

# Lessons of Partnership

Bill Taylor

I want that holy and transfixing moment forever engraved on my heart. At the front of that gigantic tent, Michael Maileau, spiritual leader of the Solomon Islands, called to his brothers and sisters from his nation and from Papua New Guinea (PNG). More than 100 came forward, stood and faced the audience. Then Michael invited people from Australia and New Zealand to the front, to kneel before them.

As they knelt, Michael's passionate praying voice spoke, "We thank God that he used the white people to bring us the gospel, for through them we came to a knowledge of the true and living God through his Son, Jesus. We are responsible for the advance of the gospel. So now, we from Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, want to share the torch of the missionary gospel with you. Take the baton with us, may we partner, let us run together, we need each other."

As Michael spoke, the Micronesian believers blessed those kneeling, laying hands on them, praying for them, exhorting them to bold faith, encouraging them to sail with them anew in the "Deep Sea Canoe Missionary Movement" that had become their new rallying banner to reevangelize the islands and then overflow to the rest of the world. I saw believers of different races, languages, histories, cultures, and education united in partnership for the gospel, each bringing strengths to the missionary movement.

The setting was the Fifth South Pacific Prayer Assembly (February, 1995), a six-day gathering of 250 people from eight island nations. I saw a number of expressions of partnership, starting with the common passion of the leaders to celebrate worship and prayer. The diversity of this partnership was striking. It included Maori New Zealanders, along with their white colleagues; dark skinned PNG and Solomon Islanders, along with Western missionaries who had obviously won their trust and affection: and the Fijians and Tongans.

The New Zealand assembly beautifully showed different facets of partnerships. Here I offer some suggestions from my own experience to help your own mission partnerships take shape and function effectively.

## Lesson One

I serve with the World Evangelical Fellowship Missions Commission, an international networking and partnering team that shares ideas, information, and resources. Our commission



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aims to empower the global missions movement to train and send long-term missionaries. As such, I work with about 60 leaders and some 30 movements, affirming their own vision and plans.

Let me describe two partnerships that grew out of years of listening to national leaders. First, based on our colleagues' requests, the commission has invested in missionary training (consultations, seminars, and publications), with a primary focus on needs in the non-Western world. We have co-sponsored consultations on missionary training and partnered with national or regional mission associations, with Latin America as our initial arena.

We made some mistakes when we unilaterally moved ahead of our national or regional partners. We spun our wheels and spent funds in the wrong projects. I regret some of the decisions I enthusiastically made and wish I could rewind the video machine of history.

*The lesson: Listen before entering a partnership, and be willing to learn from mistakes and try again.*

### Lesson Two

International missions leaders have asked me in recent years: "Bill, why are we losing so many good career missionaries? We sent them with such high hopes, and now they have returned home never to go back. Why is this happening? Is it only in our country? Can WEF help us?"

That launched our second major partnership venture, a research project, which was then coordinated by Guatemalan Rudy Giron, president of COMIBAM International. Our partners are the leaders of mission movements in Nigeria, Ghana, Costa Rica, Brazil, Philippines, Singapore, India, Korea, Australia, Germany, Denmark, United Kingdom, and the United States. We want to keep gifted men and women serving with a sense of Christian challenge and satisfaction in long-term, cross-cultural service.

One of the delights in this partnership is the number of non-Western mission leaders who so believe in the partnership that they are willing to cover their own part of the budget for the research project.

*The lesson: Partnerships work best when there is shared ownership of the project, including finances.*

### Lesson Three

Sometimes people say, "History has changed, and along with it the role of the historic (colonial) missionary. Yes, we thank God for the Western missionaries, though they made many mistakes. But the job can best be done with national missionaries. We plead with you to invest your funds in the most cost-effective manner supporting our national workers."

This is a sensitive issue in some circles. Many missions-minded people and churches are questioning the high cost of recruiting, producing, placing, and sustaining Western missionaries, particularly in high-cost cities. Admittedly, it is hard to defend investing \$70,000 per year for an American missionary family to work in Japan, or \$50,000 in some European countries. Why not redirect our giving to support 7,000 national workers? This seems to be good stewardship of limited resources.

Because I move among the non-Western missionary movement and try to be sensitive to its needs, I have struggled with these issues. But let me quote an Indian missions leader who told me some years ago:

"If Americans want to send funds to non-Western missionaries, that may be fine in some cases. But do not rob us of the joy and responsibility to support our own people. And I fear that if Americans send now only their dollars and not their sons and daughters, the next step will be to send neither their dollars nor their sons and daughters. There is a non-biblical extreme to be wary of. Biblical partnership means sending and supporting your own flesh and blood." His statement is wise. It is not a matter of either-or, but both-and.

Another Asian missions leader told me: "A lot of Asians are raising funds in the U.S. Please tell your colleagues there to check with respected nationals in our countries who can vouch for the integrity of these ministries. Tell Americans to be careful."

I profoundly respect agencies such as the Friends Missionary Prayer Band of India that refuse foreign money. They want their Indian supporters to sense complete ownership for

the mission. In some circumstances, FMPB will accept financial investment for other projects, but they are very careful.

Other non-Western agencies accept funds only for capital investments (property, buildings, equipment, scholarships for advanced study), but not to support their missionaries. Significantly, most of these agencies are growing and having a powerful impact. We won't need to learn some lessons the hard way if we look to the long view in two ways: What will bring about the fullest effort by every part of the partnership in the long run? Consider the downside: What paths of partnership may appear to bring immediate help but engender debilitating dependencies?

*The lesson: Be balanced. Don't get sucked in by hard sells based solely on comparisons of cost-effectiveness. Take time to check out potential partners before signing up.*

#### Lesson Four

What about church-to-church partnerships, which offer a growing menu of possibilities? These can be excellent, but we need some values and attitude checks. Who is putting the partnership together? What is expected of each partner? Is it really a partnership, or simply a "mother (U.S., of course) -daughter (Third World, of course)" relationship designed to channel funds, or to mobilize missions in the "mother" church?

In counseling local churches getting into these agreements, I ask them their motives, their expectations, their short-range and long range objectives. I ask them what they hope to contribute, and I probe what they hope to learn from their "sister" church. A surprising amount of American naivete, or simply cultural insensitivity, exists in many well-meaning churches.

*The lesson: Church-to-church partnerships have real potential, but must be entered with wisdom, humility, and a teachable spirit.*

#### Lesson Five

What about the church that says, "We can do everything alone to have a successful missions enterprise: screen, train, send, support, etc.?" I hear this not only across the U.S. but in many other countries as well—Korea, Singapore, Guatemala, and El Salvador, to mention a few.

Most of them operate alone; others are developing networks of like minded congregations.

First, these churches sense profound ownership of the missionary task. They may have gifted leaders (with vision, management, and technology skills), and they want to be major players on the global scene with a primary (though not exclusive) target on unreached peoples. Second, some are reacting against what they perceive to be mission agency "control." In a few cases, they have had a bad experience. Others are unaware of the agencies.

The Holy Spirit is brooding over his church and creating new ways not only of "being the church," but also new forms of "being the church in missions." I doubt that most of the historic agencies will pass away, although some need to reexamine their reason for existence. Meanwhile, hundreds of new agencies are popping up, some of them solo or "mom and pop" operations. Others are driven by a broader vision that galvanizes creative people.

However, I do worry about these ventures and potential partnerships. Yes, a church can screen, partially train, send, and support missionaries. But there is more that must be done to be fruitful. Remember the "etc." in the above paragraph? This little term is critical, for in it I cluster additional components that must exist for a healthy missionary movement: pastoral care, supervision, strategizing, teamwork, leadership.

It is one thing for the church to serve as a sending agency, but it is very much another matter for the church to serve as an adequate deploying and pastoring agency. Rare is the church that can provide the on-field infrastructure needed to sustain a strong venture over the years. Nor can any church I know of provide the complete training that is desirable and available today.

Nevertheless, some of them persistently argue the opposite. Why? Frankly, they fear losing their keen people to recruiters of other groups during their years in schooling. They also sense (rightly, in many cases) that most Bible colleges and seminaries offer mind-oriented, theoretical learning based on the formal schooling model. They do not see the schools committed to spiritual formation.

They find schools divorced from local church values. They want to provide hands-on, evaluated, experience-driven training that only the local context can provide. But can they offer the complete biblical-theological-missiological training package? No. Then what can be done?

I propose two levels of partnership, training, and member care. For training, why not form strategic alliances with schools?

Churches can talk with schools, express their concerns, and negotiate a type of partnership. Perhaps the church will focus on summer school and winter term courses. A number of Bible colleges and seminaries are packaging excellent missions courses during these periods.

Churches can also form alliances with mission agencies for field-based member care, leadership, and ongoing, hands-on training. Churches, after all, pay many of the bills (something schools and agencies should remember), and are seeking ways to give more than money. When partnerships are pursued, churches can retain ultimate responsibility for the well-being of their missionaries. The agencies contribute their considerable field-based experience.

*The lesson: Wise churches recognize what they cannot do, and partner with those who can assist them in their long-range goals.*

## A Maturing Movement

For some, partnership is like the Holy Grail. Everybody is talking about it but nobody has seen it! Perhaps the good term "partnership" risks losing its value through overuse. Nevertheless, God is bringing his people and organizations together. I thank God that I have seen vital and viable partnerships at work. Motives are moving beyond mere partnership pragmatism—of getting more "bang for our buck"—with efficient management mechanisms.

I sense a maturing attitude toward and commitment to sensitive and significant partnership covenants in the globalized body of Christ. Some churches and organizations are developing serious partnerships for the first time.

Many older mission agencies have been forming viable partnerships for years. They are

expanding them as rapidly as possible. For example, Trans World Radio has joined with Peter Deyneka Russian Ministries to launch the Moscow Media Center. President Thomas Lowell of TWR explains, "As we studied our common goals and needs as organizations, we realized there would be tremendous synergy from our working together more closely."

## Why Some Work

We have noted some lessons we can learn from partnerships. What seems to make some work? Why do others fail? I've asked a number of my colleagues. Here is a summary of their answers.

*1. Initiative with relationship.* They work when they come into existence after sustained trust and relationship-building, not simply because someone has a passion and rushes into the organizational marriage to get the job done. But, they will fail when someone rushes into the partnership, even if it is presented as a gift that will immeasurably benefit the ministry. They will fail if trust is lost, or if personal conflicts and ego drives sap its energies. Americans in general are known as pragmatic, let's-get-it-done, we've-got-the-funds-and-the-technology people with great programs and managerial skills. These potential strengths can become weaknesses when Americans plunge ahead without building an adequate relational foundation.

*2. Cross-cultural wisdom.* They tend to work when there is understanding of diverse cultures. Unfortunately, some church and missions leaders still operate from their monocultural framework of values and behavior. They impose themselves on the partner, subconsciously perhaps regarded as the junior, or secondary, player. Westerners do not have a monopoly on this attitude. Ignoring culture makes an easy recipe for failure.

For example, many languages do not have simple equivalents for the English words "partnership" or "accountability." Therefore, if partnerships are to work, the covenants must have the dynamic equivalent terms that partners can share and support. Spell it out. Make it clear.

*3. Common Goals.* They tend to work when there is a commitment to a common objective,



and the recognition that the partners truly need each other. They fail when goals and expectations are fuzzy, or when one partner wants to impose objectives not supported by the other.

4. *Understanding of accountability.* They tend to work when there is a clear understanding of how each partner functions. They fail when the agreed-upon roles are ignored, or when a partner tries to change midstream without dialogue. The concept of "accountability" is critical, because the word has different meanings in different cultures. Is accountability possible without control? Yes, but it's not easy.

5. *Ongoing care and evaluation.* They tend to work when the partnerships are carefully cultivated and strengthened. Amazingly, some partners assume everything is fine because the strategic alliance has been inaugurated, but they fail to care for it adequately. If the partners don't treat the venture like a living organism, it will die. Constant monitoring of ventures for effectiveness also helps indicate when the project has been completed, should be changed, or simply needs to be ended. Vigilant care will help us to cut losses before losing friendships.

## Conclusion

Now is the time. Surely there is some relationship between partnership in mission and the prayer of our Lord in John 17:11, 21-23. Four times our Lord prayed that ultimately God would enable us to demonstrate a marvelous unity that will make Christ Himself visible to the world. His prayer is now being answered as never before. The global body of Christ is learning about partnerships in every language and culture. Let us continue to grow, to expand, to please the heart of God without creating artificial structures. Let us now be true partners in the gospel.

How do we do this? Here's one example of powerful partnership: Francisco Velasquez\* is a Latin American who serves as a broker for partnerships in the Arabic-speaking world. He works for a Western agency, but his training, gifts, and Latin American personality enable him to serve with unique skill in the Arab world. Some North Americans are mystified at his ability to understand the Arab mind, as well as the ministry needs in the area.

His agency is involved in several strategic partnerships in this difficult area. It's not easy to attain clear accountability without heavy-handed control and at the same time maintain a stringent "need-to-know" security in this sensitive area. Francisco is able to speak lovingly and frankly with his Arab and Berber colleagues, and some wonder how he does this so well. Francisco has been cultivating these trust relationships over years, and he has earned the right to speak. He has spent long hours drinking tea, talking, visiting some of the hottest spots in the region. He encourages, listens, learns, shares his life, and teaches in an indirect way. And he speaks the difficult language of audited financial statements that show how funds were spent. He has served as an intermediary, guarding local initiatives from being over-exposed or over-supplied with resources that might cripple instead of strengthen them.

The best news I hear from Francisco is that people are coming to Christ through these partnerships. There is more fruit than can be openly reported at this time. The micro-minority churches in that sensitive area are being strengthened, proven leaders are being affirmed, and a fresh crop of leaders and ministries are emerging. I'm so glad to have Francisco as my friend, example, and instructor in partnership.

## Study Questions

1. Does the author see partnership working best with Western planning and finances, paired with nationals' cultural insights?
2. Is cost-effectiveness a primary motivation for Western and Third-World partnerships? What additional advantages can be found?

\*pseudonym

