

How to Develop a Healthy Partnership

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In 1999, a short term mission team went to Africa. During the orientation the IMB missionary informed that team that money or things given to nationals could cause problems and even hinder mission work. They were informed that before giving things check with the missionaries first.

Toward the end of the trip they were reminded again “Do not give money” to individuals or “make promises to national believers.” Most of the volunteers followed the guidelines however a few didn’t.

After returning to the USA one team member received a letter asking for financial help for a church building. Quickly a check was sent to the pastor. Later another letter arrived asking about the money again. Those sending the money knew that the check had cleared the bank. Quickly the missionary was contacted and asked what they needed to do.

The missionary reminded them of what they had been instructed previously. He contacted the national pastor to see what had happened with the money.

It seems that the pastor’s brother opened the envelope with the check (which is very normal for their culture). The brother needed money for his child's school fees so he got a friend at the bank to cash the check and he used the money (this was very normal in their culture also).

This created a major problem for all those involved. The pastor was embarrassed when word got back to him that now others knew that the money was not used for the church roof. Those sending the money were very discouraged about giving money or going on another mission trip.

This same scenario has been repeated over and over again in mission work. American are generous and often times willing to help before fully understanding the **BEST WAY** that we can help. So does that mean we should not give or support nationals from non-western countries? No! But there are areas that every church needs to avoid if they want to have a **HEALTHY PARTNERSHIP** with non-western churches.

How to Have a Healthy Partnership

First, when entering into a partnership, be cautious about giving finances to an individual pastor or church leader. It is **always best** that your partnerships be made and finances be given to the local church and its leaders (plural). When the partnership is based on one individual often times there can be abuse of the funds and resources.

Why does that happen? Because often times the person who receives the money has never been exposed to that much money before. When temptation comes (and it will) he may use the money for a more pressing or urgent need (or personal need). In all honesty he did not mean to use the money inappropriately and he may have intended to pay it back. Now, he owes a debt and he does not have the means to pay for it. He feels guilty and may have been shamed before his congregation. There is much more accountability when we give to the local church.

Before sending money ask yourself: *Will this potential church partner be responsible and use the money for purposes it was designed to be used for?*

- Partnership Strategy Plan: Meet with those you are partnering with and discuss the proper means of how money will be sent and how it will be used. Have your partner church to form a small committee to oversee that all monies are being spent for the intended purposes.

Second, do not think that our way of doing church here in the USA is the best way or only way it can be done. Culture and customs are different from place to place. That means their churches will be indigenous to their culture and lifestyle.

Are you familiar with the culture and customs of the churches you are partnering with?

A healthy partnering church is one that is at home within its context and capable of reproducing in its own setting and community. **An indigenous church is never a transplanted church from the sending partner's area.** The sending partner who brings church "just like back home" may be setting up the new work to fail because it is not capable of existing or reproducing locally.

Being indigenous means that we allow them freedom to be different than we are. Remember, “Different isn’t the same as bad, it’s just different!” If you really want to help your partnering church to grow and become a church planting church then seek ways to help them within their own culture and customs.

- Personal Example: Recently, I meet a man from the USA who was doing mission work in Africa. Instead of learning their language he was teaching them in English. In that particular country there were over 53 different languages. Instead of encouraging believers to write Christian songs in their language and cultural music style he taught them to sing hymns in English. Their church buildings looked like those of the USA. The people were instructed dress like Americans would dress (suit and ties, dresses only). A national believer told me, “When the missionary leaves, we will change it to fit our culture.” By the way, the USA church was financing 100% of the work!
- Partnership Strategy Plan: Always keep in mind the principles of Indigenous Mission Work. In this instance it would be “Make sure what you do can be **reproduced** easily within the **culture** of the people you are working with. If they cannot reproduce it then they will not be able to use it to start new churches or to reach the lost in their communities.

Third, Do not start a partnership by supporting national churches or pastors. If you do then you are leading them down the road to **DEPENDENCY**. Many American churches do not like to hear this but it is the truth. When we try to **help in the wrong way we cause the national church to be spiritually stunted in their faith?** When they start depending on your support instead of trusting God by faith for HIS supply of their needs (Philippians 4:13) then dependency has began. The non-western church may never have the resources that a western church has.

- Personal Example: One national pastor from Belarus wrote me a letter asking if I would help him get connected to another Missouri Baptist Church. For the past ten years the MBC church was sending him money supporting him as a pastor. He moved to a nicer home, sent his children to a better school, got a nicer vehicle. After ten years of this support, the MBC church changed pastors and lost interest in continuing their support. This Belarusian pastor said, “If I do not find

another Missouri Church to support me then I will have to move to another home, my children will have to go to another school, I may have to sell my car and get a different one.” What a Missouri Baptist Church thought was a “good thing” caused a national pastor to trust them and not to trust God. Now after ten years of this kind of lifestyle it was very difficult for him to go back. He was in a very serious situation.

- Personal Church Partnership Strategy Plan: Remember the Indigenous Principle of “**Never doing for others what they can do for themselves.**” Remember, you are not trying to make them nor their church building like you or your church building. Help them be indigenous and they will grow. History tells us that when we quit giving and supporting national churches many of them folded up because they are not indigenous.

Fourth, if you have a strategy for helping your partnering church then you are on the right track. **Your partnership strategy is your roadmap.** It tells you two things: Where you are starting from and where you want to end up. Once you have a strategy in place then you can decide on “How to get where you are going!” If you only give resources based upon their needs and not upon your strategy then it becomes difficult to accomplish what you desire to accomplish. There will always be needs that need meet. You can only meet so many needs before your church is financially and physically exhausted. Eventually your people will grow tired and says “Enough is enough!” Remember Jesus said, “The poor will always be with you” (John 12:8).

Personal Example: Many churches start their partnership on “needs only” basis with no plan in mind. There will always be needs both here and overseas. When evangelism and church planting is the major focus of your partnership you can eliminate many other things from detouring you. That does not mean that we cannot give financial assistance, or send medical or building teams or other things. But it does mean that every team we send out is sent out “On Mission” and with a Kingdom focused strategic purpose in mind.

- Personal Church Partnership Strategy Plan: At the beginning of the partnership meet with your partnering church and map out your strategy. What will the “**END-VISION**” look like? The end-vision

is “what the partnership will look like when it is finished!” How do you get from point A to point B? Work together with your partner on the strategy to accomplish these goals. Someone said wisely “Plan your work and then work your plan.” You will be tempted often to be sidetracked. Do not go down the side roads but stay on course by following your road map (strategy).

Fifth, do not underwrite 100% of the ministry needs in your partnership. Challenge your partnering church to contribute to the project. If you underwrite 100% of the project then it belongs to you and not to the local people. Help them see that the work in their area belongs to them and is their responsibility.

- **Personal Example:** My wife and I lived in Papua New Guinea for almost eight years. During that time we were working with an unreached people group. We asked a church from the USA to come and help us build a medical clinic and a teaching training center. The church funded 100% of the project. We were blessed to have such a nice medical clinic and training facility. It was built to be used by the people in our village. The results were terrible. We could not get the village people to cut the grass or help paint the building when it was needed or even to sweep the floor without paying them. They abused the building often and continuously told us that it was “OUR” building so we needed to pay for all of the work that was done on it. Before we built the new building we were doing the medical work out of a little hut that the people built using their own resources, material, labor and they maintained it one hundred per cent. Up until we built our new building they taught their children in their own huts and homes. In the eyes of the people the new building was “ours” and not “theirs.” If you want your partner to appreciate the work and take ownership in it they must help with its cost.
- **Personal Church Partnership Strategy Plan:** The simple and easiest thing we can do is to “just give out the money.” **It takes a lot more prayer, planning, and faith to work out a strategy where God is honored and glorified in the whole process.** One very practical way to avoid this is by asking your partner to contribute 25% of the needs for the first year while you provide 75%. The second year your partnering church provides 33% while your church provides 66%. The third year your partnering church provides 50% and you provide

50%. The fourth year your partnering church provides 66% and you provide 33%. You get the picture. One partnering church told their USA partner “Please, do not give us fish, teach us how to fish!”

The best model to follow is the indigenous model that the Apostle Paul used in the “Book of Act.” This indigenous model gives us a wide variety of churches to look at. The indigenous model was to always rely on the Word of God and the Holy Spirit for guidance and to teach the church that the **“resources for their ministry are in the harvest.”** This model will teach and enable any church, any time, and in any location to be reproducible and able to function without the aid and support from a western church. It helps the local church to thrive in its own context. It teaches them that they can be reproducible. Most importantly it shows them that they do not need a “foster parent” from the USA (II Corinthians 8:1-5).

Five Basic Indigenous Principles

1. **Self-supporting Churches** – The national churches provides its own financial support from its members from the beginning.
2. **Self-propagating Churches** – The national churches from the very beginning is a church planting church
3. **Self-governing Churches** – The national churches administers to its own affairs
4. **Self-teaching Churches** – The leaders of the national churches comes from within the church and every member has a role & responsibility
5. **Self-expressing Churches** – The national churches will be unique to their setting. Your partnering church will not look like your church. If you try to make them look and act like you, you are headed down the wrong road.

Any partnership committed to these principles has a great potential to experience the activity of God in the lives and ministries of both partners. May God be glorified in your mission work!

