



PARTNERS IN MISSION

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There is a lot of talk these days about doing mission in partnership. It is driven, in part, by an increasing awareness of the growing global church and respect for the initiative and faithfulness of brothers and sisters in Christ who are already engaged in mission in places where we are or seek to be involved.

For followers of Jesus the idea of partnership comes to us not from the business world but from God's Word and the life of the church. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians: *I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.* The Greek word that Paul uses is *koinonia*. Sharing. Communion. Participation. Partnership. These English words help to unpack the richness of the term that Paul employs.

In 1994 during what the PC(USA) called A Year with Africa, I was at a gathering of Presbyterian leaders from across the U.S. and the African continent. The large group was talking about partnership in warm, rather idealistic tones when a Rwandan who would soon become a friend, a pastor who had not known for six months if his own wife and children had survived the genocide in Rwanda, Andre Niyonsaba, stood up and said with deep passion: "Partnership begins when we know the reasons for one another's tears."

On 9-11, seven years later, when the towers were falling in New York City, the first email that hit my inbox was from Andre. "We are in Nairobi. And we are praying for you." And the tears were mine.

To be honest about it, partnerships are difficult for us here in the U.S. We cannot be a partner if we do not have needs, and most of us have so much stuff that we can insulate ourselves from our own spiritual needs and isolate ourselves from others by spending so easily on their physical needs.

Partnerships are hard because we Americans are in a hurry and want to fix things and have short attention spans.

Not long after I began my work with The Outreach Foundation, a pastor phoned me asking if I could assist him. "We've done Mexico," he said, "and we'd like to do someplace else." I was so offended and thrown by his request that all I could get out was a curt "No. We cannot help you."

Our partners need more than week-long blessing blitzes that are primarily about our doing good in order to feel better about ourselves, and then returning home amazed that the people are so poor and still so full of joy.

The joy is real; the poverty, too. But in our helping and haste we can sometimes make things worse. By rushing past any question of what God is doing in that place, in order to focus on our own doing, we can easily wind up seeking first the kingdom of our congregations and our self-righteousness. And very little is added unto us. Or to those with whom we supposedly partner.

It takes time to discern how to share resources wisely and well. And to discern what gifts our partners have to share with us. Sherron George is correct when she writes, "Unless we humbly, intentionally, and

patiently build dialogical relationships and practice two-way mission with people, our cultural default is a demeaning one-way mission for people.”

Let me encourage you and your congregation – as you seek to develop relationships for the sake of God’s mission in places far away and places close to home – to go long and deep. Keep showing up. Be patient. Listen and be slow to act. Pay attention. Don’t lead with resources. Allow time for a genuine relationship to develop. And seek coaches and counselors in this difficult work of building reciprocal relationships with believers in other places, partnerships that honor them and respect them. In most places where The Outreach Foundation works, we look to long-term missionaries and global church leaders with whom we have deep relationships to provide us with this kind of coaching. They are a great help to us. And we can be of help to you.

Partnerships are not easy, but they are worth working on.

When the Pittsburgh Presbytery partnership began with the CCAP Blantyre Synod in 1991, it quickly became a project-driven relationship. The Presbyterians from the U.S. often assumed what the Malawi believers needed and sometimes funded projects that the Synod could not sustain, or funded projects that resulted in unintended consequences such as jealousy among parishes in Malawi. Since then, as a result of prayerful and careful consultation, projects now must be approved by leaders of both partners. The partnership has been recast in terms of relationships that are a mutual blessing. Hundreds of people have traveled back and forth, sharing in worship, Bible study, and deepening of Christian friendship. They have shared staff with each other. They share life with each other.

Today, both Pittsburgh and Blantyre are better able to respond to God’s call in the place where they serve, and they’ve done some pretty neat things together. Their partnership is reciprocal and it has increased responsiveness and ability to respond to God’s initiative on both sides. Now, they are exploring shared mission work with partners in the world’s newest nation, South Sudan.

Partnerships are worth working on because of the ways that they bear witness to God’s glory and grace, and for the ways they build up the church for God’s mission in the world. Together with the church in every place, we are a part of the Body of Christ – with gifts to share and gifts that we need to receive.

The Outreach Foundation regularly takes Presbyterians out into the world to see how God is at work and to meet with the church in other places. One of those places is Cuba where we work with the Presbyterian-Reformed Church (IPRC). Out of such a trip several years ago, the IPRC congregation in Guanabacoa and First Presbyterian Church (EPC) in Thomasville, Georgia, developed a friendship in which they began asking what God might have them do together. Out of that discernment came a creative partnership in caring for persons and families living with HIV/AIDS in Guanabacoa. The work is being done by the Cubans, but the Thomasville church and a few other friends are strengthening their hand. Together, they are doing something that neither could do on their own. For several years running this ministry carried out in Jesus’ name has been awarded a “Hope Prize” from the Cuban government.

There is an African proverb that counsels, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." Reaching across barriers of custom and culture to join hands with brothers and sisters in Christ takes time, creativity, humility and discipline – a discipline that acknowledges our own limitations and affirms our unity in Christ with others and our shared commitment to God’s mission in the world.

The new expressions of partnership that I find to be compelling are not models driven by a punch-list of how to’s; rather, they embody the kind of relationships that Paul goes on to commend to the believers at Philippi: *Have this mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus . . .*

For a long time the church in the West engaged in mission from the position of privilege and power. We grew overconfident in our capacity. In this new season in which the majority church is growing by leaps and bounds – and most of our own congregations are struggling – perhaps our partners can help us to find fresh wisdom and resolve to join the crucified One and his children at the margins of this world, to learn how to humbly show and share the love of Jesus in places where he is already at work.

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