

# Mission Asia: Practical Models in Mission Partnership

## A summary



Author: Dr Patrick Fung, General Director of OMF International.

'Partnership' is a strong New Testament concept, and occurs in a number of contexts. James and John were 'partners' with the sons of Zebedee (Luke 5:10) and Paul can speak of 'partnership in the gospel' in Philippians 1:5. Biblical models of partnership include:

- Paul's partnership with fellow-workers such as Prisca and Aquila (Romans 16:3) or Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25)
- Partnership with already planted churches (Philippians 1;5, 2 Corinthians 1;7) '...because of our fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now'
- Partnership with sending churches (Acts 13:1-3)
- Partnership in sharing support (Acts 20:34) '...supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions'
- Partnership with the Lord (1 Corinthians 3:9) '...for we are God's fellow-workers'
- Partnership in suffering (2 Corinthians 1:7) '...as you share in our sufferings'.

Luis Bush has defined partnership as 'an association of two or more autonomous bodies who have formed a trusting relationship, and fulfil agreed-upon expectations by sharing complementary strengths and resources, to reach their mutual goal'. [1]

The danger of this definition is that it refers only to a task-based relationship. The Biblical model speaks first and foremost of a oneness in Christ and is both a horizontal and a vertical relationship.

### Practical models in mission partnership

The first model we could consider is the China Inland Mission (CIM) later to become the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF). This started as a British mission and became an international mission focussing on China.

We shall also look at current China ministry models: a multi-agency model; house churches/theological institutions/mission agencies working together; a radio and discipleship ministry; churches in Hong Kong and the Chinese mainland; a house-church missions network; Christian professionals, with both foreign and local workers. So that the focus is not entirely on China partnerships in Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines are also considered.

### A historical perspective

The history of the CIM is instructive. Hudson Taylor returned to England for the sixth time between January 1887 and October 1888 to recruit 100 workers for China. ('It is not great faith you need, but faith in a great God...God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply' – May 26, 1887). A young Princeton graduate by the name of Frost sailed to England to request consideration of his application to join the CIM. His application was refused but he invited Hudson Taylor to the US in July 1888. Hudson Taylor preached at D. L. Moody's Northfield student conference and at Niagara-on-the-Lake. Funds for eight missionaries were received and on September 25, 1888, 14 new workers known as 'the American Lammermuir Party' left Toronto for China with Hudson Taylor. In 1889, the North America Council was established in Toronto. A partnership had been started.

In due course there were many of these. Partnerships were formed with the Bible Christian Mission of England, the Swedish Mission in China of Stockholm (1887), the German China

Alliance (1890), the Swedish Holiness Union (1890), the Scandinavian Alliance Mission (1890), the Finnish Free Church (1891), the Swedish Alliance Mission (1892). Also 12 men and women went to China with Hudson Taylor from Australia in 1890. The part played by the Scandinavian Alliance Mission is equally instructive. Their stated aim was to:

to concentrate on the evangelisation of China within three years, under Hudson Taylor's leadership while responsible to the church sending them...

In the year 1891, 35 left for China on January 17 and a further 15 on January 29. Twelve left for China on February 14, 1892.

What lessons can be learned from this partnership model? Firstly there was a commonly owned vision i.e. reaching China's millions. Secondly there was an understood term, the "Forward Movement" (which asked the "what next?" question) and a corresponding attempt to explore synergy. Then there was the importance of communication. The danger of moving too quickly without the understanding of those on the ground was understood. The importance of training was also agreed - many from the associate missions were poorly equipped and prepared, and this had to be dealt with. Finally there was an ownership of goals. The initial goal of recruiting 1000 missionaries took some time to reach, but people were prepared to work steadily to achieve it.

### Some current partnership models

#### 1. "SERVE"

"Serve" is an example of a multi-agency model. It is a legal entity, registered as a charitable foundation in Hong Kong in 1987. It is not specifically a religious organization, but is known to recruit Christians. In fact it is a **partnership** of 13 agencies, a multi-cultural and multi-agency **fellowship** and a **family**, united by the vision for Christ and for China.

From SERVE's vision and mission statement clear goals have been agreed.

- Sending Christian professionals into China
- Focusing on the inland – Central and Western
- Emphasising on Christian values
- Word based
- Establishing churches
- A mission movement

"Serve" also has a clear process by means of which partnership is built. It is recognised that time is needed together to work through the details of the common vision and mission at different stages of development. There needs to be an external facilitator. Prayer and sharing are vital so that there can be a building of trust and understanding. Members must be consulted and it is important to ask the what NOT question!

Of course there have been and are challenges. In a multi-agency organisation there are bound to be different agendas. Foreign agencies often lack a full understanding of China. Smaller agencies may feel marginalised and it takes commitment when funding projects together.

Finally "Serve" believes that it has an important next step to take and that is partnership with local Christians and not just other mission agencies.

## 2. Agape Project

This was essentially a partnership between theological institutions (outside China), a mission agency and the house church network. The vision (which now dates back to the late 80s) was to equip house church leaders to be solidly based in the Word, effective in church organisation and have a passion for mission. The strategy was based on itinerant training. The leaders of the partnership – from the mission agency, the church network and from two seminaries in Asia (Chinese) developed a four-year M.Div-level programme, with 30-40 trainees who met quarterly for two weeks. So far about 250 pastors have been trained and some of these have been selected for further training overseas. The project has placed great emphasis on the indigenous principle. Thus:

- House church leaders decide on the selection of trainees
- House church leaders are involved in setting the curriculum
- There is an understood role change for trainers - from trainer to facilitator
- Building trust through long term commitment is a priority
- The long term goal is to hand over leadership to house church leaders

## 3. “Love China” radio ministry

This has been operating for over 40 years. In the past it was mainly directed to rural areas. It has always been strong in evangelism, but has also developed an “On-The-Air” Seminary. 495,000 letters have been received so far, and every year over 20,000 letters come from China.

Why is there a need for partnership? Partnership enables the ministry to identify some key trends and needs, and to respond to them. Here are some of them:

- The rise of the Urban Church
- Church engagement with social issues: e.g. rising divorce rate, integrity, marginalised groups (min-gong)
- Church leadership training needs more face to face interaction
- Counseling: a counseling service in partnership with Christian professional counselors and a counseling hotline
- Strengthening and equipping, including pastoral visits to graduates of the “On-The-Air Seminary” by a sister organization
- Publishing, especially providing books/ resource materials for church leaders

## 4. Hong Kong/Mainland Church model of partnership

There is a Biblical model here, the partnership between the church in Antioch and the church in Jerusalem.

There is also a window of opportunity. Ease of travel, available resources, acceptance by the Three Self Patriotic Movement, and the fact that there are 1300 churches in Hong Kong, more than 70% of which are prepared to be involved all contribute to opening this window. Of course there are also challenges.

## 5. Partnering with Christian Professionals

An example of this would be "To China With Love". The main purpose is the mobilising of Christian Professionals from overseas. These would come at the invitation of the government and serve among some of the minority peoples. They would address key projects that affect the community to do with such fields as livestock, agriculture, medical services and youth vocational training. The next step is to mobilise Christian professionals from within China. The whole idea of Christian professionals as mission partners tends to raise up questions of esteem. Do we consider one another as equal partners? What does that mean: to be equal partners?

### Other partnership models

#### a) OMF Thailand

Here we can discern three levels of partnership:

Level 1 Partnership: fully integrated into the field structure and ministry, based on shared vision, values and commitment

Level 2 Partnership: shared vision and values, but without commitment to share resources or personnel

Level 3 Partnership: assistance in providing visas, but not part of the ministry

#### b) OMF Cambodia

The FW publishing house provides another model of partnership. This is an independent not-for-profit organisation, involving a collaboration between churches, Bible colleges and mission organisations. The goal is to publish books by indigenous Christian writers relevant to the needs of church and society. The ministry has produced a number of useful 'lessons'.

- Ongoing partnership provides the opportunity to review together the original goal of the partnership and adjust appropriately. In this case there was more translation work in the beginning and this was too narrow a focus.
- Continuity is needed when leadership changes.
- It is a better situation when each partner provides the initial funds as well as the missionary personnel to make the ministry happen.

#### c) "Alliance" Partnership in the Philippines

Started 30 years ago by 4 mission agencies, it focused on training of leaders for missions. It has faces a number of challenges:

- Both focus and structure have gone through stages of change
- Nationalistic sentiment sometimes hinders the work
- Some nationals look too much to expatriate organisations for finance
- Wisdom is still needed to know when to pass on leadership to nationals
- Partner organizations occasionally launch out into new ministries without the others' knowledge

## Partnership Issues and Challenges in Asian Mission

What are the key issues and challenges that emerge from this review of partnership models?  
A number of questions arise:

- Will western agencies and missionaries recognize emerging Asian leaders as equal partners and allow them to take on leadership responsibilities?
- Will western agencies be willing to adjust and reorganize their basic structures to be relevant to contemporary Asia and to facilitate the changing roles?
- Can Asian Christian leaders overcome their inferiority complex and avoid a reactionary attitude and pride?
- Will Asian church leaders and missionaries be willing to humbly acknowledge with gratitude the contribution from Western missionaries?
- Can Asian leaders prove themselves to be accountable if funds and resources are entrusted to them?
- Is there a trend moving towards inter-dependence rather than independence? [2]

## What are some of the key factors that hinder and promote effective partnership?

By way of summary it would be good to mention some key factors in partnership both on the negative and positive side. These are drawn from a survey of mission partnership in OMF fields. First of all the hindrances:

- × Very little time taken to listen to God's leading
- × Different core and secondary beliefs and values
- × Vision not clear
- × Unspoken values not shared by all in partnership
- × Powerful but often unspoken reasons for partnership
- × Weak infra-structure
- × Too little time to develop relationship
- × Low level of ownership
- × Little communication
- × Failure to review partnership and make adjustment

Then, by way of contrast the factors that help partnership to prosper:

- ✓ Sensitivity to God's leading
- ✓ Same core beliefs as well as important secondary ones
- ✓ Mutual benefit from partnership
- ✓ Clear structure that will accomplish the mission
- ✓ Relationship of trust
- ✓ High level of ownership
- ✓ Clear communication. Nothing is assumed
- ✓ Regular review of partnership and willingness to make adjustment

A final thought: there are many 'partnerships' envisaged in Scripture but one which is mentioned perhaps more than any other is the partnership in suffering!

## Notes

[1] L. Bush & L. Lutz, Partnering in Ministry: *The Direction of World Evangelism* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), p. 46.

[2] Chin do Kham, *Journal of Asian Mission* (2003), pp. 175-190.

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