

Who is in the Driver's Seat?

A critique of mission partnership models between Western missions and East Asian mission movements



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The church in East Asia is growing at a phenomenal pace, both in spiritual vitality and missionary enthusiasm. For example, The Korea World Missions Association (KWMA) claimed that there were 14,086 Korean missionaries in 180 countries in 2006 (about 19,000 according to non-official counts). [1] India and the United States of America represent the two largest contributors to Protestant cross cultural missionaries. The Indian Missions Association represents more than 200 mission agencies working throughout India and beyond. However, some Western mission groups still operate without much reference to these growing indigenous mission movements from Korea, India, Philippines, Singapore and China. When partnerships are formed, non-Western members are commonly invited to join some elite club to perpetuate the mission goals and boundaries set by existing structures. Unless both parties explore new models of genuine partnership, many of our mission endeavours may lead to duplication, wasting of resources, reinventing the wheel, and repeating the past mistakes of colonialism and imperialism. Past Western paternalism still exerts its control due to the fact that the power associated with mission paradigms, leadership patterns, structures, economics and technology is still located in the hands of Western churches and agencies. Lest we think the problem of control and power is primarily a "Western problem", we will see that newer sending mission structures from Asia are also repeating the same mistakes.

The term Asian Mission Movements (AMMs) refers to various Asian churches, mission structures, indigenous mission organizations, and alliances that seek to spread the gospel cross culturally, both within and beyond national boundaries. AMMs do not necessarily comprise a centralised or organised network but consist of many local communities - churches and indigenous groups engaged in cross cultural witness. In reflecting on the AMMs, there are at least two caveats. First, the danger of Asian ethnocentrism, which claims that this is the Asia Pacific's Century, and that leadership in mission belongs to the Asian church. The reality is that Christ's mission is the concern of the whole church from all six continents. The AMMs need the contribution from a broader, international, and missiological community, recognising that there is much that newer missions can learn from "Older Sending Nations". Second, one needs to be careful of the tendency to generalise Asian missionary movements as a single stream, thus overlooking the unique stages and distinct characteristics of each national missionary movement. The issues faced by the more established Korean, Filipino and Chinese missionary movements may differ greatly from issues faced by the emerging Malaysian, Thai and Japanese movements.

The terms "West" and "Western Mission" refer mainly to mission bodies that share their origins to 19th century Protestant mission from Europe and North America. Although every generalisation can be faulted, I trust there are certain common issues faced, models developed, and concerns which have arisen from the AMMs which we may reflect on together. This article is a critique of Western mission that still operates in the outmoded paradigm of control. It explores possible changes in mission partnerships through case illustrations where national players are given an active rather than peripheral role.

Challenges Facing Asian Mission Movements

The Asian Mission Congress I (AMC I) was held in Seoul, Korea in 1990. One thousand three hundred and two participants from 50 nations gathered in Asia for the first time to consider the challenge of missions. Asian Mission Congress II (AMC II) was held in Pattaya, Thailand with 390 participants from 15 nations who gathered to review and follow up on issues facing Asian mission. David Pickard, a former General Director of OMF International presented a paper on “Challenges Facing Asian Missions” at AMC II, and highlighted a number of issues facing the AMMs. [2] I have built on his listing and added additional challenges:

- The need to mobilise the local church for long term missions
- Lack of role models of effective career missionaries
- Need of more examples of responsible, sending churches
- Inadequate sending structures (candidate screening, missionary preparation, field leadership, member care). In particular, member care is still lacking when compared to the level of care provided by International Missions.
- Lack of Asian missionary trainers
- Lack of community based training centres
- Need to develop creative ways in mission among restricted contexts
- Need for field research on Asian missions (strengths, weaknesses, problems faced etc.)

The above list informs us that there are still “gaps” in the growing Asian mission movements which will respond to meaningful mission partnerships. Implicitly, the list sets out a case against newer Asian Mission Movements which prefer to do mission without partnering with older sending structures from the West. Nevertheless, if partnership means mission policies and strategies are formulated predominantly through Western eyes and ears, then the primary participants in such partnerships are going to be limited to AMMs who are willing to share a similar ethos. The vast majority of newer Asian churches may no longer be interested in partnering with Western agencies that “use” Asians as some exotic displays to fulfil their own agendas. It could be said that tokenism can be a far worse mistake than peaceful co-existence in mission partnership. From the perspective of newer Mission movements, it will be better to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes than to buy into certain structures and paradigms of missions whereby inherent weaknesses are imposed externally?

Defining the Partnership Problem: Who is in the driver’s seat?

Partnership is a relationship entered into because of the different strengths the partners have. For example, Western partners may contribute mission expertise and funding resources while the Asian partners contribute local field knowledge, passion and growing missionary force. However, both parties face the problem of operating with old paradigms of mission thinking. Notably, this happens when Western agencies refuse to give up control, or when Asian churches merely look to Western partners for financial assistance. A core ideal in any effective partnership is the concept of “equality and mutuality”. While both Western and Asian partners agree on this biblical and strategic ideal, when it comes to working it out in practice, Western-Asian partnerships are fraught with numerous difficulties. As traditional Western partners and emerging Asian missionary churches are negotiating their respective

roles, most partnership models neglect the crucial role and views of a third party: namely the national church and indigenous mission movements.

To simplify our evaluation of this complex problem, we limit our discussion on mission partnership to three parties in mission:

- a) Traditional Western mission agencies (denominational and interdenominational missions)
- b) Newer sending mission agencies from Asia (denominational and interdenominational missions)
- c) Indigenous and national church mission movements. Samuel Escobar describes these movements as “another missionary force” and “missionary from below” that do not appear in mission records drawn up by specialists or theoreticians of missions. [3]

In most countries, we assume that there is now a mature national leadership whose views and counsels must be part of partnership models. Unfortunately, there are still mission models that allow leaders to strategise and make plans outside the contexts of the people and cultures they seek to serve. The indigenous missiological principle argues that good partnership models must promote the self-governing of churches and mission projects in such a manner that ownership and future direction are firmly in the hands of national leaderships. Foreign partners must seek to serve the interests of emerging local churches, not their own interests.

Incarnation as a Partnership Model: Some Reflections on Power and Spirituality in the light of Philippians 2:5-11

It is easy to talk about partnership in mission, but why are there so few exemplary models of mission partnerships? More than an issue of strategy, perhaps the answer has to do with how one handles power. This article would like to suggest that promising new models of partnership between established Western agencies and newer emerging mission movements can only be undertaken when all parties are willing to adopt ‘**Downward Spiral Spirituality**’; where each party adopts four basic approaches as they work together:

1. Issue of ATTITUDE: “Have this mind among yourselves” (v. 5)

Thou would perhaps be ashamed to imitate a lowly man;

Then at least, imitate the lowly God

(St. Augustine)

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich; yet for your sake he became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

For Adam and Eve, the issue was to become like God. Sin entered into the Garden of Eden due to the existence of Satan. For Israel during the First Century in Palestine, the older brother’s difficulty in celebrating the younger brother’s new found role had to do with the former’s self-introspection in finding his place in the family. In

the same way today the real issue is not about who is in the driver's seat, rather it is about the *attitudes* of whoever it is that is given that role of driving the mission agenda. New partnership attitudes can lead to sacrificial ways that result in newer mission movements benefiting from the expertise of older mission structures.

2. Issue of SURRENDERING RIGHTS: "Who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" (v6)

Equality with God is something which Christ already possessed. Before our Lord was born in the likeness of man, he already pre-existed in the form of eternal Divine Being. The statement does not tell us how Christ refused equality with God, or how he achieved equality as a reward, but how he used it.

Over against the standard picture of oriental despots who understood their position as something to be used for their own advantage, Jesus understood his position to mean self-negation, the vocation described in vv. 7-8... The pre-existent Son regarded equality with God not as excusing him from the task of redemptive suffering and death, but actually as uniquely qualifying him for that vocation. [4] As long as Western agencies and foreign Asian partners are unwilling to abandon self-interest and refuse to adopt the incarnational model of Christ, partnership will remain a nice slogan around mission conferences and conceptual papers.

3. Issue of IDENTIFICATION: "But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (v.7)

Biblical scholars such as Joachim Jeremias find many echoes of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 in the phrase "taking the form of a Servant" (Phil 2: 7), indeed this may be a direct reference to the Servant of Isaiah 52:12. Peter O' Brien argues that, "it seems best, on balance to understand the expression ('taking on the form of a servant') against the background of slavery in contemporary society. O' Brien argues that slavery pointed to the extreme deprivations of one's rights; even giving up those rights relating to one's own life and person." [5] Each partner must come to the table of fellowship on the premise that he or she must give up their rights for the interests of God's kingdom. Identification refocuses each partner's attention to the local communities, rather than the interests of the sending churches or foreign mission partners.

4. Issue of THE CRUCIFIED LIFE: "Being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (v.8)

Paul saw Christ's death on the cross as the ultimate act of self-humiliation, for on the cross Christ took our sin and the wrath of God upon himself. Christ freely chose to become mortal man and became a model for missionaries who are genuinely seeking to walk in the ways of the cross. Therefore, genuine partnership will only work if each party is willing to live out the self-less life of servanthood. Sometimes, the process of working with emerging Asian mission movements stalls because it touches on uncomfortable mission lifestyles and use of money. Foreign mission partners are

used to certain ways of doing mission and partnership with local or Asian Christians reveals that there are other models of mission that require sacrifices and living at the economic level of the poor.

Case Illustrations of Partnership Models in Asia

- A significant means of partnership is in the area of mission training. Notable Mission Training centres in East Asia are: Global Ministry Training Centre (GMTC) in Korea, the Outreach Training Institute (OTI) in India, and the Asian Cross-Cultural Training Institute (ACTI) in Singapore. [6] Nevertheless, there is still a lack of cross cultural mission training centres that offer full time and residential training. Some mission leaders from Asia may even assert, 'We don't need more Western evangelists. Rather, we need more theologians and missionary trainers'. The leadership of these training centres must be under national leadership, but foreign partners can be part of the team, contributing specialties in the areas of missiology, religious studies or historical studies.
- Establishing indigenous mission organizations is another needed model in Asia. Western and International mission agencies can assist in establishing indigenous missions in Asia. The danger comes when foreign groups, consciously or unconsciously, attempt to produce replicas that may not be suitable for newer missions. Instead, foreign partners need to realize that there are now mature indigenous leaders in each of these countries. Therefore, partnerships could be formed between foreign partners and the leadership of national Christians in countries such as Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam rather than simply between foreign partners. Field strategies should no longer be determined without adequate input from national leaderships. The Mekong area is an example of a place where hundreds of foreign mission agencies have planted their foreign flags in the region. Why can't these foreign agencies talk to one another, and listen to mature national leaders as to how they can best serve God in Mekong? The question of who is in the driver's seat is a pertinent one!
- Japan is an economically rich nation with fewer than 1% Christian population. There are still many small towns of 200,000 people without a significant Christian presence. The old paradigm is to send foreign missionaries to Japan, with the foreign partners planning field placements and bearing the cost of mission support. There are now models where local Japanese churches or denominations identify a mission outreach, and then request missionary help to form a structure where there is a nucleus of local believers working under national leadership. A committee of the *inter-church association* is established to oversee the planting of a church in a particular area. The committee provides the finance for a meeting place and the Japanese evangelist's salary; the non-Japanese mission agency may send foreign mission partners and provide for the salaries of these foreign workers. [7]
- In the Philippines, a few foreign mission agencies have partnered to establish the *Alliance of Bible Christian Communities of the Philippines (ABCCOP)*. This partnership has progressed from being a mission initiated and directed organization, to a self-governing body. Today, the four expatriate missions relate to one another as partners and serve under the national leadership of ABCCOP. There are regular meetings of the respective directors to coordinate ministry, plan and strategize together. No foreign mission agency makes major field decisions without consultation and interaction to some degree with partners and contributors from the national church leadership.
- The Philippine Missions Association presents a case of partnership of mission bodies at a national level. In a way similar to the practice of the Indian Missions Association, the Philippine Missions Association serves as a valuable resource for "outside" mission bodies.

Although many International and Western based mission agencies are aware of these national mission networks, very few have benefited from close dialogues with them because the International Directors are based overseas and have very little time to develop genuine friendships with these national mission leaders. Instead, we find that the Philippine Missions Associations developed strategic partnerships with similar sister associations in Indonesia and Korea. [8]

Diffusion of Roles, New Problems and Possibilities

Partnership is not just something we need to give lip service to but must be tested by the fruits of partnership, nurtured in mutual respect and carried through in selfless service for the Lord's work. There is a great danger that Western mission agencies and more established Asian missionary churches from Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore 'adopt' national workers or national churches, seeking to do mission out of position of power, and therefore neglecting the crucial principle of incarnational partnership in missions. Past charges directed against Western missions - exporting foreign ways of Church life - are now rightly directed toward some new mission ventures within Asia. Past criticisms that mission agencies do not genuinely partner with local churches are now seeping into many megachurches from wealthier Asian countries which seek to control mission fields from the home base, where decision makers have no understanding of local cultures, and where the church merely do mission through short term visits. Eventually these newer churches are expected to duplicate foreign Christianity exported from Korea, Singapore or Malaysia - just as they once received foreign models from Britain or America. Partnership remains a buzzword in mission circles, but we should revisit this issue with courage and critique, and ask the question: who is in the driver seat? Should it be foreign mission bodies from the West? Should it be new growing churches from Asia? Should it not be the indigenous churches locally? Clearly, a theological answer to the question as to who should be in the driver's seat is to look to God on the throne! If He is really on the throne, then strategically, it should NOT be foreign powers firmly setting the agendas of missions. A better scenario would be to encourage national churches to learn to drive, with good support from more experienced drivers. Ultimately God is the driver and in this new era of mission, we can celebrate mission from all six continents where neither West nor East drives the agendas but a new team of drivers from both East and West, rich and poor, career missionaries and migrant witnesses, creatively chart new directions in mission models. Sometimes we must allow others to drive, and be willing to mix up various roles and rules in order to find new routes and discover new sceneries. For such possibilities, changing drivers, rotating drivers and allowing back seat drivers are all good practices, where diffusion of roles can be a good start and provide new surprises along the way.

Notes

[1] Julie Ma, "The growth of Christianity in Asia and its impact on mission," *Encounters Mission Ezine*, 16 (Feb) 2007, 1-7. See Mark Oxbrow and Emma Garrow, *Emerging Mission*, CMS/IEM/ISPCK, 2005.

[2] David Pickard, "Challenges facing Asian mission," in Castillo, Met, ed. *World Missions: The Asian Challenge* (Manila: AMC, 1991), pp.41-50.

[3] Samuel Escobar, *A Time for Mission* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), pp. 15-16.

[4] N.T. Wright, "harpagmous and the meaning of Philippians 2:5-11," *Journal of Theological Studies* 37:2 (1986), pp. 321-52.

[5] Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 220.

[6] See Miguel Alvarez, 'Missionary Training: A Discipline,' in *JAM* 2/1 (2000), pp. 91-102, and David Harley, *Preparing to Serve: Training for cross cultural Mission* (William Carey Library, 1995).

[7] See a series of articles on "Church-to-Church Partnership" in James Kraakevik and Dotsey Welliver, *Partners in the Gospel* (Wheaton: Billy Graham Center, 2005), pp. 59-90.

[8] See Met Castillo, "The Philippine Missions Association: A Case Study," in James Kraakevik and Dotsey Welliver, *Partners in the Gospel* (Wheaton: Billy Graham Center, 2005), pp. 141-150.

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