

New and Emerging Mission Movements and Older Mission Agencies Is meaningful partnership possible?



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Mission agencies and churches do not have the best of records when it comes to partnership and collaboration in mission. Especially in evangelical circles we love to start our own thing and do it our own way. However the Biblical model for mission is one of collaboration and partnership.

The implications of Trinitarian theology for collaborative discipleship and mission have not always been readily understood, but in recent decades theologians such as Moltmann, Boff, Volf, and others have reminded us of the corporate, collaborative, nature of the being and life of God in Trinity and its implications for those who find themselves created in God's image. The *Missio Dei* is by definition a collaborative action by Father, Son and Holy Spirit (John 14:26) and also a divine action which invited human participation, if not collaboration. "As the Father sent me so I send you." (John 20:21) God has no necessity to engage humanity as agents of God's own mission but chooses the risky course of partnership. This point is further underlined by Jesus' own calling of disciples as co-workers to whom he eventually entrusts the task of global mission (Matthew 28:18-20). It is perhaps also significant that Jesus seems to have chosen as his co-workers a group of disciples with quite different theological and social outlooks – Zealots, Roman-sympathisers, Galileans and even perhaps those with Essene links. He saw the strength in building diversity-rich partnerships.

Paul is often portrayed as the great pioneer of mission, which he was, but he was not a 'David Livingstone, go-it-alone' pioneer. Careful examination of the text shows that he was in fact an accomplished collaborator, building networks of shared ministry. He counted among his co-workers local ministers such as Aquila and Priscilla, fellow itinerant preachers such as Barnabas and Silas, young recruits like Timothy, and many more, and took to task churches who sought to create division within the growing missional network, the church of Christ. With this foundation of Trinitarian mission, the example of Jesus and the practice of the apostle Paul, a firm pattern has been established for collaboration and partnership in mission.

Our workshop briefly reviewed these theological foundations for collaboration in mission and then asked what this might look like in the context of the twenty-first century, especially amongst Asian Christians.

We first acknowledged all the hurdles that exist for effective collaboration in mission, including the very words we use. The word 'partnership' is basically a good word for expressing our co-working with God and each other in mission but some felt that over the years it has become so much associated with paternalism, dependency and 'one-way traffic', that it has been rendered unhelpful today. We explored other words and concepts such as collaboration, co-working, accompaniment, and even just friendship. Some of the other barriers to effective collaboration in mission were identified as pride, lack of trust, cultural misunderstandings, power (especially financial) imbalances, different leadership styles, language, unclear expectations, etc.

Our brief was particularly to look at the dynamics between "emerging mission movements and older mission agencies" and we noted from the very start that even the title of our workshop had inbuilt assumptions of differences! Why were the newer (and by implication Asian) entities described as "movements" and the older (by implication Western) entities described as "agencies"? Is that how we see each other? Is it better to be an agency rather than a movement, or visa versa? Do movements inevitably become agencies over time? It was agreed that one of the hurdles to good relationships was how we see each other, the

values we place on 'structure' versus 'movement' and 'financial power' versus 'prayer' or 'people power'. We need to listen carefully to how others see us.

Having reviewed some of the major hurdles we face in these relationships we did, however, want to answer the question we had been posed – is meaningful partnership possible? – with a very clear affirmative. We had within our group some who could give personal testimony to this and the workshop leader was able to speak out of the experience of the growing *Faith2Share* network. This network (see www.faith2share.net) brings together 18 mission agencies and many more new and emerging mission movements from across five continents for effective collaboration in mission. It includes three major Asian agencies and many Asian mission movements.

The workshop concluded with a very useful time in which we began, in the limited time available, to spell out some of the actions which can facilitate effective collaboration. The absolute priority of deep trusting relationships was underlined and we noted that there are no short cuts to these – they take time, commitment and energy, as well as the ability to absorb hurt, reflect on mistakes and offer forgiveness. Training in cross-cultural communication was also seen to be helpful as well as a good understanding of team dynamics. Language learning can help and much care is needed when money enters into a relationship.

Also seen as being essential to effective collaboration in mission were a shared Christian worldview and core beliefs (but with some flexibility/accommodation around non-core beliefs), the establishment and regular review of partnership objectives, regular and quality communication (for all involved), and a sense of humour.

At the end of the session a number of books on partnership and collaboration (secular as well as Christian) were mentioned and a select bibliography is attached here.

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