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We, Who are Many, are One Body

Fellowship and Partnership in Mission and in the Church

Editorial
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Editorial

Walter McConnell

As a young believer, I thought the Christian life consisted of three components: worship, fellowship, and outreach. As I understood it, the first centered on our relationship with God, the second on our interaction with other Christians, and the third on our dealings with the world. This was a tidy package with everything sensibly organized. Only later did I discover that my well-ordered formulation was out of step with reality, as outreach—evangelism—is an outworking of our worship of God and the horizontal fellowship shared by Christians is based entirely on our vertical fellowship with God—the one cannot exist without the other.

This reality is stated pointedly at the beginning of John's first Epistle. Speaking for the apostolic band, John proclaims his personal experience of Jesus so that his readers might experience Christian fellowship. His is a clear gospel message. Fellowship exists between believers because of their fellowship with God—Father and Son. This grounding of the faith in the historical experience of Jesus as the Christ and Son of God and its visible expression through a fellowship of people who relate to one another because of their fellowship with God is what distinguishes true Christianity from the kind of religion promoted by John's opponents and various modern rivals.

This issue of *Mission Round Table* revolves around *koinonia*, the biblical concept that encompasses fellowship and partnership and a whole lot more. It is essentially the things we share in common, beginning with Jesus Christ. As Paul Woods's paper on "*Perichoresis* and *Koinonia*" shows, our fellowship springs from our union with God. Though the word may be new to many, *perichoresis* has long been used in the church to describe the dynamic, interpenetrating, and spiritual relationship that exists between the members of the Trinity. As God reaches out to us through the Son and Holy Spirit, we are drawn into his life and so dazzled that he would include us that we reach out so others can also be involved in the life of God.

In his article "*Koinonia*: The DNA of 'gospel partnership'," Joel Christenson reveals how his understanding of *koinonia* was transformed by a deeper study of a biblical passage he thought he knew very well. The breadth of the term, as used throughout the New Testament, shows that mission societies and individual missionaries are required to engage in gospel partnerships despite the fact that doing so is far from easy. Our partnerships emerge from our *koinonia* with the Trinity and are demonstrated as we use our gifts for the benefit of the church and the world.

The necessity of basing Christian unity and partnership on the relationships within the Trinity is expanded in "The Church as God's Agent: A Study in reflecting the Trinity." In this article, Peter Rowan draws upon ancient and modern sources to spotlight our need to plant churches and build reconciled communities that, by reflecting the Trinitarian nature of God, can and will move beyond themselves as their people grow as part of the whole people of God.

Our practical consideration of how *koinonia* works itself out in mission begins with Mark Leighton's, "Fellowship, Communion, and Partnership between Local Churches." Reflecting on his experience as a church planter and pastor in the States and nearly thirty years of ministry in Thailand, Mark shows that the limitations that often hinder churches working on their own can be reversed when they co-operate with other churches through an association.

Missionaries are well aware that they need to partner with local leaders to plant churches and disciple believers. Many can testify to the blessings we have received by working with a local pastor or church leader. Even so, it doesn't take much experience before one faces the reality that relationships between locals and foreigners do not always go smoothly. In "Growing in Partnership with Thai Church Leaders," David Chang helps us recognize some of the conflicts that can disrupt cross-cultural ministry and gives beneficial suggestions that can lead toward more effective partnerships.

> That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life ... we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1–3, ESV)

As the modern mission movement developed during the nineteenth century, mission societies and church denominations realized that the spiritual needs of the world were too great for one organization to go it alone. Mission leaders consulted with others to develop comity agreements—mutual understandings about who should work in which field or part of a field for the benefit of the gospel. In "Comity Agreements: The Not-so-simple Art of Cooperation," Neel Roberts introduces us to many of the issues involved in the agreement between OMF and the American Presbyterian Mission in North Thailand in the early 1950s. As he shows, many of the benefits that come from working together with other groups can unexpectedly lead to tension and even division.

Michael Griffiths, who served as the OMF General Director from 1969–80, has long focused on the biblical view of the church and its place in the *missio dei*. In our interview, he highlights some practical aspects of *koinonia* that should be worked out in partnership with both sending and receiving churches and reminds us that we should expect to participate in a fellowship of suffering as did our Lord and the historical church.

The next issue of *Mission Round Table* will examine the identity of missionaries as people in Christ who work in cross-cultural settings. The following edition will consider aspects of being salt and light as the gospel meets culture. If you would like to submit a paper on one of these topics, please send a brief description of your ideas to the editor.

Walter McConnell
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Perichoresis and *Koinonia*: Implications of our Fellowship with God for the Changing Missionary Endeavour

Introduction

Comparing mission in the early twenty-first century with the heyday of the faith mission movement shows that much has changed. For several reasons, it seems that evangelical missions is facing yet another mini-crisis or at least entering a period of introspection. Firstly, in the nineteenth century Western people took the gospel from rich, "Christian" nations to the "pagan" rest of the world. This paradigm remains as the home-field distinction, which our Fellowship recognises as outdated and is striving to replace. Secondly, because people in the majority world were essentially recipients of the gospel the assumption was that non-Western people needed to learn from and be apprenticed to the missionaries. Thirdly, many Western missionaries had considered the complex relationship between the gospel and indigenous cultures, leading to the imposition of Western models of worship, leadership, and theology on newly established churches. Finally, the western church was committed to mission and gave finance and excellent personnel on a long term basis.

In the last century and a half, Christianity has become a global faith, so that in many places it is no longer seen as foreign. In East Asia, talented, zealous, and well-trained church ministers and missionaries have sprung forth from the local soil. Evangelism, discipleship, and training are all still needed, and few would claim that the era of the cross-cultural missionary is over. Indeed, for some time East Asian missionaries—particularly Korean and Chinese—have been working together with Western colleagues.

Contextualisation remains controversial. In some cases theological conservatism among missionaries and fear of syncretism have retarded the indigenisation of Christianity. However, while teaching in East Asia I observed a theological "Stockholm syndrome" in which East Asians themselves resist contextualisation out of loyalty to models of theology brought from abroad.

Although we have seen significant increases in missionary personnel and finance from East Asia, our region still exhibits significant variation in the strength of the church and its commitment or ability to engage in cross-cultural mission. However, even in countries where the church is still relatively weak, Christians are aware of missions and feel part of a global movement as never before. We all have much to contribute and learn.

A new mission dynamic is being forged before our very eyes. Although there were few non-westerners at Edinburgh 1910, mission conferences today are very different, and we see a rainbow of races around the table—whether the table actually is *round* is another matter. However, the nature of today's global church and its mission effort means that we now rub shoulders with Christians from many different backgrounds. At Cape Town 2010 Patrick Fung helpfully pointed out that rather than passing the baton from the Western to the majority world church we are actually adding more hands to it.

With these factors in mind and to encourage theological reflection on how we in an East-Asian focused mission Fellowship should relate to each other and to local believers, this article explores relationships within the Godhead, between God and believers, and among believers. How might reflecting on this web of relationships influence our attitudes? Secondly, terms such as *fellowship*, *partnership*, *community*, and *agency* have become part of the theological mainstream, and thinking about them biblically may inform modern mission

practices influenced by secular management and which sometimes default to a bottom-line mentality.

To let the Bible speak into these matters, this paper looks at the upper room discourse of John 14–17 before examining *koinonia* in the NT. The relationship between Christ's teaching and Paul's thought is summarised by Tom Wright as that between "a composer and a conductor … or … an architect and a builder."[1] Christ sketches out in broad brush strokes and then the apostle fills in the details in context.

In many evangelical circles the relation of believers with God is often constrained by the traditional (Western) notion of "me and God" and thus we need to consider the different sets of relationships mentioned above. These are distinct but flow smoothly one into the other. Three short verses from John's first letter are instructive at the outset: 1 John 1:3, 6, 7.

In these verses, John challenges us to think about the love of God for the believer and the need for believers to love each other, and at the beginning he explores vertical and horizontal *koinonia*, translated *fellowship* each time in the NIV.

> … that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3)

John testifies how he and others knew and interacted with the Lord Jesus, now proclaiming him so that others may have fellowship with John and his group. Although in v 3a John's aim is fellowship (*koinonia*) between believers—which Barclay understands as *being bound*—he adds that their fellowship is with the Father and the Son.[2] The horizontal relationships so important to John derive ultimately from the relationship with the Godhead; for Stott one cannot be mentioned without the other.[3] We may also consider John's mention of fellowship with Father and Son a nod to intra-Trinitarian relationships.

> If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practise the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:6–7)

Fellowship with God has an ethical dimension which clashes with the sinful morality of a fallen world (v 6). John's request that we walk in the light (v 7) is a plea for ethical and moral transformation. The mention of "as he is in the light" conveys a sense of movement towards a divine asymptote.

In brief, these three verses at the beginning of 1 John combine vertical and horizontal aspects of fellowship. The relationship with God and fellow believers is inherently dynamic rather than static.

Perichoresis and fellowship—John 14–17

The first few verses of 1 John can serve as an introduction to similar ideas found in the upper room discourse. In John 14:1–4 Jesus presents the Father's house as the believers' ultimate destination, and in the same breath confirms that he will take them there. Responding to their questions, he claims to be "the way and the truth and the life," the only way to the Father (v 6). Next, Jesus identifies much more closely with the Father: knowing Jesus equals knowing the Father (v 7), and Father and Son are mutually indwelling (v 10). As the chapter unfolds, Jesus' identification with the Father marks him as very different from the disciples, despite their shared humanity.

The description of the Father-Son relationship then flows into an introduction to the Holy Spirit. The Father sends the Spirit at the invitation of the Son (v 16), and in his name (v 26). The Holy Spirit is the Counsellor, teaching the disciples all things and reinforcing Christ's teaching (14:26 and 16:13–14). An extra layer is added in chapter 16 because the Spirit takes what is Christ's (v 14) *and* the Father's (v 15), and passes it on to the disciples.

Moltmann refers to the complex mutual embrace between the members of the Trinity as *perichoresis*—literally dancing around. *Perichoresis* describes a "community without uniformity, and personality without individualism," and Moltmann quotes John of Damascus as saying that Father and Son constitute a unity but without mixing, although each person is completely in the other two.

Moltmann refers to the complex mutual embrace between the members of the Trinity as *perichoresis*—literally *dancing around*.[4] *Perichoresis* describes a "community without uniformity, and personality without individualism," and Moltmann quotes John of Damascus as saying that Father and Son constitute a unity but without mixing, although each person is completely in the other two.[5]

In this dynamic view of the Trinity, the dance results in the provision of space, each person for the other two. Hence, difference (but not division) is ensured, and separate identities preserved (Moltmann refers in passing to John 10:30 and John 14:7–17). The love of each member allows him to "stand out" for and be drawn to the others, and thus *perichoresis* leads to *kenosis*—space-making is associated with self-emptying.[6] Indeed, the *kenosis* of the Son in Philippians 2:6 is a time-space limited version of an eternal reality. I see here the basis of the command to love our neighbours as ourselves.

If John 14 spends energy on the inner life of the Godhead, then John 15 is concerned with the relationship between Godhead and believer. In chapter 14 Jesus encourages the disciples to keep the faith, obey him, and hold to the truth, and John 15 links remaining in Christ with the bearing of fruit—tangible results of faith and obedience. Taking on the Christian identity entails service and action.

Unity in the church depends upon the unity of believers with the Godhead through the Son, which depends ultimately on the unity within the Godhead. Unity thus cascades down from God to the believers, one form of unity derivative of another.

Jesus does not flesh out what bringing forth fruit means. Perhaps there is a continuum from changes in individual lifestyle and righteous living to involvement in the mission of the Godhead. And John 15:2 and 15:6 contain a dynamic perspective; branches which do produce are improved, while ineffectual ones are burned. There is a sense of progress towards a goal here; knowing Christ and abiding in him means being changed ourselves and bringing change in others. To know him is to serve him and to be transformed and we are reminded of the connections between faith and good works in Ephesians 2:10 and James 2:14–18. Salvation does not make us worker ants in some vast insect colony, yet being in Christ means service and transformation, to the glory of the Father (John 15:8).

Individual Christians are branches grafted into and drawing on the vine for life and ministry (15:5). God the Father is present as gardener, yet Christians come to relationship with and are dependent upon the triune God through the incarnate Son, the intermediary between human and divine. God is three persons and salvation means that human beings know each of them, yet this happens through the incarnation and sacrifice of one of them.

Verses 9–12 contain a pattern that I have elsewhere called *cascading*.[7] An attitude or characteristic pours from the Father to the Son, then down to us, and out to those around us. Here love and commands cascade, so we must keep Jesus' commands and remain in his love. Indeed, the two meet as Jesus *commands* us to *love* each other as he has loved us (v 12); the pattern for our horizontal relationships is the intra-Trinitarian love that God has shown to us.

Jesus' followers are now not servants but friends with whom he shares what he has learnt from the Father (v 15). *Friends* suggests belonging and comradeship rather than pragmatism or task-orientedness, and the timbre of the Gospel narratives rules out a purely transactional relationship—the disciples were never simply hired hands. Yet to those he now describes as friends Jesus passes on an obligation to bear fruit. This merging of belonging and responsibility, the bearing of fruit by friends, makes me a little uncomfortable with the modern term *mission agency*, which seems rather instrumental, heavy on task and light on fellowship.

At the beginning of John 17, Jesus briefly restates his relationship with the Father before focusing on unity between the disciples. Unity in the church depends upon the unity of believers *with* the Godhead through the Son, which depends ultimately on the unity *within* the Godhead. Unity thus cascades down from God to the believers, one form of unity derivative of another.

Perichoresis creates "space for movement" which draws people into the divine life but maintains individuality (redeeming and purifying it) and celebrates personal diversity without imposing conformity. This is *difference* without *division*...

Much of John 14 concerns the unity of *in-ness*—Father being in Son and Son being in Father—and unity of purpose—especially as the Spirit reinforces the teaching of Christ. In John 17, before Jesus discusses unity among believers he remarks on the unity of glory of Father and Son. By fulfilling the task entrusted to him Jesus has brought the Father glory on earth (v 4), and will be glorified himself (v 5); service and glory are linked even for the eternal Son. Later, in 17:10 Jesus receives glory because of his followers' witness. We may conclude that true unity in love, fellowship, and acceptance of the other by the making of space, is part of the witness which glorifies the Son. In this section the cascading of glory goes upwards!

In John 17:18 Jesus sends the disciples as the Father originally sent him. This is striking, given the huge chasm between God and man. Yet this introduces the final section of John 17, which highlights the unity of believers. The Father sending the Son brings several images to mind: the self-emptying of the Son for the benefit of the unworthy; the necessity for trust and empowerment—Jesus' baptism is accompanied by the Father's clear approval: "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased" (Matt 3:47); the reliance of the Son on the word of the Father during the temptation; the submission to the Father's will in Gethsemane. Then perhaps on the more human level, the Gospels record Jesus' choice and empowering of followers, his challenging of religious and social conventions, his compassion and mercy, and his eventual humble submission to an unfair death sentence. Perhaps manifestations of self-emptying such as humility, compassion, and mercy can inform our service as we are sent into the world.

In John 17:21a Jesus prays that the believers manifest a unity similar to that existing between the Father and himself, asking that they be *in* the triune God. The inclusion of Christians in the Godhead results in a *perichoretic* human community, which is how Moltmann understands the mutual abiding in 1 John 4:16b.[8]

Among God's people must exist *perichoresis* and *kenosis* analogous to those derived from the Godhead and modelled by the incarnate Christ.

Borrowing from Cyprian, Moltmann believes that the redeemed participate at some level in the life of God, referring here to John 17:21.[9] God himself is a community, which welcomes and accepts us without any confusion between human and divine natures. *Perichoresis* creates "space for movement"[10] which draws people into the divine life but maintains individuality (redeeming and purifying it) and celebrates personal diversity without imposing conformity. This is *difference* without *division*, technical terms from St Maximus, referring to positive and negative attitudes to the other, someone distinct from oneself.[11]

Koinonia: Fellowship and partnership

The rather abstract discussions of relationships between the Godhead and Christians in the Gospels are grounded and applied in the Epistles. To see how Paul the builder follows on from Christ the architect we will consider in their contexts the NT usages of the word *koinonia*, commonly but not exclusively translated *fellowship* in the NIV. For the Pontifical Council, *koinonia* has the sense of "belonging, communion, participation, partnership, sharing in."[12] They also argue that *koinonia* between Christians has its basis in the relation between Christians and the persons of the Godhead. In addition, mission has *koinonia* at its centre and as its aim.[13]

Strong's concordance lists nine occurrences of *koinonia*, as well as seven of *koinonian* and three of *koinonias*. In addition, the NT contains the forms *koinonos* (one who shares) and *koinos* (an adjective meaning *shared* or *held in common*. More broadly, in classical Greek *koinonia* has connotations of association or partnering.[14] The open generosity of *koinonia* is contrasted with selfishness—for Kariatlis it is the opposite of *private*.[15] Also, in first century everyday Greek *koinonia* can refer to business relationships, marriage, and a person's relationship with Zeus.[16]

The translation of *koinonia* as contribution adds to our understanding of the word... Here *koinonia* is very practical; fellowship is not simply a spiritual unity, but also involves sharing with the needy.

The NT form *koinonia* is variously translated in the NIV as follows:

- *Fellowship:* Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 1:9; 2 Cor 6:14, 13:14; Gal 2:9; Phil 2:1, 3:10; 1 John 1:3, 1:6–7
- *Contribution:* Rom 15:26
- *Participation*: 1 Cor 10:16
- *Sharing:* 2 Cor 8:4, 2 Cor 9:13; Phlm 3:6; Heb 13:16
- *Partnership:* Phil 1:5

In the following Bible verses the italicised words are the (mostly) NIV translation of *koinonia*.

> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *koinonia*—fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42)

Fellowship is one of four group practices important to the early Christians. Like the other three perhaps more specific activities, fellowship strengthened the body, maintained communication with God, and bore witness to the saving work of Christ. On the strength of this verse, *koinonia* was not merely some kind of imputed organic unity among believers, but also something to be strived for. We might be reminded of working out our salvation (Phil 2:12) or the exhortation in Ephesians 4:3 to keep the unity of the Spirit. The unity is from the Spirit, yet believers are to work to maintain it. From Acts 2, we may tentatively conclude that fellowship is both a given and an aim, static and dynamic, as believers strive to live out what they already have. Yeo notes the need to "manifest ethically" the identity symbolised by baptism.[17]

The practical and tangible results of this fellowship—this new lifestyle of generosity and contributing to the well-being of others—is variously described throughout the New Testament. In Acts 2:44 and the related Acts 4:32, Luke uses the form *koina* to refer to communal ownership by the early Christians. Other passages show the breadth of the concept.

> For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a *koinonia*—contribution—for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. (Rom 15:26)

The translation of *koinonia* as *contribution* adds to our understanding of the word. Paul wishes to return to Jerusalem to help the Christians there, and commends those in Macedonia and Achaia for their generosity. In v 27 such material generosity is their obligation because of the spiritual benefit Gentile believers had derived from the Jewish people.

Here *koinonia* is very practical; fellowship is not simply a spiritual unity, but also involves sharing with the needy.[18] The material contribution is entrusted to the Jerusalem church for them to use as they see fit, and hence trust appears as another consequence of *koinonia*.

> God, who has called you into *koinonia*—fellowship—with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful. (1 Cor 1:9)

The believers—the *you* here is plural—are called of God, whose redemptive action and calling make fellowship with him possible. This fellowship is a great leveller: all are present because of what God has done, and there is an implied obligation for mutual tolerance and acceptance between believers. In addition, this verse is part of a preamble to Paul's passionate appeal for unity among the believers. In St Maximus' terms, Paul accepts difference but rules out division. A fellowship which looks back to grace and forward to perfect unity of mind and thought (1 Cor 1:10) is dynamic rather than static. The spiritual unity and identity involves transformation,

We may translate koinonia as fellowship, but the NT is clear that this includes practical efforts to improve the material conditions of others through sharing and trust. God is praised through our practical fellowship.

individually and communally. This sense of journey and edification of and by a diverse group is felt in chapters 12–14 of 1 Corinthians where Paul emphasises the use of spiritual gifts in partnership for the common good in an atmosphere of love. This fellowship life is oriented to transforming people and forging a teleological unity in Christ and on his terms—vertically and horizontally.[19]

> Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a koinonia *participation* in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a koinonia *participation* in the body of Christ? (1 Cor 10:16)

The Corinthians have to make up their minds—one cannot share in the Eucharist and sacrifice to idols. At the Eucharist, *koinonia* is participation in Christ, and as a statement of allegiance is also a form of witness. For Barclay, the Eucharist is the greatest example of vertical and horizontal fellowship.[20]

Participation in the blood of Christ suggests an on-going death to self and sin and a new orientation to him and other believers. We join a *body* which seeks to be like its Master. The NT body metaphor combines unity and diversity. Lossky summarises this elegantly according to the ministry of the Godhead. Christ "lends His hypostasis to the [human] nature, the [Spirit] gives His divinity to the persons. Thus, the work of Christ unifies; the work of the Holy Spirit diversifies. Yet, the one is impossible without the other."[21] In its local instantiations the church should demonstrate unity and embrace diversity better than the world.

> They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of *koinonia*—sharing—in this service to the Lord's people. (2 Cor 8:4)

This is similar to Romans 15:26, except that here *koinonia* refers not to the contribution itself, but to sharing in the service of God's people. Thus, one aspect of fellowship is working to benefit others. Paul's reference to the Philippians' material generosity in Philippians 4:15 uses the Greek *ekoinōnēsen*, rendered *share* in the NIV.

> Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in *koinonia*—sharing—with them and with everyone else. (2 Cor 9:13)

This verse also refers to generosity and the meeting of needs. We may translate *koinonia* as *fellowship*, but the NT is clear that this includes practical efforts to improve the material conditions of others through sharing and trust. God is praised through our practical fellowship.

Participation in the blood of Christ suggests an on-going death to self and sin and a new orientation to him and other believers. We join a body which seeks to be like its Master. The NT body metaphor combines unity and diversity.

> May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the *koinonia*—fellowship—of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor 13:14)

At the end of his second recorded letter to a church wracked by division and factionalism, the apostle makes his final appeal. In v 11 he asks the Corinthians to rejoice, and to seek full restoration and encourage each other. In exhorting them to be of one mind and live in peace he is still addressing division and personal agendas. Just being Christians was not enough—the Corinthians needed to grasp, protect, and extend their spiritual unity to deal with their issues.

This is the background to the blessing in v 14. Jesus accepted the Christians through grace and they must do the same for each other. God the Father is the source of love which cascades down to us through the Son, and the Spirit comes in fellowship (*koinonia*) to bring unity and community. He leads us and reminds us of what Jesus taught (John 14:26, 15:26, 16:13–14), providing the transformational power we need. Fellowship is about the emulation of Christ, transformation, and unity.

> James, Cephas and John, those esteemed as pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of *koinonia*—fellowship—when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. (Gal 2:9)

At the beginning of Galatians 2, Paul discusses his acceptance by the Jerusalem triumvirate of James, Peter, and John, who recognised that he was preaching the true gospel (v 2), primarily to the Gentiles (v 7). The right hand of *koinonia* was based on a spiritual unity but resulted in a division of labour. Here, *koinonia* relates to ministry—it is task-*associated* if not task-*oriented*. This fellowship involves a purpose and apportions resources under God's leading. *Koinonia* subsumes what we might separate into fellowship and partnership, and any neat distinction between the two is undermined.

> I always pray with joy because of your *koinonia*—partnership—in the gospel from the first day until now. (Phil 1:4b-5)

In Paul's greeting his love for and partnership with the Philippians are evident. In v 4 he prays for them with joy, and in v 5 he talks about partnership in the gospel. Being Christian means becoming part of the gospel enterprise, perhaps in a similar way to what we find in Galatians 2. Note that while the NIV translates Galatians 2:9's *koinonia* as *fellowship*, Philippians 1:5 uses *partnership*. *Koinonia* is fellowship for a purpose, partnership based on shared allegiance to Christ.

> Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any *koinonia*—fellowship—in/with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. (Phil 2:1-2)

After acknowledging their *koinonia*—fellowship/partnership—in the gospel, Paul urges the Philippians to remain united in spirit and mind. The Spirit of God establishes a unity between believers—the verb forms here are plural—which changes heart and head. Verses 3 and 4 are all about attitudes and actions which should result from this transforming unity. Looking merely to one's own interests (Phil 2:4) damages the *koinonia* of the church.[22] Following this is a clear logic linking the kenosis section of Philippians 2:6–11 to the obedience and witness highlighted in vv 12–16.

> I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and *koinonia*—participation—in his sufferings. (Phil 3:10)

In the section leading up to v 10 Paul contrasts his own human status with the glory of knowing and serving Christ. For Paul, knowing Christ includes both his power and suffering; both are transformational, refining and redirecting the apostle's life. Yet the explicit *koinonia* is with Christ's suffering, and from the context it is this which is transformational. Going further, Martin suggests that human fellowship is created by the suffering of Christ.[23]

Just as we cannot conceive of a Godhead who has fellowship of belonging without the mission of creating, redeeming, and restoring the universe, so redemption of each individual commits him or her to some degree of involvement in God's mission. To be and to do are two sides of the same thing.

> I pray that your *koinonia*—partnership—with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. (Phlm 1:6)

As Paul sets the scene for the rehabilitation of the runaway slave Onesimus, he commends Philemon as a colleague in the gospel. Both men are ministers, albeit with differing scope and degree of influence, and thus the *koinonia* of v 6 is partnership. Working together in the gospel and living it out practically promote the deepening of faith; service is helping faith rather than springing from it.

Later in the letter, the transformative power of the gospel is seen in Paul's collapsing of status distinctions between apostle, established believer, and new convert with a dubious past (vv 8, 10, 17). Wright observes: "The idea we need to grasp—the theme that dominates the letter—is that, in Christ, Christians not only belong to one another but actually become mutually identified."[24] Reading Philemon shows us that *koinonia* is rooted in what Christ has done, binds people together across social boundaries, and transforms not only how we look at the world, but how that world might look at us.

> And do not forget to do good and *koinonia*—to share—with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Heb 13:16)

As he brings his letter to an end, the writer to the Hebrews reminds his readers to stand firm and imitate the Lord Jesus. He links doing good and sharing with others; *koinonia* is very practical but springs from knowing and following Jesus Christ.

Two Eastern Orthodox scholars help us draw together some of the theological and biblical themes marshalled so far. Zizioulas—who wants to celebrate diversity, difference rather than division—comments that otherness is derived from the nature of the Godhead and thus rather than endangering unity is actually the essence of it.[25] Further, communion and *koinonia* come into being through the work of the Spirit, who "de-individualizes beings where He blows."[26] Yet *koinonia* comes through Christ; Zizioulas argues that we cannot be in *koinonia* with others unless we have been through the cross and have grasped what he calls the "kenotic way."[27] He then progresses to the Eucharist, which must include all believers and exclude no one: it is an event which goes beyond all human distinctions.[28] He is thus in agreement with Volf's claim that in the church, "bodily inscribed differences are brought together, not removed."[29]

Kariatlis concurs. Because the origin of *koinonia* is God himself, communion is theological rather than sociological. "The way that God communally exists" is the pattern for church unity, and *koinonia* within the Godhead is conceptually very close to *perichoresis*.[30] Kariatlis follows St Gregory of Nyssa in claiming that both *koinonia* and *perichoresis* illustrate the distinction between difference and division. Within the Godhead difference is celebrated in divine love through fellowship and the mutual making of space.

The Scripture and the history of the church and Christian missions show that God is a risk-taker,... We need to have the same spirit of courage and openness in our relationships with those on the field.

This principle is to be implemented on earth through the church. Kariatlis echoes John Chrysostom in connecting *koinonia* and *ekklesia*; Christians are *called out* in order to have a communal relationship with God and a consequent "unity and concord."[31]

Towards an application of *perichoresis* and *koinonia* on the twenty-first century mission field

It remains to pull some of these threads together and point to their application in modern missions. We can take *koinonia* among believers as a derivative instantiation of the perichoretic relationship obtaining among the members of the Godhead. Within the triune God are celebrated diversity and difference in an atmosphere of love, trust, and empowerment. Through the incarnation of Christ and his redemptive work, believers (plural) are admitted to this perichoretic life as individuals in community. While no ontological distinctions between divine and human are removed or renegotiated, Christians take part in the divine life. This fellowship with God means that we are entrusted with the Great Commission, bearing fruit, preaching the gospel, and bearing witness along the lines of 1 Peter 2:9–12. We are "redeemed for redemptive living."[32]

Thus imperfect, insecure human beings, with our worldly prejudices and loyalties, are permitted and even required to represent the perfect, sinless God. Just as God admits our imperfection into his divine life, he also recruits us into his missionary force. The principles of loving diversity and missional obligation cascade down from Father to the other members of the Trinity, and down to us through the Son. Because we form a second level perichoretic human community, drawing life from and representing God, the examination of *perichoresis* and *koinonia* above suggests the following.

First, we must integrate being and doing. To know God is to be drawn into his service, with no exceptions. The missionary task needs to empower all, even when it is framed within gradients of power, influence, education, or heritage. The message of the NT is that there is no static *being* pure and simple; starting to *be* Christian means inheriting the commission to *do* Christian. The broad brush strokes of the Great Commission in Matthew 28 are for all, and it is the responsibility of missionaries and church leaders together to work out the details in specific situations and locations. Our belonging to Christ is not pragmatism or just for the sake of expanding the kingdom; it is richer and more complex than that. Just as we cannot conceive of a Godhead who has fellowship of belonging without the mission of creating, redeeming, and restoring the universe, so redemption of each individual commits him or her to some degree of involvement in God's mission. To *be* and to *do* are two sides of the same thing. Grasping this reality might refine our understanding of fellowship, or broaden it such that however we have seen *koinonia* translated, it includes what is often separated out as fellowship and partnership. To accept fellowship (in the traditional sense) only might suggest that while we recognise that we and those less privileged than ourselves on the mission field *do* share something amorphous in Christ, we are not willing to share finances, strategy, and authority. To accept a traditional idea of partnership but without fellowship might mean we work together or even separately for some far-off shared missional aim, but that we are less willing to share life and bump up against each other every day. I am reminded again of my unease with *agency* as a term for a mission society; there is something too utilitarian and objective about it.

Second, we must embrace the other on the mission field. We cannot deny differences in educational level, theological and missiological training, understanding of host cultures, and financial resources. These are givens, and no amount of wishful thinking or political correctness can or should sweep these away. However, we must adopt a posture of accepting those from different backgrounds and believe that in the sovereignty of God they have something to offer, which rules out St Maximus' *division*. This applies not only to multi-ethnic, interdenominational mission societies, but also to relations between missionaries and local colleagues in the host country. All believers bring different resources to the mission task and lay them at the feet of Jesus for the bearing of fruit, as in the parable of the talents (Matt 25:14–30). This principle of all sharing together, despite different degrees of preparedness for the task, I call *asymmetric mutuality*.

Related to this is an eschatological aspect. Fellowship between believers and between believers and God is developmental and dynamic—we are all in a "moving room".[33] The human perichoretic community is different from the divine in that people need to grow and develop while God does not. This is a concession to human finiteness and the effects of sin, an acknowledgement that we need God's grace and trust. Those with greater understanding and experience of the gospel and mission, or more money and influence, should work to facilitate development and growth—fruit bearing—in and with those whom they meet on the field. As all who serve the Lord are trained and equipped, individual gifts and strengths can be discovered and developed with a sense of teleological expectation. This is the principle of asymmetric mutuality again. God pours his Spirit and resources into us and we should do the same to those around us, according to the idea of cascading.

Next is the absolute necessity to be relational and trusting. Despite our imperfections and the certainty that we will make mistakes and fail, God trusts us. The exploration of *koinonia* in the NT showed the high degree of trust present in the early church. Paul was trusted and empowered by the Jerusalem apostles and in turn cascaded trust down to others as he worked in *koinonia* with them. The Scripture and the history of the church and Christian missions show that God is a risk-taker, at least from our human perspective, even though there is no need for trust or risk-taking within the Godhead. We need to have the same spirit of courage and openness in our relationships with those on the field. Do we trust local pastors and evangelists to plant churches "in the right way"? Do we accept leadership from local groups on the field? How do we explain the emerging sense of strategic partnerships to supporting churches on the homeside, who may still feel that some East Asian countries need the wisdom of the West, or the Chinese, or the Koreans? These are not easy questions to answer.

The fifth and final principle is respect, which overlaps some of the others, but also with the two concepts of division and difference. Division looks at the other in a negative way, identifying and emphasising supposed gaps in quality or suitability based on prejudice. Within the Christian community such an attitude is abhorrent, because we are a developmental, eschatological community. We are *all* to move forward, and if some start from a place further back than we are, it is our job to facilitate their progress, acknowledging distinctions but drawing them into the space created by God's dance within himself and with us. As a people of love we help each other become what God meant us to be.[34] Lack of respect can be very subtle and clothed in pleasant sounding language, but it is often felt, particularly across cultural and income gaps. Martin comments that human fellowship is created by Christ's own sufferings,[35] and our immediate response must be, "Who are we to question or endanger such a precious unity?" If one of the core values of mission is respect, then this should manifest as contextualisation on the field. Respect is extended to the culture and worldview of local people and their ability to undertake self-theologising. It also means that the input of local Christians is seen as essential in forming ministry teams and developing mission strategies.

Just as we cannot conceive of a Godhead who has fellowship of belonging without the mission of creating, redeeming, and restoring the universe, so redemption of each individual commits him or her to some degree of involvement in God's mission. To *be* and to *do* are two sides of the same thing.

All of this is easier to research and write about than to put into practice. In addition, a short article can only begin to tease out and relate the different ideas. In a true spirit of *perichoresis* and *koinonia*, may those from richer countries or with more formal training embrace those who have had fewer opportunities, and may any who have been treated unfairly or paternalistically forgive the mistakes of others. In his nature and practice our God accepts diversity and asks us all to move forward together in the great redemptive mission of what he has created. After all, it is he who is Lord of the dance!

NOTES

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[23] Martin, *Philippians*, 51.
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[25] Zizioulas, "Communion," 4.
[26] Zizioulas, "Communion," 5.
[27] Zizioulas, "Communion," 4.
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[31] Kariatlis, "Affirming," 56.
[32] Chris Wright, *The Mission of God's People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 96.
[33] Jürgen Moltmann, "God in the World—the World in God," in *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 369–81.
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Koinonia: The DNA of "Gospel Partnership"

The phrase "partnership in mission" has gained a good deal of currency in mission circles in recent years. But let's be honest, partnership between Christian groups and organizations—even evangelical groups and organizations that have a shared commitment to the authority of Scripture and the priority of evangelism, church planting, and world mission—is not easy. It does not come naturally. It demands a lot of time and effort. It requires us to commit limited funds and limited personnel to activities that are not entirely under our own control. It can feel very inefficient at times. It can create a sense of inequality—of being taken advantage of—if one party feels that it is gaining less from the partnership than the other party, or if one party feels that all of the decision-making power rests with the other party. It can lead to misunderstandings and a sense of broken trust. It can foster jealousy, competition, division, and even slander. It can leave us wounded, disillusioned, and distrustful of entering into similar partnering relationships in the future. Because of these types of experiences, one international director of a large mission organization commented to me recently that organizations such as his don't see much value in cross-organizational partnerships anymore. The implication of his remark was clear: it is better for each Christian organization to just get on with its own focused calling and mission, and to leave other Christian organizations to do the same thing.

But is partnership in mission, as agonizingly difficult as it can be, something that we are simply free to embrace or to reject according to our personal whim or organizational fancy? When push comes to shove, is it merely a matter of personal preference whether we enter into partnership in mission with other believers or not?

In considering these questions, I have been struck by the remarkable similarity between the nature of cross-*organizational* Christian partnership and cross-*cultural* Christian mission itself. Both types of activity are very difficult to do. Both require a lot of time and energy, including the commitment of limited resources to activities not entirely under our control. Both can lead to frequent misunderstandings and a sense of inequality between the various parties involved. Both can leave us feeling wounded, disillusioned—ready to give up and go back to the safety, the security, and the comfort of our own people, our own place, and our own way of doing things. And yet, which of us would be willing to say that we do not see much value in cross-cultural Christian mission because it is too difficult to do? Can we fully embrace the tremendous cost and inefficiency (from a worldly point of view) of cross-*cultural* Christian mission in one breath, and then disavow all interest in and commitment to cross-*organizational* Christian partnership in the next? I would like to caution us to be very careful not to dismiss cross-organizational Christian partnership merely because it is difficult, costly, and seemingly inefficient. To do so would be to call into question the necessity and validity of the Great Commission itself.

So then, if God's word is clear and unequivocal in its mandate for us to cross social, ethnic, political, linguistic, religious, and economic barriers in order to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19), can we find similar encouragement in the Scriptures for us to do the equally hard work of partnering together across our organizational lines in the fulfillment of the world mission mandate? Let's take a look and see.

I have been involved in cross-cultural ministry among the Chinese for nearly three decades now—first in Taiwan in a Hakka church-planting ministry, then in North America on the pastoral staff of a Chinese church, then in Henan as a university lecturer in English and American literature, and now as the director of an NGO that places and supports foreign Christian professionals in Mainland China. Throughout these years of cross-cultural ministry, two verses from the opening paragraph of Paul's letter to "all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi" have been very meaningful to me:

> In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now (Phil 1:4–5).[1]

That one phrase in particular—"partnership in the gospel"—seemed to express much of what I and my co-workers, my prayer and financial supporters, and my Christian employers were engaged in together: gospel partnership. I often found myself quoting all or a portion of those two verses when writing a prayer letter or a thank-you note to supporters or friends. I even chose those verses for the back of the prayer card that we mailed out to our supporters when my wife and I first relocated to Asia long-term in 1998. After all, those 200-plus prayer supporters of ours were "partners in the gospel" with us, and we (like Paul in his letter) were grateful to God for the partnership we had with them.

So when I accepted the invitation to lead an organization consisting of co-workers from more than a dozen different sending organizations and twenty different countries, and when I began to realize just how complicated and difficult it was to partner together with all of that complexity and diversity, I naturally turned to Paul's passage in Philippians about "partnership in the gospel" for insight and encouragement.

What I discovered instead—through closely reading the Greek text behind the English translation—was that I had actually been misreading Paul's passage on "partnership in the gospel"—and in the same way that countless other English readers have probably misread that passage. Paul was actually speaking, I was astonished to learn, of a much more enduring, foundational, and abundant "partnership in the gospel" than I had considered, a "partnership" between God and humans that we begin the moment we receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, the English word "partnership" that we find in the NIV is far too weak to describe the depth and intimacy of the relationship that God invites us to enter into with himself through faith in Jesus. In essence, Paul is joyful because the believers in Philippi have been drawn into life-giving fellowship with God himself from the day they first came to faith in Jesus. Other translations have struggled to capture that richer, fuller sense of partnership with God himself that is alluded to here:

> I thank my God … [for] your *fellowship* in the gospel (Phil 1:3, 5, KJV).[2]
> I thank my God … in view of your *participation* in the gospel (Phil 1:3, 5, NASB).
> I thank my God … because of your *sharing* in the gospel (Phil 1:3, 5, NRSV).

The underlying Greek word that these translations are attempting to render into English is κοινωνία (*koinōnia*). It is a term that is found frequently in Paul's writings, and appears in several other New Testament writers as well.[3] As might be inferred from the various ways in which Philippians 1:5 has been translated, *koinōnia* and its grammatical variants can in different contexts refer to "partnership," "sharing," "fellowship," "participation," "communion," or "close union."[4] In this one epistle alone, Paul actually makes use of *koinōnia* in almost all of these slightly different semantic senses at different points in the letter. For instance, a few verses later in his opening paragraph, Paul defends the warmth of his feelings for the recipients of his letter by adding,

> It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, … for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you *share* [*synkoinōnous*] in God's grace with me (1:7).

Similarly, in Chapter 2 we find the *koinōnia* that exists between God and his sons and daughters in Christ described as "*fellowship* with the Spirit" (2:1), and again (famously) in Chapter 3 as "the *fellowship* of *sharing* in [Christ's] sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (3:10).

It is not until the very end of Paul's letter, in fact, that Paul finally uses two verbal variants of the noun *koinōnia* to talk about "partnership" in the sense that we usually think of partnership today—and in the way that I had always thought of "partnership in the gospel" in my own innocent, yet culturally biased, misreading of Paul's letter. In Chapter 4, Paul specifically thanks the Philippians for some monetary gifts that they had sent to him through his co-worker Epaphroditus.

> Yet it was kind of you to *share* my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into *partnership* with me in giving and receiving, except you only (4:14–15, ESV).

This is highly instructive to me. The logical order or sequence in which Paul develops the concept of *koinōnia* in his brief letter to the Philippians is by no means random or accidental. In the first two-thirds of the letter, Paul goes out of his way to emphasize the close fellowship and intimacy that we experience with God himself by means of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, that is essentially what the miraculously "good news" of the gospel is all about: bringing sinful human beings back into close fellowship—into genuine *koinōnia*—with a righteous and holy God. "Partnership in the gospel" is first and foremost about us sharing in and partaking of the goodness of God himself. It is about God welcoming us "in Christ" into that joyful, trusting circle of fellowship and oneness that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have always known and experienced within their Trinitarian nature. And only after the Philippians have been repeatedly reminded by Paul of the *koinōnia* that exists between them and God does Paul make mention of the *koinōnia* that exists between fellow believers in Christ—a *koinōnia* that is characterized by the act of "partnership … in giving and receiving" that Paul mentions at the end of his letter.

If any doubts remain as to the centrality of the term *koinōnia* in Paul's conception of our fundamental faith relationship with God in Christ, they are put to rest by his double use of the term in 1 Corinthians 10 where he writes about the Lord's Supper. For Paul, the intimate communion that exists between God and the believer is made possible only by means of our actual participation (or fellowship or sharing or partaking) by faith in the physical death of Christ:

> Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks *a participation* (*koinōnia*) in the blood of Christ? And is not the

> bread that we break *a participation* (*koinōnia*) in the body of Christ? (1 Cor 10:16)

These are rhetorical questions to which the obvious response is, "Yes, indeed!" Our joyful union with God in Christ is based firmly upon our participation by faith in Jesus' spilt blood and broken body on our behalf. That is always the heart and soul of our *koinōnia* with God. It is only through Christ's offering of himself as the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice that a restored intimacy with God is possible. And this spiritual *koinōnia* with God through Christ's death on our behalf serves as the unshakable foundation upon which all *koinōnia* among and between believers within the faith community is eternally based.

The connection between these two types of *koinōnia* would have been obvious to the original recipients of Paul's letter to the Philippians, which was written in *koinē* Greek. We partner together freely in God's family, generously giving to one another and receiving from one another, because God in Christ Jesus has already drawn us into abundant, life-giving partnership with himself. To put it another way, the grace that is ours by means of our vertical "partnership in the gospel" with God is continuously overflowing into horizontal "partnerships in the gospel" in all of our relationships on earth—including and especially our relationships with fellow Christians, regardless of where they live, what languages they speak, what local gathering of believers they belong to, and so on. It is only by the power of the gospel itself that meaningful, fruitful fellowship and partnership can exist between brothers and sisters in Christ—and, by extension, between and among Christian congregations and organizations.

What is particularly crucial for us to realize here is that "gospel partnership" in this extended sense is not just limited to partnership in so-called "full-time Christian ministry." Our *koinōnia* with God actually extends into and transforms *all* of our human relationships and institutions, of which Paul and the rest of the New Testament writers are always eager to remind us. We are, by means of the intimate participation that we experience with God in Christ, both called upon and empowered to bring "good news" into our marriages, into our homes, into our economic structures as masters and slaves (i.e. as employers and employees), into our educational institutions, our governance structures, and the communities in which we live and worship. We are invited, by means of our gospel partnership in and with the living God, to allow his goodness, grace, and life-giving abundance to flow into all of our human relationships and structures, witnessing him transform those relationships and structures along the way.

What did this look like in practice in the first-century church as it began to spread outward from Jerusalem across the Mediterranean world? In Jerusalem, it meant that the believers

> were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to *fellowship*, to the breaking of break and to prayer.... All those who had believed were together and had all things in common ... selling their property and possessions and ... sharing them with all, as anyone might have need (Acts 2:42–45, NASB).

In Antioch, it meant that "the disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea ... sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 11:29–30). It also meant that, when specifically called upon by the Holy Spirit to release Barnabas and Saul (40% of their church leadership team!) from local pastoral responsibilities in Antioch so that they could be involved in cross-cultural church-planting work among the Gentiles in other parts of the Roman world, they willingly and eagerly prayed for them, placed their hands on them, and sent them off (Acts 13:1–3).

In Ephesus, it meant that husbands were to love their wives "as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25, ESV), that fathers were to bring their children up "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4), and that both masters and slaves were to "do good" to one another "as if ... serving the Lord, not men" (Eph 6:7–8). In Macedonia, it meant that even in the midst of severe trials, a "grace of God" was given to all the churches in the region so that

> their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty ... overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.... They gave according to their means ... and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints [in Judea]—and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us (2 Cor 8:5–8, ESV).

There are dozens and dozens of additional accounts like these scattered throughout the New Testament record, all pointing to and illustrating the gracious, generous, humble, open-handed nature of our transformed lives and relationships as the *koinōnia*—the gospel partnership—that all believers have and know in Christ begins to work its way into and through and around all of our other relationships. All those who are in Christ enter into redemptive horizontal gospel partnerships—both personal and corporate—because that is what *koinōnia* with God always yearns towards and makes possible.

What does this mean for those of us engaged in cross-cultural mission today? At the very least, it means that "partnership in mission" is never just a matter of personal preference or organizational expediency. We do not do the hard work of entering into creative, generous, cross-organizational gospel partnership because it is easy or cost-effective or convenient (which it most certainly is not). Is it easy for husbands and wives to submit to one another and to love one another as Christ loved the church? Is it easy for masters and slaves to genuinely seek one another's good and to treat one another with Christ-like compassion and dignity? Is it easy for impoverished Gentile believers in Macedonia to give generously so that impoverished Jewish believers in Judea (whom they have never met) can provide for their own families in a time of severe famine? None of these humble, generous "partnerships in the gospel" make any sense at all apart from the rich, inexhaustible *koinōnia* that those

of us who are in Christ know and experience on a daily basis from the moment we first place our trust in him. No, we do the hard work of finding what "gospel partnership" means for us as stewards and gate-keepers of God's resources entrusted to us because that is what believers in "fellowship with the Spirit" have always done, and are always being prodded by the Spirit to do more and more of (Phil 2:1). It is who we are. It is our birthright as God's children. It is our truest spiritual nature and our highest spiritual calling on this earth.

I find it remarkable that the concept of *koinōnia* with God is largely missing from the Old Testament narratives. We find many examples of fellowship, partnership, sharing, and participation in various human relationships in the Old Testament, but there is no equivalent expression of the intimate fellowship *with* God that is abundantly on display in the New Testament accounts. The primary understanding of *koinōnia* in the Old Testament (as reflected in the Greek Septuagint) is one of associations between human beings, and in particular of associations of a legal or semi-legal nature.[5] Even the associations between God and his own people are primarily delineated in the language of covenant and law. While God can be known by his chosen people in the Hebrew Scriptures, there is always a sense of respectful distance and formality in that relationship. And the horizontal *koinōnia* that is on display between the twelve tribes is often hopelessly strained and fractured as well, characterized by tribalism, strife, competition, and internecine warfare. It is clear that they are still awaiting a Messiah to unite them once again and to call them back into abundant community.

As I reflect upon the competition, mistrust, and lack of open-handed cooperation that too often inhibits and blunts cross-organizational partnerships among God's people today in the cause of world mission, I wonder if we might still be operating under a tribalistic, Old Testament understanding of partnership. We joyfully enter into the intimacy of fellowship with God in Christ and invite that transformational grace to flow into our *interpersonal* relationships, including those with other brothers and sisters in Christ in our local places of worship. But it is often difficult for us to grasp either the privilege or the blessing of also allowing that transformational grace to flow freely from our grouping of God's people towards another grouping of God's people—whether those groupings are in a local church setting or in a Christian business/NGO setting. We essentially remain law-bound in our understanding of Christian partnership, and the whole body of Christ—indeed, the whole world—misses out on the fuller abundance and deeper blessing of grace-based *koinōnia* as a result.

This is the very thing that Jesus earnestly talked to the Father about when praying for all of us at the conclusion of his highly priestly prayer on the night before he was crucified:

> My prayer is not for them [the eleven disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:20–23).

Three times here within the span of a few brief sentences, Jesus prays specifically for our unity—for our oneness—as believers. Moreover, Jesus makes a strong link here between the *completeness* of our unity with one another and the *completeness* of the world's knowledge of himself as the Messiah sent by God. As we are brought into complete unity with one another in Christ, the good news of Jesus Christ is literally thrust outward and fans across the globe. Nothing can stand in its way. Jesus had already said essentially the same thing to his disciples earlier that evening: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

I am confident that both the Son and the Spirit are still interceding on our behalf before the Father, asking that we might be one, just as they are one, *so that the whole world may know Jesus through our united efforts*. After all, the three persons of the Trinity have been engaged in "partnership in mission" far longer than any of us has. And now that the Father, Son, and Spirit have graciously chosen to invite us by faith fully into that privileged place of *koinōnia*, how can we presume to do anything less in our dealings with one another as we live out this grace-based *koinōnia* in our personal, corporate, and organizational relationships?

Let us all, then, as spiritual brothers and sisters in the community of God's people and as stewards of the spiritual and material resources that he has entrusted to us and to our faith-based organizations, hear the challenge that Paul gives to another gathering of God's people nearly two thousand years ago:

> I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.... [For] to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it ... to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:1, 7, 12–13).

We are indeed a graced people, with vital gifts to offer one another as individuals, congregations, denominations, and mission communities for the mutual benefit of the entire body of Christ. May we enter fully and unreservedly into the grace-based, *koinōnia*-infused "partnerships in mission" that God himself has prepared beforehand for us to walk in. To this we have been called and for this we have been chosen.

NOTES

[1] Unless otherwise stated, biblical quotations in this paper are from the NIV.
[2] Italics in this and subsequent biblical quotations are added to highlight English translations of the underlying *koinōn* word group.
[3] See Acts 2:42; Heb 13:16; and 1 John 1:3, 6, 7 for non-Pauline uses of *koinōnia*.
[4] Friedrich Hauck, "κοινός, κτλ," *TDNT*, 3:804–6.
[5] *TDNT*, 3:801–3.



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The Church as God's Agent: A Study in Reflecting the Trinity[1]

Introduction: troublesome theological baggage?

The doctrine of the Trinity was hammered out in the context of cross-cultural mission. As Newbigin says,

> It is indeed a significant fact that the great doctrinal struggles about the nature of the Trinity, especially about the mutual relations of the Son and the Father, developed right in the midst of the struggle between the church and the pagan world. These Trinitarian struggles were indeed an essential part of the battle to master the pagan worldview at the height of its power and self-confidence.[2]

Even so, many Christians tend to steer clear of the doctrine, not because they wish to deny it, but because "it has usually been regarded as a venerable formulation handed down from the past, or perhaps … a troublesome piece of theological baggage which is best kept out of sight when trying to commend the faith to unbelievers."[3]

For this reason, while most Christians will be Trinitarian in creed they may not necessarily be so in experience. They struggle to articulate its practical relevance for personal faith, never mind its connection with mission. But far from being "a piece of theological baggage" this doctrine is of central importance.

In his book *The Orthodox Church*, Timothy Ware reminds us that "Orthodoxy believes most passionately that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is not a piece of 'high theology' reserved for the professional scholar, but something that has a living, *practical* importance for every Christian."[4] This is the spirit in which we should approach our topic.

Trinity and mission: Latin terms to Lausanne Commitments

It is worth remembering that until the sixteenth century the term "mission" was used to describe the activity of the Trinity—the Father's sending (*missio*) of the Son and the Father and the Son's sending (*missio*) of the Holy Spirit. We have the Jesuits to thank for extending the term "mission" beyond the activity of the Trinity to include the church spreading the Christian faith. It is always helpful to keep this order in mind: that the church's mission is always an extension of God's prior mission.

The twentieth century saw something of a revival of Trinitarian theology and this has influenced missiological thinking—that mission is first of all God's mission and flows from the initiative and community of the Trinity. This larger perspective is good medicine for missionaries and churches who too often succumb to an introverted self-centredness and have the propensity to limit the scope of the biblical mission. How true that, "We invite God's blessing on our human-centered mission strategies, but the only concept of mission into which God fits is the one of which he is the beginning and the end."[5]

In recent years evangelicals have been thinking hard about the Trinitarian basis of mission. The World Evangelical Fellowship's Missiological Consultation in Iguassu, Brazil, in 1999, saw Ajith Fernando give a series of Bible readings on the theme, "Grounding our reflections in Scripture: Biblical trinitarianism and mission." The Iguassu Affirmation contained a commitment to ongoing reflection on "Trinitarian foundation for mission".[6]

A more accessible, and probably more influential expression of the *missio Trinitatis*, is found in *The Cape Town Commitment* of the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization which took place in Cape Town, 2010.[7] The document's confession of faith and call to action are expressed within a Trinitarian framework using the covenant language of love. The *CTC* is a wonderfully clear and succinct vision of integral mission set within a Trinitarian framework.

The church: icon and representative of the Trinity

There is an inherent danger of constructing our understanding of mission using isolated biblical texts. An understanding of what it means for the church to reflect the Triune God of mission requires a larger, altogether more comprehensive vision of God shaped by an engagement with the whole counsel of God. But we have to begin somewhere, and perhaps there's no better place than John's Gospel. Anastasios of Androussa writes that

> The starting point of any apostolic activity on our behalf is the promise and order of the Risen Lord in its Trinitarian perspective: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you... Receive the Holy Spirit" (Jn 20:21–22). The love of the Father has been expressed through the *sending* of the Son. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ... For God sent the Son into the world" (Jn 3:16–17).[8]

John 3:16 has been described as "The inexhaustible, key gospel verse" laying out simply yet profoundly, "God's immanent nature and economic expression in the world."[9]

In the Fourth Gospel, God is the sending God. John the Baptist is sent by God to bear testimony to Jesus. Jesus is sent to do the Father's will and to make him known. The Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit who continues the witness and work of Jesus in the world. And finally, the disciples are sent to accomplish the mission of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Our understanding of what it means for the church to represent and reflect the triune God who is missionary is also part of what it means for us to be made in the image of God. We most often apply this individually, but there is a corporate dimension which is not always present in our discussions on church and mission.

On first glance, it seems that the only one in John's Gospel who is not sent is the Father, and yet, "In his position as source of the incarnational mission, the Father is both 'sender' and 'sent'."[10] The key person at the centre of all the sendings is Jesus. He is "the flaming centre of the Christian message."[11] Remove him and the church has nothing to say and no mission to the world. "Every other mission," observes Köstenberger, "is derivative of the mission of Jesus: the mission of the Baptist, the Spirit and the disciples."[12] And the disciples receive this commissioning not as isolated individuals but as a community. Of all the so-called classic missionary texts of the New Testament, Jesus' words of commissioning—"as the Father has sent me so I am sending you"—are surely the clearest in terms of the church being sent as the representative of the Trinity. The immediate context is Trinitarian and the wider context of the Fourth Gospel has already taken up the theme of representation in 13:20, where being a representative of Jesus is also, indirectly, to be a representative of the Father. "The sending of the church is intimately linked to the sending activity of the Trinity. It is not by human authority, but through the authority of the triune God, who as Father sends, as Son redeems, and as Spirit empowers."[13]

Our understanding of what it means for the church to represent and reflect the triune God who is missionary is also part of what it means for us to be made in the image of God. We most often apply this individually, but there is a corporate dimension which is not always present in our discussions on church and mission. Orthodox theology recognises that "the church as a whole is an icon of God the Trinity, reproducing on earth the mystery of unity in diversity."[14] So what does it mean for the whole church to image the wholeness of the triune God, in bringing the whole gospel to the whole world?

Reflecting the Trinity in building community

My main aim in this article is to throw the spotlight on what it means to reflect the Trinity in building community. But very briefly, let me underline two additional areas I believe are crucially important when thinking about what it means for the church to image the wholeness of the triune God.

First is our understanding of discipleship. Any attempt to flesh out what whole-life-discipleship looks like must begin with how our discipleship seeks to reflect the wholeness of God—imaging God across the whole of life in word, deed, and character.[15] Reflection on this theme would also alert us to the ways in which discipleship is hindered when churches and denominations tend to concentrate on one member of the Trinity at the expense of the others. Leonard Hodgson reminds us how "The doctrine of the Trinity enables us to keep the right proportion in our faith."[16]

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Second is how the church reflects the Trinity through the marks of the church. A traditional way of understanding the nature of the church has been to take the four features of the church defined by the Nicene Creed of Constantinople in 381—"I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." In unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity, the church finds its true identity. Graham Tomlin takes up these marks and filters them through a Trinitarian, eschatological pneumatology, and concludes: "These four marks of the church need to be viewed as an answer to this fundamental question: what kind of community is needed to engage in the mission of God to the world. Answer? It needs to be one, it needs to be holy, it needs to be catholic and it needs to be apostolic."[17] In other words, and turning them into adverbs as Charles van Engen does, the church must be unifying, sanctifying, reconciling, and proclaiming in order for it to be God's agent in reflecting the Trinity.[18]

Pursuing partnership and unity

The relationality and interdependence of the Trinity is to be reflected in how we pursue partnership with other Christians, churches, and organisations.

As the letter to the Ephesians explains, the church is a multi-ethnic community, and in this new humanity "is the promise that this society mirrors as in a microcosm the hope of the world and the universe, at present divided and at odds with its creator."[19] In the NT, "God's reconciling work in his people during the present age is presented as a pilot scheme for the realisation of his saving purpose."[20] This means that a foretaste of God's ultimate reconciling work is already present in creation—in the church. The working out of this eschatological vision into the concrete ministry and mission of the church must surely include demonstrating visible, experienced unity. This, writes Hastings, is "the most powerful dynamic in mission." Reform movements within the church therefore need to be tempered, so that "emerging churches and church plants … do all they can to remain within the catholicity of the church. Jesus calls the church to missional effectiveness by working for unity."[21]

Seeking to maintain gospel integrity and seeking to achieve the unity of the church are not mutually exclusive goals. Indeed, the former probably requires the latter. As Kevin Vanhoozer puts it, "The Truth of the gospel ranks higher in the evangelical order of priorities than does visible church unity. It may be time, however, to rethink our priorities."[22]

Sometimes it is those situations closest to home that we struggle with most. Vinoth Ramachandra writes of a visit to Seoul to take part in a conference on reconciliation.

> I was impressed by the passionate intensity of my South Korean friends' prayers for unification with their North Korean kinsmen. Every day, groups of South Korean Christians gather in the de-militarized zone to pray for the unification of the peninsula. But I saw no comparable passion for the unity of the church in South Korea. Indeed they must have found my questions regarding Christian unity and partnership in mission as baffling as I did their lack of interest in the latter.[23]

There is a sense in which churches belong to each other. Every church is part of the body of Christ. Every church is to reflect the relationality and interconnectedness of the Trinity in its pursuit of partnership and unity. We have all been called "into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor 1:9). Churches may differ in terms of organisational structure and worship patterns, and yet there is "one body and one Spirit … one hope … one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Eph 4:4–5).

Partnership is not simply a useful idea in carrying out the task of mission. It expresses something of the essence of what the church is and reflects the Trinity in our relationships. "Within world Christianity, 'partnership' expresses a relationship between churches based on trust, mutual recognition and reciprocal interchange.… It is a term designed to show how different parts of the church belong to one another and find their fulfilment through sharing a common life."[24]

When Paul writes to the Corinthians and connects them with "churches everywhere that call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours" (1 Cor 1:2), he is reminding the Corinthians that they are part of a larger body. They are not the only pebble on the beach. Our local contextual expressions of church need to be balanced with their catholicity—the practical outworking of their theological connection to "churches everywhere".

Building reconciled communities

What distinctive form should church communities take, particularly in contexts of ethnic and cultural diversity? How can a congregation become the dynamic expression of the triune God in terms of unity in diversity? One answer, particularly in ethnically diverse contexts, is for a local church to express the way Christian identity transcends ethnic and cultural boundaries.

The gospel requires us to demonstrate the social implications of the doctrine of reconciliation and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Let me illustrate this from the Malaysian context. Since Malaysia's independence, many have pinned their hopes on the education system to provide the necessary foundations for racial integration, and on the local school as a place where such integration can be fostered and seen in action, preparing each generation for the reality of *Bangsa Malaysia*.[25] However, research has shown that in this aspect at least, the education system has largely failed.[26] Therefore, where in Malaysia can a racially reconciled community be seen in action? As Christians we ought to be able to point to the local church. In reality however, most congregations are as racially segregated as the society around them. Denison Jayasooria has called for the breaking down of racial barriers within the Christian community.

> While it is true to affirm the importance of an individual's or community's cultural, linguistic or racial background, those who have found new life in Jesus are a radical community.... Within our Malaysian context where there is racial and linguistic polarisation, the Christian community should set a model of inter-ethnic relations. However the tragic reality is, many large denominations operate like the Barisan Nasional. As a radical step forward, should not our churches drop labels like "Chinese Church", "Tamil Church" etc.... There must be the breaking down of racial barriers and myths.[27]

The gospel transcends the barriers of race, ethnicity, and culture, making the church the most inclusive community on earth. In its local expression it therefore has the potential to become a community of hope in a fragmented world. In Malaysia, the church has the task of not only proclaiming the message of reconciliation to all Malaysians, but of embodying the concrete implications of that message in its community life, so that Malaysians of all races can look at a local church and see the gospel fleshed out in a racially reconciled group of people who can work, worship, and witness together. This is one dimension of what it means for the church to reflect the Trinity: a unity in diversity.

This is one dimension of what it means for the church to reflect the Trinity: a unity in diversity. Such a model of reconciliation will find various pathways opening up for reconciliation and peacebuilding initiatives to be carried out within the wider community.

Such a model of reconciliation will find various pathways opening up for reconciliation and peacebuilding initiatives to be carried out within the wider community. Richard Dorall recognises that the unique, multiethnic make-up of the church in Malaysia creates possibilities.

> The most striking feature of Malaysia's non-Christian religions is their ethnic exclusivity. Only Christianity is multiethnic, reflecting closely in its membership the overall ethnic composition of Malaysia.... Christianity, then, is uniquely placed to make major contributions to genuine multiracial living in Malaysia.[28]

In diverse and fragmented communities, church planting strategies should contain the goal of seeing churches birthed that reflect the community of the triune God—churches which demonstrate how the gospel has the power to bring diverse peoples together, forming them into reconciled communities. Church planting strategies where this intentionality is absent risk distorting the gospel itself.

> The moment we make "planting churches within people groups" the aim of Christian mission, even in heterogeneous geographical areas, we inevitably distort the gospel so that it no longer confronts the idolatries of politics and culture. It no longer challenges converts to identify with the 'outsider' and even the "enemy".[29]

It may be the case that working with one particular ethnic group is a useful starting point in evangelism and in the early stages of church planting, but there are significant theological reasons why it is necessary for new Christians and young congregations to understand early on in their spiritual pilgrimage that they are part of the whole people of God, the multiethnic, multicultural people of God, and that the gospel requires us to demonstrate the social implications of the doctrine of reconciliation *and* the doctrine of the Trinity.

Conclusion

In the early fifteenth century, the Russian iconographer, Andrei Rublev, painted a famous icon of the Trinity. It is based on the Genesis 18 narrative which describes Abraham being visited by three angels. In the icon these angels are depicted as God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit seated around a table, and the Trinity is pictured inviting us into their mysterious community where there is a space at the table. The icon's purpose is to remind the believer of the call to go deeper into the divine life. And this is the key to our becoming God's agents in mission and reflecting the triune God.

In diverse and fragmented communities, church planting strategies should contain the goal of seeing churches birthed that reflect the community of the triune God—churches which demonstrate how the gospel has the power to bring diverse peoples together, forming them into reconciled communities.



Holy Trinity by Andrei Rublev. Tempera on Wood, 141.5 x 114 cm, Tretyakov Gallery, early fifthteenth century

The Genesis 18 narrative contains the promise to Abraham that "all nations will be blessed through him," a promise that finds fulfilment as the Patriarch keeps "the way of the LORD" (Gen 18:19)—a common theme in OT ethics and one which is carried over into the NT with the pattern of discipleship seen in the Gospels and in Paul (e.g. Eph 5:1–15). As with Abraham, so with us: in the context of a sinful world, God calls his people to be characterised by the way of the Lord, the way of mirroring the triune God in the totality of life. And as we live that kind of life, God's mission to the nations is fulfilled.

As with Abraham, so with us: in the context of a sinful world, God calls his people to be characterised by the way of the Lord, the way of mirroring the triune God in the totality of life. And as we live that kind of life, God's mission to the nations is fulfilled.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this paper was read at the OMF Mission Research Consultation, April 2013.
[2] Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 34.
[3] Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine*, 35.
[4] Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin, 1991), 216.
[5] Christopher J. H. Wright, "An Upside Down World: Distinguishing between Home and Mission Field no Longer makes Sense," *Christianity Today*, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/january/30.42.html (accessed 10 November 2014).
[6] See "The Iguassu Affirmation," in *Global Missiology for the 21st Century*, ed. William D. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 15–21.
[7] *The Cape Town Commitment* (The Lausanne Movement, 2011).
[8] Anastasios of Androussa, "Orthodox Mission: Past, Present, Future," in *Your Will be Done: Orthodoxy in Mission*, ed. George Lemopoulos (Geneva: WCC, 1988), 79–81.
[9] Martin Accad and John Corrie, "Trinity," in *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*, ed. John Corrie (Nottingham, IVP, 2012), 399.
[10] Accad and Corrie, "Trinity," 399.
[11] Carl Braaten, *The Flaming Centre: A Theology of the Christian Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 2.
[12] Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 209.
[13] Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennett, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 73.
[14] Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 244.
[15] For more on the theme of discipleship see Peter Rowan, "Matthew's Guide to Missional Discipleship: Towards an Integral Mission Theology in the First Gospel" *Mission Round Table* 9 (September 2014): 4–11.
[16] Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Nisbet, 1943), 191, quoted in Newbigin, *Trinitarian Doctrine*, 82.
[17] Graham Tomlin, *The Prodigal Spirit: The Trinity, the Church and the Future of the World* (London: Alpha International, 2011), 160.
[18] Charles van Engen, *God's Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), quoted in Vanhoozer, "Evangelicalism and the Church: The Company of the Gospel," in *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects*, ed. Craig Bartholomew, Robin Parry, and Andrew West (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 78.
[19] Ralph Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study in Paul's Theology* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), 232.
[20] F. F. Bruce, "Some Thoughts on Paul and Paulinism," *Vox Evangelica* 7 (1971): 14.
[21] Ross Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church: Hope for Re-Evangelizing the West* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), 115.
[22] Kevin Vanhoozer, "Evangelicalism and the Church," 79.
[23] Vinoth Ramachandra, "Foreword," in Peter Rowan, *Proclaiming the Peacemaker: The Malaysian Church as an Agent of Reconciliation in a Multicultural Society* (Oxford: Regnum, 2012), xi.
[24] J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission?* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999), 184.
[25] The goal of National Unity gave birth to the phrase *Bangsa Malaysia*, first used by the former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohammad in 1991. *Bangsa* is a Malay word meaning "race, nationality; belonging to a race, or nationality". *Bangsa Malaysia* means "Malaysian nationality", "Malaysian People" or "United Malaysian People".
[26] See Lee Hock Guan, "Globalisation and Ethnic Integration in Malaysian Education," in *Malaysia: Recent Trends and Challenges*, ed. Saw Swee-Hock and K. Kesavapany (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 2006), 230–259.
[27] Denison Jayasooria, *Social Transformation: Theology and Action* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysia Care, 1990), 19-20.
[28] Richard F. Dorrall, "Religion and Ethnicity in Malaysia: A Preliminary Analysis of Data in the 1980 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia," CMW Project, *Komisi Bahasa Malaysia Gereja Katolik Semenanjung Malaysia*, January 1986.
[29] Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 204.



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Fellowship, Communion, and Partnership between Local Churches

When I arrived at university in the fall of 1970 I found a few other Christians. We started to meet together and soon became a church on the campus. We called ourselves "The Christian Fellowship." Fellowship was an important word for us. We took the "one-another" commands very seriously, trying to make them part of our daily lives. We taught fervently and repeatedly about being the body of Christ. Many students were discipled through this "body life" and are serving Christ all over the world today.[1]

After I graduated, this church asked my wife Becky and me to stay on to help them. We did so for the next six years. We also saw a house church develop and served both churches. During this time we saw God's provision as we lived by faith, completed seminary studies, and even bought a house!

But God was moving among us and he moved us to Fresno where I served in a Presbyterian church for five years. Having grown up in a Presbyterian church, I was familiar with words like presbytery and synod but had never really experienced inter-church activities. Now I did. The churches in the presbytery did things together: Junior and Senior High School Youth Retreats, special Bible teaching times together, organized an annual missions conference, and other joint ministries. An important part of my work was managing the interface between the local church I served and the other churches. It was through the annual mission conferences that our passion for missions was sustained and our calling made certain.

Moving to Thailand in 1985 and then on to work in central Thailand, we continued to work with churches in fellowship with other churches. The Associated Churches in Thailand had just been formed, of which the Central Thailand Church Association was one of the founding Associations. The churches in central Thailand did many things together: children's camps, youth camps, training events, annual "revival" weekends, evangelistic outreach, prayer, and so forth. The churches profited from and enjoyed this kind of cooperation. It made them feel less isolated in a society with very few Christians and churches. We joined in with this inter-church communion enthusiastically.

Reflecting on these experiences, I see three main benefits for churches to be in relationship with other churches. The most immediate benefit is that churches working together can do more than one church alone. This is a service or ministry benefit. Then there is the witness benefit as churches together can speak of the unity in the body of Christ and demonstrate this unity across the many divisions in this world. Finally, there is a protection benefit for churches in an association. This is a benefit that guards against internal dangers and helps those who face external pressure. We will examine each of these below.

1. Churches can do more together

In both America and Thailand, churches working together can do youth work that one church can not do alone. Often in the small churches of Central Thailand there are neither enough young people nor enough leaders to have regular youth meetings. Churches working in fellowship help disciple the youth and keep them on track with the Lord.

In both America and Thailand, churches together can promote and support missions in ways that one church can not. One of the first missionaries sent out from Thailand by OMF had over fifty supporting churches. Even in America, where the churches are more affluent, it is rare that one church can fully support a missionary.

All local churches have limitations. No local church can reflect all the diversity that will be on display before the throne of the Lamb. But churches in fellowship with other churches can reflect a greater diversity than any one local church.

The opportunity to join together and do useful and beneficial activities is a primary incentive for inter-church associations. The list of things that can be done together is extensive. Here are some of the things I have seen churches do in partnership:

- campsites
- cemeteries
- crematoriums
- youth work
- children's work
- evangelism
- buildings
- financial aid and mutual help
- care for retired pastors
- scholarships
- Bible college and seminary
- internship programs
- crisis pregnancy assistance
- assistance programs to help struggling churches
- help with new church planting
- pulpit supply
- support for home and foreign missionaries
- missions conferences
- help with discipline issues
- lay leadership training
- Bible teaching events
- "renewal meetings"
- advice and counsel
- help with inner healing
- deliverance ministry
- help with governmental relations
- land registration
- pre-schools and schools
- hospitals and clinics

Readers can probably add to this list. While some of these things can be done by one church working on its own, ministries like these will usually benefit from more than one congregation's involvement. In many cases, the participation of a significant number of congregations is essential. When this happens, ministries like these can produce blessings that impact millions.

2. Churches together can witness to the unity, reconciliation, and love in the gospel

One of the criticisms made of our university Christian Fellowship was that it lacked an age spectrum, as we were all students. Some went so far as to say we were not a church because we did not have a full age spectrum. We did not find this idea to be consistent with the New Testament. We were a church. We believed and confessed that Jesus is Lord. We regularly met in the name of the Lord. We celebrated the Lord's Supper and practiced baptism. We appointed leaders and we were self-consciously a church.[2] But that does not mean that we could not and did not profit from fellowship with other churches that had a broader age spectrum, ethnicity, or social status. We did have some of these connections and benefited from them.

By co-operating and partnering, Thai and members of hill tribes relate and have the chance to reflect the unity in Christ that transcends ethnicity, language, and social status. This is a witness to the gospel in Thailand.

All local churches have limitations. No local church can reflect all the diversity that will be on display before the throne of the Lamb. But churches in fellowship with other churches can reflect a greater diversity than any one local church.

The Associated Churches in Thailand (ACT) is made up of sub-associations that have roots in language and ethnicity. There is a Hmong association, a Yumien association, and so forth. By co-operating and partnering, Thai and members of hill tribes relate and have the chance to reflect the unity in Christ that transcends ethnicity, language, and social status. This is a witness to the gospel in Thailand.

The Presbyterian church I served in had a broad age spectrum, but in some respects it was just as limited as the student fellowship. Two of the men that I discipled during those years did manual labor for a living while the church was mostly composed of professional people. These two men felt like misfits when they parked their pickup trucks next to the high-end sedans in the parking lot. Fortunately, the wider fellowship of the churches in the Presbytery included others who did manual labor and reflected a broader social spectrum.

The broader social spectrum represented in a group of local churches not only reflects the unity we have in the body of Christ, it is also helpful in practical ways. This is especially true for societies like Thailand that place a high value on personal connections. ACT, as a national body, has members from all kinds of professions and social strata who display a wide range of abilities. One example of how this was helpful came during the tsunami relief efforts. A Lawa church in the north sent a team to help with relief work in the south of the country. One of their members was a local government official. As they teamed up with a local church in the tsunami area, this man was able to link with a local government official of the same rank. Suddenly the relief ministry was much easier.

Many of the first Christians in central Thailand were leprosy patients who were socially ostracized. At first there were churches that were composed of leprosy patients and others churches that were not. In reality, the leprosy churches were never wholly made up of leprosy patients because the gospel was spreading among their families. In all the so-called leprosy churches there were a few who did not have the disease. Similarly, the "well" churches were not completely free of leprosy patients, as some who did not have obvious deformities freely participated in them. As inter-church activities developed in central Thailand, there was mingling across this social barrier. In the 1970s, the missionaries did away with the distinction and even merged some churches. Though doing away with the distinction was the correct thing to do, merging churches was not an easy task as it limited witness in a society that feared leprosy and sometimes new Christians were not ready to associate with leprosy patients. In one case, the newly merged church split over the leprosy issue. OMF missionaries helped this new church survive until it could join another church association. It might have been better to see each of the churches develop and foster fellowship at the inter-church level where it was already happening naturally due to the spiritual influence of the gospel in people's lives. The testimony for Christ through the love between Thai Christians with and without leprosy has commended the gospel to many.

3. Churches together help protect one another from internal and external dangers

When a church was straying in its teaching about the Trinity, the leaders from other churches went together to that church to explain, instruct, and call that church back to the orthodox faith. When a church leader fell into sin, other churches helped that church until new leadership could be established.

One reason the tribal associations gave for wanting to have relationships with Thai Christians and churches was for social protection. The tribal Christians felt pressured by the Thai government in various ways and saw that it was beneficial for them to be able to show a connection with Thai Christians. Often, local persecution of Christians can be prevented if the Christians can be linked to a bigger and broader group. In some cases, international Christian pressure can help groups of persecuted believers. In Thailand, where Christians are still less than 0.7% of the population, just being at a meeting with a bigger group of Christians means a lot. It reassures believers that they are not alone and helps them keep pressing on with Christ.

On one occasion, leaders of the Evangelical Fellowship of Thailand (EFT) (including the author) were falsely accused of slander. When the police who received the accusation summoned the EFT leaders to surrender themselves, many local Christians and Christian leaders from the wider region, including a Thai Christian policeman, showed up on the appointed day. They wanted the local police to see that there was a community of people standing with the EFT leaders. They did not want local police to be manipulated and miscarry their responsibility to see justice done.

Are church associations biblical?

We see in the New Testament that churches interacted with one another. Most notable are the churches in Achaia, Macedonia, Asia, and Galatia that worked together to send an offering to the Christians in Jerusalem. This offering was sent along with representatives from each of the provinces (Acts 20:4–5; 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8:1–15). This association of churches was organized enough to get something done that required communication, collective decision-making, and coordination of a specialized activity, all in an age when there were no phones! This indicates a remarkable amount of commitment to collective action and organization.

The church in Jerusalem was multi-congregational. The believers met daily in homes (Acts 2:46; 5:42). The twelve apostles could not have attended every house group as there must have been over 100 house churches to accommodate the 3000 new believers from the day of Pentecost who grew to over 5000 men in a fairly short time (Acts 2:47; 4:4; 5:14). As I try to visualize what it was like in Jerusalem, I imagine that there was a lot of fluidity among the various house churches, with most of the believers attending more than one house church meeting during a week. The apostles likely circulated through these house groups, teaching, admonishing, and helping with specific issues. The various house groups were sharing with each other, as indicated in Acts, with the twelve apostles coordinating the activity at first.

By Acts 6, the total number of Christians in Jerusalem could have been over 10,000.[3] Both Greek and Aramaic-speaking house churches co-operated with each other to provide for widows. The growth of the house churches and the number of disciples required a restructuring of administrative procedures. Since the failure to provide assistance for all the needy widows was damaging the

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church's witness, the disciples from all the house churches gathered for a special meeting and devised a solution. Seven men were appointed to lead the ministry to feed and care for the widows. Specific needs resulted in a growth in leadership (Acts 6:7), and the number of disciples multiplied greatly.

While the persecution of Acts 8 scattered the disciples and devastated the church in Jerusalem, there is evidence of continued communication and co-operation among the churches. Peter and John went to help Philip in Samaria (Acts 8). Barnabas was sent to help the church in Antioch (Acts 11:19–22). Peter (and likely the other apostles) went to help the new churches in Judea (Act 8:32–43) and other places that had been started by the scattered disciples.

The pattern of urban areas having many house churches that also have an identity as one Church, as was evident in Jerusalem, was likely copied in other places. This could explain why Paul included a long list of personal greetings at the end of Romans—he was greeting all the various house church leaders in the whole city. There is evidence of other clusters of churches such as Laodicea, Colossae (Col 2:1 and 4:16), the house church in Philemon's home (Phlm 2, 23), and Corinth and Cenchrea.

Just as a Christian who does not have fellowship with others is not acceptable, a church that is not in fellowship with others is not acceptable. The body of Christ metaphor and reality suggest that we are all connected and all needed (1 Cor 12:12–31; Eph 1: 22–23; 2:15–16; 4:1–16; 5:29–30; Rom 12:3–8). This connection does not have to be in the forms developed 200 years or more after our Lord's death and resurrection. The New Testament clearly presents to us churches that had a living connection to each other—churches in relationship.

The institutional forms that developed later tended to emphasize authority and control rather than communion, partnership, and fellowship. At a much later date, this resulted in the Church of England forbidding an Indian Christian from evangelizing in India among his own people because he was not authorized to preach the gospel by the authorities in Canterbury![4] If the emphasis is on fellowship, communion, and partnership, then the mutual submission taught by Paul in Ephesians 5 becomes normative for how churches should relate. The Lord Jesus is the head, and the church—his body and bride—voluntarily arranges itself around and under the purposes, directions, and values of the head. Mutual submission should be the norm for Christian life in the local church and for inter-church relationships. No person and no local church is ever at a point of not needing to listen to and participate with others.

I went to a Baptist Seminary. Many of the churches that supported this seminary were ferociously independent. They were proud of their "congregational" polity and did not want to take orders from anyone. Yet they co-operated to form and support a seminary. They also co-operated to send and support missionaries. They co-operated in less formal ways as well. Why? Because they understood (and taught) that local churches are connected in the body of Christ and need to live this out practically, not because of institutional structures, but because of the nature of the Church.

Indigenous biblical church movements

As the OMF Thailand Strategy Council has investigated indigenous biblical church movements (IBCMs) over the past decade-and-a-half, we have come to the conclusion that we cannot just start individual churches. A movement can only happen when the churches we start start churches! When we establish a new church we cannot just instruct it and train it to be a church. We must instruct and train it to establish other churches and get it to start a new church as soon as possible. We have to be "multiple" church planters, not just sequential church planters. We recognize that, often in the past, we did sequential church planting that left a church that knew something about how to be a church but not how to establish a new church. The "Project Paul: Empowering Church Planters" course, aims to help all our missionaries function as multiple church planters.

This aim to plant multiple churches means that we are creating a family of churches. It means that the administrative structures to support a family or clan of churches have to be encouraged and developed. This topic has not received as much attention as it deserves in church planting literature.

One illustration of multiple church planting is happening in Singburi. OMF missionaries established the first church in this province back in the 1960s. Since the mid 1990s, a second, third, and fourth church have been established. A "team" of Thai from these churches now help plant other churches in partnership with OMF missionaries. The Thai lay church planters participate in their local church and at the same time join believers from the other churches to establish new churches. Currently, three churches are being started by this group. As the movement grows and this family of churches continues to develop, more mutual ministry efforts that are beneficial to the broader family will come into being. This already includes training, evangelism, youth work, and help with funerals.

As the OMF Thailand Strategy Council has been considering IBCM, we keep coming back to Jesus' command to "make disciples of all nations." We have asked ourselves, "How do we disciple the whole Thai nation?" Simply planting a local church is not enough. We have to establish churches that participate together in mutually beneficial ministries that strengthen and expand the church. We have to establish local churches that fellowship together and present a witness to the love of Christ for all. We have to establish churches in communion that have the anti-bodies to resist false teaching and practices. We have to establish churches in fellowship that can meaningfully interact with the government and the community.

Developing church associations

It is beyond the scope of this article to fully explore how church associations should be developed. But here are a few questions I am pondering: How do we develop an inter-church organization that is appropriate to the context? What structures fit into the culture and can be led and managed by the local leaders? How do we develop an organizational structure that works now and can grow as the churches and disciples multiply? How will money be provided for the inter-church activities? How will the issues of authority and control be managed? How will fellowship and participation be emphasized? The Associated Churches in Thailand has had problems with all of these questions just as others have. They have found some things that work, but also struggle with some of the things "inherited" from missionaries. Even if the missionaries had thought more about this sooner and been more consistent in their approaches to inter-church fellowship, it would not have solved or prevented every problem.

Observations about churches that lack fellowship with other churches

Churches—especially smaller churches— that do not fellowship with other churches often lack ministry scope. They often are very "provincial" or closed-in and narrow because they don't have connections that push them outward. This can often be reflected in a narrow theology and ridged expressions of the Christian life. They do not present as full a picture of the body of Christ as they should because of their own limitations. When they have problems within, there is no other church that can help them. If they have troubles from without, no other church knows and they don't even get the help of prayers from the household of God. A significant benefit of an association is the mutual accountability of churches and church leaders that keeps them on track. In Thailand, isolated churches are often led by little dictators who rule over everything. They lack any accountability. The flock becomes entrapped in the control of one person.

A local church cannot do everything and be everything, so the local churches need to establish relationships to help each other do all that our Lord has in mind. He wants to disciple the nations, and this means establishing a multiplying movement of churches that brings his presence into every community

Conclusion

Not only are fellowship, communion, and partnership key dimensions of the body of Christ that have to be expressed locally in the church, they also have implications for inter-church co-operation. Church planting missionaries need to establish churches with this big picture in mind. Andy Smith, who serves with OMF in the Philippines, recently told me that when he went to an unreached part of Bicol, he "intended to establish a district of churches, a presbytery." The leaders of the local churches rejoiced in this because it helped them with the issue of who their sons and daughters would marry. If the local church was isolated, then how would they find suitable Christian partners for their children? A local church cannot do everything and be everything, so the local churches need to establish relationships to help each other do all that our Lord has in mind. He wants to disciple the nations, and this means establishing a multiplying movement of churches that brings his presence into every community.

After all, local churches can die in a way that the church cannot. The Student Fellowship and the house church that we were part of no longer exist. But other local churches are enriched throughout the world today because of how God has scattered us. Everywhere we have gone we have tried to work into the warp and weft of our relationships the reality of being members of the body of Christ!

Notes

[1] Ray Stedman's book *Body Life* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1972) was a great inspiration to us. A revised and expanded edition is available at http://raystedmanlibrary.org/bodylife/ (Accessed 24 October 2014).

[2] We based our practice on the teaching of a number of biblical texts including Matt 16:16–19; 18:15–20; Acts 2:42; Rom 16:5; 1 Thess 1:1; 5:12–13, Heb 10:25; and 1 Pet 2:4–5, 9.

[3] As Acts 4:4 gives the number of men believers as 5000, adding women and children to this number would reasonably push the total to more than 10,000.

[4] Robert Bernard Dann, *The Father of Faith Missions: The Life and Times of Anthony Norris Groves, 1795–1853* (Waynesboro GA: Authentic, 2004).

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Growing in Partnership with Thai Church Leaders

The topic of partnership in missions is more relevant than ever as churches in East Asia grow in number and spiritual maturity. Many churches in Thailand are reaching out and planting new congregations. It is not only strategic, but spiritually healthy for missionaries to partner with Thai Christian leaders in order to see an indigenous biblical church movement. Pastor Tim Keller illustrates that having a variety of partnerships is essential to church growth in any geographical location:

> Just as a biological ecosystem is made of interdependent organisms, systems, and natural forces, a gospel ecosystem is made of interdependent organizations, individuals, ideas, and spiritual and human forces. When all the elements of an ecosystem are in place and in balance, the entire system produces health and growth as a whole and for the elements themselves.[1]

Partnership between missionaries and local leaders can be very rewarding, but it can also be disappointing. After a decade serving in Thailand, I was feeling both hopeful and doubtful about partnering with Thai church leaders. I was chastised by many incidences of miscommunication and cultural clashes. From 2010–2011 I was given the opportunity to conduct research towards a ThM thesis through Fuller Seminary. Using the methods of ethnographic interviews and participant observation in my ministry context, I discovered some answers to the following questions: "What kinds of conflicts do missionaries face when working with Thai Christian leaders?" and "How can missionaries work effectively with Thais in church planting?"[2] I will start by categorizing and defining six major areas of conflicts I discovered in my research. I will then propose four keys that should help missionaries work effectively and happily with Thai Christian leaders. Although the focus will be on work in Thailand, many of the principles discussed here should be relevant in other contexts.

Culture-related conflicts

One morning, I left home early and drove halfway across Bangkok to attend a prescheduled meeting with Thai colleagues only to find the appointment canceled at the last minute by the Thai leader. After many years of working with the Thais, I still found myself angry and frustrated over differences in culture. In this case, my cultural upbringing placed a high priority on planning beforehand, while my Thai coworkers were more spontaneous and flexible with time. Learning and dealing with cultural conflicts is not for the shortsighted and fainthearted!

In spite of good missiological training before new workers enter the field, cultural differences can still catch many by surprise. Anthropologist Charles Kraft wrote, "Culture consists of two levels: the surface behavior level and the deep worldview level. At the core of the culture ... lies the structuring of the basic assumptions, values, and allegiances."[3] As there is no room here for an extensive discussion on worldviews, I will highlight a few "cultural insights" from my interviews with a number of senior missionaries and Thai church leaders.

Thais and Westerners in many ways think differently. An example is when Western missionaries find it troublesome to address an issue in a round-about way. Rather than speaking directly, Thais may hint at a matter from different angles. Westerners may overlook the Thai strength of examining issues holistically. Thinking holistically includes thinking relationally and thinking sympathetically towards the people who are involved. When missionaries learn to appreciate how their coworkers think differently, they begin to explore the deeper levels of culture.

Thais and Westerners also learn differently. Thais usually learn by rote. Westerners learn by logic and analysis. A few senior missionaries I interviewed are incorporating Thai ways of learning in their teaching ministries. One missionary spent time with a rural Thai leader one entire day a week. They went through Bible stories orally, and discussed the various challenges of ministry while working on a farm together.

Another area of cultural tension is how one handles a crisis. When Thais appear relaxed or unwilling to tackle problems, missionaries can easily become frustrated. Missionaries who come from countries that have better infrastructure to manage crises are left feeling unhappy about the Thai attitude of *chuey chuey* or "non-responsiveness" in times of trouble. During an interview, a Thai church leader conveyed that Thais may be slower in dealing with crises compared to missionaries. This however is not because Thais are inadequate, but because they prefer different methods or timeframes.

These are just a few examples to demonstrate that cultural conflicts are subtle, complex, and often deeper than surface assumptions. The following categories of conflict that I discovered are also somewhat related to culture.

Communicational conflicts

Conflicts between missionaries and Thais arose often due to different methods of communication. Throughout my interviews, Thai Christian leaders consistently expressed that they placed a high value on peaceful relationships. The lack of sensitivity among missionaries toward the Thai value of harmonious relationship can be a source of conflict in partnerships. Missionaries from Western cultures are more comfortable with direct methods of communication. Posing an overtly direct question and discussing issues with *arom* or "strong emotions" will cause Thai leaders to withdraw.

Lack of real communication is another major cause of conflict. In several interviews, Thai leaders expressed their concern that missionaries were not communicating enough with them. Some missionaries appeared very busy, filling up their schedules in advance with lots of programs. Thai leaders in these partnerships were unable to feel at ease in approaching missionaries in order to discuss matters. The lack of communication is a problem sensed by many missionaries as well. In a ministry situation where I was a participant observer, the missionaries were frustrated that the Thai leader seldom held team meetings. They felt that missionaries were always the ones initiating communication.

In a situation where missionaries were working in a large team, the Thai leader felt he was in the minority and missionaries overlooked his input when making decisions. The Thai leader felt confused and looked down upon. The Thai informant speculated that the missionaries had their own goals, and included Thais only to make use of them. The Thai member of this missionary-led team felt hurt that he was not treated as a real team member. Big missionary teams should be cautious of the tendency to leave Thais out of discussions and the decision-making process.

Throughout my research, I saw that miscommunication was a major cause of conflict in church planting. Both sides have been responsible. Some lacked the effort to communicate, and some were insensitive. I will present a few solutions to this challenge below.

Leadership style conflicts

Conflicting leadership styles is apparent between missionaries and Thai leaders and is partly related to culture. Hierarchy is one of the cornerstones of Thai social relationships. In every social group, Thais need to know their vertical position in relation to others. Examples of hierarchy can be seen in Thai politics. Followers are loyal to patrons, often supporting their benefactors in spite of questionable policies. The patron-client relationship is deeply rooted in the Thai social structure and carried into Christian circles. Knowing one's place actually enables Thais to function with greater ease and confidence. This particular aspect of Thai culture is often quite difficult for Westerners who come from more egalitarian societies to accept. Even other Asian cultures, such as the Chinese in Thailand, place less emphasis on hierarchy.[4]

In *Leading Cross-Culturally*, a particular case study was done on a ministry team that consisted of missionaries and Thais. The Thai value of control and power-distance became extremely frustrating to one missionary who ended up carrying out ministry activities without consulting with the rest of the team.[5] This story reminded me of the frustrations I felt during my first term in a church plant. During a team meeting, it seemed to me that everyone agreed upon a decision about an outreach event. Afterwards, however, the Thai pastor assumed authority and changed the decision without consulting with the rest of us. As a new missionary in Thailand, I was angry and hurt. Thankfully the Thai pastor was away for a few days and I was prevented by the Lord from speaking to him disrespectfully.

In a survey conducted among a group of OMF missionaries, most missionaries expressed that they enjoyed working with lay leaders more than seminary graduates. Respondents made the following statements. "Lay leaders have few self-expectations and serve out of passion and God's call on their lives. They sacrifice and are willing to learn. Lay leaders are willing to go the second mile and trust God," said one missionary. Another wrote, "Lay leaders are a key for the future of the church. They tend to be mature, self-supporting, married, and able to understand local culture and appropriate methods of evangelism and pastoral care and will remain in the church long term."

It appears that graduates from seminaries are more status-conscious, while lay leaders may feel more secure, since they are usually older and have passed the stages of hierarchical advancement. Leadership style can thus be a source of conflict between missionaries and Thai Christian seminary graduates. Missionaries usually value group or team leadership. Thai seminary graduates often prefer clear vertical lines of authority.

However, it is important to realize that missionaries will not always have the luxury of choosing whom they work with. Thai leaders graduating from Bible seminaries are increasing in number. Missionaries must find ways of working effectively with Thais from different backgrounds.

Strategic conflicts

A number of Thai leaders commented during my interviews that one of the strengths of missionaries is their ability to plan and strategize. Many Thais appreciate this skill, and some have learned to plan better in the course of partnership. Missionaries often face conflicts with Thai partners in the area of planning. Some believe that Thai leaders lack clear strategies; others clash with the Thai leaders because of the differences in strategies and goals.

A senior missionary remarked that he sympathized with a particular Thai leader's lack of long-term planning. He explained that this Thai leader worked in a cultural environment that did not value long-term plans. Most of his church members were less educated and tended to respond to problems and crises with little preparation beforehand. In this environment, it was difficult for the Thai leader to mobilize members for long-term goals. However, the strength of the Thai leader lies in his ability to adapt to change and be flexible, which may be a weakness in many missionaries who come from goal-oriented cultures.

What are some major areas of conflict in strategy between missionaries and Thai Christian leaders? Throughout my research, some missionaries shared that the Thai leaders they worked with wanted a proper church building and a paid pastor. While not all missionaries saw this as an issue, missionaries who came with a vision for multiplying house churches or who emphasized lay leadership struggled with these differences. Not all Thai leaders aim for large buildings or paid pastors. Missionaries in rural Thailand spoke of success in training lay leaders and multiplying small churches. Most city pastors in Bangkok however favor large buildings and paid clergy.

Another area of conflict has to do with the lack of clarity during the phase-out stage of church plants. Phasing out is part of the missionary strategy, but actual implementations on the ground can be a cause of confusion. A Thai leader commented, "These missionaries are not doing anything to help the church. What are these missionaries doing with their time?"

There are also differences and confusion in viewing the missionary role. Some Thai leaders shared that they see the role of missionaries as serving side-by-side with the Thais. Some Thai leaders would like to see missionaries working under the local leadership and submitting to the Thai church. A missionary said, "Partnership should be like two adults relating to one another. Each one gives the other the freedom to decide whether he or she would like to participate in something." Another missionary said, "We should not make a big deal out of the differences between Thais and missionaries, making distinctions is unhelpful." A senior Thai leader said specifically, "The days of missionaries walking around and passing out tracts are over. Missionaries should be teachers and trainers of Thai leaders."

Conflicts happen when missionaries do not meet the Thai expectations of certain roles and responsibilities. Thais leaders too have disappointed missionaries in failing to follow through on some agreements. How can partners resolve conflicts in strategies and expectations? I will suggest a few ways to move forward together below.

Financial conflicts

Another area of conflict between missionaries and Thai leaders is finance. The use of money is often rooted in one's culture and beliefs. Individualistic cultures see money and material possessions as private. More collectivistic cultures see material things as "ours". Mary Lederleitner wrote that Africans see partnership as a long-term relationship, comparable to a marriage or family. Most expats however focus on business contracts and partnerships within a specific time period. When missionaries use words like "trying out," they betray a very different view towards partnership.[6]

A non-Western partner had just finished paying off loans from missionaries when he decided to borrow more money. To the surprise of missionaries he said, "I want to borrow more money from you to show you that I am committed to a long term partnership with you."[7]

Throughout my research, I found that missionaries who worked with lay leaders experienced fewer financial conflicts. Most lay leaders had jobs and were using their evenings and weekends to serve the church. Financial difficulties cropped up in partnerships between missionaries and Thai seminary graduates who needed a salary. In most pioneering church plants, the money came from missionaries.

Some Thais spoke of the vast difference in lifestyle between missionaries and local pastors. Missionaries arrive with nice vehicles and financial backing from early stages in ministry, while Thai pastors often struggle for a long period of time and are still in want of basic resources. A Thai leader expressed that she is not envious, but feels content with what God has provided. However, she feels baffled as to why missionaries complain so often about the hardships and difficulties of life in Thailand. She said, "Sure, there must be the pain of being separated from loved ones and home culture, but missionaries have all the financial resources to deal with difficulties in life—money for medical expenses, children's education, nice homes, vehicles, vacations, and computer gadgets." When I asked her, "What should missionaries do then?" She answered, "Look at all that you have in comparison with Thai pastors! You have resources to make life so convenient. Why not use what you have to serve others?"

Moral and ethical conflicts

Throughout my interviews, conflicts related to morality and ethics came up repeatedly. In several situations, Thai leaders were involved in sexual misconduct. In most of these cases, missionaries tried to confront Thai leaders but were unsuccessful. Confrontation of sin resulted in the Thai leaders becoming angry and

defensive, and caused them to launch verbal attacks on the missionaries. It is not surprising to note that some missionaries were also guilty of sexual immorality. Other moral issues that caused conflicts included mishandling of finance and work ethics. Some missionaries and Thai leaders were unwilling to do their job or fulfill responsibilities given to them.

Ethical conflicts can happen in all kinds of work relationships. They are, however, more confusing in cross-cultural partnerships. Missionaries and Thais may interpret actions differently. For example, what is seen as bribery by one society may be an acceptable form of gift giving in another culture.[8]

"What causes quarrels and what cause fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?" (Jas 4:1). Moral conflicts are particularly hard to resolve because sin and human pride are at the root of the problems.

Moving towards effective partnerships

Having explored six major areas of conflict between missionaries and Thai church leaders, I will offer some suggestions on how missionaries and local leaders can move forward together. I will propose four keys to working effectively and happily with Thai Christian leaders. For the sake of being memorable, I will categorize my findings into four Cs: culture, community, comprehensive phase-out plan, and communication.

Culture learning

The first key to working effectively and happily with Thai leaders is for missionaries to develop an in-depth understanding of Thai culture. A Thai pastor said, "Since you missionaries are serving in Thailand, you should adopt the Thai culture as a basis for your ministry. For example, if you eat with Thais in a restaurant, only one person will pay the bill." This seems simple enough, right? However, adapting to Thai culture goes deeper. It involves discernment and evaluating culture in light of God's revelation. The Lausanne Covenant stated, "Culture must always be tested and judged by Scripture. Because man is God's creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he has fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic."[9]

Fellowship that is rooted in biblical values honors God and allows Christ to direct the work. Partnerships that emphasize money tend to deteriorate and lead to dissatisfaction. Missionaries and Thais must guard and nurture their times of worship, prayer, and fellowship around God's word.

Here are a few questions and reflection points on the Thai religious culture. Popular Buddhism is centered on the temple—a physical structure. But even though the physical location is obvious, its deeper functions and purposes are not always readily apparent. A Thai temple serves as a place for people to gather for social events. Thais go from temple to temple to make merit. Since Buddhists have a strong sense of the sacredness of the temple location, we must ask how the Thais' cultural understanding of the temple influences their Christian practices. Could some preferences of the Thai church be linked to Buddhist traditions? Could the Buddhist emphases on law and self-effort undermine the gospel of grace? What aspects of Thai culture are obstacles to Christian discipleship?

An experienced missionary affirmed the importance of being a student of culture in an interview, "Understand as much as you can about the cultural perspective ... especially how they see issues of security. Listen to them, see the deeper patterns of their lives, as well as understand yourself—What are your basic values?" He went on to suggest that when we learn the culture, we can move into anticipating the problem rather than reacting. "We will have tension here and there, I can anticipate how they respond, how I can adjust to it.... This is a hierarchical society, I am egalitarian.... Try to get into their shoes to see the world from their perspective." This kind of attitude is much needed in cross-cultural partnerships. When there is mutual respect and acceptance, it becomes possible to introduce new ideas or fresh perspectives from God's word.

The book *Ministering Cross-Culturally* encourages missionaries to pursue a realistic goal—to become one hundred and fifty percent people. What does this mean? It is impossible for missionaries to lose their home-cultural identity. It is also improbable that anyone will fully adapt to another culture one hundred percent. However, it is possible to become seventy-five percent home-culture and seventy-five percent host-culture as missionaries are motivated by the love of Christ to incarnate and communicate the gospel among the people they serve.[10]

Christ-centered community

The second key to working effectively with Thai leaders is to develop genuine relationships within a Christ-centered community. My interviews consistently revealed that missionaries who worked effectively with Thai leaders paid close attention to their relationships. Relationship building will look different in urban and rural settings. Both contexts require sacrifice and reducing overly busy schedules in order to make time for people. Thai leaders also wanted to know if missionaries are committed to a long-term relationship. In some situations, it was possible for effective partnerships to develop in spite of geographical distance. But there had to be consistency and a commitment to see the other person blossom and grow.

Besides spending quality time together, experienced missionaries shared that going through pain and crises together helped strengthen relationships. Some missionaries supported the Thai leaders when they faced family issues. Thai leaders suffered opposition, persecution, and ministry crises. Missionaries who stood by the Thai leaders over time reaped the harvest of enduring friendship.

A Christ-centered community is restorative... When both sides are committed to one another, in spite of personal hurts, they will experience God's grace and healing.

What are some other ways to develop a Christ-centered community? I discovered that praying and studying God's word together were foundational in effective partnerships. Fellowship that is rooted in biblical values honors God and allows Christ to direct the work. Partnerships that emphasize money tend to deteriorate and lead to dissatisfaction. Missionaries and Thais must guard and nurture their times of worship, prayer, and fellowship around God's word.

As partners study God's word together, a kingdom mentality will emerge. A kingdom mindset includes willingness to serve one another, to learn from one another, honor one another, accept one another, and obey all the "one another" commands in the New Testament. Accepting and honoring one another ranked very high among the Thai responses in my interviews. Thais value peaceful relationships, which is also a biblical value (Eph 4:2–3). However, kingdom values, as demonstrated by Jesus, also include such things as servant leadership and confronting religious hypocrisy. These are definitely harder to practice. This is why partners must have fellowship around God's word on a regular basis, so that conflicting values may be examined together and commitment to kingdom truths be upheld.

Divisions stem from pride. "What I mean is that each one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos'" (1 Cor 1:12). A Christ-centered community keeps the message of the cross at the forefront and demolishes self-exertion and boasting (1 Cor 1:18–31). A Christ-centered community also protects partners from moral failures. As discussed in the previous section, moral conflicts were common in partnerships. Spiritual encouragement, growth, and accountability can all be fostered in a context of community. A Christ-centered community is restorative. Both missionaries and Thais have experienced moral failures or broken relationships. When both sides are committed to one another, in spite of personal hurts, they will experience God's grace and healing. Keep in mind that we are all sinful human beings who naturally offend and hurt one another. Commitment to genuine relationships means to forgive one another and to accept one another's weaknesses. When missionaries or Thai leaders are willing to persevere through crises with each other, there will be growth and fruitfulness in the long run. The four stages of team development affirm this truth: teams tend to form, storm, and norm before they can perform.[11]

Being in a Christ-centered community also means sharing with one another, including material possessions and financial resources. As stated previously, financial conflicts often occur in partnerships. There is inequality in the degree of physical comfort and security between partners. Missionaries need to remember, "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" (1 John 3:17).

Being a genuine community does not necessarily require us to live on equal salaries or to donate all our possessions to Thai churches. This principle was implied by Peter when he addressed Ananias and Sapphira about their property: "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?" (Acts 5:4). The main sin of this couple was not their unwillingness to give, but their lying to God. The kingdom principle in the New Testament is to share our resources freely and generously. Missionaries who have vehicles should be considerate of Thais who need a ride. Missionary homes should be open for Thais to visit. Missionaries need to be sensitive and responsive to the unspoken needs of Thai leaders, such as important travel or medical expenses.

Meanwhile, those who serve Christ should avoid excesses and overindulgence in material comforts. It is striking that in the Gospels Jesus often sided with the poor. The lifestyle of missionaries should therefore identify with and be of help to the needy as much as possible. Finally, God's servants should not spend too much time comparing their resources and giving with others, but know that each one will be judged by God for their stewardship of resources and demonstration of love (Matt 25:14–46).

Comprehensive phase-out plan

The best way to avoid unnecessary conflicts over strategy and goals is to start church planting with a comprehensive phase-out plan. Having a plan does not mean that missionaries become inflexible. Strategies often change, especially when missionaries are starting a new work. It does mean that they need to have some clear objectives. It is extremely important for church-planting missionaries and Thais to receive basic training in order to understand the different phases of church planting. These phases are team forming, evangelizing, gathering, developing, installing leaders, and reproducing.[12] Having a phase-out plan and actively communicating the church planting stages will empower Thai leaders and ensure smoother transitions.

Several experienced Thai church planters shared with me that having a plan from the start and having clearly defined roles for all the team members helped avoid unnecessary conflicts. When missionaries and Thai leaders settle on certain strategies in church planting, plans should not be changed casually without serious prayer and discussions. Having clear and agreed-upon strategies builds trust. I have observed that missionaries and Thai leaders who began church planting together without discussing strategic details often clashed at a later stage.

A Thai church planter shared: "Missionaries and Thais in partnership should open their hearts to one another.... Missionaries should not hide their problems or ask advice only from other missionaries. Being open and vulnerable towards one another,

accepting one another, and making sacrifices together are the pathways to effective partnership."[13]

Financial conflicts in partnership often stem from a lack of clear policies. I observed in some situations that money was distributed unequally, causing jealousy or comparison among the locals. The benefits of having a phase-out plan include communicating support policies to the Thais beforehand. For example, when a Thai church planter or church knows and agrees to receive one hundred percent support in the first three years, sixty percent in the next three years, and thirty percent in the following three years before a complete withdrawal, it will help avoid confusion and assist Thai leaders and church members to stand on their own. A senior missionary recommended that these policies should be clearly stated on paper and signed. In some partnerships, it may not be ideal or necessary to provide ongoing financial support. One-time gifts to a church plant or project may be a good gesture of friendship with no strings attached. The important thing is to decide upon a financial strategy for phase-out in order to avoid misunderstanding.

Having a comprehensive phase-out plan helps missionaries to think through the various stages of church planting in order to phase out effectively, leaving a church in the hands of trustworthy Thai leaders. Phasing out pushes missionaries to develop strategies in training Thai leaders. For example, a missionary underscored the importance of having reproducible methods. Materials and methods should be packaged in such a way that the Thais can easily pass them on without help from missionaries. Training methods should always go beyond the classroom setting, as we see in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. An urban Thai pastor shared how on-the-job training in street evangelism was crucial to his growth and development.

Thais should also be included in decision-making which gives them a sense of ownership. In the process of phasing out, many decisions or activities will not be performed to the liking of missionaries. But this gives Thais the chance to learn, make mistakes, and eventually become trustworthy church leaders. Faith in God, humility, and self-effacement are key attitudes to maintain to ensure a smooth phase-out.

Communication

The final key to an effective and happy partnership lies in communication. Missionaries must be willing to make the effort to communicate, as well as use the appropriate methods of communication in Thailand. As discussed previously, I encountered several partnerships where communication was lacking. Breakdown in communication may be due to fear, pride, or busyness. It takes real effort to communicate. It starts with a basic commitment to be open with one another. I have observed throughout my research, as well as from personal experience, that most issues—goals, strategies, finance, culture, leadership style, theology, and ethics—can be discussed within a Christ-centered community.

In the Thai cultural context, private confrontations protect the unnecessary loss of face. Indirect methods of communication may be used when confronting older leaders. Mature and respectable third parties can be brought in for reinforcement. Missionaries may want to influence Thai partners creatively. Bringing people to conferences or special meetings that introduce new perspectives may open up opportunities for discussion. When there is uncertainty about the meaning of a Thai verbal expression or action, it is important to ask before jumping to conclusions. A senior missionary or a reliable Thai friend can be called upon to explain or mediate.[14]

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to acknowledge that there is still much to discover about effective partnership between missionaries and local leaders. Let us maintain a learning posture in order to grow in this area. Missionaries today can benefit from Daniel's outstanding example. Daniel and his companions entered cross-cultural missions from a position of weakness. As exiles in Babylon, they had no power to demand things. Instead, they constantly faced unreasonable demands and danger. From a position of weakness, they had to serve and earn the trust of local authorities. "God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs" (Dan 1:9). They had no social or financial advantage over those for whom they worked. The only way to accomplish things was to be tactful, humble, and most of all prayerful (Dan 2:14, 18). May God help us to reflect upon these truths and become more effective partners for his kingdom.

Notes

[1] Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), Kindle.
[2] This article summarizes chapters 4 and 5 of my ThM thesis. All Thai and missionary informants are kept anonymous. The entire thesis (which includes a chapter on the biblical foundations of partnership) is available at www.thaimissions.info. Download David Dao-Ming Chang, "Forming Effective Partnership with Thai Christian Leaders in Church Planting" (2011).
[3] Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 11.
[4] Tangtongtavy Holmes, Henry Holmes, and Suchada, *Working with the Thais: A Guide to Managing in Thailand* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1995), 26–29.
[5] Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Leading Cross-Culturally: Covenant Relationships for Effective Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 91–95.
[6] For a thorough treatment on the subject of money and cross-cultural partnerships see Mary T. Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships: Navigating the Complexities of Money and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), Kindle.
[7] Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships*.
[8] For further studies on cross-cultural ethics see Bernard T. Adeney, *Strange Virtues: Ethics in Multicultural Perspective* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995).
[9] This statement comes from the Lausanne Covenant, point 10, "Evangelism and culture," http://www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant (Accessed 9 December 2014).
[10] Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin Keene Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 121–123.
[11] Daniel Sinclair, *A Vision of the Possible: Pioneer Church Planting in Teams* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2005), 36–38.
[12] Sinclair, *A Vision of the Possible*, 55–59.
[13] The second part of this quote is my paraphrase from an interview.
[14] For principles in managing conflicts and communicating cross-culturally, see Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict: Building Relationships for Effective Ministry* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 171–182.



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Comity Agreements: The Not-so-simple Art of Cooperation

The OMF Handbook lists as one of the stated values of the mission:

> We PARTNER in Ministry
> - with sending churches globally
> - with local churches in the ministry context
> - with like-minded Christians and mission agencies

I assume that the word *partner* in OMF nomenclature means to cooperate intentionally in some aspect of the missionary endeavor to a greater or lesser extent at the micro or macro level. Perhaps the word "partner" is used here because it represents the closest of relationships between two parties and therefore when OMF states that it values the closest levels of cooperation it goes without saying that the agency is also open to all lesser forms of interaction as well.

The rationale for working together is necessarily founded on a conviction shared by at least two individuals that there is a task that ought to be done and that it cannot best be accomplished by one party alone. A key verse in all such efforts has been Amos 3:3. "Can two walk together, except they are agreed?" I have studied the history of CIM/OMFs work in the Upper Mekong Region to determine the degree to which OMF missionaries choose to cooperate with other agencies, churches, and individuals. This interest is not at all an academic one. One way or another, Christians must seek that level of cooperative effort (or perhaps that level of effort to cooperate) which will lead to the speediest evangelization of East Asia's millions. In this paper I will provide a sketch of how the concept of cooperation affected the work of OMF missionaries during their first decade in their new field of North Thailand.

The OMF enters North Thailand

When the first CIM surveyors arrived in Thailand in 1951 they duly contacted the leaders of the American Presbyterian Mission (APM). A comity agreement was arranged whereby the Presbyterians turned over large areas of Thailand for OMF to evangelize on their own. In North Thailand the Presbyterians, who were well established in several provinces, did not divide the territory with OMF. Instead they handed over responsibility for reaching the tribal hill people and the Shan Buddhists of Maehongson Province to OMF while they continued to give their attention to the Northern Thai of the lowlands.[1]

A comity agreement is perhaps the simplest means by which Christians can cooperate. It follows the model of Abraham who said to Lot, "if you will take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left" (Gen 13:9). The concept behind comity agreements goes back at least to 1792 in William Carey's *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens, etc.* While he sought immediate action from his own Particular Baptist denomination, he went on to write:

> I do not mean by this, in any wise to confine it to one denomination of Christians. I wish with all my heart, that everyone who loves our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, would in some way or other engage in it. But in the present divided state of Christendom, it would be more likely for good to be done by each denomination engaging separately in the work, than if they were to embark in it conjointly. There is room enough for us all, without interfering with

each other; and if no unfriendly interference took place, each denomination would bear good will to the other, and wish, and pray for its success, considering it as upon the whole friendly to the great cause of true religion; but if all were intermingled, it is likely their private discords might throw a damp upon their spirits, and much retard their public usefulness.[2]

Comity agreements were helpful in encouraging new mission agencies to move to those places where the least work was being done and to develop a pioneer work there. Established missions were often quite willing to pass on their most neglected fields to newcomers if only to keep them from trampling on their own well-tended gardens. When the CIM left China and became the OMF they had an ethos that made them seek the frontiers; thus the comity agreement with the Presbyterians served their purposes quite well for a time. The great challenge for these missionaries was that the CIM had been working side by side with native believers in China for the previous century. These newly arrived North Thailand field workers desired to work closely with Thai Christians. They commonly spent their early years learning Thai in a Northern Thai Christian village. Friendly relationships developed, but issues emerged that needed to be addressed at the first Overseas Council in Singapore in 1953.

A Mr. Moore of the South Malaya Field expressed his particular concerns in a way that showed them to be very widespread.

> Upon entering the new fields we as a Mission were prepared to co-operate with churches or Mission groups of like faith wherever possible, but if we went to pioneer areas we would then allow new converts to decide their own type of church order and affiliation. We would in no case attempt to change existing church order.
>
> In actual practice in the South Malaya field comity and doctrinal difficulties are being faced with deep concern, and the development of the work is being hampered greatly. Similar aspects of the same problem are faced on the North Thailand and Japan fields, while the same situation exists in embryo in Taiwan. After prolonged discussion several expressed a desire for a restatement or clearer definition of our policy, and an explicit word as to just what we mean by "co-operation" with other groups. The word "indigenous" is also bandied about until its true meaning tends to become obscured. Until we have a clearer understanding it is impossible to exploit the opportunities and challenge for the reaching of the unreached in Malaya today.[3]

On the following day after further discussion a summary statement emerged:

> 1. Our main concern on entering new fields is to preach the Gospel to un-reached peoples in those areas and to fill unmet needs.
>
> 2. We will seek to carry on work in co-operation with local churches of like faith, and with due regard for other Christian organizations in that area.
>
> 3. In places where missionaries may be invited by already existing Christian groups to minister the Word, no attempt will be made to bring about any change in Church organization or relationship with other churches.
>
> 4. If patient negotiation to coordinate our work with existing Christian organizations fails to prove satisfactory, our sense of responsibility for giving the Gospel to these who are evidently not being reached makes it imperative that we should not withhold the Message from them.
>
> 5. In places where, through God's blessing, groups of Christians are brought into being, the ultimate responsibility shall be upon them to decide upon their relationships with existing churches and associations.[4]



Dr Ed McDaniel, a Presbyterian medical missionary and good friend of OMF missionaries, with a Yao Leper.

Competing values: indigenous principles vs. partnership

The situation in North Thailand was that OMF missionaries were to fellowship with the existing Presbyterian Churches when they were in the lowlands but to start new churches on new foundations among the tribal people in the hills. In those early years when the missionaries spoke limited Thai, little or no Northern Thai, and were only creating the very first language lessons for some of the tribal groups for which they were responsible, it was tempting to want to make the most use of the Christians whom they found in the existing churches. In China they had almost always worked alongside national believers and they had results that showed the effectiveness of this approach. In North Thailand they were struggling on their own. What made it difficult for the field workers was that the strong value of always practicing indigenous principles forbade the hiring of national workers. Even providing meals for visitors or helping with travel fare for evangelists was considered forbidden by some members.

Problems arose in various areas where workers with limited language could not even explain to the local population



North Thailand Field Conference, 1957

what they were doing there. This too was addressed by the Overseas Council.

> Experience in the new fields has shown that the principle, of not giving support to national workers is justified, despite the difficulties our missionaries experience through not having the assistance of national workers to explain them to the people, and to help them avoid making unnecessary mistakes in the beginning.
>
> From the reports on problems arising from the application of our indigenous principles it was evident that we lack the fellowship of these who can interpret us to the people and explain to us their customs in the initial stages of our work.
>
> We should not, however, pay money to national Christians for this purpose, but look to the Lord to make us known, and should take a more positive attitude in letting people know why we are here....
>
> We should be ready to offer hospitality to worthwhile visiting Christian workers for we are exhorted in Scripture to "be given to hospitality."[5]

Some fields struggled more than others with the indigenous policy and its implications on how much work could be done alongside of native believers. The North Thailand Field was relatively comfortable with it.

> A report from North Thailand ... indicated a very happy spirit prevailing between the existing churches and the O.M.F. This may be partly explained by the fact that our workers go there primarily for the purpose of further experience in the language, and then proceed to their ultimate sphere of service.[6]

The work among the tribes saw real progress over the next few years as missionaries gained access to their communities, learned their languages, and in the case of the Lahu and Akha combined their efforts with believers from Burma. The Lisu churches in Burma sent four evangelists specifically to help the OMF missionaries reach their Lisu brethren in North Thailand.[7] New challenges came with time.

In late 1957 field workers in the very unresponsive province of Maehongson requested funds to arrange for a Presbyterian evangelist to help with a campaign. In 1959 another missionary arranged for a seminary student from the McGilvary Seminary in Chiang Mai to assist in his ministry because of his ability with the Northern Thai dialect. In those days special activities needed approval from the Headquarters' staff in Singapore.[8] When these workers who were seeing little progress sought help from the Presbyterians they got the immediate attention of OMF leadership for several reasons. First of all, the Presbyterians and the CCT, which was in large part their handiwork, were noted for a non-evangelical theological stance. Then there was the issue of indigenous principles and policy. If the invitation came from the missionary then the expectation must be that the missionary would foot the bill. This was not indigenous, for it was not an emerging local church that was offering an invitation, nor was it partnership with an existing church because, once again, the initiative came from the missionary and not the Presbyterians themselves.

The slippery slope: from comity to cooperation

While the theological issues between the Presbyterians and certain members of the OMF increased over time, warm relations remained the norm. So, for instance, though OMF members in Chiangmai would attend a Presbyterian missionary prayer meeting, no members of the American Presbyterian Mission were in attendance when the principal of an evangelical Canadian Bible institute gave some public messages in the city. Shortly thereafter an OMF missionary in Chiangrai got permission from the Church of Christ in Thailand and the local church in the city to do evangelistic outreach in the market. He requested funds to rent a shop front for this purpose. The Western Regional Director in Singapore wrote to the North Thailand Field Superintendent:

> My dear ____:
>
> The copy of my recent letter to ____ will give our reaction to the suggestion that a shop front should be rented on the Chiangrai market by the O.M.F. for Gospel work. From what ____ tells me he has secured permission from both the local church and the Church of Christ in Thailand. Our question of the rightness of this action is based rather on O.M.F. policy, and I trust that you will not feel we have been too doctrinaire in the stand which we have taken. The last thing we wish to do is to discourage ____ from pushing on with gospel work seeing he is more or less tied to Chiangrai for the present, but we can not see how we

can possibly take the initiative in such work when there is already an established church in the town. Even if there was no church we would not feel justified in renting property for a preaching hall.

Regarding negotiations with the Church of Christ in Thailand, I am sure a chap like ____ would contact them in a worthy manner, but I would suggest that in the future it would be well if the Superintendent conducted such inter-Mission negotiations. In the past our relationships with the Presbyterians and other groups in Thailand have, on the whole, been cordial because our Superintendents have leaned over backwards to observe Mission comity and to carry on any negotiations with other Mission leaders in the right spirit. In some cases individual missionaries are good at this, but on the whole we feel much happier if Superintendents take responsibility for all inter-Misssion negotiations. Perhaps ____ had liberally interpreted something which you have said, and I know sometimes when chaps are enthusiastic about a certain project, Superintendents do not wish to interfere, but I feel that in such cases you should politely but firmly offer to conduct any negotiations which are necessary after conferring with the missionary concerned.[9]

What this letter makes clear is that Comity agreements became very fragile when a missionary from one agency was living in an area claimed by another agency. If the CCT church had its own shop-front evangelistic center in the market then the OMF missionary could have easily come alongside their evangelists to help in outreach. It would have required no financial outlay and therefore no letter would have been sent to Singapore, but it appears that the CCT church members were not doing evangelism in the area assigned to them, and therefore the missionary wished to fill in the gap. Now, one of the lessons that the CIM took out of China was that they should not rent property for evangelistic purposes. So the rental idea was out of the question. As for the negotiations with the CCT (district leadership presumably) and the local church, the policy coming from Singapore was that this was not the sort of thing that a field worker should engage in. The safe thing to do would be to bring in the Field Superintendent who lived a long day's journey or an air flight away. So in order to preserve cordial relations in terms of a comity agreement at a national level there was a need to put a damper on any form of binding cooperation at a local level.

When two agree to walk together it must be readily apparent that if the first of the two chooses to walk with a third party then he must get the agreement of the second party or be willing to risk losing him in the process of gaining the third.

Even when the initiative came from the Presbyterians there were obstacles to face. The Chiangrai Presbytery, through its moderator, formally requested a full-time Bible teacher to work in the churches in and around Chiangrai. The Regional Director's response to this was that:

> Unless there has been quite a change in the theological atmosphere of the Presbyterians, I would feel that it would be a difficult situation for any O.M.F. missionary designated to this task. Furthermore we need to keep in mind the possible reaction of keen evangelical-supporting churches in North America who would find it difficult to understand how the O.M.F. could co-operate with a Presbyterian Board which is definitely labelled theologically.[10]

The CCT was not the APM, but it was their offspring. Some CCT pastors were strong evangelicals but others definitely were not. While it might be acceptable for an OMF missionary to be invited by a church moderator who was sympathetic to an evangelical message, how would leadership and supporters respond if that missionary showed up at a church where the pastor did not want the evangelical message preached? The Regional Director was right that keen evangelical supporting churches could not understand the sort of cooperation suggested by the moderator of the Chiangrai Presbytery. Actually, they could not understand the Northern Thai language, or the complexities of cooperation and comity agreements from the other side of the world either, but the issue that would make or break their willingness to support the OMF was whether or not they perceived that OMF was cooperating with modernists. Can two walk together except they be agreed? OMF had agreed to walk with American churches that held strongly to evangelical doctrine. In those days they might also have been called fundamentalist, as that term had not yet taken on political overtones but rather referred to an uncompromising commitment to the fundamentals of the Christian faith. When two agree to walk together it must be readily apparent that if the first of the two chooses to walk with a third party then he must get the agreement of the second party or be willing to risk losing him in the process of gaining the third.

A yellow or a red light?

The beginning of the 1960s saw the OMF-CCT relationship take new turns. On the one hand, most of the tribal work was making some progress, but on the other hand, the missionaries were realizing just how hard it was to recruit and train new missionaries for the work that needed to be done. Discussions took place about the possibility of taking definite steps to draw suitable Christian workers from the CCT to help in tribal outreach in the hopes that they would stir their churches to become directly involved in cross cultural outreach. This was definitely a great step forward from the original comity agreement. While the views of the field members were being sought with regard to this new endeavor one pilot project was



Missionaries were not the only ones who faced complex challenges. Animistic, tribal boys who grew up in a Thai, Buddhist country and heard the gospel from foreign missionaries found choosing which religion to follow to be far from simple.

attempted. This time the Presbyterians themselves offered Bible school students who could help with short term work among the tribes.

A young Thai man was invited to join a veteran OMF missionary on an evangelistic trip which included both pioneer evangelism and visits to established churches. The report that came back was taken to be "a red light" by both the missionary who made the experiment and the Field Superintendent. The West Regional Director responded that it was a "yellow light indicating that caution was needed if not actually a real red one which I am inclined to think is a realistic interpretation of the situation."[11] From the missionary's perspective, the student's being "unable to bear testimony to or explain the new birth" was an issue of fundamental importance, but what made this case particularly sensitive was that the Bible school student was a Presbyterian. The OMF missionary took him to a Lahu village made up of Baptists from Burma who would not welcome a member of the CCT "as a worker of any sort."[12] Once again, if getting two to walk together is a challenge, then what happens when a third party is added to the mix?

Two months after this red or yellow light appeared in the area of evangelism, another sort of unplanned cooperation was exhibited at the deepest level in the most trying of circumstances. On 19 May 1962, Roy Orpin, a missionary to the Meo (Hmong), was shot by robbers near a bus stop where the trail leading to his village was located. Local villagers flagged down a passing bus and got him sent to the government hospital in Pitsanuloke where every effort was made to save his life, but in vain. OMF missionaries did not have a presence in that town. The Superintendent who traveled down from Chiang Mai wrote in his report,

> We have had God's help through the Thai Christians here. I had known some of them a bit before. But they rallied around for continual prayer, brought ice, water, towels, etc. and then after Roy's exodus they took over all the responsibility for formalities with officials, getting the coffin, funeral arrangements, internment and all of the expenses of these things too.
>
> It was a church funeral with very pleasant setting of flowers and all.... Roy's body rests in the Christian cemetery along with other Christians. They put up a cement cross head stone as the others have.[13]

Where planned coperation sometimes hit snags and came to naught, such fellowship in times of suffering showed that ties which bound believers together were still very real.

The divisive potential of cooperation

New issues surfaced in the 1960s which were the results of closer interactions occurring between missionaries of different denominations and with the local churches. Several OMF missionaries were now being regularly invited to speak in CCT churches in Chiangrai Province. A positive desire for closer fellowship with God and one another sometimes led to divisions emerging where a more monolithic if shallower unity had been evident in the past. In some churches a pentecostal or holiness emphasis was emerging. This apparently new situation was actually not at all new to the Old China Hands. They had many similar experiences in China. Having experienced some of the unintended consequences of spiritual interchange among not likeminded Christians in China, the Regional Director sent a timely warning to the North Thailand Superintendent.

> Regarding this whole question of cooperation, is there any indication that ____'s ministry in the Chiangrai area is tending to cause a division in the church between the worldly element and those who are really seeking for true spiritual help? I feel that it would be well for you to discuss these matters with Mr. Sanders [the General Director], who will be shown your letter; for at this stage of the work I feel that we need to be very sure of each

A positive desire for closer fellowship with God and one another sometimes led to divisions emerging where a more monolithic if shallower unity had been evident in the past.

step that we take in this matter of cooperation. On the other hand, I feel we should not lightly refuse to cooperate where we are invited, but we ought to see where we are headed and not suddenly find ourselves faced with circumstances which could have been foreseen and avoided.[14]

Conclusion

Cooperation is an agreement to work together at some level over some period of time. Cooperation of any sort will lead both parties to come to know each other more deeply. This in turn will lead to continual re-assessments by both parties as to whether they wish to increase their level of cooperation or decrease it. The OMF and the APM/CCT began their relationship in 1951 with an informal welcome being given to the CIM and the hope expressed that, "we ought to achieve a clear understanding concerning areas of work, and that, as far as possible, there should be no overlapping."[15] The healthy manner in which both parties maintained the letter and the spirit of their comity agreement as well as the gradual expansion of churches meant that over time there was overlap but that overlap always occurred with consultation and mutual consent. Eventually a stage was reached where OMF missionaries sought the services of CCT workers and vice versa. In the early years, the value of cooperation was constantly juxtaposed with that of indigenous policy. For OMF Headquarters' staff in Singapore indigenous policy always trumped cooperation. In later years doctrinal issues became more apparent. During those years OMF missionaries succeeded in making their impact on some members of some CCT churches. That led these members to seek a closer level of cooperation. It was not quite partnership but in some locations it did get close. That closeness resulted in OMF becoming drawn into the emerging tensions in the CCT itself where certain pastors held more evangelical or pentecostal views than others. The Regional Director foresaw that cooperation in preaching on the new life in Christ to old churches would lead to divisions in those churches. Who would have guessed that cooperation leads to division? Only someone who had learned from long experience could have made that connection.

Where planned cooperation sometimes hit snags and came to naught, such fellowship in times of suffering showed that ties which bound believers together were still very real.

This short historical sketch ends fifty-two years ago. Cordial relations and cooperation continues to this day. Few missionaries and fewer Thai Christians know about the original comity agreement or what grew out of it. Most do know that OMF missionaries have aided and been aided by Christians in CCT churches for many years. Differences still remain. Efforts to work with each other are always a challenge and are not always successful, but with thousands of CCT members living in the midst of millions of Northern Thai Buddhists the logic of seeking to stir them to reach out to their non-Christian neighbors makes efforts towards cooperation of some sort inescapable.

Notes

[1] The APM had been instrumental in the founding of the Church of Christ in Siam (later called the Church of Christ in Thailand or CCT) in 1934. Due to that connection, OMF's agreement with the APM became a *de facto* agreement with the CCT. The distinctions between the terms Presbyterians, the APM, and the CCT often became quite blurred and that blurriness is found in this paper.

[2] William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens, in which the Religions State of the Different Nations of the World, the Success of Former Undertakings, and the Practicability of Further Undertakings are Considered* (Leicester: Ann Ireland, 1792), 84, accessed 10 December 2014, https://ia700408.us.archive.org/34/items/TheEnquiryByWilliamCarey/2-16-08AnEnquiry-Original.pdf/.

[3] Minutes of Overseas Council, 14 April 1953, p 33, OMF IHQ Archives AR5.2.4, Box 1, Folder 3.

[4] Minutes of Overseas Council, 14 April 1953, p 35.

[5] Minutes of Overseas Council, 14 April 1953, p 42.

[6] Minutes of Overseas Council, 23 March 1954, p 17, OMF IHQ Archives AR5.2.4, Box 1, Folder 4.

[7] North Thailand Superintendent's Report, p 1, OMF IHQ Archives AR5.2.4, Box 1, Folder 7.

[8] (The Japan Field was the most eager to allow special exceptions to the Indigenous Policy but the vast majority of members of the Overseas Council opposed exceptions and encouraged the centralized decision making policy for applying the Indigenous Policy.) Overseas Council, 1954 p 27.

[9] Letter dated 3 November 1959, OMF IHQ Archives AR5.1.5 Box 2, Folder 6.

[10] Letter dated 20 November 1959, OMF IHQ Archives AR5.1.5 Box 2, Folder 6.

[11] Letter dated April 10, 1962, p 2, OMF IHQ Archives AR5.1.5 Box 2, Folder 7.

[12] "COPY Regarding the Stay of a Thai Worker for Future Possible Work among Tribes," 31 March 1962, OMF IHQ Archives AR5.1.5 Box 2, Folder 7.

[13] Letter headed "Pitsanuloke, Thailand, Mon. May 21, 1962," p 4, OMF IHQ Archives, AR5.1.5 Box 2 Folder 7. Underlinings in original.

[14] Letter dated 27 October 1962, p 2, OMF IHQ Archives, AR5.1.5 Box 2, Folder 7.

[15] "Notes of an Informal Conference Held in Bangkok between Representatives of the China Inland Mission, The American Presbyterian Mission, The Christian and Missionary Alliance Mission, The World-Wide Evangelization Crusade, and the American Bible Society," 2 August 1951, p 2, AR5.1.5 Box 2, Folder 1.

An Interview with

Michael Griffiths



Michael Griffiths served with OMF in Japan before becoming General Director, a position he held from in 1969–1980. He subsequently served as Principal of London Bible College and Professor of Mission Studies at Regent College in Vancouver. He has written widely on mission and the church. As his book *Lambs Dancing with Wolves* (London: Monarch, 2001) investigates the need of missionaries to bond with Christ, fellow missionaries, national Christians, and the national church, it demonstrates the day-to-day importance of partnership.

Don't Expect a Fairy-tale Ending: The Realities of Biblical Partnership

You have spent many years thinking and writing about the biblical view of the church and its place in the mission of God and have often used fairy-tale imagery to remind us of our esteemed position in God's eye.[1] As we consider what it means to be in partnership with God and the worldwide church, can you highlight any storybook images that will help us better understand the concept?

Let me begin by erasing one storybook concept and replacing it with a more biblical idea. We are not meant to be spiritual Robinson Crusoe's living solitary Christian lives. Rather, we are to live by the Scriptures that place us in relation to God and others and show that the way we relate to our fellow believers is very important. In the church, we are no longer isolated individual units, but a fellowship of people caring for each other and working together side by side. Partnership is thus a rich biblical concept that envisages the church as a corporate body that does things together.

We see this in the Gospels where James and John, the sons of Zebedee, were "business partners" (*koinōnoi*) with Simon (Luke 5:10). Notice that *koinōnia* exudes hints of a financial flavour. We see this more clearly in Philippians where Paul thanks the church "because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil 1:5). And while this partnership between Paul—as a first century missionary—and the church—which he, Silas, Timothy, and Luke had planted—cannot be limited to financial support, it certainly includes it as is seen in Phil 4:14–16 where Paul says that after he left Macedonia the Philippians were the only church that shared with him in giving and receiving (cf. Rom 15:26).

Is partnership merely a business term?

While it is a business term, it is much more. In the Bible, *koinōnia* and its cognates are used to describe the relationship between those who were fellow workers for the cause of the gospel. When Paul and Barnabas went up to Jerusalem to meet with the leaders of the church, James (the brother of the Lord), Peter, and John gave them "the right hand of fellowship (*koinōnias*)" when they recognised that God had given them grace to preach the gospel (Gal 2:9). Paul uses the word for Titus—he is my partner (*koinōnos*) and fellow worker among you" (2 Cor 8:23)—and wants Philemon to consider him a partner (*koinōnon*, Phlm 17).

It is fascinating to realise that Paul broke loose from his Jewish culture and was prepared to speak of Gentiles as his partners and fellow-workers (*sunergos*). Indeed, Paul was prepared to include women as fellow-workers (Rom 16:3; Phil 4:3).

Two important observations seem appropriate here: (1) Paul makes no distinction between fellow missionaries and national Christians, as we do today. They were fellow-believers and fellow workers, irrespective of race or gender. (2) We often think of Paul as an individualist, a strong, natural leader, but it is clear from the way that he writes to and concerning colleagues that he is also a good team player, and sees the importance of partnership relationships.

You say that no distinction should be made between our partnership with fellow missionaries and national Christians. How should this impact our relationship with the members of churches we plant?

Paul speaks of both the Corinthian and Philippian churches using this partnership concept (2 Cor 1:7; Phil 1:7). An important principle that we

need to derive from this is to not see the missionary as indispensable. We have the brief temporary privilege of being in partnership with emerging congregations, while for all of our lives we should be encouraged by their progress.

The process of identifying and bonding should lead us to develop friendships with members of a national church. We shall not achieve this overnight. Even people who are outgoing and friendly may not make friends lightly or easily. It takes time to trust a foreigner. Partly, the problem is our inability to express ourselves in appropriate words. We may have learned the words for buying train tickets or asking directions to the post office, but our limited vocabulary makes it difficult at first to express feelings and friendliness. We still use words in the new language like blunt instruments, and subtleties and nuances of feeling (so important in cultures that convey meaning in an indirect fashion) are often beyond us. The new language learner does not know how to drop gentle hints, or to imply something tactfully without actually saying it. We behave like linguistic bulls in cultural china shops, even when trying to be tactful. We have to accept that initially our communication will be limited, but that, as we get to know people over an extended period, our friendships will deepen. Women are often much better at making friends than men are. Sometimes it takes a family illness, bereavement crisis, or suffering and the opportunity to give or receive help to deepen mere acquaintance so that it becomes lasting friendship.

What can we learn from the Bible about how we should partner with our sending churches?

I have to be honest here, for though all of us would see Antioch as Paul's sending church, we have no record of Antioch sending any financial gift to Paul and Barnabas, and no "thank-you letter" (like Paul's to the Philippian church) addressed to Antioch has been preserved. Indeed, 1 Corinthians 9 makes it plain that these two were self-supporting. This is reinforced by Paul's assertion in Philippians that "not one church shared with me ... except you" (Phil 4:5). Even so, it is striking that the Holy Spirit tells the other church leaders in Antioch and not just Barnabas and Saul that he is separating them for this mission ministry (Acts 13:1–3). There is no place for us to act as freelance mavericks and claim, "The Lord has led me ..." We need to consult with our sending church leaders, to seek their advice, guidance, and support. We are not to act as though we are not members of the local church!

We behave like linguistic bulls in cultural china shops, even when trying to be tactful. We have to accept that initially our communication will be limited, but that, as we get to know people over an extended period, our friendships will deepen.

And while Paul returned to Antioch after the first and second journeys and made Antioch his base, it might be reading in too much to call it his "sending church" in the way we use the term today. Scripture simply tells us that "they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been *committed to the grace of God* for the work they had now completed" (Acts 14:26). And after the Jerusalem Council, we are told that "The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter.... But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord" (Acts 15:30–35). Then after the flaming row, we read that "Paul chose Silas and left, *commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord*" (Acts 15:40). Again, at the end of the Second Missionary Journey we see that when Paul "landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church" (in Jerusalem!) "and then went down to Antioch" (Acts 18:22). After spending some time there, Paul set out for Galatia and Phrygia to begin his Third Journey, a journey which ended when he sailed from Miletus, landed at Tyre, Ptolemais, and Caesarea, and then went up to Jerusalem where he was arrested. There is no record that he ever returned to Antioch. Neither are there any extant letters or other evidence of letters exchanged between Paul and the Antioch church. Even so, we should conclude that the way Paul returns to the city after his first and second journeys demonstrates a kind of partnership "solidarity" with them.

Are you saying that we should work in partnership with sending churches but work for our own support?

It is easy to fail to notice and therefore ignore certain aspects of New Testament methodology. It is evident in 1 Corinthians 9 that from the earliest days some missionaries were church supported and others, notably Paul and Barnabas and probably Dr. Luke, were self-supporting. There were sound practical reasons for this: some had portable trades and some didn't. Some, like the twelve and the seventy-two, could look to fellow-Jews for support. Others, like Paul, antagonised synagogues, that, having thrown him out, would certainly not support him any longer. A key verse is Acts 20:34: "You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions." There is a practical partnership between Paul and his colleagues: some earned money and supported others who did not or possibly could not. They operated a pooling system, a common purse between them. In this, they followed the example of Jesus and his apostles. In John 13:29 we read that "Judas had charge of the money." This seems to indicate that they pooled resources.

This hearkens to the old CIM financial system. Are we to return to the pooling system?

For some young people currently considering missionary service, this may be the way ahead. The Lord may call them to join together as a team. Some will have portable trades and lucrative professions that enable them to earn money, and others—with lower money-earning capacity—will have been endowed with spiritual gifts of evangelising and teaching.

"God's fellow-workers we are; God's agricultural and building project, you are!" The very concept takes our breath away. As a Christian, I am in partnership with God himself. It could transform your life to think in that way.

Such brothers and sisters may decide to covenant together to form such a sharing partnership—an extended mission family. This practice has a long history in Protestant missions outside of CIM/OMF.

The earliest Protestant missionaries—the Moravians—functioned this way. They were inevitably all self-supporting. Even if the home church in Saxony had the money to send them, there were no international banks to transfer it to their accounts. On Christmas Eve 1792, a Dutch tailor, a German cobbler, and a German cutler arrived at Baviaanskloof to begin a mission to that southern part of Africa. In 1798 they were joined by a Dutch hatter, his wife, and three women from Europe sent out to marry the three pioneers. The mission "station" they started—called Gnadendaal (Grace Valley)—was a self-supporting farming community, with more than 1200 people living around the mission and working to support each other. I love the following quote from earlier still. "On 30 March 1756, Solomon Schumann wrote from Surinam in South America: 'Brother Kamm is picking coffee; Brother Wenzel is mending shoes; Brother Schmidt is making a dress for a customer; Brother Doerfer is digging the garden; Brother Brambly is working on the canal.'" They were a mutually self-supporting team.

It is less often realised that the first Baptist missionaries in India were largely self-supporting. At the beginning of the nineteenth century we often hear of the Serampore Trio—William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward. Carey worked from 1793–99 as manager of an indigo plantation at a salary of £150 a year paid by the Christian owner George Udney, who went on supporting Carey even though the plantation lost money the whole time Carey managed it. Unfortunately, on their voyage out, the Marshmans and Ward let it be known that they were "missionaries" and the British East India Co. would not permit them to enter British India. They therefore moved to the Danish colony of Serampore. Carey had now lost his source of income. How would the enlarged group survive? They were supported by the income earned by Mrs. Hannah Marshman from a number of schools where pupils' fees brought in money. Later, Carey was given a post as lecturer in the Calcutta Civil Service College at £1500 a year, a sum that supported all of them and paid for their Bible translation programme. You see here a model of a supporting group sharing out their income to meet the needs of the whole group.

While the Bible says a lot about our partnership with others, it also speaks of our partnership with the Lord. Could you give us a few words to show what that should be like?

I find it quite remarkable that both Paul and John can use this biblical word group to indicate that we can enjoy a business partnership with all three Persons of the Trinity (1 Cor 1:9; 2 Cor 13:13; 1 John 1:3, 7). Perhaps it would revolutionise the spiritual experience of some of us if we grasped this concept: we have been given the esteemed privileged of being junior partners with the Holy Trinity. In 1 Corinthians 3:9, Paul speaks of us being fellow workers with God. The original word order is emphatic: "God's fellow-workers we are; God's agricultural and building project, you are!" The very concept takes our breath away. As a Christian, I am in partnership with God himself. It could transform your life to think in that way.

Does working in partnership with God and with his church ensure that all of our problems will solve themselves?

When I started to consider the theme of partnership in the New Testament I was surprised to find that partnership, or sharing, in suffering is a major theme. Although we all shrink from the very notion of persecution and suffering, it is found throughout the New Testament. As you might expect, the theme is found first in the teaching of Jesus. At Caesarea Philippi, following Peter's confession that he "was the Christ, the Son of the living God," we read that "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he *must* go to Jerusalem and suffer many things ... and that he *must* be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Matt 16:21). These words about his personal suffering were followed by a challenge to his disciples: "If anyone would come after me, he *must* deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt 16:24). The Lord Jesus came to suffer redemptively on behalf of all mankind. Jesus' disciples are similarly called to be willing to suffer for his sake.

And Paul is a perfect example of that, isn't he?

Yes. Right after he was first converted, the Lord sent Ananias of Damascus to tell Paul "I will show him how much he must suffer for my sake" (Acts 9:16). But the actual Damascus Road experience implies this suffering, for when Saul asks "Who are you, Lord?" he hears the reply "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5). In persecuting Christians, Saul had been persecuting Jesus: the Lord shares in the sufferings of the church and the church shares in the sufferings of the Lord.

Paul picks up this idea several times in his own writings. In Colossians 1:24 he writes, "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church." It is almost as though there is a quota of suffering to be accepted and shared by the Lord's followers. Indeed, he can record that "as you share in our sufferings (lit. are business partners [*koinōnos*] in suffering), so also you share in our comfort" (2 Cor 1:7). The whole letter we call 2 Corinthians is extremely realistic about apostolic experience. Paul confesses to being distressed (1:6), despairing (1:8),

downcast or depressed (7:6), and much besides. Paul destroys the false illusion of being an apostolic superman, unmoved by pressures of the work.

Then there is that marvellous and deservedly famous passage in Philippians: "I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing (noun, *koinōnia*) in his sufferings" (Phil 3:10). Since Paul wrote these words from prison, he was suffering while he was writing. All this seems an important corrective to the kind of superficial evangelism which offers subjective benefits—come to Jesus if you want joy, peace, happiness, and—as some even offer—prosperity! But it's also a corrective to the way in which many churches today encourage Christians to sing, "I, me, and my," and thus reduce Christian discipleship to subjective navel-gazing. It is only a very selfish kind of unbiblical Christianity which focuses on spiritual self-gratification and is weak on objective Christian action.

What do we find when it comes down to our difficulties in recognizing political enemies as Christian brothers and sisters?

The book of Hebrews was written to first century Hebrew Christians who were caught up in the politics of race. The international fellowship of the multiracial church was anathema to patriotic Jews who hated the Gentile dogs in general and the Romans in particular. As zealot hostility to Gentiles rose and the Jewish revolt began that ended with the sacking of Jerusalem and the fall of Masada, Jewish believers were forced to choose how they would associate with their Gentile and even Roman brothers and sisters in Christ. They had to decide whether to become zealot patriots or to be regarded as traitors by their fellow countrymen for fraternising with the enemy. This was akin to the situation following Pearl Harbor when Japan interned British and American missionaries in China and their German missionary colleagues took food parcels to them in prison!

Identifying with fellow believers can lead to suffering. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, "Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side (*koinōnos*) with those who were so treated. You sympathised with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property" (Heb 10:32–34). When we hear of Christians being attacked in some corner of the globe, are we just glad we are safe where we are or are we in some way ready to be partners with them in their suffering? How much (honestly) do we pray for our fellow believers suffering persecution?

It seems that partnering with those who are different or suffering should be considered a normal part of the Christian life.

That's correct. The whole letter of 1 Peter, in spite of its short length, contains no less than eleven uses of the verb *pasxō* ("to suffer") out of a total of forty for the whole of the New Testament, and four out of sixteen uses of the noun *pathēma* ("suffering"). A full quarter of New Testament usages of these words occurs in this one short letter that was addressed to suffering Christians. The key passage, which includes the notion of partnership in the sufferings of Christ, comes in 1 Peter 4:12–13: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate (*koinōneō*) in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." This concept is so important in the book that Peter pairs "suffering" with "glory" four times (1:11; 4:13; 5:1; 5:10).

It should not surprise us that a suffering church is also in view in Revelation. Writing to the seven churches of Asia, the author identifies himself as, "I, John, your brother and companion (*sugkoinōnos*) in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus" and reminds them that he "was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev 1:9). His faithfulness and theirs resulted in mutual suffering for the sake of Christ.

What you are saying is that when we suffer for Jesus, we are simply joining in partnership with others who have experienced suffering before us.

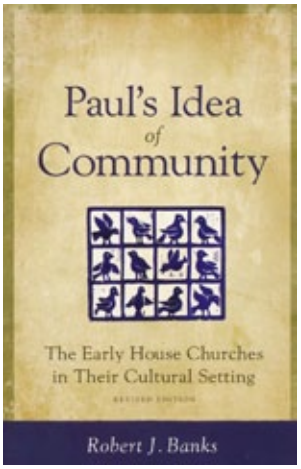
Partnership in suffering is a truly Christian activity—as it is being like Jesus—and truly apostolic—as it follows Peter, Paul, and John. The people who exhort us to be partners in suffering, all suffered themselves. It is a constant New Testament theme that we cannot escape. While we like to feel safe and comfortable, the Lord is more interested in blessing us and blessing other people through us, and that often only comes through suffering. Abraham had to leave Ur, Moses had to leave Egypt, Ezekiel and Daniel had to leave Israel for captivity in Babylon, Peter, Paul, and John all had to leave the places where they had grown up to preach Christ elsewhere. Anyone involved in mission can expect to face suffering and partnership in suffering. In the communion we remember the suffering of Christ for us. Are we willing to suffer for him?

I hope you see that partnership is a *very* biblical concept and ask yourselves which of these different kinds of partnership you have been consciously experiencing, as they really enrich our lives as Christians. Rather than leaving this up in the air, I would encourage you to pray to the Lord and ask him to extend and deepen the range of your partnership with himself and with your fellow-believers. Will thinking this way not deepen your own relationships and so strengthen the congregation to which you belong?

NOTE

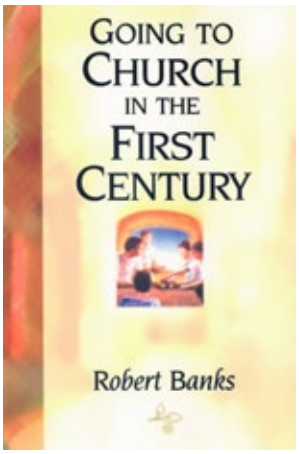
[1] See Michael Griffiths, *Cinderella with Amnesia* (London: IVP, 1977), *Cinderella's Betrothal Gifts* (Sevenoaks: OMF, 1978), *Shaking the Sleeping Beauty: Arousing the Church to its Mission* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), *Get your Act Together, Cinderella* (Leicester: IVP, 1989).

Book Reviews



Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Cultural Setting

By Robert Banks. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994. Revised edition. ISBN: 1-56563-050-5. 233 pp.



Going to Church in the First Century: An Eye-witness Account

By Robert Banks. Jacksonville, FL: Seedsowers, 1990. ISBN: 0-941232-37-5. 48 pp.

Reviewed by Allan Harkness.

I admire anyone who makes their PhD dissertation readily accessible outside the academic realm for which it was primarily written—and Robert Banks is in this league with these two titles.

To be able to surmount the pressures of pragmatism and technique-ism contemporary church leaders face, careful theologising on the nature of their faith communities is a must, and *Paul's Idea of Community* (first published in 1979) aims to help this process through an exposition of the apostle Paul's insights into the meaning and practice of Christian community, as "the most clearly developed and profound understanding of community in all the early Christian writings" (1). Steering a middle line between being too dense or too "pop" in his style, Banks takes his readers on an informed journey which highlights how Paul developed his perspectives on appropriate community: merging Paul's deep awareness of the historical and cultural context in which the first churches existed with his [Paul's] sharp theological nous.

Bank's eighteen chapters cover a comprehensive range of topics inherent in Paul's ecclesiology. They range over systemic matters, leadership issues, and the applied outworking of community life. But it's not just "what it was like back then." Banks challenges his readers to sense the relevance for our contemporary church life, making us sit up and think through some of our often unquestioned assumptions. For example:

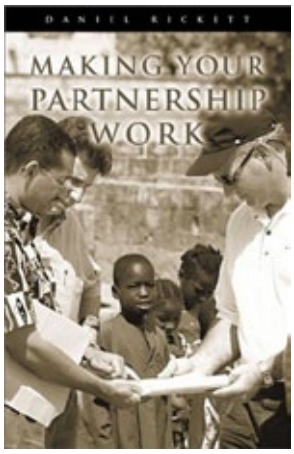
> One of the most puzzling features of Paul's understanding of *ekklesia* ... must have been his failure to say that a person went to church primarily to "worship." Not once in all his writings does he suggest this is the case. Indeed it could not be, for he held a view of "worship" that prevented him from doing so (88).

A sacred cow kicked perhaps, gently but firmly. Readers will find more, depending on their own ecclesial background, but along the way will doubtless find reinforcement of perspectives they have already thought through.

So much for *Paul's Idea of Community,* informing and challenging church leaders as well as it does. That's still a limited number of church participants. Banks was challenged by some of his peers to make his insights accessible to a wider group also, and so *Going to Church in the First Century* was born (in 1980; since reprinted several times). According to the author, "This brief historical narrative attempts to depict what it was like to attend an early Christian gathering in the middle of the first century" (1). The narrator, a sceptical Roman named Publius, attends a house-based meeting with his Christian friends, and records his observations and feelings. His report of the dynamics unfolding through the meeting are expressions of the perspectives Banks highlights in his main work.

I've used *Going to Church in the First Century* with cell group leaders, church think-tanks and theological college students. For all groups the narrative style impacts on their thinking in a rather different way than does the more "solid" *Paul's Idea of Community*. Well worth circulating and discussing in church leaders meetings.

Two books, same focus, same relevance for church life today. I have a hunch we'll see further reprints.



Making Your Partnership Work: A Guide for Ministry Leaders

By Daniel Rickett. Enumclaw, WA: Partners International, 2002. ISBN 1579214193. 167 pp.
Reviewed by Chris J. A. Cooper.

This go-to book often minds my boarding pass on the way to a partnership meeting. It's slim, but packed with wisdom and practical advice distilled from over thirty years of Daniel Rickett's personal experience and six decades of background from Partners International.

In his short introductory chapter—"What Every Partnership Needs to Succeed"—Rickett notes that changes in the landscape of world evangelization push us towards building alliances and coordinating strategies with partners. He presents a helpful spectrum of partnerships with increasing levels of involvement and interdependence (association; service alliance; multilateral alliance; joint venture; complementary partnership; and merger). The main focus of the book is on joint ventures and complementary partnerships, however the principles introduced are widely applicable.

Rickett's basic framework addresses the imperatives of productive partnerships in three parts: Vision; Relationship; and Results. Each part is further subdivided into three chapters and a summary checklist. "Vision" encourages partners to explore what *shared vision* God might have invited them to reach together, how *compatible* they might be, and what *ground rules* would be helpful for mutual benefit. "Relationship" explores the role of *alliance champions*, the development of *intercultural understanding*, and fundamentals of *mutual trust*—and provides very helpful insight on three types of trust essential to partnering: intentions, competency and perspective. "Results" considers the *meaningful results* that might arise for the gospel, simple practicalities of *documentation*, and the need for *learning and change* in the midst of uncertainty and variability.

Three further practical resources aimed at more formal partnership situations are provided: a checklist to help ministries to *assess and select* partners; a copy of the Pledge of Partners International which could be adapted for other partnership situations; and a readiness to partner Self-Assessment tool. The book concludes with endnotes and an extensive bibliography of further reading.

For anyone involved in gospel partnerships this book deserves to be on the shelf, except when it goes with you to partnership meetings! (Readers should also check out www.danielrickett.com).

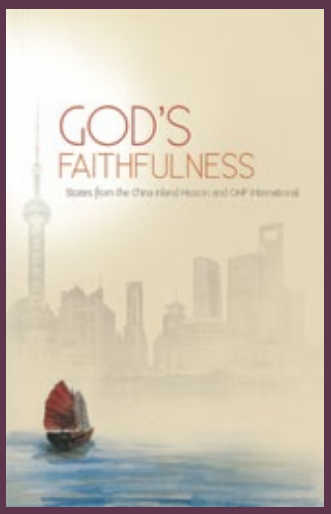


Partnership: The Study of an Idea

By Max Warren. London: SCM, 1956. 127 pp.
Reviewed by Walter McConnell.

C. S. Lewis, in his famous essay "On the Reading of Old Books," proclaimed that "It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to every three new ones." Max Warren's *Partnership* is an old book that should be added to the reading list of anyone who wants to understand the subject as it impacts the church and mission. Even though sixty years of political and cultural changes has dated some of its contents, this book shows us that many ideas we think are new have had a long shelf life. Here we learn that "The essence of partnership is that it is a relationship entered upon in freedom by free persons who remain free" (4). Partnership does not entrap anyone. It is further made up of three factors: involvement, acceptance of responsibility, and acceptance of liabilities. Warren develops these ideas by investigating the biblical and theological aspects of the concept and demonstrates how they can be worked out in church, mission, and in building a multi-racial society.

Recommended Books



God's Faithfulness: Stories from the China Inland Mission and OMF International

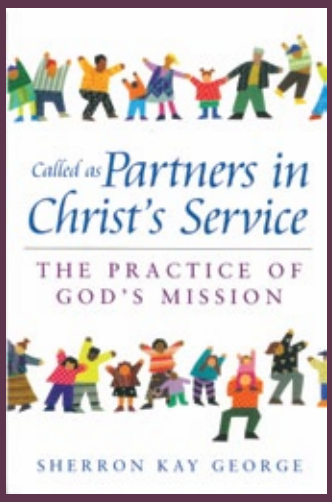
Compiled by Rose Dowsett and Chad Berry. Singapore: OMF International, 2014. Hardback ISBN: 978-0-85363-160-6. Paperback ISBN: 978-0-85363-161-3. 338 pp.

God's Faithfulness: Stories from the China Inland Mission and OMF International is a unique anthology of forty CIM and OMF missionary stories which testify powerfully to the faithfulness of God throughout the 150 years of our history. The book incorporates a clear and helpful four-part summary of the history of the mission and stories of workers from almost every country where we have teams today.

The overall aim is to display God's faithfulness through the stories of particular individuals, events, and experiences. There are tales of tragedy and triumph, sorrow and joy, provision on a huge scale and provision in some small but precious way. Throughout we read of answers to prayer that reveal human weakness and highlight divine power. We encounter ordinary men and women, working in multiple cultures, who struggle to tell the story of Jesus to others and are met by the grace of God who brings people to faith.

The book introduces us to a man who was angry because his daughter went to serve in Taiwan and reveals how he was transformed. It recounts the courage of a young Canadian who fearlessly spoke the truth to a rebel leader. We are moved by the compassion of a Dutch sister who ministered to women entrapped by prostitution. We are join with Christians who have journeyed with those searching desperately for missing loved ones after the Indian Ocean tsunami. And as we read, we catch a glimpse of the light and hope found in Christ.

These are stories that will inspire readers from different generations, backgrounds, and experiences. Those who are familiar with the work of OMF will feel their hearts lifted as they pass through familiar territory. Those who are unfamiliar with OMF will be blessed as they discover God working in and through the members of the mission. Wherever readers are in their journey towards understanding God's heart for the nations, this book will give them reason for hope and faith to take the next step.



Called as Partners in Christ's Service: The Practice of God's Mission

By Sherron Kay George. Louisville: Geneva, 2004. ISBN 0-66405925207 xvi + 132 pp.

Reviewed by Walter McConnell.

This little book begins by telling us that "Partnership is not merely a means, method, or approach to mission. *Partnership is a fundamental dynamic of the triune missionary God of love who is, acts, and relates in mutual partnership in sending the Son, the Spirit, and the church into the world as instruments of God's saving mission*" (1, italics in original). The author, a veteran missionary and mission educator, follows this up by laying out biblical and theological foundations for partnership (mainly gleaned from an overview of John's Gospel), delineating the attitudes we should express as we partner with others (respect, compassion, and humility), and describing practices that characterize true partnership (observing and participating, receiving and giving, and discerning signs of God's transformation).

Though written to help members of a particular denominational missionary society understand and implement their policy statement, this little book provides valuable input to a much wider audience by helping us think through many issues involved when foreign missionaries enter into partnership with local Christians. The questions for group reflection and case studies found in the appendices can be fruitfully used to guide many discussions about the topic.