Mission in Partnership
A Response

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The idea of a contextualised gospel and, as a result, an indigenous leadership which is busy at work in its own community – with global consequences, is at the heart of partnership. Paul Gupta of Hindustan Bible Institute puts it this way:

If the gospel is going to find reception globally, it will happen as the church encourages the contextualisation of the message, builds indigenous leadership, and releases them into the communities.

This is not a new idea. What we might call ‘the indigenous principle in partnership’ was clearly enunciated by Billy Graham at the original Lausanne Conference in 1974. Addressing delegates from what was then called the Third World, he said:

As national church leaders you must exercise your birthright and establish new church movements, mission agencies and parachurch agencies that represent indigenous identity.

That was more than thirty years ago but the challenge still remains. Indeed, Phill Butler in his recent book, Well Connected (2005), suggests that it is the challenge.

What is the church’s greatest challenge today? Lack of money, prayer, people? I’m convinced of one thing: the brokenness in the church, the divisions that abound, and our constant resistance to God’s design of restored relationships and practical unity is our greatest sin.

Can we honestly say to people who are not ‘us’ (our family, our folk, our church, our mission), ‘I rejoice that God is blessing you’. Unity is absolutely foundational to our witness.

Going right back to the beginning we can overhear the words of Jesus of Nazareth spoken in Jerusalem about 29CE:

I pray that they may be one, Father! May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they be one, so that the world may believe that you sent me.

Partnership as practical unity

The New Testament is full of phrases such as ‘partnership in the gospel’, ‘fellow workers with God’, ‘sharing lives in suffering’. But what does partnership as practical unity mean today?

Practical unity requires:

- Mutually agreed purpose, a clear vision and shared values. This could also be described as ‘exploring synergy’. What could we do better together than on our own, so that one plus one equals three rather than two.
- Every partner brings to the table something valued by all.
- Trust – the depth of trust that only comes from genuine relationships. This can only be developed by spending time together.
- The establishment and maintenance of a level playing field – in a world which is naturally full of inequalities and power imbalances.
- A lot of forgiveness and a lot of prayer.
Voluntary missionary movements and imperial mission agencies

It may be that the historical context of today’s mission makes partnership even more challenging. Leaders and thinkers such as Roland Allen and Max Warren spent a lifetime of ministry trying to bridge the gap, not least in the thinking of the church, between mission agencies with imperialistic attitudes on the one hand, and the more spontaneous, more indigenous voluntary missionary movements on the other. The key question has always been ‘what do we mean by equal partnership?’ Also, to what extent have our imperial mission agencies become post-imperial?

Emerging Missions Training

One of the ways that partnership can be expressed is through emerging missions training. Faith2Share, a network of mission organisations with a world wide ministry and a focus on ‘strengthening indigenous movements for the mission of God’ is just one organisation which has seen this need and responded to it. The agenda of their Emerging Missions Training Consultation at Bangalore (2004) eloquently describes the sort of issues that need addressing. These are the key ones, as identified by the Consultation:

- Obedience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit
- Discernment as a leadership priority
- Having the right people in the right places
- Training and cross-cultural seminars
- Need for mission literature/teaching materials
- Focus on reaching unreached people groups
- Individuals the key to successful outreach
- Pastoral care of mission workers
- Mutual prayer and encouragement

Finally

The challenge of partnership is great. It is not a new challenge but it is a crucial one which must not be avoided. Also, there is much work to be done, not least in supporting the new voluntary, indigenous mission movements which are the hope of the future.

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