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Building Global Partnerships in the Twenty-first Century

DOUG PRIEST

A lot can change in a few years. When I went to Ethiopia in 1966 with my parents who served with CMF International, the mission team had deliberately selected a part of the country for ministry where there were almost no Christians and no other mission efforts. In their ministry among the Oromo people, the missionaries were the ones who did the preaching and teaching, along with some hired evangelists from other church groups from different parts of the country. Small groups of people were taught in many locations and local churches were established. Over time a national church was formed and legally registered with the government. Today missionaries with CMF International function with specific roles that assist the national church. They serve at the invitation of the church.

Back in 1966 there were many more Christians in the West than in the Majority World or Global South. Today, of course, the center of Christianity has moved to the Majority World where approximately two-thirds of the world's professing Christians live. In a previous time missionaries took the lead in initiating evangelism and ministry projects simply because there were few, if any, Christians in the areas where they wanted to serve.

Today, in most of the world, that is no longer the case. The growth of the church, with Christians in every country of the world, means that missionaries should first seek to discover where and how God is at work, and then come alongside local believers to advance the kingdom of God. While there are many groups of people—usually termed *unreached people groups*—who have little or no witness among them, there are often Christians in the country who have a deep desire to share the gospel with these people. The paradigm of the *pioneer missionary* has largely and appropriately given way to the Christian vocational worker *partnering* with local bodies of believers.

But just how do we go about partnering with others? How can we build global partnerships? How do churches in the United States partner with believers in the Majority World? This article provides two case studies where the partnership has been positive and productive. Unfortunately, not all partnerships turn out so well, so this article concludes with a diagram labeled the *Partnering Continuum*, the brainchild of Brian O'Connell.

Case One

CMF International, the agency I serve as executive director, desired to enter an Asian country for ministry, a country that does not allow missionary visas. We began with several years of exploratory research, networking and making trips to become acquainted with other Christians working there. We also went to conferences featuring work in this country to meet colleagues who shared our interest.

At the same time we had been researching Business as Mission (BAM) as a valid way of sharing the gospel. The BAM approach involves establishing a legitimate business and sharing the gospel as opportunities present themselves. The business strives to make a profit, to bless the community in which it is located, to provide employment (usually to the poor) and to care for creation—operate as a green business rather than wantonly harming the environment.

One way we began developing contacts in the country was responding to invitations to take in a number of American business leaders who would lecture, usually drawing a large audience. In their lectures—on human resources or accounting practices, for example—they would pepper their talks with Christian principles, often illustrating these principles with an appropriate scripture.

One of the people we met lived in Asia and was a Christian entrepreneur. Over time he saw that we were serious. He noted our proven track record by asking others about us and visiting our home office. His role in Asia was as an investor, the leader of several businesses, and as a broker between United States companies and Asian opportunities. He invited us to consider investing in a new company that was being started in a city of two million people. We were able to raise the needed funds through the generosity of a strategic-minded congregation. The business opportunity was with an American company who wanted to branch out in Asia so that they could be closer to their customers. This company provided the majority of the capital funds needed to start the new business.

We were invited by the company to send a volunteer project manager from a church in Colorado to help oversee the construction of the manufacturing facility. An American plant manager was recruited, and we also recruited an engineer from the Georgia Institute of Technology who became a missionary with our agency. Through her engineering work at the company she was able to start some Bible studies. In several short years over half of the plant's employees became believers. We regularly visit the company and offer motivational lectures to the employees.

The company makes brass products and also produces some manufacturing chemicals. Over the decade it has moved from investment to profitability. In addition, the Asian company is involved in corporate social responsibility as required by the government. Our United States workers in the country have taken on the responsibility for the specific avenues of these efforts. Poorer children in the community are sponsored to go to school. Eyeglasses have been provided to these poor children. We have established an English teaching program so the kids may have the benefit of advancement.

We've been invited to offer Vacation Bible School in a couple of large churches in another part of the town, and we've recruited United States churches to assist us in this unexpected ministry opportunity that would not have been possible a decade ago.

Case Two

CMF International began work in Kenya in 1978, focusing on two pastoral nomadic rural groups that had few Christians, the Maasai and the Turkana. These ministries have gone well, and today consist of over 150 congregations with a membership of some ten thousand. In the late 1990s some of our missionary personnel lived in Nairobi and felt called to minister to the urban poor. Roughly 60 percent of the city's population—three million people—constitutes the urban poor of this world-class city.

These missionaries spent two full years researching churches and ministries among the urban poor. The research involved interviews, participation in some minor projects to assess compatibility and wandering through the slums looking for signs that indicated where churches were located.

One couple interviewed, Wallace and Mary Kamau, indicated their heart for the slum. Mary Kamau first started visiting the Mathare Valley slum when she was a student at Nairobi University. She would visit each weekend as part of an evangelistic team, and as she says, "I never quit working in the slum." She and Wallace, an accountant, formed Missions of Hope International (MOHI) and registered their mission with the government. Their vision was to transform the valley of darkness into the mountain of God.

In physical terms, Mathare Valley is a place of desperation. One million people live within one square mile, making it one of Africa's largest slum areas. Unemployment rates are astronomical. Infrastructure is such that there is almost no electricity or running water in the small shanties where people live. With few community toilets—one toilet per 40,000 people in some parts of the slum—sewage lines all pathways in the community. The vast majority of the children in the slums are unable to attend school.

Our missionaries learned that the Kamaus' strategy was to establish a small private Christian school. Through knowing the children, access to the parents or relatives could be achieved. An initial school of fifty children had grown to two hundred students at the time of the interview.

The Kamaus were looking to find another piece of property with a larger building to house the growing school. Through several years of interacting with the Kamaus in prayer, discussion and working on small projects, we came to sense kindred spirits and to see that we were compatible. We bought in to their vision and strategy and together we composed a memo of understanding, a partnership agreement between MOHI and CMF International.

Since that time, the ministry has rapidly expanded. Following Mary Kamau's strategy of serving children as a bridge to the community, we were encouraged to expand a child sponsorship program in the United States. We initiated a church-based child sponsorship program whereby a church sponsors a community and its children in the school. Community sponsorship is through the church's budget, while the children are sponsored by church members through their personal giving.

The sponsored children are able to attend private Christian schools established by the MOHI team. Fourteen schools have been started, and the number of sponsored children attending these schools will soon reach ten thousand. The graduation rate of children in junior high is over 90 percent, double the average of Kenya as a whole. Eight churches have been planted and three additional preaching points—areas where groups of people are meeting but have yet to become a formal church—have been established.

A microfinance program was initiated because unemployment is so rampant. A period of instruction for groups of individuals desiring a loan means they receive training in designing a business, creating a business plan, bookkeeping, marketing and saving. Over seventeen hundred people have received loans, and the repayment rate is 96.7 percent. Those desiring to help provide a donation so that people in Mathare Valley can receive a loan make contributions through BigDent.org, a website established specifically for this aspect of the ministry in Nairobi.

The partnering churches in America send teams to visit the community in Nairobi, and while there they assist by teaching, meeting medical needs, greeting the children sponsored by their church and lecturing in business, microfinance, nutrition, safety and so on. These trips are all at the invitation of the local community in the Mathare Valley slum. CMF's involvement in the partnership includes promotion, oversight and management of resources, communication and the recruiting of other partners.

Partnership Basics

According to Daniel Rickett, a partnership “is a complementary relationship driven by a common purpose and sustained by a willingness to learn and grow together in obedience to God.”¹ Many Americans, with our desire to quickly solve problems and achieve results, rush into partnerships without getting to know the ones with whom we partner. I recall doing some research in Asia so that our mission agency could open up a new work in a country where we did not have any missionaries. One missionary involved in the same sort of research said that he would never form a relationship with a local believer until he had been to the country on at least three research trips. He added that often the first people you meet are exactly the ones with whom you would not want to form a partnership. “Rather,” he said, “the type of people you would want for partners are not sitting around motels and guest houses looking for people for partnerships. No, the people you want are those who are in ministry. You have to go find those people.”

Developing a partnership takes time, and is not something that should be hurried. Think of partnership like the American practice of dating and marriage. You don't generally walk up to a complete stranger and ask them out for a date. First, you meet somebody and suggest meeting again.

¹Daniel Rickett, *Building Strategic Relationships* (Winepress Publishing, 2003), 13.

If things go well you continue to see one another. You continually check the character and reliability of your friend. You observe their talk and their walk. After a suitable period of time, based upon knowing each other in a variety of circumstances, the couple becomes engaged. As the relationship matures, then the couple gets married. Just as developing trust in a relationship takes time, developing trust between partners take time.

Good partnerships value the resources that each of the partners bring. Such resources include those who have intimate knowledge of the local situation, those who live in the area and carry on ministry, financial resources, an outsider's point of view and the ability to cast vision. Having an insider who knows the language and culture can be more important than the money supplied by another partner. All partners have a role in setting the vision and determining the strategy. It is not just the church (here or there), not just the missionaries, not just the national leaders and not just the mission agency. All partners have a seat at the table.

Creating a viable strategy takes time. To enter an area with a predetermined strategy and believe that this strategy can be communicated and agreed to on a short-term visit is not good practice. It is patronizing and paternalistic. Westerners are often decisive and action-oriented as opposed to people-oriented. We want results, yesterday. When we go on a trip, we want to accomplish something tangible, and feel that unless we do, the trip is wasted. However, those who graciously receive us are generally more interested in getting to know us and enjoy fellowship and prayer with us rather than in getting a building finished or painted.

Mary Lederleitner, in her book *Cross-Cultural Partnerships*, notes that "if there is a greater geographical distance between the ministry partners and a significant cultural distance, there is a high probability that behaviors will be misinterpreted."² For example, while we might desire to "get it all into writing," our partners might feel that a handshake is best. Both approaches will suffice, but each partner may not fully understand the other's practice.

Those who bring financial resources to a partnership must be very careful not to use those resources as a means of control. At the same time, financial resources can actually hurt a project in that they can lead to dependency and lack of initiative. It is helpful to think of a financial continuum, ranging from *dependency* on the one end to *sustainability* on the other. Partnerships should always be moving along the continuum in the direction of *sustainability*. The partnership approaches that lead to sustainability are those that work with a community to understand its own resources and how those resources can be used to transform lives and the entire community.³

While some partnerships last for years because of the relationships and trust that have been built up over a period of time between the partners, many partnerships have a beginning date and an end date, especially those partnerships that focus on accomplishing a specific task. Once the purpose has been accomplished, the partnership is concluded.

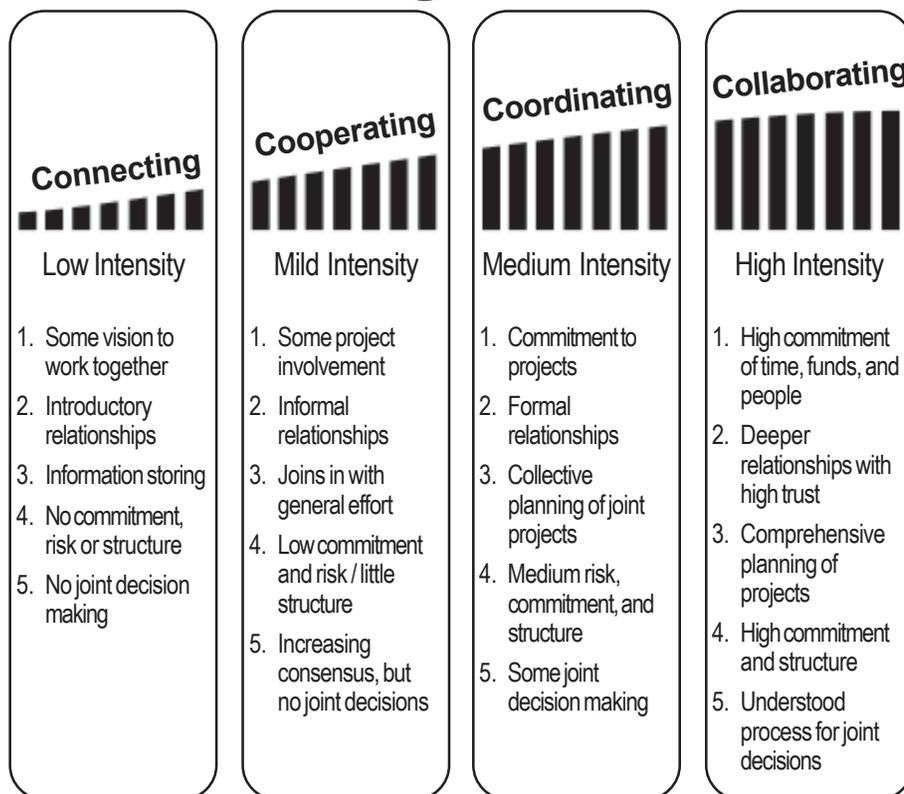
The Partnering Continuum

Brian O'Connell of REACT Services has developed a diagram he calls the *Partnering Continuum*. His continuum moves from low intensity partnerships to high intensity partnerships, utilizing the four phases of *connecting*, *cooperating*, *coordinating* and *collaborating*. Each step builds upon the previous phase. His diagram also highlights the nature of the partnership during each phase. As an example we will consider how decisions are made in the four phases of a partnership. In the connecting phase there is no joint decision making. In the cooperating phase there is increasing consensus, but no joint decisions. In the coordinating phase there is some joint decision making. In the collaborating phase there is an understood process for making joint decisions.

²Mary Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2010), 74.

³For an excellent discussion of dependency and sustainability, see Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009).

Partnering Continuum



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The task of holistic and transformational mission demands the very best from all of us. We work best when we work together rather than each person, party, church, or agency trying to do it alone. We can learn from business. Due to the economy, many businesses have begun to outsource some of their formerly in-house activities. The organization I am with discontinued the process of writing salary checks internally and now a check-writing service takes care of that for us. While we could print all of our materials internally, we use an outside printer for most pieces we produce. We partner with the check-writing service and we partner with the printer.

Working together in partnership demands humility as access to power and resources becomes open to all. We must be willing to submit to one another in love and to surrender control. When we envision the desired future, and partner with each other toward that future, God is glorified not only by the result but also by the manner in which we bring it about.

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