

From Missions TO . . . to Missions WITH, #1

By Gary Edmonds

From the COSIM Conference, June 13, 2006

I believe that these are truly, truly revolutionary times. I believe that God is seeking to fulfill his promise in Habakkuk 2:14: "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." I am convinced that God is up to something in an unprecedented way in this time in history. Partly this is from what I have seen from my 30 plus years of my own travels and involvement watching the church grow and develop, but at the same time as I read both biblical and modern history. Many of you are already catching up with what God is doing around the globe. I think that the dynamic of mission in itself has changed. Yesterday, I received a phone call. There is a new paper that Ralph Winter, a professor at Fuller Seminary that I had in a Church Growth class in the 70's, has written where he states that we have missed the mark; we got mission all wrong. Now, that is pretty radical when you think about it. He says that we have missed what our mission is. And he has rooted it in the book of Genesis.

I think there is a dynamic that has changed. I think as well, then, it requires the practice of mission to change. I believe that we in the west can no longer "go to" to "do for" others. Many times that has been the perception of the way that we go. We must learn how to do mission "with."

We are living in revolutionary times. Philip Jenkins in his book The Next Christendom brings that out again and again. He makes the statement that the changes are so radical that they are comparable to the Reformation of the 16th century, where nothing is going to be left untouched. In Thomas Friedman's book, The Earth is Flat, you see again the leveling, the outsourcing, and the collaboration that is taking place. He talks about the equalizers that are necessary for us to operate. In other words, the world today is different. It is very different in the last few years.

Christianity as a whole is both growing and changing in ways that observers in the West tend not to see. Many sitting in the pews in North American churches are not aware, and the pastors in front of them every single week, those who have an opportunity to cast vision, to declare reality, to influence the minds, the hearts, the pocket books of the faithful who have been given so much, most of these people do not understand what God is doing at this time in history. In fact, I am convinced that many of them operate with a paradigm for mission that has come out of the 1950's, in other words that came out of the Second World War. But Christendom is changing.

1900 – 95% of evangelicals lived in the Western/Northern nations. Those who had an evangelical belief, those who believed in a Trinitarian God, those who believed in the inspired authoritarian Word of God as the Bible, in conversion to Jesus Christ through faith alone. In mission gatherings, they constantly talked about how many they could send to the mission field, to send more this year than last year. If your success is based upon the number of people that you can send, you have a very limited strategy. I am not convinced that sending is the ultimate success factor for mission. Our churches need to

understand this. We talked about taking the Gospel to the heathens. There was a sense that God was not present there. There were not followers of Jesus in those contexts. It was an “us to them,” “go to to do for” things that they could not do.

One hundred years later, 80% of evangelicals live in the non-Western global south. Radical change in a one-hundred year time frame has occurred. A dramatic example is Africa. In 1900, Africa had about 10 million Christians out of a total population of about 107 million. In the year 2000, in sub-Saharan Africa, 50% would declare themselves Christian with an evangelical orientation to their theology and practice. Some would debate what this means, but nonetheless, you still have some countries like Swaziland where they would say that 84% would claim to be evangelical followers of Christ. Jenkins estimates that by the year 2025, 70% of the Christian population will live in Africa, Asia and Latin America. And the places where the church is growing are the places where you have extreme poverty, rampant disease, ideological conflict of one sort or another. This is where God is raising his church right now and beginning to expand it at explosive rates.

When I look at mission trends, we are sending missionaries from everywhere to anywhere. In 1993, Christianity Today reported that there were 3411 non-western cross-cultural missionaries in the world. Today, 12 years later, reliable estimates would say that in the year 2005, there are 103,000 non-western missionaries who are operating cross-culturally. The US ranked 19th in the world in the number of missionaries sent to unreached peoples to the ratio of churches in their land. Number one in the world was Singapore. Many in the US still see the world in the old paradigm that came out of the Second World War, thinking not a lot has changed in the distribution of Christians around the globe. A startling illustration of reality comes from Korea. In 2005, Korea ranked second behind the US in the number of cross-cultural missionaries operating around the world. However, by 2010, based upon current trends, there will be more missionaries sent out by Korea than by any other country in the world.

Let me offer some other examples of the radical change taking place in the international make-up of the Body of Christ. I have worked with partnerships in the “stan” countries of Central Asia. In these partnerships, there were representatives from 55 different nationalities. CRAF, in West Africa, is a gathering that started in 1998, bringing together indigenous missionaries with expats, coming together to plan and strategize how to work together to take the Gospel to the unreached peoples. There are now more than 400 Nigerians who are missionaries into that predominately French-speaking region. The great challenge is how do they integrate them with the French-speaking and expats who have little experience ministering alongside of Nigerians? In the Middle East and North Africa, there are 384 Egyptian missionaries working among the Kurds and in Turkey, Algeria, and Yemen – all of these from one local church. There is a training program in Malaga, Spain, set up by COMIBAM in partnership with 40 different agency partners, to look at how the Gospel will move into North Africa. In Albania in 1991, there were three known followers of Jesus when communism fell. It was closed, restricted, hard-core communist, impoverished, rated by the UN in 1992 as one of the 10 worst countries in the world for poverty and corruption. People thought that it would never change.

However, the UN said in 2003 that a miracle was occurring in Albania, 168 churches representing 22,000 baptized believers, the poverty and corruption rate declining. Now this last year, Albania started a coalition of churches called the Albanian Church Planting Coalition and claim they are probably the best suited in the world to work in the kind of context that Cambodia presents. They also have workers in Kosovo, Bosnia, Macedonia, and Turkey. Most people are not aware of this. Rwanda last summer held a very large church conference called Church Arise. Seventeen thousand people from Rwandan churches and from 19 other nations gathered for eight days. They have heard God's call to bring the Gospel to Europe and the US. They have now planted two churches in the US, the newest one in Atlanta last November.

I look at this and say that God is up to something here. There is no one individual giving orders but the Spirit of God is stirring and moving Christ's people in unprecedented ways. When Jesus is Lord, the people of God begin to act and move in ways that are beyond the control and understanding of any one personality, organization or nation.

Aware of these new realities, my claim is that we need to shift our "Mission to" to "Mission with." Primarily I am speaking to North Americans, but not exclusively. Many times, we have taken a very patriarchal approach that God has come to us, blessed us with wealth, knowledge, freedom, and know how, and now we must take this message of the Gospel to the needy and the poor in other parts of the world. It is our responsibility to go and fix the world in the name of Christ. An African recently pleaded with me, "To you Americans, please do not send any more church planting teams to Africa. It feels like neo-colonialism. That does not mean that we don't need your people, but we want to work with you, not have you come to us to do things that we are capable of doing."

Theological reasons why I advocate for "Mission With"

As we align with these new Christian realities, the guiding theology and practice of the non-western church will force the Western church to actually get better and become more mature. Relationships with others will give us a richer and deeper understanding of God and His Kingdom. When I look at the theology that is coming out of many of these other contexts, there is a theology of supernaturalism, a supernaturalism in the sense that they believe that God is the source and redeemer of all of life. Therefore, when I ask the question, "Why did Jesus shed his blood on the cross?" the inevitable answer from Westerners is, "To save souls and prepare them for heaven." But that's not what Paul says there in Colossians 1:15-20. He says Jesus shed his blood on the cross in order to reconcile everything or all things in heaven and earth, the whole of life. He roots that in God's creative and sustaining work. What has God created? Paul goes through a litany of everything in the entire world that God created. Therefore, Jesus came to reconcile everything.

I am finding that when I go into Latin America, Africa and Asia, they are grasping the truth that the redemptive work of Christ is for the entire created universe! Abraham Kuyper, a great reformed Dutchman, says there is no square centimeter in the world

where God does not declare “Mine, mine, mine!” “Everything belongs to me,” says God. “I have made Jesus Lord over the totality of life.”

When I travel, I find in Latin America, Asia and in Africa, that Christians are beginning to grasp this truth. We in the west tend to operate with a Greek commission, a Gnostic dualism, a reduced gospel that says that God came to save souls, but He is not concerned about the material and social world. However, the Church of the south recognizes that God has created all of life. They recognize that there are demons and evil, the world of the spirits. Prayer matters. How many of you know that 4 June was Pentecost Sunday? How many of you are aware of the Transformation Prayer movement that was birthed out of South Africa? How many participated? Hundreds of millions around the globe did. One hundred fifty-six nations were mobilizing for prayer. They are Christ followers who believe that God responds when we humble ourselves, come united and pray.

There are lessons to learn from the rest of the world – for one, a whole-life faith in contrast to naturalism. When I came back to the United States in 1994, I was involved in a very large church and worked with several Christian organizations. I was struck how they would strategize, most often bringing in strategic business planners and marketers. They took samples of the population; found out what the issues were that were driving peoples’ buying patterns and then they would launch ministries and programs to meet these felt-needs. In order to cast vision and communicate with their constituency they developed newsletters based on a marketing strategy, not a prayer strategy.

In the 2000s I interacted with many leaders of Christian organizations in this country that were bemoaning how people in the pews do not understand what God is doing around the globe. I said, “Why don’t you come together and develop a training tool collaboratively that could go into churches to educate them?” I had the CEO of a very large organization say to me, “There is no money in that.” In other words, he would not do it because it was not a good marketing or fund raising strategy. This is nothing more than naturalism.

When I look at the moral teaching of southern Christianity, I find that it is quite often more conservative than what we have in the north. I have had a friendship for many years with an Anglican bishop out of Singapore. He has been ordaining Anglican priests to come to the US because of the drift of the US Anglican Church. He said that they would not tolerate the nonsense of same-sex marriage. Why is the church in the west tolerating it? Don’t they know that Jesus is Lord over all of life and He has defined marriage?

Think with me about “communal identity” and the spiritual authority of pastors. In developing countries, the Christian people have as strong a sense of community as they do of the individual. Often they will make the Christian community more important than the individual. In the West, we have gone to the other extreme; the individual is preeminent in all ways. We don’t see ourselves as connected into a community. We don’t have a good theology of the Church and what it means to be baptized into the Body of Christ. The consequence is that the Gospel we proclaim to the non-western world does not satisfy their communal longings.

Improvement is required. We must grasp that to follow Jesus brings social transformation as well as spiritual transformation. As you minister in contexts of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, animism, the people are not only asking the question, “Is this spiritual truth?” but “Is this communal truth?” “Do Christians have a community or family that is equal to or better than the community or family that I am being asked to leave?” This is a huge gap that we need to fill in our understanding of the gospel.

A book written for the American audience called High Impact African-American Churches, by George Barna and Harry Jackson, helped me to understand a lot of what I was seeing in other contexts. Harry Jackson, an African-American in Washington DC, a pastor and bishop, said that if people in the African-American community have a problem - a financial problem, a marital problem, a family problem, they go first to the church. The church is the 911-call center, the help center for the community. We in the white community go to professionals - lawyers, accountants, doctors, psychologists. African-Americans go first to the church. We have designed missions with specialists rather than strengthening the central core, the local church that is called to minister to the whole person. The local church needs to be prepared to deal holistically because God cares about the whole of life. When local churches understand that the work and mission of Jesus Christ concerns the whole of life, they will be able to pastor and affirm those with special gifts and callings. We need to think about missions establishing and equipping churches that will represent the full agenda of Christ reconciling everything in all sectors of life.

As a side note, Philip Jenkins says that there are more tangible benefits in the global south from being a member of a local church than being a mere citizen of say Nigeria or Peru. Do we see that the relationship we have entered into through Jesus is not simply a private and personal faith? It is a faith that places us into a family of forgiven and gifted people called to represent and follow Jesus as Lord in all spheres of life.

Why do we need to work “with” others of the global Church? In Mark 3: 13 we read that Jesus went up on a hillside and called his disciples to come and be “with” him. The prophet said, “The virgin will be with child and he will be a boy and he will be called God “with” us. I am convinced that God is asking us to reflect the very image and nature of God. The trinity is a God “with” us God. The patristic fathers of the second to the sixth centuries used the word “perichoresis” to understand the Trinity. It comes from two words – PERI (perimeter or circle) and CHORESIS (choreography or dance). When these fathers looked at God and his nature, they saw interconnectedness between the persons and a rhythm in their actions like a circle dance. God created humankind in his image. Part of the image of God is this interconnectedness, this “us-ness,” what it is to be together. You can speak about “you-ness” and “me-ness” but being like God is “us-ness.”

The first command that God gave to the man and the woman was to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. What is God saying? Not simply to populate the earth but to have the very image of God spread throughout the whole earth. Fill the earth with the image and likeness of God. God wants men and women to be in relationship to each other under the sovereign rulership of God everywhere throughout the globe. For us in

the west, God is helping us learn how to reflect this diversity in unity in the locales where we are asked to reside.

Another theological reason for “mission with” is emphasized in the book of Ephesians. “There is one body and one Spirit,” Paul says in Ephesians 4: 4. “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” (4: 3) I think God would say to us, as in John 17: 20-23, “I pray that you be one so that the world will believe.” What is the world to believe? Two things: 1) Jesus was the one sent from the Father, and 2) that the Father actually loves them. I am convinced that God is calling the Western Church and the global Church to reflect this one body, to literally give a gift to the world of a reconciled and united people of God working together in the cause of Christ.

There is one body that has one Father, one Lord and Savior, his name is Jesus, and there is one Spirit. The credibility of the Gospel and of our own souls is tied into this. The most strategic mission strategy is to minister with other members of the one Body.

Another theological reason of why we need to think “with” is found in the Psalms, “The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it.” Don Richardson helped us in his book Peace Child. As he moved into the South Pacific, he said that God already beat him here. What he needed to do was grasp what God had already done and was doing, what redemptive illustrations are included in the culture that he could bring out. God wants us not only to be with each other but to be with God. The nations are the inheritance that the Father gave to the Son. Therefore, we need to have our eyes wide open, to pray and say, “God you beat us here. These people and this place belong to you. You are engaged with them. Help me to operate and move with you.”

When I look at the mandate of the Church in Ephesians, what is the church to do? It is to be a sign, a display of his splendor, to reflect the trinity. The way that we relate to each other is to reflect this mutuality, this relationship, this unity in diversity. As well, we are to express this love to the world in all sectors, in all spheres of life. When I go into churches to consult, one of the things I ask them if the church is already present in that context into which they are going? The church has been given the charge, the mandate to display, to reflect the unity of the Godhead. They have been given the mandate to express the love of Christ in all spheres, in all sectors, of life. If you go into another context, can you make it your mandate to say their mission becomes our mission? We do not sit here and design and craft strategies but we come alongside them and say, “What is your mission to reflect and to carry the love of Christ into your community? How can your mission become our mission? How can we help you to fulfill it?”

Missiological reasons why I advocate for “Missions With”:

The western model of missions is less useful where God is raising up much of the mission force. It is very expensive, and there is a complexity in our organizational structures and systems. The two-thirds world is much more flexible, much more collaborative in the way that they are trying to work. When I look at the fruit of effective missions, the key issue centers on ownership. Do the indigenous people own their own

faith and the responsibility to disciple their community and nation? If we “go to to do for” them, the ownership of responsibility and leadership always resides with us. Specifically, we have not done a very good job in Africa. God has used us; we can be grateful. But we have not done a very good job of transferring ownership to the African leaders that God has truly anointed and raised up to disciple their nations. Fortunately, as we come alongside and go “with” we will see the fruit of ownership from the indigenous leaders take place.

Regarding psychological and contextualized theologizing, you may want to ask the following questions: Who is responsible for carrying out God’s mandate? Do they own it? Do they feel it? When we depart will they continue regardless of the obstacles? If we come alongside them, but don’t usurp or take it away their responsibility, we will see much greater fruit. The Africa Bible Commentary is coming out shortly, twelve years in the making. Africans are addressing the contextual issues that Africans are facing, not simply Europeans or Americans addressing these issues. MMD – More than a Mile Deep – is a group of African theologians developing a theology that is truly contextual. They are intent on reflecting biblically on issues facing Africa so that this wisdom can be transferred to their children and their children will not be suspicious of it.

“Asset-based Development” is a key missiological concept that needs to be understood and practiced. How do we wholistically develop our communities? The continent of Africa is the richest continent in the world in terms of natural resources, but on average, coming from the UN, different governments, secular and Christian NGO’s, etc., twenty billion dollars per year is pumped into Africa in foreign aid. In 2003, a UN survey of the state of Africa found that the quality of life indicators in every area had gone down.

“Asset-based Development” is building communities on assets that are already in those communities. When people see that they have assets in the community to be developed, their creativity rises, they take ownership, activity has sustainability, and there is growth of the Kingdom. Let me offer a simple principle I call the “SAM Principle” – Strengthen, Accelerate, Multiply – what is already present in the community. Build from what is already at hand.

How do we define success?

I contend that many churches have as their criteria for success ABC – Attendance, Buildings and Cash. My point is that if success in missions is simply the number of missionaries we send, we will miss the mark of what God wants to do. I was with some Croatians a year ago, and one of them told me that Croatia was a mess. He looked at us as Americans and said, “I think that those in the world of Christendom who can help us the most are the Ukrainians. Will you Americans help them to come and help us?” If our success is simply measured by how many we can send overseas, we may miss some opportunities to advance the gospel of the Kingdom and strengthen the indigenous church to be and do the agenda of Christ.

For others the criteria of success is to establish churches. We have established lots of churches. This is wonderful! However, I contend that it is not enough. Zimbabwe is a great example of a country where 70% of the people were involved in churches in 2003, and yet the country is in a state of chaos and decline. Where is the impact of the Gospel? I would advocate that the fruit for us should be the advance of God's Kingdom. Jesus said that he came proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom. My contention is that God wants us to look not simply at numbers of churches or conversions, but how does the whole of life come under the reign and rule of God through faith in Jesus Christ; God's Kingdom is our mission. The gospel is about seeing Jesus as Lord in the whole of life.

A black South African friend of mine, a professor at Cornell University until last summer, has looked at how communities and nations are transformed by the Gospel. I asked him what the key is to transformation. He thought for a minute and said, "Ideas, Ideals and Friendship." We thought about that for a while and realized that we had heard that before – Faith, Hope and Love. Ideas, truth principles by which people order their everyday steps in life. Ideals, hope, a standard, a future vision! The Psalmist said, "Who can ascend the holy hill of the Lord?" Are we helping people live with the level of hope to which God aspires? Friendship equals love and relationships. We are talking about the power of ideals, the power of ideas, and the power of relationship to transform lives. This is what the Christian gospel is all about.

When I worked with Interdev, we would declare, "Guns and money will never transform a country."

Faith, Hope and Love will.

From Missions TO . . . to Missions WITH, #2

By Gary Edmonds

From the COSIM Conference, June 14, 2006

I had a very distinct experience back in 1977, working in Europe, much of it in the former Soviet Union where the church was still underground. I would spend multiple weeks traveling, several times during the course of the year. Part of my work was connecting the Church in the East with the Church in the West of Europe. I can remember very clearly saying, "Lord, what is it going to take to bring about change?" And there was a distinct time when God said, "It's going to take my people working together." I did not know what that meant, what it would look like. But I asked God to help me to learn. That was in 1977, and I have spent nearly the last 30 years trying to understand what it means, what is the process for God's people to actually function and work together. You will see some of these truths and principles that I have recognized, that God has shown me, that others have taught me. I hope this will be helpful to you, that it will have take-home value for you.

One experience that marked my life goes back seven years. I was going into North Africa where I met with ten young men, Muslim background, now followers of Jesus. They

were incredibly poor men but impassioned for Jesus. I asked what brought this about. How did they, coming from a Muslim background, now become followers of Jesus Christ, now have a vision, a plan to go to every village in Algeria, to talk about Jesus? They said, “We encountered these people who were followers of Jesus who is Lord God Almighty. We realized that they knew each other by name. Not only that, but they spoke well of each other wherever they went, not competitive nor comparing, but speaking well of each other, members of the body of Christ. And they actually worked together in a loving way.” In their community and culture, these Muslim men had lived in an environment of suspicion and distrust. The witness of the Christian community was incredibly attractive to them. If Jesus was Lord God Almighty and could take these men and have them work together, they wanted a part of that. Then, I asked who was training them since they wanted to establish churches. They said that they just do what “the book” tells them to do. “Jesus broke down the barriers. He has made us one. We are to love one another, to talk about this Jesus, to do good works. We are just doing what the book tells us.” They knew a lot more than I knew.

Some how to's of Missions “With”

Isaiah says, “Come let us reason together.” What is the essence of the Gospel? Why can we make a declaration that Christ’s death is the solution to the brokenness emanating from the fall? Why can we really say that? I have wrestled with that over the years. When I look at what is broken in our world, I locate it in four areas:

- 1) Our relationship with God has been broken, severed. It needs to be restored.
- 2) The relationship with myself is broken – who am I? Part of my theological work was looking at monism, new age spirituality, alternative forms of spirituality. In a monistic understanding of life, a person is no different from a rock or a tree or a river or bird. The goal of life is to meld into one, to become a part of this oneness. Part of what God wants to do is to reconcile us with ourselves, to help us understand who we are in his created order. The first sin was that Adam and Eve wanted to become like God. He did not create us to be like God. We are made in his likeness, in his image. We need to be reconciled with self, with humanness, what does it mean to be a man or a woman, to be made in his likeness, in his image, like no one else in the entire universe, but not God and not simply another created thing.
- 3) Our relationship with others – what does it mean to love others? Part of what God is trying to do is to teach us how to dance, to get a rhythm of life that is consistent with his rhythm, vitality, beauty and vibrancy. That is who God is and that is how he has made us. When you encounter another human being, you ought to tingle inside because you realize that you are peering into the face of another who bears the stamp “Made in the Image and Likeness of God.” Therefore, we do not simply treat people as a cog in the wheel but as a human being made in the image and likeness of God who has hopes and fears and dreams and aspirations, and God has stamped his very image on that person. God has a unique role and responsibility for that person to fulfill in His story. Help me to understand something of your uniqueness, beauty, complexity and grandness through this individual. I do not enter into a relationship simply to get things done, but with a sense of wonder, awe and excitement. God wants to reconcile us to these kinds of relationships. Every human being bears something very unique.

4) Our relationship with the created order. There is a created order, the first five days God created, and on the sixth day he created the man and woman. God gave a commission to the man and woman that he created to rule over the earth, to be a regent, a governor. This came before the fall, but he repeats this again in Gen. 9, after the fall. We are to be in appropriate relationship with the created order, and our response is to rule, care for and subdue it. God wants to restore us to a right relationship with the creator of the universe, but also with his creation.

At my youngest daughter's wedding rehearsal, the day before the wedding, the church is decorated, food has been prepared, and family and friends were there. The groom, groomsmen and bridesmaids were all in front of me. I was joking around and said that we could do a double or triple wedding and save their parents a lot of money. "Do any of you here have someone special in your lives and we will save you a lot of money." The best man looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and said, "You know, I don't have anyone special in my life right now, but my mom tells me I'm quite a catch."

As we think about ourselves, as we look at the church, do we see ourselves as quite a catch, as very unique, bearers of the image and likeness of Christ, to be in relationship with God, with the created order, given special assignment and responsibility? God has placed us here, in this context, at this time in history to live out his will and purposes for which he has designed us. This includes restoring the brokenness that came from the fall. Remember the essence of the Gospel is reconciled relationships. Paul in Colossians 1:20 states, "It is through him, Jesus Christ, the one whose blood was shed, to reconcile to himself all things." Do you see yourself like Isaiah in the vision, a reconciler and a repairer of that which is broken?

A theologian from Seattle University, Dr. Bill Grace, has said that the number one factor to bring about change or restoration to communities, is building bridges of relationships. This is the number one key to bringing health to a community – be a reconciler. "Mission With" is the journey of partnering, the journey of reconciliation and building healthy relationships. I do not want to minimize the word "partnership," instead I want to emphasize "partnering." "Partnering" is a verb, an ongoing process, a relational process, getting to know and become more vulnerable, open and authentic before God, myself, and others.

I find that God keeps taking me into new and deeper understanding of myself. He knows more about me than I do. I can get to know myself as he has created me and sees me. And get to know others as He has created and sees them. This is part of the partnering and reconciliation that God wants to bring to His world.

I want you to understand some truths. Partnership is not a technique, not a methodology or a goal, but a process. It is not a network of contacts, or encounters where you come together to learn or take something from others to go back and operate independent from that person or group. Rather partnership is coming together to journey together, to stay together, and to do something together. It is not a network where we glean information, tools, ideas and resources from others to benefit ourselves or our own group. Partnership

means that we literally travel, journey, work and relate together. It is not a mere contractual agreement where you do something and I do something. Many times from a western mentality, we write up a memo of understanding or a contract where we report at the end of a time on the outcomes. At the end of this activity, the relationship is done. That is not partnering. When we think about partnering, we need to grasp that God is asking us to become more human than we have ever been before, to be who God intended us to be. We are human beings not just contractual agreements, or tools or functionaries but human beings. At stake in our relationship with others is our very soul.

I love every Christmas when we sing the carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” In the second stanza it says, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” We all have hopes and fears. Do we believe that Jesus can meet these, that he can help us to be or become who he intended us to be? I am convinced that partnering is part of his gift to us to help us to become what he intended us to be, reconciled to everything in heaven and on earth. Partnering – coming together in a relationship where you are building trust and love to do something together for the purpose of furthering God’s work. Part of the purpose of a partnership is to have us become more human.

Mission “with” requires a relationship of trust built on mutual prayer, worship, allegiance to scripture. God has given us the means to connect with him, with one another. One of the greatest unifying forces is praying together. Transformation is based upon an encounter with the holy triune God that brings us into relationship with others whereby we walk together under God’s ordinances, and consequently all sectors, spheres and domains of life will be touched. I think that is what transformation is all about. God is saying to us do we pray, do we worship, do we give allegiance to scripture, and do we help one another in this process? It is based on a coming together for a common purpose. Do we honor and glorify God; do we want to see the knowledge of his glory cover the entire world? It is a process; it is not an event. Drink a lot of coffee together. Take time to listen and talk; it is a process. Signing a contract and walking away is not partnership. Partnership is messy. The church is Mystery and Mess. The mystery of God – why did you do this and bring us together? And the mess of the human involvement – trying to work out the dynamics of this relationship. It builds joint ownership of a plan through consensus.

I have watched leadership models that are emerging around the globe. The Christian church is behind the curve right now in what the world is experimenting with. The business community is getting ahead of us in an understanding of what leadership is about. In the western world (and we are seeing the Western influences transferred into Africa and Asia,) we have had the very charismatic leader who goes to the mountaintop, hears from God, stands before the masses, and pronounces the vision, mobilizes the people and says, “Let’s go.” I do not believe this is biblical leadership. As I read scripture, it says, “Where has vision been given into the church?” Vision is given where the Spirit is given. Who has received the Spirit? All of those who are followers of Jesus. According to the prophet Joel, and the apostle Peter brought this out in Acts 2:16-22, it says that young and old, men and women alike, will dream dreams and have visions. Thus leadership is about being able to bring together God’s people, draw out and

understand what the collective vision is that God's Spirit is giving to us, His people, for His world. Leadership serves the people rather than making pronouncements from on high. When this kind of servant leadership is practiced, joint ownership of a plan through consensus of listening to the Holy Spirit will be the fruit. Therefore biblical leadership requires leaders who can listen to and facilitate the process with the people of discerning the voice of God.

One of the keys to the book of Acts and Ephesians 4:16 is that the body members will be connected together by joining tissue, ligaments. Have you ever thought that in the Body of Christ there are people who will act as ligaments? In the book of Acts, Barnabas was this person, this ligament of the early church. I am convinced that for partnerships to form, God has given the gifts of these connecting tissues, these ligaments, these Barnabas types, to keep the different parts of the Body of Christ together. They are small and not very pretty. We hardly know they are there, but they keep connecting people to people, people to ideas, people to resources and tools so that the Body of Christ can actually function as the Body of Christ. In the book of Ezekiel, chapter 37, Ezekiel had a vision of the valley of dry bones. Bone connected to bone and flesh covered it, and then all of a sudden, God breathed into it and it became a body. I am convinced that God wants to connect us; he wants us to be a well-connected body able to function together.

In Ephesians 4:11-12, Paul says that all of those who are leaders in the church should "prepare or equip the people of God for works of service." When you study the source of the word "prepare" or "equip," you find that it was used in two ways in the Greek context. Medical doctors prepared joints that were dislocated or bones that were broken. The body was not able to function, so someone needed to align the bones or set the joint. It was also used in the fishing industry, when you were equipping for fishing; you went over the cordage of a fishing net to make sure that all the cords were attached and in proper alignment. Preparing or equipping is about aligning people properly, bringing them into right relationship with other members of the body of Christ. It requires leadership to facilitate this process.

In addition, partnering will be mutually transforming. Eph. 4:11-12: "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be pastors...so that the body of Christ may be built up ... and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." Our interconnectedness, our right relationship with each other, is critical for maturity and for us to attain to the full measure of Christ. I have a dream that one day the church in the west will actually take initiative to invite members of the church of the global south and say, "Come and help us. We need your gifts, your insight, your understanding." It will not be the one way street that it is right now. Then we will really move to a new level of maturity and fullness in Christ.

Stages of the Process:

I have stated that partnering is a process. Let's take a few minutes to look at process for developing partnering relationships that allow you to function together.

Exploration Stage: Get to know who is doing what where with whom. Develop rapport. Know each other by name. In creation, God gave Adam the responsibility to give names. Do you take the time to know each other by name? Know their families, their dreams, their hopes. Speak well of each other. Listen to each other's hearts and dreams. Ask the question, "Are you willing to meet together?" If the apostle Paul was here today, I think he would address the fact that members of the body are not attached randomly. They are attached so that they work well together. Our physical bodies have systems. Parts of the body are not randomly connected, but they come together with a function or purpose in mind. You can lose a part of the body and it can still function, but if a system breaks down, the body will cease to function. Therefore, leaders who act as ligaments must learn how to be social engineers of getting the members into healthy and functional relationships.

Without spending too much time, let me remind us that we must not be instruments of division or separation of what God is already doing to bring together the parts of His Body. Unwittingly, we can separate and divide the relationships of trust that are already being built in a community. Therefore, we must continue to ask, "Can we meet; can we explore? Who else needs to be here? Who needs to be in relationship with whom?"

Formation stage: When we come together to pray, plan and work, ask these questions:

- 1) What do we sense is God's plan or purpose?
- 2) What is the specific need?
- 3) What will it take to meet the need?
- 4) What challenges or obstacles are there?
- 5) Who is best gifted and positioned to meet this need?

Ask these questions in this specific order. From a western paradigm, we always ask first who is in charge here; who is leading, rather than asking the question, "What does God want to do?" Then, when we come to agreement on that, the last question is, who should lead or facilitate the process of carrying it out? Otherwise, we distort the vision, goals and objectives and misalign people for their God-given purposes.

Operation stage: The third stage of the process has us actually working together. We are addressing the agreed upon joint plans, working together, giving regular feedback, and carrying out ongoing evaluation of what is being accomplished. In the "operational stage", we will need maturation in relational trust. We don't simply monitor the accomplishments, but we also need to keep monitoring how we are doing. Do we still love and trust each other? Are we concerned about each other's growth and well-being? Keep checking not only what we are accomplishing but also how we are relating. Servant leadership will encourage and facilitate this process.

A Conceptual Model:

Part of what God has had me do is bring together the church in whole communities and, in some contexts, in whole nations. When I go into a community, I look for leaders of local churches. Eph. 3:10: "God's intent is that now through the church the manifold wisdom of God will be revealed." I look for leaders of the church because I am

convinced that they are to equip the church that is given the mandate of God to reveal his multi-faceted, multi-colored manifold wisdom. After I look for leaders in local churches, I also seek leaders of the community. Leaders in business, government, education, media and the arts are identified because God has placed these people as leaders in a community for accomplishing his redemptive purposes. I look, as well, at who are non-residential partners influencing the community. There are people who come in and flow out, like many of us, an apostolic band, an Apollos, Priscilla and Aquila who come in and teach and influence. Then I try to help build these into relationship. Can I bring leaders from local churches into relationship with each other? Can I bring leaders of and in the community into relationship with each other? Can I bring these into relationship with leaders of the church? Can I bring the non-residentials together with these others?

Then I do something very simple called the **VIA** – The Way. Can we talk together to discern where there is convergence of **vision**? God is giving vision to the community, to the people. Can we help draw out that vision and look at places of convergence? **Vision** – for the children, for widows, for the homeless, for agriculture, for morality, to address corruption and begin to map the vision that the Spirit of God is giving into a community. And bring those gifted and positioned to carry out the common vision into relationship to each other. **Ideas** – What can we do to actually move toward the realization of the Vision? Begin to form working groups and task groups around the vision. Then have those in the common vision sectors come up with ideas of what they can do to realize the vision. **Assets** – What has God given us by way of assets? He always gives assets to build the community, building blocks for transforming a community. The bottom line, the foundation, is the Ten Commandments. Do an asset map of the community. What can we use to carry out our ideas to move toward realizing God’s vision for the community? Partnership is being the Body of Christ in a community and working together to bless the community.

The prototype of what God wants from us: Mark 3:13-19, Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to himself those he wanted and they came to him. Ecclesia – the called-out ones, the Church. In the fourth century, the town clerk would call the citizens to come together to conduct the affairs of the community. They used the same word, ecclesia, the called-out ones who come together to conduct the affairs of the kingdom. Therefore, Jesus says, “Come.” He called and appointed twelve that they might be “with him.” He did not do a survey first, he just asked them to come, hang out together, and enjoy presence with himself. What God wants for us in partnership is:

- 1) To be with him – **communion**, to authentically align ourselves with God, to be in relationship, to enjoy knowing him. I believe that the fall is moral in nature. The healing of the nations will begin to take place when the people of God properly align themselves with God, become obedient and faithful, morally living out what we are meant to be as His followers.
- 2) To have **community** – community with others (Mark uses the familiar or nick names of the disciples). They gathered together and got to know each other. It was the very familiar names that Mark used. They got to know each other as community, to gather together, to have fun together, and to have love, trust, intimacy, joy. Interconnected with other parts of the community to find out where

we fit. Do our churches create spaces and opportunities for the people to get to know each other intimately?

3) To take up the **commission** to do his work. Ephesians 2:8-10 clearly states that we are saved not by works, but we are saved to do good works. Communion with God and community always leads to commission. Christianity is not fatalism. It is not merely a fellowship where we wait for Jesus to return. Jesus always has a work for us to do. We are to be a blessing to the society. It will be expressed in, through, and from communion and community. It will be accomplished as Christ's body works together for the advance of God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

An African proverb, first told to me by a Christian brother who has come out of a Muslim background in French-speaking Africa, says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." This vision and command of God to take the gospel "to the ends of the earth" means that it must move geographically, to all places and corners, but as well to all people, people groups, all kinds of people. And the gospel is to penetrate to the depths of culture and civilization. That is what the Christian life is all about. That is why we must conduct "mission with" other members of Christ's global body.