Global Mission Partnership:
Missiological Reflections after Ten Years of Experience.
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Concordia Theological Seminary
Fort Wayne, IN
(Unedited Draft)

A Personal Journey

As always, this conference seeks to explore the issues under discussion not only from a formal research perspective, but also from the perspective of practitioners. While I have been teaching missiology at Concordia Theological Seminary, including Missiological Research Design, for several years, what I have to offer on the topic of "Majority World Missions" is born more out of my experience as a missions executive for Latin America and the Caribbean for our denomination than from any formal research I have conducted on the topic.

In 1970, Dr. Ralph Winter produced an excellent work titled *Twenty-five Unbelievable Years: 1945 to 1969*. He picks up where Kenneth Scott Latourette left off; pointing out several phenomena that those twenty-five years, including the end of political imperialism and the emergence of "national" churches around the world. But especially he explains how the return of veterans from different parts of the world after World War II brought a consciousness of the outside world to the United States, which soon translated into an explosion of Christian mission from North America. He then tries to deal with the way ahead, particularly concentrating on the structure of Christian mission. In his analysis of the pros and cons of what he calls "vertical" and "horizontal" structures, however, he finally concludes—and this is the last sentence of his book:

> One thing seems clear: the fact that in Protestant missions many of the most significant forward steps in both the strategy of support, and the strategy of overseas operations, depend upon a far better understanding than we now have of the "anatomy of the Christian mission."[1]

In other words, who can really understand Christian mission and the way God works?

I would have to say that if those twenty-five years were unbelievable, as equally unbelievable to me are the past twenty-five years since I have been involved in world mission. In 1970 I don't think anyone could have predicted the opening of China and the fall of the Soviet Union. In addition, while Winter did predict the growth of Christianity in what we now call the "majority world," especially Africa, I don't know if any of us were truly aware just how significant that growth would become.

Of course today we have the likes of scholars like Philip Jenkins, who has made it abundantly clear that we are in the midst of a great change in the look and locus of Christianity—what we now know of as the famous "shift in the center of gravity of Christianity." His books on the topic of what is happening globally[2] have also revealed

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[1] Ralph Winter, *Twenty-five Unbelievable Years: 1945-1969* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1970), 98.

[2] *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2002); *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford University Press, 2006); and, *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

the great commitment to Scripture and the evangelistic zeal of Christians in the majority world, two factors to which he draws a connection.

Rob Moll has stated that the phenomenon of majority world missions "is forcing scholars and missionaries to create new ways of talking about the global scene."[3] Finding those new ways of talking has been a personal challenge, I will admit.

Reflections from a Pragmatic Perspective

I would like to talk about what this means from the perspective of our experience with something relatively new. For many of you, this may be nothing new, but for our church body, working in global partnership with our sister churches around the world from what we would call "Confessional Lutheranism," is somewhat new.[4] We talked about it for a while, but never really put it into practice. Now, however, certainly it is becoming more significant for us.

Just to name a few examples of what we have done in the past fifteen years or so, here are some examples: We have formed partnerships in mission with our sister church in Brazil to carry out mission work in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Panama, Venezuela in Latin America, Mozambique in Africa, and Portugal in Europe; we have formed a partnership with our sister church in Nigeria to carry out mission work in Jamaica; we have formed a partnership with our sister church in Argentina, for mission work in Spain; we have formed partnerships with our sister church in Ghana West Africa, to carry out mission work in Benin, Uganda, and in the United States.

These are just a few examples of a new way of working that has come to the fore in the past fifteen years or so, what we have come to call "strategic alliances."

While I wholeheartedly believe that these efforts have been and are a great blessing and are healthy approaches to world mission, they have not been without some serious bumps along the way, and it has raised some concerns for reflection. So what I am offering are simply some areas of concern and reflection from a pragmatic perspective as we embrace what I think is can be an enormously healthy movement in world Christianity.

1. *Training of Majority World Missionaries is an Urgent Need.*

Most of the U.S. career missionaries that we have sent have gone through a great deal of preparation before departing for their field of service. In my own case, I had several months of missions training at the seminary where I learned mission theology, something of cultural anthropology, linguistics, missions history and practice; but also I was assigned the task of doing research projects on the specific history of Guatemala, on the specific culture of Guatemala, the history of the church in Guatemala, the current events important in the life of Guatemala, and, of course, the Spanish language. In addition, I was led through a study of missions from a Biblical/Theological perspective, so that I could see and understand how what I was doing fit into the *missio Dei*.

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[3]Mark Moll, "Mission Incredible," *ChristianityToday.com*, March 2006, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/march/16.28.html (accessed April 12, 2008).

[4] Dr. Otto Hinze, my predecessor as our mission board's area secretary for Latin America/Caribbean, wrote a Ph.D. dissertation in 1980 en entitled, *Complementarity: A Mature Interrelationship between Partner Churches for Better Effecting God's Mission* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago). It would be safe to say that his ideas had little impact until at least fifteen years later.

What we have seen in our circles is that there is precious little preparation of a missiological nature for those missionaries coming from the majority world. While typically they have a thorough theological education at a residential seminary, most have had almost no orientation in cross-cultural ministry, linguistics, mission strategy, mission history, and theology of missions. The dynamics of how to work together in an international team setting is another area where preparation would be helpful, which I will touch upon under a separate heading.

Too often we have made assumptions about the readiness of a family to live and work in another part of the world that have proved to be false because we assume the cultures are similar. For example, if you send a Brazilian family to work in a place like Panama, you may assume that, since they are Brazilian from Latin America, they will have to cross very little cultural and linguistic distance to minister effectively in Panama, another Latin American country. Our experience has been that in this kind of situation those Brazilians who go to a place like Panama run into the same kinds of misunderstandings in their new home, make the same kinds of inaccurate judgments about the new culture, go through the same culture shock, experience the same loneliness and isolation, often have similar linguistic challenges, and go through the same kinds of trials and tribulations that are a part of becoming enculturated[5] in a new society, just like any of our missionaries from the U.S. In more than one case this has been a part of the reason why some of those missionaries have returned to their homelands after only a short while discouraged, disillusioned and embittered.

Perhaps all the training in the world would not have changed the result in some cases; however, I firmly believe that basic training in missiology in all its dimensions first, would help to make life more satisfying for the missionary and family in the new place, as they would have a clue as to the typical nature of what they are experiencing; second, it would help these missionaries to work more effectively; and third, it would give them a fighting chance at surviving in the new place.

Without a doubt, some are doing much more in this arena, and I applaud the work of organizations such as COMIBAM[6] (Cooperación Misionera Iberoamericana), COSIM (The Coalition on the Support of Indigenous Ministries)[7] and the Mission Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance,[8] and I am gratified by the impact our programs of missiology and intercultural studies have had around the world, but the need for proper training for front-line missionaries from the majority world is crucial.

2. ***Churches in the Majority World Can Improve their Recruitment Procedures***

Of course this is true for all of us, but I have been quite startled by the lack of understanding sometimes on the part of our sister church leaders of what needs to be

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[5]Wikipedia provides a helpful, succinct, definition of enculturation: "Enculturation is the process whereby an established culture teaches an individual by repetition its accepted norms and values, so that the individual can become an accepted member of the society and find their (sic) suitable role. Most importantly, it establishes a context of boundaries and correctness that dictates what is and is not permissible within that society's framework." "Enculturation," Wikepedia.org, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enculturation (accessed April 10, 2008).

[6] www.comibam.org

[7] http://cosim.info

[8] www.worldevangelicals.org/commissions/mc

seriously considered when choosing people for foreign mission service. This is closely related to the issue of missionary pre-field training.

I suppose we have become somewhat "sophisticated" in our procedures for recruitment. First, we look for the kind of person and family we feel will make a good missionary family. But as part of the selection process we go through a whole host of testing and evaluation in terms of the individual's flexibility, sensitivity, training, experience, maturity, etc. Then we bring the whole family in for extensive interviews with several people to get a feeling for how the family interacts, what their feelings are about the possible move to a foreign country, and what their suitability is for the situation for which we are considering them. In most cases we consult with the mission field or sister church to which the missionary and family will be going to be sure the field is comfortable with them.

Sometimes I have been shocked by how quickly and even haphazardly missionaries from our sister churches have been chosen. In one case, the church officials simply asked the candidate how his wife felt about possibly going overseas. He was so enthusiastic himself about going that he responded that she was very open and willing to go. In fact, nothing was farther from the truth. I won't go into more detail. Suffice it to say that the results were nothing less than tragic.

There are other situations where the missionaries' personalities simply were not suited for the work to which they were called. Of course we've made those mistakes too.

This situation has improved greatly in recent years, though. For example, the new missionary couple from Nigeria that is working in Jamaica was very carefully screened by several people on both sides of the Atlantic. Most importantly, the people who make up the small Lutheran Church in Jamaica had an opportunity to ask questions and provide input in the selection process. The careful selection process has meant that the missionaries are in a much better position to have a rewarding experience in Jamaica and to be supported and successful in their work. The Jamaican Lutherans have ownership in their new missionary.

3. ***Team-building must take place, especially in the cases of a multi-national missionary team.***

Our early attempts to form global, strategic alliances by having our U.S. missionaries working side-by-side with majority world missionaries were less than satisfying, to say the least. The reality is that we struggle with missionary-to-missionary tension and conflict even when the people involved come from the same cultural background. When you throw in all the potential cross-cultural faux pas, miscues and misunderstandings, the likelihood of friction and stressed-out relationships is magnified many times over.

Conflicts and ill-will, in our experience, has developed over several factors. One big problem we have experienced is the discrepancy sometime in the level of financial support of the U.S. missionaries compared to the majority world missionaries. Sometimes conflict arises because of the different ways in which the partners look at leadership and strategy. Our U.S. missionaries—no big surprise here—are often thought of as being too impatient and task oriented, and often paternalistic. On the other hand, the U.S. missionaries will complain that the majority world missionaries appear to waist too much time standing around talking, joking and enjoying social time with others, instead of getting the real mission work done.

Misunderstandings regarding expectations have led to at least one majority world missionary calling it quits early and returning home with his whole family. He didn't understand the North American's way of setting goals as something to strive for, but not necessary being the indication of complete success or failure. When about nine months into his first year he realized that he just wasn't going to reach the somewhat ambitious goals that had been set to have so many converts in the new church plant, he decided to return home, rather than face the shame of not having met the goal, which he thought was a hard and fast indicator of his performance. As far as he was concerned, he was going to fail, and therefore it was better to go home now.

These kinds of problems, of course, point out the need for cross-cultural sensitivity and understanding, as well as work on all the other challenges to working as a team. People come at the task at hand from different perspectives, none of which are necessarily wrong. But what is necessary is an understanding of those differences—an understanding of yourself and of the perspectives of your mission partners. Patrick Sookhdeo affirms that "if Christians are to enter into meaningful partnership relationships with each other, then this will involve a whole new way of thinking and behaving. It will demand of us a trust and openness such as we have not previously seen."[9]

Daniel Rickett, in his little book, *Making Your Partnership Work*, makes the point that the need for mutual trust is conditioned by two factors: 1) the degree of interdependence; and 2) the cultural difference between the members of the partnership.[10] This would mean that the fostering and maintenance of mutual trust among inter-cultural mission teams would be of paramount importance, since the members are likely to be interdependent, and the cultural difference may be wide.

As Rickett states, "trust is not something that happens by accident. It is crafted on purpose, with each partners' full awareness of how his or her actions affect the relationship."[11]

If trust is a key to the success of partnerships, and it doesn't just happen by accident, then it is something that must be worked towards through intentional team-building.[12]

The most successful missionary endeavors that we have undertaken with our global partners have been when the mission team sent out is homogeneous, that is, when we don't try to put together multi-national teams. That is probably because many, but not all, of the pitfalls of teamwork are avoided thereby. However, I'm not sure that we are truly capitalizing on the strengths that we all can contribute to the extension of God's kingdom if we apply a sort of homogeneous unit principal to our mission teams. We can do better, but we must begin to be intentional about team building and maintenance.

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[9] Patrick Sookhdeo, "Cultural Issues in Partnership in Mission, in *Kingdom Partnerships for Synergy in Missions*, ed. William D. Taylor (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1994), 61.

[10] Daniel Rickett, *Making Your Partnership Work* (Enumclaw, WA: Winepress Publishing, 2002), 75-77.

[11] *Ibid.* 78.

[12] Patrick Lencioni has listed five problematic areas in teamwork: 1)Absence of trust, 2)Fear of conflict, 3)Lack of commitment, 4)Avoidance of accountability, and 5)Inattention to results. From Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen, and Douglas McConnel, *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 253.

4. ***There is a need for improved support structures.***

In most cases, missionaries face a whole host of challenges on the mission field. These range from personal issues, like emotional or family struggles, or health problems, to logistical issues such as finding suitable housing, to strategic issues, such as how to develop a plan or direction for what the missionary hopes to accomplish and how he or she is going to get there, to relationship issues with the local Christians, or just the culture in general.

I have seen culture shock impact majority world missionaries just like it can impact U.S. missionaries. One majority world missionary became so depressed that he wouldn't, or couldn't, eat. When I happened to meet up with him on a visit to the country where he was serving, his sending church had no idea about how bad things were getting for him, and they didn't bother much to ask either. Moral support—someone caring, praying for, providing guidance and counsel—is necessary.

Related to the moral support, of course, is the logistical support that can be provided to a missionary, first, as the entire family enters into new territory, and then as they continue to live there. Some major issues are related to questions of health insurance, housing, education for children, food, transportation, what to do in emergencies, not to mention the quagmire of going through the process of obtaining a visa. In one place, the sending church was quick to throw in the towel because a missionary was having trouble getting visas for himself and his family. When I found out about it, I was able to suggest a number of possible approaches to the visa issue, which the sending, majority world church just didn't know about.

But there is even another kind of support that is crucial for success and gratifying mission work, what I call "strategic support." There is nothing worse than being stuck somewhere without any clear direction, no plan, no reasonable goals, no way of knowing how you are doing, and/or no clear expectations. Strategic support is absolutely essential, both for the advancement of the mission, and for the well-being of the missionary.

Part of this is just plain old accountability. Everyone needs to be accountable. While it is true that we are accountable to God, we must also recognize that being accountable to other people is important. Paul even spoke of this when he was talking about how he would handle the offering for the Jerusalem church that he was collecting. He recognized the need to be accountable when he said: "For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men" (2 Cor. 8:21).

5. ***Funding of Majority World Missionaries***

A deep concern of mine has to do with the funding support of majority world missions. I will admit that I have been very influenced by people like Glenn Schwarz,[13] who has tried to help mission organizations avoid unhealthy dependencies. I'll admit that I am not quite comfortable with a situation in which majority world missionaries are sent out, often with great fan-fare that the new, young church is now "sending" missionaries too, when all, or almost all, of the funding support is coming from the U.S. This has been the situation in almost every case in our experience.

Roland Allen observed long ago that the importance of the way we handle money cannot be underestimated, saying that it's not the arrangements *per se* that are the

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[13] www.wmausa.org

problem, but "how they affect the minds of the people."[14] My first reaction to what we are doing would be to say, "Paying others to do our work is not partnership in mission!"[15]

There are a host of problems with our current system from my perspective, but time does not permit adequate discussion here. Suffice it to say that this question needs to be addressed seriously. Again, how is this arrangement affecting the minds of the people? My fear is that in many cases, if not most, the "sending church" of our U.S. supported majority world missionaries has little ownership in the work he and his family is doing, nor does it require much accountability.

Maybe it is time, however, to rethink my stance. In the great book, *The Changing Face of World Missions*, the authors include a chapter in the part of the book called "The Strategic Context," whose title is "The Changing Uses of Money: From Self-Support to International Partnership."[16] After reviewing the major missiologists throughout history on the topic of the "indigenous church" the authors conclude that the self-support mentality "reflects the reality of Western individualistic cultures more than group-oriented cultures of the two-thirds world."[17]

They describe four models for mission, 1)the personal support model, 2)the indigenous model, 3)the partnership model, and 4)the indigenous/partnership model. The latter is the preferred model, in which a church is begun under the indigenous principles of the past, but when it grows to maturity, it seeks partnerships with others, presumably wealthy, Western Christians, to then, in turn, carry out world mission.[18]

The world is changing, and globalization is making partnership—strategic alliances—ever more crucial. We see this in business, and we will see more and more of this in missions. Of course we should work together with our fellow-Christian worldwide, but I would only reiterate, let us not naively forget how deeply the financial arrangements can and will "affect the minds of the people."

6. *Does not replace our sending*

This final point relates closely to the previous one. This is probably not your problem, but in my experience I have a fear that instead of sending our own sons and daughters we are in effect hiring people to do it for us. While there are certainly many gifted and capable people from the majority world churches that we can help to mobilize with our financial support, let us remember that Jesus commanded us to go, to send our own, and not just to send money.

In 2001 I wrote a paper directed to our own mission board on the idea of, as I put it, admittedly in a cynical way, "hiring others to do our mission work for us." Let me conclude my comments by quoting from the last paragraph of that paper:

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[14] Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: Saint Paul's or Ours* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 49.

[15] I wrote a paper on this topic entitled: "Hiring National Missionaries: A Good Idea?" You can find it at www.LutheranMissiology.org.

[16] Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen, and Douglas McConnel, "The Changing Uses of Money: From Self-support to International Partnership," in *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 279-297. While I appreciate the authors' discussion of this topic, I do not believe we can in a facile way brush aside the concerns over how the way we handle money "affects the minds of the people" by just saying the issue is simply one of "western individualism."

[17] *Ibid.*, 287.

[18] *Ibid*., 292-295.

There may be some ways in which true partnerships can be worked out, and perhaps someday there will be a truly international Lutheran missionary movement, in which all the participants are truly equals, in which manipulation by those who hold the purse strings is not practiced, in which proper accountability systems are able to function, and through which all participating churches are able to realize their potential, rights and privileges of bearing witness to all the world of the power of the gospel. In the meantime, however, it will be exceedingly important to exercise wisdom and caution, lest unwittingly the gospel be compromised, and we think that it is possible to fulfill our responsibility to "go," to be "sent," and to bear witness to "the ends of the earth," by hiring others to do so for us.[19]

Conclusion

In spite of what has been said regarding the bumps along the way to global mission partnerships, there really is no doubt as to their value in God's kingdom. My plea is that as we enter into such strategic alliances with fellow Christians from around the world, we do so with our eyes open, to both the blessings, and to the challenges and issues that such collaboration in the gospel brings.

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[19] Rutt, 2004.

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