MISSION PARTNERSHIPS: THE HARSHER REALITY

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Category: Observations

In my last post, I commented on Krish Kandiah's blog post; Mission Partnerships the Harsh Reality. This is an excellent and thought provoking paper which is also included in the Lausanne Global Conversation and I recommend that you read it.Â However, on reading what he wrote, I found myself thinking that Krish had missed out on some of the harsher realities. In order to push some of the things Krish mentions a stage further, I'd just like to take one section of his paper.

> ***Economics*** *â€“ because mission agencies need to fundraise there needs to be a â€œUnique Selling Pointâ€ of a mission agencies work in any given situation. Explaining to funders that we have decided to partner with another agency which is doing a similar ministry to ours might undercut our funding base.*

So far, so good. Krish's comments are very true, but they relate to a situation where you have two or more organisations with a similar funding model. In these cases there may be disagreements, but at least they are disagreements between equals. Very often, mission partnerships exist between two very different organisations where there is anything but economic equality. For example, it is not at all unusual to have partnerships between a Western mission with a strong fundraising operation in the USA and a rural African Church which has to rely on the collection it can raise Sunday by Sunday. In these conditions all sorts of problems can occur, for example:

Dependency. Glenn Schwartz excellent book When Charity Destroys Dignity: Overcoming Unhealthy Dependency in the Christian Movement is a good introduction to this issue. When one partner has seemingly endless financial and other resources, the less well off partner may well be discouraged from even trying to raise funds or to contribute to the partnership. The problem is that when the partner with the money moves the funds elsewhere, the dependent partner has nowhere to go.Â This pitfall is extremely well documented, but it is incredibly hard to avoid.

He Who Pays the Piper: when you have two partners who are on an equal economic footing, they can discuss how they are going to work together in an even handed fashion. However, when one of the partners controls all of the financial resources coming into the project, their view on what should be done usually wins out. This issue is exacerbated by the need to report to the authorities in the donor country to prove that the money has been used appropriately. The threat that a Western donor or government might block the flow of funds if the project isn't done in the way they want it to be done is a very persuasive argument. Even when the richer agency wants to be even-handed, they may find that they have no choice but to impose a Western viewpoint on the partnership.

Colonialism: those of us who live in the old colonial powers tend to think of our Imperial past as something mildly embarrassing that belongs to a bygone age. But we need to realise that for those who were colonised, the legacy of colonialism can be a very live one even fifty years after independence. In Ivory Coast, I met old men who could remember being forced to work building roads by the French; neither they nor their children were about to let colonialism be forgotten.

Colonialism has left a confused and confusing legacy behind it which plays into the sorts of asymmetric partnerships that I have mentioned above.

Expectations: I was once chatting to a church leader who told me that he desperately needed a missionary to come and work in his area. Naively, I asked why this was, only to be told that the area was too large for the Pastor to travel around and he needed someone with a car to come and live in the area to transport him around. I'm not sure what a seminary trained missionary would think about being viewed as a taxi driver! But the truth is that in many mission partnership situations the wealth of Western expatriots speaks far louder than their theology degrees or their heart for service.Â Because missionaries are seen a rich, they are expected to conform to certain norms. However, this can pose huge problems when the missionaries in question are not at all rich. Ben Byerly has posted a couple of excellent posts on the situation faced by an African missionary in Africa (1, 2). This quote is very telling:

> *the host communities expect African missionaries to fit into this model of â€œthe standard missionaryâ€ with all the attached stereotypes. But the African missionary often does not have enough to keep him on the mission field.Â The paradox of the â€œmissionaryâ€ title without the stereotypical resources creates a lot ofÂ pressure and stress.*

Social Pressures: I must admit, I wasn't a great fan of much missionary social life. I don't particularly enjoy pot-luck suppers, and as a Brit, I wasn't always sure what was expected of me in a mainly American environment. But think what this can mean for an African missionary in an increasingly international mission community. You may have no idea what 'cowboy food' is (I didn't) and you may not like it anyway! But, you may well find that the financial cost of social events, although negligible to your Western colleagues, goes well beyond where your support will stretch to. Do you miss out on the evening and appear unfriendly, or do you go along and spend more than you think you should on a social event?

Of course, not all mission partnerships between the West and the developing world exhibit any or all of these traits, but many of them do. Each of these traps are easy to fall into and well-intentioned, well-motivated people can easily make a mess of a partnership when money becomes involved. If we are to avoid these traps, we need to talk them through. There needs to be honest and open dialogue in which both the donors and the receivers can express their desires and their concerns. But expressing the concerns isn't enough. Both partners need to listen too (and that's the hard part).

I'd just briefly like to comment on one other issue in Krish's paper:

> *Most conference speakers in any given country are likely to be British or American.*

It isn't just that the devotional speakers at conferences tend to be English speaking, but the

conference sessions at which international mission strategy and direction is formulated tend to be English speaking too. Even if your English is good enough to listen to a devotional speaker and profit from it, that doesn't mean that you will be able to take part in a nuanced debate about how mission should move forward. This is improving; but the pace of change is painfully slow.