



# SERVANT PARTNERSHIP

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*The key to success in cross-cultural ministry relationships*

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## INTRODUCTION

It was a time of tremendous dynamic change. The whole context of world missions was shifting. The historic center of missionary-sending endeavor was no longer at the cutting edge of where things were happening. Instead, the exciting new advances in mission outreach were happening from new centers of church growth. Once considered mission frontiers, those very places were mobilizing workers to go out to even newer frontiers. Old paradigms of mission strategy were being discarded while new ones were being created.

Are we talking about the next Christendom? The current twenty-first century transition from Global North to the Global South? Nope! Try first-century church history as recorded in Acts, chapters 11–13. Thanks to a significant rise in persecution culminating in the martyrdom of Stephen and James and the scattering of the early church mentioned in chapter 12, the way mission had been done in the early church was turned on its head. From that point forward, Jerusalem was never again the primary center of missionary-sending activity. Instead, Antioch and other frontier areas became the launching pad for a whole new outreach effort to the Gentiles of Asia Minor.

Without question, we are experiencing a similar paradigm shift in global missions today. September 11, 2001, was perhaps our “Chapter 12” experience, marking the beginning of the end of two centuries in which almost all missionary action had been launched from the West—especially North America. Fortunately, this instructive example from the book of Acts teaches us many lessons on how to navigate the difficult waters that come with any epic shift in global mission strategy. Central to these lessons is a new mindset toward partnership in mission endeavor. This mindset was needed in the first century, and it is needed today as we face the tectonic shifts in demographics among God’s people worldwide.

## NEW MINDSET FOR PARTNERSHIP

Partnering together for mission outreach is certainly nothing new. In Acts 15 we see a wonderful example of dialogue and cooperation as both old and new harvest workers agree to cooperate in reaching the Gentiles of the day. And partnership has been a major theme of Western missions during the past one hundred years with the majority of the effort spent on giving birth to fledgling indigenous churches. But today, as the

Global South actually begins to eclipse the Global North in the sheer quantity (and sometimes quality) of Christian impact, a different mindset of partnership is needed, one that I would like to call *servant partnership*.

Much of our Western understanding of partnership, even in the context of the church, comes from business. Two parties partner together for purposes of mutual benefit. If the partnering effort is no longer beneficial for one of the parties, the perceived need for partnership is gone as well.

Servant partnership, on the other hand, is not focused on mutual benefit but on the desire to see a single vision accomplished. Servant partnership is demonstrated when one party puts aside personal agendas and invests in the accomplishment of the vision by promoting the calling of the other partner. I believe servant partnership is to partnership what servant leadership is to leadership. It is a willingness to put aside position, title, status, and even personal benefit in order to serve others and make them successful. As with its leadership counterpart, servant partnership is not the only way partnership has to be done, but it certainly is a way that embodies the biblical values of Philippians, chapter 2: *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant... (Phil 2:5-6 NIV).*

One of the clear cries being heard today from church leaders in the Global South is that, despite good intentions, most partnership practiced by the Western mission enterprise is not of this kind. Instead, it continues to be based on the business model of mutual benefit or, even worse, on a colonial model with a top-down, paternalistic emphasis. It doesn't help that the so-called partnership "Golden Rule" continues to rear its ugly head in these partnering relationships where it is clear to all that the West still owns most of the "gold" and, therefore, gets to make the rules. Although the West, particularly North America, continues to be the resource rich, our brothers and sisters in the Global South are increasingly the opportunity rich. That is why this is a day that calls for a new mindset of collaboration that demands the application of servant partnership.

Although I may have recently coined this new label, I believe Partners International has sought to embody the principles of servant partnership throughout its sixty-seven-year history of ministry service and has learned much about what it means to implement servant partnership in cross-cultural partnerships. In particular, we have grasped that servant partnership must be fleshed out in both *attitude* and *action*.

## **SERVANT PARTNERSHIP ATTITUDE**

In the 1940s and 1950s when our organization was just a fledgling mission, the concept of partnering with indigenous organizations, especially to the point of entrusting them with funds for ministry implementation, was quite revolutionary. However, by 2004, partnership in mission had not only become familiar in mission circles but it was the most important mission strategy being applied anywhere. This caused us at Partners International to take some time to rethink what we mean by this often overused word—*partnership*. The result was a document we call our "Covenant of Partnership" that outlines six principles of healthy, cross-cultural, missional partnership we seek to follow:

1. Mandate—it is not just a good suggestion but God’s mandate for his church.
2. Mutual – there must be a commitment from all parties for both give and take.
3. Moving – it is not static but dynamic and, therefore, change will happen.
4. Multiple—it will naturally draw in other parties to create ministry networks.
5. Measurable—there must be measurable accountability to provide mutual trust.
6. Messy—since it is based on personal relationships, there will inevitably be challenges in meeting the expectations of all parties.

Partners International learned, however, that just describing a philosophy of partnership in this covenant was not enough to bridge the divide between West and non-Western cultures. Nothing can more quickly defeat well-intentioned partnership than confused expectations created by different cultural perspectives. One brilliant attempt at grasping this challenge was offered by our own Alex Araujo at the recent Consultation on Support of Indigenous Ministries (COSIM) in his presentation of the powerboat and sailboat metaphor:

*A powerboat captures the essence of the Western paradigm. Power is inside the boat, in the hands of the human operator. The powerboat metaphor represents “taking control.” The destination—and getting there fast—is often most important. Unless there is a calamity on the sea such as a catastrophic storm, it [the boat] will go wherever the captain directs.*

*Contrast the sailboat, representing the [non-Western] paradigm of less control. While the people in a sailboat have some control and power, their power is much more subordinate to the wind. Success depends completely on their cooperation with the wind. They respect and carefully assess the context, and realize that flexibility is one of their greatest resources. The sailboat epitomizes high trust, and less control.*

Araujo concludes that to work in greater collaboration with the emerging powerhouse of the non-Western evangelical church, the West will need to learn how to work with

- greater mutuality, equality, and vulnerability;
- more emphasis on relationship and less on accomplishment;
- increased sensitivity to context that overrides the automatic exportation of Western ministry methodology; and
- higher dependence on God’s Spirit and less dominance of Western business practices.

Inculcating these attitudes of servant partnership into the fabric of our ministry has taken a long time, even decades, and has not been without difficulties along the way. Nevertheless, we are convinced more than ever that this concept not only must drive the values for which we are known, but also has to be the first step toward any successful cross-cultural ministry relationship we participate in.

## **SERVANT PARTNERSHIP ACTION**

Believing in servant partnership is one thing. Acting it out in practical implementation is another. Today, Partners International is redesigning its role as a catalyst for healthy mission partnerships. Whereas in the past most of our efforts were on funding individual ministry projects and worker sponsorships, today we see our role as helping national leaders accomplish their God-given vision so that they might develop successful ministries that have long-term sustainability. Our focus now is on developmental partnership that we define in three distinct phases: (1) discover, (2) grow, and (3) launch. Each of these three phases is offering us new opportunities to demonstrate servant partnership in fresh new ways.

### **Phase 1—Discover**

As God actively raises up a whole new generation of non-Western, indigenous ministry leaders with great vision for advancing his kingdom in their corners of the world, we want to be a mission actively involved in discovering who these leaders are. However, as we do so, we are finding that few have the necessary financial or non-financial resources necessary to bring their particular vision to fruition. That is why we are actively seeking to identify, equip, and help young national leaders get their—not our—dreams off the ground. During the first partnership phase that lasts no more than two to three years, both parties learn if there is both the right commitment and the right chemistry for deeper partnership.

### **Phase 2—Grow**

Once a ministry proves to be a serious ministry partner, Partners International commits to an extended time of investing training, prayer, people, and funds into the national ministry with the intention of helping it with organizational and ministry growth. There are no cookie-cutter approaches. Each partnership must be customized according to context, relationship, and purpose. One of the key objectives of this phase is to determine together what the right economic model might be for financial sustainability, one that will assure ongoing ministry fulfillment without creating unhealthy dependency. Simultaneously, our hope is to acquaint and introduce the national ministry to a number of other like-minded ministries and churches that can offer customized training or other resources that will help improve ministry strategy and effectiveness.

### **Phase 3—Launch**

Just as a plane launches itself into the sky when it reaches its airborne velocity, so we too strive for the point at which a national ministry can successfully press forward with sustained accomplishment of its ministry vision. At this point, our partnership involvement changes from being a growth mentor to a network catalyst. Besides providing a conduit for some continued ministry funding, which the national ministry now becomes fully responsible for, we create connections between the ministry and other national churches and organizations for the purpose of cross-fertilization. In this way, our hope is to see whole missional movements emerge from multiple indigenous ministries working together on a global partnership scale.

It is this third phase that is pressing us to act out a whole new dimension of servant partnership. Although we will always have a role as a resource bridge that links

U.S. churches, foundations, and individuals to specific ministry projects, we see that more and more of our activity will involve introducing national ministries to each other, especially in ways that will help more experienced leaders to mentor the next generation of younger, emerging leaders. Already we have helped experienced, Indonesian-Muslim ministry leaders provide training to Chinese church leaders who want to learn how to reach the Islamic people groups in their own country. Soon, we'll be hosting an event that will bring Indian and Chinese ministries together to begin strategy dialogue. Perhaps one of the most interesting connections currently underway is between a national ministry and a veteran American mission. The American missionaries have recognized their mission's hundred-year-old strategy is in need of an overhaul if it expects to be effective in the changing context of its ministry environment; and so, they have asked the national ministry for special training.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the book of Acts, Paul's missionary journeys described in chapters 13-28 clearly represent a new paradigm of mission outreach from that of chapters 1-11, but it is particularly special to read about Paul's encouragement to these frontier churches to provide assistance and aid for fellow Christians back in Jerusalem. What a wonderful example of servant partnership in reverse as second-generation churches showed care and compassion toward the ones that initiated the first century's mission movement.

Perhaps the day is coming, sooner than we might think, when we in the West will be the ones in need of partnership from the resource-rich in the Global South. When that day arrives, will it not be a blessing to experience from them the same kind of servant partnership attitude and action that they once learned from us?