

## **Best Practices in Global Church Partnerships**

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### *Case Study in Partnership*

Alan, a young man from a large, evangelical church in the Midwest of North America, after completing his university studies with degrees in history and political science, consulted with his pastor – actually, with two of them – the young college age pastor and the slightly older, graying but still energetic missions pastor – about his next steps in life. From their counsel, after reviewing his gifts and the church’s directions, Alan enrolled in major seminary on the West Coast. There he took two major life decisions: he met and married Annie, a young woman student who had grown up as the daughter of missionary parents working for an NGO in Southeast Asia. Second, after receiving a Master’s Degree in International Studies, and again in consultation now with the missions pastor, he applied for and was accepted by the U.S. Department of State as a Foreign Service Officer.

Thus began a ten year series of postings to embassies around the world, arriving finally in Nairobi, to work in the spacious, gleaming U.S. embassy built after the embassy bombing by terrorists some years earlier in Kenya. Prior to leaving for east Africa, he had been commissioned by his Midwestern church during a morning worship service, to serve in his official State Department capacity as an ambassador of the ministry and message of reconciliation for the Kingdom of God.

The church had an active missional outreach both in its local community and globally, regularly identifying and sending around the world both bright and enthusiastic young graduates, as well as second career professionals, and also seasoned, experienced seniors, retired from long, successful occupations. Working together in strategic teams in key arenas of the church’s interest, they helped men and women in the under-resourced and sometimes underground church in Africa and Latin America, central and south Asia and other places that cannot be openly talked about, establish bona-fide businesses to compete in the global marketplace.

Other teams were sent out from this Midwestern church on shorter assignments, but returning year after year to the same locations to work alongside national church and indigenous, developing mission leaders to train the growing cadre of church leaders desperately needed by the burgeoning churches planted in villages and communities in Brazil and Bolivia, Sudan and Sierra Leone, evangelized by untrained, local, itinerant gospel preachers. The Spirit of God was moving in ways that were powerful and dynamic and impossible to manage.

As soon as they arrived in Kenya, Alan and Annie researched the church scene in Nairobi, discovering a thriving church near the university filled with students, young professionals, business and government workers, and a smattering of ex-pats, these last refugees from the International Church in the gated, western suburb of the city. The church was led by a brilliant young Kenyan preacher; he himself had studied business in India and theology in Australia. He was surrounded by a growing team of church leaders, some with theological studies in Singapore, others had received training in the U.S., still others were studying at Nairobi’s theological school in the heart of the city.

This thriving church was committed to developing leaders for Africa’s churches; it’s mission vision included planting churches and staffing health clinics and schools in the vast slums of Nairobi, reaching out to neighboring African countries beginning to emerge from the morass of decades of violence and war, and poverty and AIDS, colonialism and

corrupt post-colonial leadership. They also had a heart to re-evangelize Europe, with its many African migrants, and to plant a church in the gateway city of Sidney. This last grew out of the presence on their staff of a transplanted physician-turned-theologian, an immigrant from Indonesia of Chinese heritage who had been raised in Australia and studied theology in Africa. While in Nairobi his presence had attracted to the church scores of Chinese workers, coming to Africa in waves as China invested in the continent, building roads and supermarkets and high-rise office complexes. Upwards of a hundred Chinese would gather on benches in the courtyard of the church each Sunday to join the worship, singing in English and Swahili, with the sermon translated for them into Mandarin.

While working in Nairobi, Alan and Annie invested themselves and their growing family in the life of this exciting church. When individuals or teams from their church in the U.S. came through Nairobi en route to their various assignments, they would visit and luxuriate in the vibrant, healing worship of Africa. Friendships were built, and teams of post-modern young adults from Alan's church in the U.S. would occasionally join university mission teams from the Nairobi church to do a youth outreach, sometimes in Nairobi's slum, other times in a neighboring country using soccer and music as an attraction for the 70% of central Africa's population under that age of 15.

The pastor in Nairobi had been asked to join the Board of Directors of Rejoice Africa International, a mission agency with a one-hundred year history on the continent albeit under very different name, which had only recently thoroughly re-imagined and re-tooled as an organization to address the opportunities afforded to the message of the gospel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the culture-scape of Africa. The mission had moved its international offices from Wheaton, to Kampala in Uganda, and was seeking ways to address the critical needs of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, beset by years of rapacious colonial greed, subsequent dictatorial leadership, violent tribal conflict, extreme poverty and neglect by all other than the multi-nationals exploiting the gold, diamonds, hardwoods and other minerals like coltan, used in the cell-phones of the great societies of the west. The leaders of three denominations – one started by American Baptists, another by Anglicans from the UK, and a third by an independent, fundamentalist, faith mission out of the U.S. in the early years of the last century – had come and asked Rejoice Africa to join with them in reshaping their established mission churches to draw in the dispossessed of Congo.

Alan and Annie's Kenya pastor now came to them with a question: Would they be willing to ask their church back in the Midwest if there was a possibility that all three ministries could work together to address these overwhelming opportunities? An African church, an American church, and an established mission with years of history and experience, invited by a disheartened and despairing church, joining hands for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

They commit themselves to pray, to study the Scriptures together, and to discover what resources each of the potential participants have to contribute to the work that looms on the horizon. *Suddenly I wake up, startled!* Who are these people? What was I thinking? Was it all just a dream?

### ***Partnership Best Practices***

Can dreams become realities? If we are students of Scripture we must believe that it is possible. The story above is fictional, though rooted in facts. It is what the best of our thinking at Elmbrook Church about church and mission and partnership aspires to become.

There is such a church in Kenya; and there is a church in the Midwest, where I pastor, that aspires to inculcate some of the practices described. We have been walking together for more than a decade, listening to each other, learning from each other. We have done some things together, in some of the places and for some of the reasons mentioned. But much of it is a dream. Alan and Annie are not real, although there are those like them in many gateway cities of the world. The question is, I suppose, are they present in those cities for Kingdom reasons, or simply to advance the interests of the American empire? Still, dreams are what often drive most of us, I imagine, who think about churches and missions and partnerships.

What I want to think about in this paper are some principles, or “practices,” if you will, that we have been learning together about partnership: what it is, how to do it, what happens when it goes wrong. What are those best practices, or, if not best, at least good practices? I manifestly *do not* want to mislead you into thinking that we have mastered any of them.

### *Reading the Bible again*

The first practice is biblical: we need to go back to our Bible and re-read it. We need to read again about mission in the ministry of Jesus, the one who was sent by the Father. God is the missionary God, who has sent his Son, Jesus, into the world – by the way: the first and most successful short term mission – in God’s scale of eternity and the fullness of time – with the gospel. Jesus in turn sent his disciples, and sends us still. Mission is about sending.

We need to go back and read that great missionary manual, the Acts of the Apostles, to be reminded of the sovereignty of God in the unfolding of mission: Antioch was a surprising and unexpected work of the Spirit. We should not engage in global partnerships for the reason that it will be more effective in reaching the lost, although it may well be. We need to study again the partnership between, on the one hand, God through his Spirit, and on the other, the church through its leaders at worship, and finally, on the third hand, an apostolic team comprised of the best and the brightest Antioch could send out into the world. We need to read again the list of names of Paul’s missionary band, recorded in Acts 20, representing the churches of Paul’s new world, on their way to Jerusalem carrying relief for the impoverished saints suffering in Judea. “All they asked,” Paul wrote early in his ministry speaking of the Jerusalem apostles, “was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do” (Galatians 2:10).

We need to read Romans. What does Paul mean when he writes: “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be *mutually encouraged* by each other’s faith” (Romans 1:11)? It surely sounds like partnership, and the values of mutual and reciprocal ministry. We need to review the names of Romans 16, Paul’s co-laborers in the cause of Christ, men and women working and leading together, those he hoped would partner with him in his further efforts to extend the reach of the Kingdom to the west.

We need to dig in to Philippians. The church at Philippi was the apostle Paul’s key partnership church. Preaching to the Philippians began for Paul out of personal, spiritual struggle. He was on the border of the province of Asia, desperately trying to go to metropolitan centers like Ephesus. But twice we read (Acts 16:6, 7), that the Spirit of God would not allow them to go. Then Paul had his Macedonian vision and sailed for that province and it’s leading city of Philippi. There a church began, comprised of an

international businesswoman, a jailer's family, and quite possibly a slave girl delivered from demonic and economic oppression.

This young church immediately joined Paul as a partner in the gospel, sending him continuing financial and personal assistance from the earliest days of their collaborative efforts (Philippians 4:15, 16; 2 Corinthians 11:8, 9). When he was in prison – the locations of the epistle's writing – Philippi sent a personal representative in the person of Epaphroditus to take care of his needs (Philippians 2:25). Paul can rightly speak of them as his partners from the first day until the present (Philippians 1:5).

The ministry of partnership appears in every chapter in Philippians. In chapter one: *partnership in the gospel* (1:4-5). The Greek word group Paul uses some six times in four contexts throughout this short epistle to describe their partnership, is or derives from *koinonia*, meaning 'fellowship' or 'participation' or sometimes 'communion'. It has to do with *being* together. Some think Paul is speaking primarily of the material aspects of their concern for the apostle; the Philippian church sent financial assistance to help him in his missionary outreaches. But it must include much more, both because of his frequent use of this and related words in his letter to them, and because of the full-orbed picture Paul paints of 'gospel' in this chapter.

He speaks of: (1) "defending and confirming the gospel" (v. 7): Paul was imprisoned — probably in Rome — when he wrote (vv.13-14); (2) the "advance of [the] gospel" (v. 12): what Jesus described to his disciples as the preaching of the gospel in the whole world before the coming of the end (Matthew 24:14), or as Paul wrote to believers in Colossae: "All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing (Colossians 1:6b); (3) again "the defense of the gospel" (Philippians 1:16): as in his fearless *apologia* — meaning 'legal defense' — before the crowd in Jerusalem (Acts 22:1), governors Felix (Acts 24:10) and Festus (Acts 25:8), and King Agrippa (Acts 26:2); (4) "the gospel of Christ" that motivates good conduct (Philippians 1:27); and (5) "the faith of the gospel", for which Christians should fight fearlessly "as one man", literally, as if "one soul" (v. 28).

Partnership in the gospel, Paul writes to the Philippians, is all about prayer (Philippians 1:3,4), about joy (v. 4), about love and deep care (vv. 7,8), about sharing together in grace (v. 7), about confident endurance (vv. 5,6). These are the kinds of beliefs and behaviors and belongings that sustain relationships over the long haul. Partnership is rooted in relationship.

Paul pleads then, at the close of the first and opening of the second chapter, for a demonstration of the reality of "partnership in the Spirit" (1:27; 2:2). "Whatever happens" (1:27), – the NIV translation for the more literal, "now one thing," or "here is *the most important* thing," – Paul writes to these faithful believers who have stood with him contending for the truth of the gospel. Unity must characterize the people of God, not only is it a demonstration of the truth of the missionary God sending his Son (John 17:20, 21), but it is the only way to keep from breaking apart under pressure. Buildings in earthquake zones are designed by engineers to withstand the pressures created when tectonic plates under the crust of the earth are forced together or tear apart. The designers understand the geologic forces that cause buildings to collapse, and design accordingly. If the materials used in the buildings do not have the integrity of the architect's specifications, the construction will not stand. So it is with the church. The integrity of God's design of the church, righteousness in our relationships, must be diligently guarded to preserve unity under both external and internal pressures.

Paul pleads for unity through the Holy Spirit<sup>1</sup> to stand, first, against external opposition and guard, second, against internal dissension. He encourages them to “stand in one Spirit” and to “contend as one soul” – quite literally as if they are one individual –into whom the Spirit of God has breathed life. They are standing and fighting for the gospel, no one and nothing coming between them.

But it is not only opposition from outside that weakens the church, dissension from within is even more pernicious. And so we must look carefully and work diligently for the interests of others, giving them priority of place, serving and advancing their causes rather than our own.

Paul provides concrete illustrations of partnership: First the incomparable example of Christ Jesus incarnate, sent by the Father to the world; then of Timothy, sent by Paul to the Philippians; finally Epaphroditus, sent by the Philippian church to minister to Paul’s needs (vv. 19ff.). Following the genocide of Rwanda in 1994, and during the long civil war in neighboring Burundi, Elmbrook teams went to minister to the church: poor, weak, broken, exiled, dying. We protested that we had not much to offer them, our troubles were comparatively light and momentary. “What is important,” we were told again and again, “is not what you say to us, and not what you do for us. What is important is that you come to us.” Paul honors Epaphroditus for “risking his life to make up for the help” the Philippian church could not otherwise bring personally (v. 30). Jesus left his home of glory, humbled himself, entered our world, lived among us, served us, died for us (vv. 7-8).

In chapter three the apostle reveals, personally and intimately, his desire to know — again using the same root thought as in *koinonia*, only now doubled up for emphasis — “the fellowship of sharing in [Christ’s] sufferings” (v. 10). Our human tendency is to take the easy path, exercising strength without experiencing weakness, salvation without suffering, glory without the cross, finding resurrection without facing crucifixion. But Paul is our guide on the less-traveled path that Jesus walked. He calls us to and models for us a “fellowship of sharing in suffering”. This is an important word for the church in North America, too often self-indulgent and suffering-avoidant. When trouble comes in heretofore unimaginable waves, as it did in New York City on September 11, 2001, or last year with the terrible damage in Mississippi and Louisiana from Hurricane Katrina, the church at ease in the West can learn from the suffering church in other, seemingly remote but not-so-far-in-Spirit places; learn about grace, about joy in sorrow and strength in weakness. But it will only happen if we are living in true, biblical partnership.

Recently a young Hungarian pastor and church leader visited Elmbrook. He spent time visiting ministry activities, talking to staff and participants, listening to biblical exposition and application. At the end when he de-briefed with us, he remarked that while “highly educated people teach on an academic level or from best-selling books,” there are things that can be “understood only through a personal relationship with Jesus and suffering.” It is in serving the poor, the sick, the sinner that we begin to learn our own hearts and speak with honesty. “Every person goes through suffering,” he reminded us. “The difference is how we pass through it. Western culture teaches us we can and should avoid suffering. But God shapes our hearts for eternity through suffering; this is the legacy

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<sup>1</sup> There is no good reason not to identify “one spirit” in 1:27 with the Holy Spirit in 2:1. It makes good sense, and it would be unusual in this close context for Paul to mean otherwise.

we can leave to others.” It is, among other things, to know such people so shaped by Christ’s cross, to listen to their stories, to learn the lessons of their lives, that we engage in partnership.

The apostle comes, in the end, to where most of us often start; he talks about partnership in "the matter of giving and receiving" (v. 15). Partnership is also about money, who needs it and who has it and what to do with it. It is vital to lay the groundwork in the gospel, in Spirit-unity and in cruciform suffering before we can freely and fearlessly, openly and even-handedly, work through matters of money. For Paul, money is not about power and control, but about ministry and opportunity. He talks about money easily, without embarrassment. We should remember here that the Philippian church was one of those Macedonian churches that gave generously out of conditions of extreme poverty (v. 15; see 2 Corinthians 8:1-4).

Paul uses the language of accounting to describe their partnership in monetary support of his mission: what Paul wants for them is what may be credited to their account (Philippians 4:17). He is not talking about an earthly deposit in the First Bank of Macedonia, but an eternal investment in a kingdom trust (vv. 18b-19). Elsewhere, *viz.*, to the Roman church, Paul describes financial stewardship as a ministry *quid pro quo* (Romans 15:25-28a, 31). It would be an interesting, but probably not very profitable, exercise to compare the dollar amounts in U.S. Christian savings and retirement accounts with the dollars spent in missions. One organization in the UK reports that in the West, more money is spent auditing the accounts of Christian churches and ministries each year than in sustaining Western missionaries cross-culturally around the world. On an international level, it has been reported that more dollars flow in interest payments *from* non-Western, developing nations to Western financial institutions, than are sent *to* the developing world in the form of economic assistance. I suspect it is here that we have the most to learn, but as in any educational program there are prerequisite classes for disciples: partnership in the gospel, the Spirit, and in suffering.

### ***Re-thinking our theology***

A second fundamental practice for us in our churches is to revisit our theology. We are routinely familiar with purposive partnerships; perhaps we could write about *purpose-driven mission*, and finance all the work we would like to in the world. We understand that where there is a task to be accomplished, and we alone do not have the necessary skills, experience or resources to start or to finish, we find someone who can supply what we lack so that the job can be undertaken and completed. It is the language of business and contract: each party in the partnership brings their unique abilities to the task; we work together and are compensated according to what we have contributed. At the finish, we are free to go our separate ways.

We are less familiar with partnership based simply but essentially on relationships. But relationships lie at the core of *global church partnerships*. They are meant to reflect theological realities, not least the trinitarian nature of the very Being of God himself. Theologians talk about the Trinity in two ways: the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. This does not imply two trinities, nor really different ways that God is triune in His Being. It is merely a formal, language-limited way of talking about the Trinity: God as He-Is-in-and-of-Himself (immanent), and God as He-shows-Himself-to-Be-to-us (economic). God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son and Spirit. He is also in Himself eternally and essentially Father, Son and Spirit, while remaining One God, undivided.

God is not just Being, the Uncreated Creator of all that exists – Aristotle knew that! – rather God is Being-in-Relationship. The reality of relationship is grounded in the very nature of God the Creator; it stands to reason that those who are His also live in the context of relationships, first to God through Christ in the Spirit, then to one another through the same Spirit. This is precisely what Jesus prayed in his high priestly prayer for his disciples (John 17:21). He asked his Father that those who would come to believe in Him through their witness would be one, just as Jesus was in the Father and the Father in Jesus. Do we really think that the deep experiences of relationships will not build the kingdom? Especially experiencing true unity in our fractured world? I'm not sure we have really tried to live Jesus' words in John 17.

Our oneness in Jesus is what theologians, following the Bible, call the Church, described variously as the body-of-Christ or the people-of-God. It is what Paul addresses in his letter to the Corinthians about the need the various parts of the body have for each other, when he asserts that "we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). We have, rightfully, understood Paul in this passage to be speaking to the individual members of the church at Corinth, some of whom thought they were more important members of that local church than others. But as has been pointed out,<sup>2</sup> an application is easily and legitimately made to churches around the globe, gathered for worship and working in mission. Although there are many local churches, there is only one Church, that of the Firstborn (Hebrews 12:23), purchased by the blood of God himself through the death of his Son (Acts 20:28). Christians are not just individuals living isolated lives before God, but persons-in-community, and those communities comprise local churches. But these local churches are themselves part of a larger community. Thus it is theologically appropriate and accurate to affirm that local churches partner together in vital relationships to demonstrate the re-creative work of God in Christ on the cross.

As churches on different continents and cultures, we need each other. God has created diversity in culture in order to bring glory to himself. I think this is the meaning of the picture of the kings of the earth bringing their splendor into the city of God (Revelation 21:24). God has gifted churches with a variety of gifts, he has entrusted different resources to different churches that we might learn in turn to gift them to each other, to be the Church. If the church in the West has the majority of the world's financial and theological and pastoral resources and does not gift them to the non-Western church, it is a scandal. If the church in the South knows how to flourish in the face of adversity, and is not allowed to bring this gift to the affluent church, it is a scandal. If the church in North America, because it enjoys economic power, will not listen and submit to the economically impoverished church in Africa, it is a scandal.

There is another dimension of best theological practice that we must learn as evangelical churches and agencies and missionaries. Evangelicals have rightly insisted on the proclamation of justification. At times, however, we have left the impression by our gospel preaching that salvation is *only* justification by faith, rather than the Reformers' doctrine of justification by faith alone. We forget what John Stott has taken pains to remind us, that justification is simply one image of salvation. A full-orbed picture includes images of propitiation, drawn from religious shrines; redemption, taken from the marketplace; and reconciliation, from the personal relationships of family life; as well as

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Van Engen, "Toward a Theology of Mission Partnerships," p. 24.

justification, with its imagery of laws and courts, trial judges and advocates. We have too-often ignored the rich, personal and cosmic New Testament themes of reconciliation.

At Antioch (in Acts 11), as in Jerusalem (in Acts 6), reconciliation could only be achieved through “a miracle of God’s grace and power,” due to “the mutual bitterness and contempt which Jews and Gentiles felt for each other...”<sup>3</sup> In societies oriented to family, clan and community, salvation understood as reconciliation through Christ, vertically to God and horizontally to one another, might have helped prevent one of the most violent genocides of the twentieth century in the most Christianized country in the world, the tiny African nation of Rwanda. The terrors of darkness are still unleashed in the heart of Africa, as in Congo, the country of my birth, where nearly four million have died in a decade of continental plunder, civil war and tribal conflict. Paul tells us that God reconciled “us to himself through Christ,” and so has given to us the message and the ministry of reconciliation.<sup>4</sup> He taught that the barriers that divide humanity have been broken in Christ, through whom we are all reconciled to God.<sup>5</sup> We have seldom learned this lesson well.

### *Some practical best practices*

Several years ago I came across some statistical information that I have not been able to ignore. It changed my view of the world. I am unsure of the source of the data, perhaps it is from David Barrett’s statistical information on world Christianity. It illustrates vividly the global shifts in the church:

Percentage of Christians Living in Europe & North America		
1900	2000	2025
550 m	2.0 b	2.6 b
85%	39%	>30%

One hundred years ago, some 85% of 550 million Christians — counting by whatever theological stripe — lived in the West. At the turn of the millennium, the percentage of the now two billion Christians living in the Western world had dramatically shrunk, to less than forty percent. In the next quarter century, this number will further decline to less than thirty percent, and continue decreasing. The large majority of the world’s Christians today belong to the non-Western church.

This is a sea shift, and needs to be radically considered when thinking through missionary strategies. Philip Jenkins writes that “The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes, and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning.”<sup>6</sup> The majority of the church’s theological resources — Christian universities and seminaries, trained pastors, Christian publishing houses and theological libraries — are to be found in Europe and North America. We need not only to think ‘partnership’, but act as true partners.

<sup>3</sup> John R.W. Stott. *The Cross of Christ*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 194.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:18, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 2:14-18.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 3.

Some time ago a book written by two missions thinkers, James Engel and William Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions*, argued passionately that the world has changed, that the mission field is no longer *over there*, but *everywhere*.<sup>7</sup> They were right. The Western church, worshiping in a declining Christian cultural ethos, needs to learn from the evangelistic fervor, dependent prayer and enthusiastic worship of our brothers and sisters from 'overseas', even as we encourage them to send mission teams to our increasingly post-Christian world.

As Americans, we are nothing if not pragmatic, problem-solvers. We take pride in our ability to assess a problem, research solutions and apply a fix. There are at least three practical reasons to partner with non-Western churches: the first eschatological, the second missiological, the third economic.

In the first instance, there is the matter of worship. We say we believe our Bibles. The Bible, giving us a glimpse into the throne room of heaven, shows a Lamb standing in the center of the throne, while gathered before the Lamb who is the Lord stands "a great multitude...from every nation, tribe, people and language" worshiping (Revelation 7:9). How will we worship with those with whom we have not yet learned to live in self-surrendered love? Mission is *not* the most important thing the church does. The first work of the church is worship; worship is submission to the glory of God, it is celebration of His victory over sin and death and evil. As one writer notes: "Worship is the supreme and only indispensable activity of the Christian Church. It alone will endure, like the love for God which it expresses, into heaven, when all other activities of the Church will have passed away."<sup>8</sup> Mission is an invitation for those who do not know the true end and purpose of their humanity to find their joy and satisfaction in God alone. (Discipleship, by the way, the third activity of the church, is not for our sake and our good; it exists to equip people for mission. Disciples come out of the worshipping community.) Worship requires a repentant relinquishing of our cultural pride accompanied by a joyous presenting of our cultural splendors before the presence of the Living Lord. Too often we hold too firmly to the former while dismissing too casually the latter. This too is scandalous.

Partnering with other churches across cultures teaches us to appreciate the profligate creativity of our Creator. He did not make us all alike. In our different cultures we experience different aspects of God's love and grace. We see the world in different ways, and express our joy differently. Another church's culture may be difficult to understand, but it is not hard to appreciate when we witness others exuberantly praising the same Lord, albeit in a different way. Cross-cultural partnership also allows us to see ourselves as other see us, thereby perhaps deflating our pride somewhat, teaching us humility somehow, bringing us to a more human place. It requires attentive listening to and active learning from each other.

There is a second practical reason that has to do with the cross-cultural mission of the church. Where there is an active, growing church, it is much better placed to reach its surrounding community and culture than are missionaries from a far-different culture. This does not mean that the latter are not needed, that there is no continuing role for Western missionaries. Paul spoke of becoming all things to all in order to reach some (1

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<sup>7</sup> James F. Engel & William A. Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 47ff.

<sup>8</sup> W. Nichols, quoted in David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 15.

Corinthians 9:22). Yet he was both multi-cultural by birth, and lived in a world with much greater commonality than is the case in much of our world today, despite all our rhetoric about the global village. Greek culture and Roman empire, while not ubiquitous, made the Apostle's world a more familiar place.

In our modern world, with the marketed appeal of Western popular culture – it is often much easier for someone from a non-Western culture, who has some degree of education and exposure to the wider world, to understand the West, linguistically and otherwise, than for us as Westerners to move out of our privileged places to other cultures. Americans are more mono-cultural than most in our world. Nairobi Chapel is far better placed to reach Kenyans for Christ than is Elmbrook, crossing barriers of continent and culture, tribe and tongue.

Partnership is good for missions because of culture. But, in the third instance, it is also good for economic reasons. Where the Western church has resources of material prosperity, non-Western churches often have human resources, combined with time, energy and faith. Sometimes it is asserted that it causes dependency for wealthy churches to subsidize impoverished churches. And this may be true in some or even many cases. Financial subsidies can cause corruption and neglect for stewardship. But the answer to abuse and misuse is not disuse, rather it is thoughtful application of biblical principles, spiritual truth and careful faith.

Missions theorists, following the nineteenth century missionary Henry Venn, have championed the adage that the goal of missions is to plant churches that are self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. These principles sound noble, but are they truly biblical? Self-sufficiency is the ancient temptation of the garden, no less a danger for the community than for the individual. This may be especially true as regards financial assistance to economically struggling churches. The first great missions-minded church was found at Antioch. When the church there learned of the impending humanitarian disaster facing the church in Judea, they immediately engaged in relief efforts (Acts 11:27-30). The ongoing need in the Jerusalem church became a major dynamic in Paul's Gentile mission (Romans 15:25ff.; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8, 9).

It may be that we fall into difficulty in the economic arena simply because we place an economic value on monetary resources, while spiritualizing, and so in a paradoxical sense undervaluing, other gifts brought to the table. Paul wrestles with the equivalency of spiritual and material gifts distributed to the churches. He ends by concluding that both are *ministry*. Nowhere is his thinking more clearly argued than in Romans 15, where he talks about his calling to the Gentiles, and his plans to visit Rome. He begins by describing what we today would perhaps call primary evangelism: his vocation (v. 16) is proclaiming the “gospel of God,” to the Gentiles, describing this in terms of priestly ministry and offerings acceptable to God. A few verses later he compares the material blessings given by the Gentiles to the Jews — namely, the relief monies he has been collecting — with the spiritual blessings that have come through the Jews, namely the good news of Jesus (v. 27b). The material gift is, in effect, repayment of a spiritual blessing; Paul bookends his self-description managing and conferring their gift as “service” (vv. 25 and 31).

Too often we emphasize the ‘spiritual’ side of ministry while we minimize the undergirding material dynamics. This is an unbiblical dichotomy; God has created human persons as the kind of beings who require the physical part of their lives to exercise the spiritual. It is this unfortunate dualism that has left us with the dilemmas of dependency. The answer to dependency is not independence but inter-dependence, which is the way of

the body (1 Corinthians 12). It has been rightly said that the Bible knows nothing of “bodies of Christ,” but only “the body of Christ.”

We often hear that the transference of wealth from rich to poor churches has a corrupting influence. We believe either that the individual receiving such largesse will be corrupted by gain and greed, or that the recipient church will not learn the disciplines of giving, or that Western-supported projects will not be sustainable when the donors or sponsoring organizations lose interest or return home. Surely there are enough examples of all the above to support such conclusions. But is the answer, to use an American adage, throwing the baby out with the bathwater? Would it not be better to develop a working theology of money in mission partnerships, to put into place firm and agreed-upon principles of accountability?

Abuse of financial resources is not an issue for needy Christians alone.<sup>9</sup> Those who are financially prosperous may well have even greater difficulties with their stewardship. Was it not Jesus who— loving the rich, young man unable to part with his wealth — warned that it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom (Mark 10:17-25). Those with wealth at their disposal are no less susceptible to the corrosive effects of capital. We only need to open our Bibles, if not our checkbooks, to know the truth of this. The corrective to the abuse of financial subsidies is, at least in part, a firm resolve by both givers and receivers to place equivalent kingdom value on all other capacities of the person and spirit as we do on money.

### **Conclusion**

Our goal as a church is to build a global network of like-minded churches utilizing Kingdom-relationships to engage mutually and reciprocally in ministry and mission. It is our continuing desire to announce to the world the reign of God in Christ through the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit. This is gospel work; it is the mission of the church. I have made two assumptions: First, that God’s desire is to work in the world through the church; second, that his design is that the local congregation be the locus of God’s work in the community.

Churches are intended to be communities of celebration, through vibrant worship bringing the beauty, joy and splendor of our cultures into the presence of God who dwells in our midst (Revelation 21:22-26). Churches are designed to be places of transformation, redeeming and reconciling individuals and communities to God, each other, and indeed, all of creation (Colossians 1:13, 18-20; Romans 8:19-21). Moreover, churches are supposed to be centers of proclamation, witnessing by life, word and deed the Lordship of Jesus Christ over personal circumstances and social structures (Ephesians 1:19b, 22-23; Colossians 1:15-17; Philippians 2:9-11).

Andrew Walls suggests that the great and fruitful missionary movement of the modern era, that of one-way sending-and-giving missions from center to periphery, is now in its old age: still alive, still with vital gifts and some important tasks to accomplish, but needing now to encourage “two-way traffic, fellowship, for sharing, for receiving...”<sup>10</sup> Agencies can encourage and facilitate this traffic, in both directions. They are perhaps

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<sup>9</sup> See Jonathan Bonk, *Missions and Money* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), for a thorough discussion of the influences of money on missions and missionaries.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 260.

uniquely placed and equipped to do so. Partnerships are grounded on relationships. *Koinonia*, as used by Paul in the New Testament, is first of all partnership *in* something before it is partnership *for* something. As we saw above, we have fellowship in the gospel, in the Spirit, in suffering. We are brought into a new relationship with Christ Jesus, which makes us a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17), we are baptized through the Spirit into one body (1 Corinthians 12:13). Paul argues passionately for the practical implications of this new relationship in Christ, in the church: there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female (Galatians 3:26-29); the old barriers have been abolished (Ephesians 2:11ff.).

Relationships between churches worshiping and working as partners require authenticity; authenticity means being honest, trusting and trustworthy, vulnerable, mutually submissive and encouraging, standing together and witnessing together to the new community that is brought into being through Christ’s death and resurrection.

Partnership in the gospel demands mutuality. By intention and design we make room at the table for churches from different communities and cultures, with different callings and gifts and experiences. Tasks to be accomplished, strategies to be determined, must be conceived, planned, designed, implemented and evaluated consensually. This is why it is first of all necessary to know and trust each other. Objectives and outcomes must be determined by the interests, needs and abilities of each partner church. The North American church cannot say to the African church: “We do not need you.”

Finally, partnership requires reciprocity, ministry by each church to each church. Benefits and blessings are bestowed by each partner to each partner, coming to all and flowing in all directions. Partnership is more like the swirling currents of an atmospheric system than it is a river with water all flowing downstream. Tasks undertaken by a partnership should be designed to ensure that the recipients of the ministry are able to return blessings out of their capacities (see again Romans 15:27b). True and meaningful reciprocity not only blesses each partner church engaged in the relationship by receiving unexpected gifts, as we saw above, it guards against imposed or acquired dependencies.

These are best practices then. Well-versed in Scripture, thoughtful in theology; living through sacrificial service the authenticity of the Kingdom, actions that demonstrate mutuality and reciprocity, and attitudes of veracity and humility. May God grant us the wisdom to listen to, learn from, and serve with each other to extend his Kingdom.