# PARTNERS? WHY NOT FRIENDS?

*Posted on May 27, 2010 by Eddie*

**Category:** Observations

Partner and partnership are 'buzz' words in the mission community at the moment. I've lost count of how many seminars and workshops that I've attended (or even led) on partnership issues. Now, don't get me wrong; I believe that partnership is incredibly important. John 17:23 tells us that the unity of Christians bears strong witness to the fact that Jesus came in the flesh. In 1999, my own organisation, Wycliffe Bible Translators, adopted what we call Vision 2025:

> *â€œBy 2025, together with partners worldwide, we aim to see a Bible translation programme begun in all the languages that need oneâ€*

To me, the important issue in this vision is not the date (which is out of our control entirely, anyway) but the commitment to partnership. It signals that as a family of organisation we had to make some wholesale changes in our approach and attitudes to working with others. This was not a one-off exercise, but is something which needs to be constantly reviewed and renewed.

Partnership is a good thing and we need more of it.

However, I find myself wondering whether partnership is the best way forward, especially when it comes to individuals working together. Certainly, the Bible has no trouble with the idea of c0-workers (the nearest concept I can find to partners), but I must admit that I much prefer Jesus description of us as his friends (John 15:14). I thought it might be interesting to explore some differences between partnership and friendship in the mission context.

The first thing I'd suggest is that mission partnerships exist for a purpose, whereas friendship is an end in itself. Partners meet to pray, to strategise and to do stuff: friends meet to be friends. It is true that friends may have a project or a hobby in common, but even if they didn't they would still meet up just to be together. When partnership functions well, there is no problem. But there is an inherent danger that we will start to see the other partner as simply a means to get things done. We'll value them less as a fellow human being and more as a way of achieving a goal. Friendship is never like that, friends always value each other as people.

Friendship implies a deeper commitment. Partners can hold each other at a distance, as long as the project moves forward. Friends continually draw closer. If you are a friend, you will want to learn the other person's language, get to know their family and hear the latest news about their football team. Being a friend brings you into the other person's community, being a partner may do that - but not always.

Friends learn the truth about one another. The people I work with see the best side of me; my friends see me warts and all. I'm not perfect when I'm at work, but generally, I manage to hide those aspects of my character which are best not let out in public. With my friends, my guard is down and they see the bits of me that the Lord is still dealing with. My friends know my worst side and they still care for me and they pray for me. There is no pressure to maintain an image with my friends. I wonder how

many missionaries are good enough friends with the people they have come to serve, that they dare let the image slip for a while?

Friends share things. Mission is a global phenomenon and brings us face to face with the deep inequalities and injustices that exist in the world. Friends from different contexts have an interest in working through some of the issues raised by these inequalities. They can't solve the problems, but friendship opens up a dialogue that can at least move them forward. Partnership, all too often, ignores the harsh realities of life.

Just a few thoughts...

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