

Global Mission Partnership: Striving to Balance Limping Alliances

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Mennonite Mission Network (MMN) hosted a consultation that sought a new dispensation in fostering effective and healthy global partnerships. I believe it is very noble that MMN continues to take practical steps to ensure mutuality in mission partnerships even in the face of power imbalances that threaten to undermine good relations. Striking a good balance, however, is an enigma that seems to be slippery as an eel. This paper considers some negative effects of our colonial legacies that hinder general harmony in mutual mission, and also ponders some positive postures in the horizon for our limping mission alliances.²

Colonialism has distorted mission efforts due to legacies such as paternalistic tendencies, ongoing exploitation, the perpetration of dependency syndrome, and some effects of Western theology.

First, paternalism has perpetuated a superiority and inferiority dichotomy—the subtle arrogance of the givers and the belittling of the receivers. Digging deeper into this dichotomy, Jeanne Zimmerly Jantzi presented an excellent keynote address that unfolded the dilemma of the world church members she terms “Insiders” and “Outsiders” in the partnership field.³ No one can dispute the good and beneficial work the Outsiders bring into any local community. Yet, the power imbalance paradox created by the fact that the Global North church has better access to generous financial support and other resources that they bring to the partnership table hounds and distorts an otherwise good collaboration in spreading the good news. Also, it is an indisputable fact that donor funders trust Outsiders but view Insiders with suspicion. All this hinders a graceful partnership.

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2 On the “limping” or unbalanced character of our global alliances, see my comments on Jeanne Zimmerly Jantzi’s paper below.

3 Jeanne Zimmerly Jantzi “The Mission of God and Global Partnerships: Assessing the Role of North American Anabaptist Agencies,” Council of International Anabaptist Mission Plenary, January 10, 2018, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN. This paper is published in this issue as “The Mission of God and Global Relationships.”

Secondly, some people in the Global South continue to reject the gospel outright because they view it as a tool of exploitation that was used to loot natural resources during the colonial period. It is unfortunate that missionaries brought the gospel at the same time that greed and rape of the colonies happened with impunity from fortune predators during the scramble for Africa.

Third, the perpetration of the begging syndrome is a curse that many African peoples have not yet wriggled out of. I was saddened and dismayed last year to listen to some African church leaders declaring failure to pay some dues and blaming it all on poverty in the region. That frame of mind sustains the image that Africa is poor, sick, and dying, and can only be saved by the mercy and aid of the Global North.⁴ Africa is not poor. Riches have for years been plundered from the Global South by the Global North. The truth is, everyone does have something to give, no matter how small. Attitudes need to change.

In my country, Zimbabwe, there is a vast difference in the spirit of giving practiced by home-grown churches and those established by missions. While the latter tend to want to look to their mother bodies for assistance, the former usually take ownership of their churches. The spirit of giving flows more freely from the home-grown churches as they use their gifts and talents to give with one mind. They have built home-grown hospitals, clinics, schools and universities, media houses, and even have foreign missions. One such church is Forward in Faith Ministries International (FIFMI) started by Ezekiel H. Guti in Zimbabwe.⁵

I salute what the President of the Republic of Ghana espoused during the Global Partnership Education Conference in Dakar when he said, “We cannot depend on other people to finance the education of our continent.”⁶ He suggested creating policies to enhance quality education and eliminate corruption. He said that Ghana cannot continue to develop upon the charity of the West, although any help given is appreciated. People in my part of the world are tired of being looked down on and labelled as lazy, ignorant, corrupt, and drowning in poverty. More African leaders are getting encouragement from the new winds of change blowing.

⁴ Marence Bart-Williams of Sierra Leone in her presentation about the exploitation of Africa, TEDx conference in Berlin, 2005, <http://www.tedxberlin.de/tedxberlin-salon-chances-challenges-changes-development-2015-and-beyond-speakers>.

⁵ FIFMI is also known as Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA). See <http://fifmi.org>.

⁶ President Nana Akufo-Addo, Global Partnership for Education Conference in Dakar, Senegal, published February 5, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5H-GMVt_Z18A.

Legacy of Western Theology

Western theology came with the missionaries and had a negative impact on worship styles, dress codes, and other crucial social issues. The drum, for instance, was used in Africa to communicate and in song and dance. Somehow with Christianity came a notion that the drum was demonic. Other indigenous musical instruments were also deemed evil. In 1961, when one of the missionary doctors in our country played an accordion during a service among the Khoisan peoples, the Khoisan picked up their own musical instruments and joined in, only to have the service discontinued lest they begin to dance.⁷

Then there are social issues such as what to do with a polygamous situation after repentance of the polygamy. Early mission influence might have messed up on a way forward and kept many polygamists from church. This scenario is changing.

Another challenge has been the lack of adequate training in Bible schools or theological colleges for men and women called to ministry. Some were sent to foreign motherlands of the church to train and never returned home. Only in recent years do we have home-grown Bible schools that churn out well-trained preachers. I was excited to see the Africa Bible Commentary with contributions by seventy African scholars and theologians. The volume provides an African biblical perspective that is very helpful to pastors in the continent. Availability and purchasing power, however, are limited. That is where partnership may come in handy.

Dr. John Edmund Haggai, a North American leadership guru, was endowed with a vision years ago to train indigenous leaders who would then go back to their countries to train their own people locally. The Haggai Institute logo said, “Training leaders globally to impact their world locally.” That is good partnership in missions work.

Challenges Presented by Money and Power

In most of our African countries, the challenge presented by money and power is compounded by poverty, famine, disease, political oppression, and a myriad of other problems. These challenges lend themselves to corruption, nepotism, succession issues, and the “eating” syndrome. The former first lady in my country made us a laughing-stock by boasting that she would wheel the former President Mugabe, at 94 years old, in a wheelbarrow to campaign and

⁷ Barbara Nkala, ed., *Celebrating the Vision: A Century of Sowing and Reaping* (Bulawayo: Brethren in Christ Church, 1998), 46. The gospel that missionaries brought to the peoples of Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) stopped dancing that accompanied singing during services, as dancing was associated with ancestral spirit worship.

continue ruling. Is there a chance for global mission partnerships under senile governance?

There is also the challenge of a proliferation of the prosperity gospel preachers. People have seen over the years that money spells power, and so they naively flock to false prophets who propound a pseudo gospel that no longer preaches servant leadership and dying to self, but rather a gospel that appeals to the flesh and feeds the power and ego.

In my country, we generally had a poor theology about money. As I grew up, business people were considered sinners who used magic to obtain their riches. The Bible story about Lazarus and the rich man⁸ did not help matters. When my husband decided to go into business, I was very discouraging to him because of the teaching that “Money is the root of all evil” was supposed to be scriptural.⁹ Things have since improved in people’s attitudes toward money, but many of our people need to understand that money is a tool to be used positively and creatively. Mission work requires money to thrive.

Money and power also tend to dictate how and where to use the resources received. I was once involved as part of a team that was writing school texts to teach about HIV and AIDS. A foreign donor was paying good money for the project. But I had to drop out and leave the team because some of the ideas the donor was expecting us to include in the texts communicated values that were foreign and unacceptable in our culture and in my belief system. One of my friends said, “You are quitting and losing out! The money is good. Just write what they want.” But for me, it was not about money. Hence, I subscribe to what Stanley Green called the need to develop a self-critical posture of one’s motivations in partnership work.¹⁰

Understand the New Dispensation

I am cognizant of the pregnant statement that an Insider said to one of the Outsiders: “We need you to sit down while we stand up.”¹¹ For me, these words are a cry for recognition, a cry for mutual respect, a cry to regain lost dignity. African governments are tired and suspicious of wrong motives that continue to be exploitative, hence they have become wary of granting visas or work permits to Outsiders, except for transfer of knowledge and technology. Good

⁸ Luke 16:19–31.

⁹ This is a widely used scriptural misquote. The correct scripture is: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Tim 6:10, NIV).

¹⁰ Stanley Green, CIM devotional, January 10, 2018. Stanley highlighted that the foundation of partnership is Christ Himself.

¹¹ Stanley Green, quoting an emerging leader’s response to a question about what the Insiders need the Outsider partner to be as they collaborate in work.

partnership calls for training and equipping the receivers to develop in such a way that enables self-sustainability when the donors move out. Also, there should be no strings attached, except accountability and transparency.

Conclusion

A limping alliance is not the best solution in the new dispensation. Those who are at the receiving end need to work toward self-sufficiency. The receivers need to take a leaf from the Chinese legend that tells the story of a wise man and his disciple who were afforded hospitality by a poor family with only one cow—a cow that provided their daily sustenance. On departing from the poor family’s dwelling, the wise man instructed his disciple to push the prized cow over the cliff. Despite being riven with guilt, the disciple obeyed his master. Many years later, the guilty and remorseful disciple returned to the poor family’s shack to check on their welfare. He feared the worst, only to find that there had been an amazing transformation in the lives of this family after their prized cow had died. Perhaps the “prized cow” of paternalism needs to be taken away in order for the rich rewards of self-sufficiency and innovation to take hold in Africa!