Direction (in New Zealand), and others.

What about your own city, country, or region? Seek the Lord. Pray, and act.

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