

# Partners in the Mission of God

Evertt W. Huffard  
Harding School of Theology

## **Is it really a partnership? And with whom?**

The 2016 movie, *Hidden Figures*, tells the story of a group of African-American women who were mathematicians at NASA in 1962. Although they were clearly partners in the successful launch of John Glenn into orbit, they were not treated that way, especially Katherine Goble, whose skills in analytic geometry made it possible to accurately identify the “go, no go” point for reentry. She was not even allowed to include her name on the reports which she wrote, in which she did most of the calculations. In 1969, she helped calculate the trajectory for the Apollo 11 flight to the moon. She really deserved a “Partner in Progress Award”! However, later in life she finally received the appreciation she deserved with awards from Congress, the President of the United States, and NASA.

Although a fictional character in the movie, Al Harrison (played by Kevin Costner), was portrayed as Katherine’s sympathetic boss. He never verbalized appreciation to Katherine as a partner or at least as a vital member of the engineering team.

In the history of Christian missions, stories of unrecognized partnerships can be countered with countless stories of declared partnership on the surface with little collaboration to justify calling it a partnership. The mission of God depends on real and meaningful partnerships with God, with sister churches, with (and within) mission teams, with local church leaders, and between those who give support and those who receive support. The balance between all of these entities seems so easy to tip the wrong way when anyone wants to take

credit for what God has been doing, when those with the funds dictate the use of those funds in contexts they do not know or understand, or when those who raise money call the donors partners when all they do is participate in a very small way in a mission far away.

What has intrigued me in my engagement with churches in Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Africa is how seldom I hear about “partnership” from their end compared to how often I hear it in the U.S.

Partnership assumes equality in Western eyes, but through the lens of non-Western patron-client societies, those who take the initiative or supply the funds may not be viewed as partners. Rather, they could be perceived as patrons, despite what Christians in the West may think of themselves.<sup>1</sup> This cross-cultural reality creates an opportunity for us to discover how to become godly patrons—to discover how to empower others rather than keep power or how to increase spiritual influence rather than manage funds. Our mission is to honor God, the Patron of us all, and not ourselves. We can still be benevolent and accountable with our identity rooted in a relationship with God, not in the money we manage. A more noble goal produces more godly patrons, not more clients. Learning to share resources with a group of believers, not just an individual, will avoid the tendency of setting that person up for jealousy, unhealthy patronage, and even more control—which leaves little room for a partnership with God. Partnerships in this way help outside leaders reinforce their vision for the local church rather than their own agendas (even when their agendas might be good). They nurture interdependency and guard trust, with priority given to the relationships (honor) more than finances (efficiency).

### **Partners with God**

The gap between the ideal and the real in the life of most churches seems the greatest when it comes to fulfilling the mission of God. Churches I have been blessed to consult with usually show more vitality in spirituality and relationships, while their inadequacy will likely be in organization and mission/vision. I would venture to guess that 10–20 percent of congregations effectively

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Ajula, in *Holism in Development: An African Perspective on Empowering Communities* (Monrovia: MARC, 2001), shares helpful analogies for partnerships that NGOs experience in Africa in terms of a horse and rider, cow and milker, and two oxen (171–72). In some, the Western NGOs are the rider, in others the cow. Yoked together for the same goal is a challenging ideal.

execute their mission within their community and the world. The majority seem to survive, accept mediocrity, and focus on keeping everyone happy.

No matter how many reasons we can find to explain the gap between what most disciples of Christ know to be the mission of the church and how they fulfill that mission, the one thing needed to narrow the gap will always be mature spiritual leaders who are committed to executing God's mission through the church. I like the way Christopher Wright captured Andrew Kirk's description of that mission:

*Mission is not ours; mission is God's.* Certainly, the mission of God is the prior reality out of which flows any mission that we get involved in. Or, as has been nicely put, it is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission—God's mission.<sup>2</sup>

That's the ideal—an awareness that the church was made for the mission of God, not just for her own spiritual, emotional, and social needs. In times of transition (and even despair), it seems best to root whatever we do going forward in the foundation of our faith. In whatever era of God's story we might find ourselves, some things never change. One unchanging truth is our partnership with God in his purposes for the whole of creation. We commit to healthy marriages to participate in the on-going creation of human life. We relate to God's creation with care for the environment. As the people of God, we also care about the mission of God in reconciling people to God. Whether we plant or water, it will be God who gives the increase. Our task is faithful service to his calling within whatever context his providential care has placed us. Although unworthy and often incompetent, we partner with the living God to make a difference in the world.

Church leaders are partners with God in executing his mission for the church. They know that "missions" involves the global transformation of lives to the honor of God and not a special contribution to support someone somewhere. I would guess that less than half of our church leaders view their engagement in missions as much more than a Sunday dedicated to raising

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 62; adapted from J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 23–37.

“special funds” for missions. In these cases, the budget usually determines (limits!) the mission of God rather than the vision of God fueling the mission of God.

Only a minority of church leaders realize that missions is more than a task. Where “missions” assessment focuses on *doing* the Lord’s work more than *being* the presence of God, partnerships involve one side supplying the funds (doing) and the other side producing the results with a good return on the investment. When assessed as a task, the expectations of funding, short-cuts, short-term goals, and power will shape the execution of the mission of the church. When assessment also considers the presence of God, it anticipates more lasting partnerships where the use of spiritual gifts, more time, deeper relationships, collaboration, and dependence on God define the mission. As Borthwick describes it, “In a relational view of partnerships, I don’t need to have all the answers, all the money, or all the ideas. We come together as a family to chart the way forward. We need each other....”<sup>3</sup>

### **Partnerships as the Final Era of Christian Missions?**

While para-church organizations provide great resources for executing the global mission of the church, their impact at the “grass roots” level (on both the sending and the receiving ends of God’s mission) involves functional partnerships with churches committed to equipping disciple makers and spiritual leaders.

Evidence of God’s partnership in mission will be found in churches that depend on God more than themselves. They dream God-sized dreams and enjoy witnessing what God can do. They discover that if they lean into God’s mission and follow where the Spirit leads them, there will be unlimited resources to fulfill that mission. For example, look at the impact one congregation in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, has had in reviving the desire and equipping disciples to make disciples and plant hundreds of churches.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Borthwick, *Western Christians in Global Mission: What’s the Role of the North American Church?* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), 154.

<sup>4</sup> North Boulevard Church of Christ vision to plant churches as a primary strategy for making disciples has initiated more than 700 new church plants (<https://www.northboulevard.com/vision>).

Since the 1980s, people throughout the U.S. have been studying missions in the *Perspectives* course. It has trained over 200,000 people and consistently offers 190 classes annually. The course uses a reader with 136 essays on missions, edited by Ralph Winter and Steven Hawthorne.<sup>5</sup> One of the essays includes the idea of “empowering partnerships” as one of seven standards of excellence in short-term missions.<sup>6</sup> Another essay notes that where partnerships worked well, they emerged “after sustained trust and relationship-building.”<sup>7</sup>

Some writers in the *Perspectives* course claim that we are in the final era of Christian missions from the West, an era of partnerships.<sup>8</sup> I’m of the opinion that they were too quick to discern that we are in an era that will be known as one of partnerships. If partnerships define the last era, it seems we still have a lot to learn to do it well enough to define it as an era of Christian missions. Based on my experiences in global missions, their assessment of partnerships was more aspirational than actual. Given the complexity and scope of Christian missions, partnership might describe one aspect of Western missions but lack adequate data to describe our current era, much less a final era. We can humbly observe, with thanksgiving, the mysterious movement of God within peoples and nations through migrations, persecutions, and disciple-making movements.

If mission efforts continue from the grass roots of well-intentioned yet inexperienced, untrained, and ill-equipped Christians in the West, paternalism will continue to be an unintended consequence of Western Christian missions. While there is a positive side of loving new believers as children in the faith, there is a dark side to paternalism when missionaries or sending churches treat the new believers (who are mature adults) as if they are children rather than partners in the faith. We can manage this phenomenon by equip ourselves with resources like that offered by Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, in *When Helping Hurts*. They propose a paradigm shift to avoid paternalism—simply

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<sup>5</sup> *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> “U.S. Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Missions,” in *Perspectives*, 756; extracted from *Maximum Impact Short-Term Mission*, by Roger P. Peterson, Gordon Aeschliman, and R. Wayne Sneed (Minneapolis: STEM Press, 2008), 277–79.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Taylor, “Global Partnerships: Now Is the Time,” in *Perspectives*, 376.

<sup>8</sup> Yvonne Wood Huneycutt, “New Pioneers Leading the Way in the Final Era,” in *Perspectives*, 381.

don't do for them what they can do for themselves. They unpack the various shades of paternalism, such as resource paternalism, spiritual paternalism, knowledge paternalism, labor paternalism, and managerial paternalism.<sup>9</sup> A positive follow-up resource by Brian Fikkert and Kelly Kapic can be found in their book, *Becoming Whole: Why the Opposite of Poverty Isn't the American Dream* (2019). We are in an era of Christian missions that offers some of the best resources that have ever been available to equip the church for cross-cultural ministry. In a sense, we are without excuses. All we need to do is seek and we will find resources that can equip us for effective cross-cultural ministry.<sup>10</sup>

### **Listening to Our Global Partners**

Given the prevalence and desire for partnerships in missions, how can we make them more meaningful and real?

*Partnership* has become one of the most overused buzzwords in the global Christian enterprise. A search on Google for the phrase partnership in mission points to over seventeen thousand sites. But the word has many potential meanings. For one, partnership can mean, "You send us the money, we'll find the Majority World worker for your money to support and then we'll send you results of his or her ministry and a picture for your refrigerator."<sup>11</sup>

The term "partners" may include a range of assumptions from co-workers with a shared task to shared relationships, as in a marriage. If the partnership is predominantly task-oriented, then power, finances, control, and outcomes assessment will prevail. If partnership assumes more of a relationship, then listening, sharing values, and respect will influence the dynamics of the mission.

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<sup>9</sup> See Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2012), 109–13 for an extended discussion on the poison of paternalism.

<sup>10</sup> For a sample of these resources, consider Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting in around the World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002); Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006); Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> Borthwick, *Western Christians*, 149.

The pandemic in 2020 put all short-term missions (STM) on pause for more than a year. The team at Mission Resource Network decided to use this time to listen to what global mission “partners” were thinking about partnerships with churches in the U.S. We hosted listening groups with church leaders in Africa and Asia who had some experience with American missionaries or STM groups. The results are available in a summary report titled “Partnering with Indigenous Leaders.”<sup>12</sup> The following observations summarize my perspectives on what we can learn from their feedback and the report.

1) *Healthy partnerships balance tasks and relationships.*

Both factors of a partnership require intentionality and will cost something. Unless we love and honor one another the things we do will not produce the outcome we hope for. When one side of a relationship provides all the funds and the other side does all the work, it will feel less like a partnership and much more like employment or paternalism. The concern for accountability without a concern for faithfulness will be a strong indicator that tasks have become more important than relationships. More specifically, if the contribution of outsiders to a local ministry shifts accountability away from indigenous leaders, priority has been given to funding at the expense of affirming local leaders. Another indicator of imbalance will be the desire for speed. Western church leaders typically lack the patience to evangelize the world because it will take too long and cost too much to develop the relationships needed for effective partnerships. The appeal for speed shifts all the weight to tasks and return on investments.

Duane Elmer offers a wise perspective: “In reality, most task-oriented people can be relational, and the more highly relational person can get the job done. Realize, however, that in a relational culture, the job rarely moves along smoothly until a trusting relationship is established.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This report is available at <https://www.mrnet.org/partnerships>.

<sup>13</sup> Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting in around the World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 130.

In a meeting in 2000 with Western and African partners from fourteen different countries, Sherwood Lingenfelter and his wife surveyed the participants' perspective of partnerships. They asked them (1) to define a partnership, (2) to describe the character qualities that you would like your partners to have, and (3) to explain what you would expect to give others in the partnership. Their responses highlighted different assumptions of partnerships.

Western Partners	African Partners
<b>Definition</b> —task, results	<b>Definition</b> —relational ministry
<b>Character</b> —reliability, humility, commitment, <u>work values</u>	<b>Character</b> —love, call of God, generosity, <u>social values</u>
<b>Give</b> — <u>superior/inferior</u> , training, money, facilitation, <u>critical feedback</u>	<b>Give</b> — <u>complementary</u> , people, relationships, spiritual resources, <u>everything is shared</u>

Contrasting Partnership Assumptions (Lingenfelter)<sup>14</sup>

At first glance, we can see the value of both perspectives and the potential good of integrating both perspectives in a healthy cross-cultural ministry. However, human nature, as it is, can take a wrong turn, and the assumptions become a source for strained relationships. “The Africans saw the Westerners as harsh, unbending, and uncaring; the Westerners saw the Africans as undisciplined, careless about time, and having low goals with regard to productivity.”<sup>15</sup>

Disciple-making movements seek to reach as many as possible with the gospel through a model of multiplication that is empowering and affirming, up to a certain point. Receptive people may come to Christ quickly, but the development of emerging leaders will fail without the presence of role models and patient long-term equipping of emerging leaders within a people group. All the gifts God has given the church

<sup>14</sup> Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Leading Cross-Culturally: Covenant Relationships for Effective Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 45 (emphasis original).

<sup>15</sup> Lingenfelter, *Leading*, 48.



(Eph. 4:11–16) will always be needed. Partnership with God supplements the work of disciple makers with shepherds, prophets, and teachers. Many long-term missionaries get stuck in disciple making and the spiritual maturing at the individual levels as they continue to serve as the primary leader in a church. The challenge of developing followers of Christ while also maturing the body for Christ can be daunting. The development of partners in leading a church will demand a lot of energy to mentor and empower emerging leaders.

- 2) *Joy in partnerships will be found in everyone making meaningful contributions to shared goals.*

The interdependency of partnerships assumes a humility that respects each other's gifts. We engage in partnerships because we know that we can do much more collectively than we can do individually. Joy comes when we all do our part and witness what God can do with our feeble efforts. Both partners make sacrifices for shared values, recognizing there are no shortcuts in God's mission. All the money in the world will not disciple a nation, but some resources can really help initiate a movement that is sustained by the sacrifice of disciples who have committed their lives to serve the Lord.<sup>16</sup>

- 3) *In global missions, lasting partnerships will be developed between groups (churches) and not one or two individuals from each group.*

The development of partnerships naturally starts with one or two people on "each side" coming together, getting to know each other, trusting each other, responding to needs, and working together. This is especially true of STMs and would be a reason why STM does better when connecting to long-term mission efforts. However, if a transition to group relationship (like a mission committee in a sending church

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<sup>16</sup> See Mary T. Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships: Navigating the Complexities of Money and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2010), 88–89, for how external funding can convince local believers that they are powerless or even weaken their own incentives to give. Throwing money at a mission may not make everything better.

and to a group of indigenous leaders) fails to develop within a few years, missions will be siloed in the sending church and the recipient of their funds will not develop leaders or become accountable to local leaders. This fails to be a healthy partnership. When global missions in the supporting church becomes siloed, that is, it becomes the responsibility of a few people in the church to manage a “missions budget” for a long period of time, the church will not feel any relationship with a sister church somewhere else in the world. This is not a partnership; it is simply a spiritual banking service for a good cause. It might be a good place to start, but it leaves a lot of room for improvement. When an indigenous leader receives funds directly from outside sources, with no other leaders at the church aware of what he receives, he will view any emerging leader as a potential threat. This is not a partnership; it is employment without locally shared responsibility, collaboration or accountability. Unfortunately, this has become a common practice that is really tested when conflict arises.

Stories abound of the failure of outside sources to listen to local leaders in resolving conflict. For example, when local church leaders muster up enough courage to report the failure of a missionary or local evangelist to the supporting church, the potential for failure escalates. The supporting church may send a delegation (of all outside leaders!) and decide that they will continue to support the missionary or evangelist, with no local accountability, and nothing changes. The paternalism grows deeper. Local leaders either resign or they give up, passively participate with minimal motivation, or leave to start their own ministry. Many developing churches have lost gifted and talented emerging leaders because of the dysfunction they experience in this pattern of missions. After all of this, the missionary or leader will continue to complain about the lack of motivation or good candidates to lead the church. In this typical scenario the Western church “partnered” with an indigenous leader but did not see itself as a partner with the emerging church and its leaders. Partnership here means the outsiders supply the money and determine the effectiveness and appropriateness of the methods and behavior of the leader they support.

A growing trend in missions for Western churches will likely be more support for local evangelists rather than sending a family that will take about five years to learn the language, adapt, connect with people to make disciples, and grow the church. Although this makes financial sense, there is a problem if Western churches support the indigenous disciple maker as if he were a trained missionary with whom they maintain minimal contact. If most missionaries feel abandoned by sending churches, one can only imagine how a local evangelist might feel with limited interaction with a supporting church in a very different cultural context. If a partnership develops between the supporting church and the indigenous church, shepherds from the supporting church and other leaders will need to visit the sister church several times a year—once a quarter would be even better. This visit could be a time to learn from each other, to shepherd and care for the church and the evangelist.

In these visits, the missionary or local evangelist will need to be equipped and motivated to develop leaders in the church. Otherwise, the partnership means outsiders supply the money to one person who leads the church and serves as a proxy for the views, doctrines, and culture of the supporting church. How could this church dynamic create a desire for members to give and sacrifice for the mission of the church? Outsiders need to ask themselves if their money or resources undermine local giving and the influence of local leaders. Without frequent visits to this mission context, it will be difficult to determine whether the outside support is strengthening local leaders or weakening them.

4) *Financial support always changes the equation.*

Western partners (outsiders) might feel like they are in equitable relationships with indigenous church leaders, while the insiders may view the relationship differently. Western generosity has unintended consequences.<sup>17</sup> As a spiritual gift, generosity involves much more than

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<sup>17</sup> Outsiders often fail to understand the power of precedence when providing funds for a person or ministry. Once you start funding someone or something, it will seldom

giving a lot of money. In fact, most of us have been more blessed by sisters and brothers with the gift of generosity shown to us by giving us their time, listening to us with an open heart, practicing patience with our failures, working alongside of us in tough times, sharing our grief, and forgiving us when we were wrong. Sending money is a task and cannot take the place of these other aspects of generosity in developing healthy spiritual relationships. When the connection is only monetary, expect communication to be strained and even unrealistic—on both sides. Without the healthy trusting relationship of a good partnership, the mission will ultimately cost more and be less effective.

For example, David Maranz observed a difference in how Americans and Africans view requests for money. Africans feel honor, some satisfaction, in being asked, whether they give or not. Westerners are annoyed by the ask and try to evade the patron-client role.<sup>18</sup> These divergent views and values undermine the simplicity of sending financial support. For the African, the value of a project is not to be measured by its long-term success; and the loan is eligible to be repaid when the creditor's need becomes greater than the debtor's need. The tension between the “we need your money” and “don't send money to create dependency” can be real for every supporting church. Maranz offers two suggestions. (1) It is all about relationships. Are we walking together, as it were, on the road to Emmaus? (2) Recognize that how we respond to a monetary request depends on many contextual factors like the political climate, skills we offer, the churches in the area, and willingness to adapt.<sup>19</sup>

Financial relationships can easily digress into a purely corporate configuration to determine what each side gives or gains, reflected in a memorandum of understanding. However, theological insights and missional principles can provide the keel and rudder to keep the ship

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be seen as temporary or an exception. A mediator could be an asset in discerning how much to begin with and whether the funding they provide would inhibit local giving. An unintended consequence of Western generosity often results in dependency, lack of gratitude, loss of mutual respect, and a greater reliance on outside funds than on God.

<sup>18</sup> David Maranz, *African Friends and Money Matters* (Dallas: SIL, 2001), 129.

<sup>19</sup> Maranz, *African Friends*, 159–60.

on course. For example, what do we learn from God about the patron-client relationship that would have application to global partnerships? What biblical and theological insights can we bring into the discussion that might deepen our relationship? What disciplines of spiritual formation could assist anyone in creating a virtuous patron-client relationship and prevent the abuses of that relationship?

Recently I visited with an emerging church leader in Africa and heard him say something I would never hear in the U.S. The church wanted him to serve as an elder, and, from everything I could see, he would be a wonderful shepherd. He stated that he really would like to serve in the future but could not do so now. When I asked what was holding him back, he said, “I cannot afford to do so.” Somewhat puzzled, I asked what he meant by “afford.” He explained his financial commitments and that he knew as an elder he would need to be able to respond to a lot of financial needs. In churches with very limited resources, the elders serve as patrons, helping brothers and sisters in need—which he looked forward to doing when he had the resources to do so. It was an honor. Finances can change the equation, in this case, in a positive way where shepherds really care for their sheep.

- 5) *Healthy, cross-cultural partnerships need mediators to develop the relationships, define the expectations, and manage conflicts.*

The foundation of any partnership in the kingdom of God begins with our partnership with God—which requires a mediator (Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate) to establish and maintain this partnership. Why would Western Christians struggle to apply this fundamental element of our faith to cross-cultural partnerships? Simple answer: Western Christians read Scripture with the eyes of individualists, thinking of Christ as their “personal Savior” (a phrase not found in Scripture) and managing conflict directly (even though this approach has not always worked well), rather than “saving face” in the social context of the local church.<sup>20</sup> God has raised up mature, gifted, cross-

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<sup>20</sup> For more insight on this, read E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012).

cultural servants all over the world that could mediate in almost any emerging cross-cultural partnership and at least help develop a healthy partnership before tensions erode the joy of working together.

Mediators help both sides identify and appreciate the resources they all bring to the mission of God. They can help both groups discern how to manage conflict and what to expect when things go wrong.<sup>21</sup> If the issue is control (by those who send the funds), then a mediator will help funding churches become as accountable to God as they want the recipients to be accountable in reporting their use of the funds. Without mediation, I have seen churches drop their support in a very dishonorable and hurtful way. I have also seen recipients of funds fail to communicate with transparency for fear of losing support, and in turn erode trust and lose support.

According to Paul Borthwick,

The greatest challenge in building effective partnerships between Westerners and non-Westerners is control. This control issue gets played out around money, goals, policies, reporting mechanisms, theological statements and more. It seems that our inherently sinful condition makes working together difficult, which is one of the reasons that unity of Christians is foundational to global witness.<sup>22</sup>

The further the cultural distance between the supporters and the indigenous ministry, the greater will be the necessity for mediation to evaluate and maintain the integrity of both groups. For example, I know an extremely gifted evangelist who has been raising millions of dollars among churches in the U.S., who understands the power of connecting generous hearts to impressive results with regular reports of many baptisms and unthinkable persecutions. However, he refuses to be transparent and supply complete accounting to the overseeing

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<sup>21</sup> See chapter 5 on “Mediation and the Mediator,” in Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict: Building Relationships for Effective Ministry* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 65–79. “The mediator serves not simply to reconcile, interpret and negotiate but, much more positively, to *integrate* two parties” (75).

<sup>22</sup> Borthwick, *Western Christians*, 151.

church through whom he funnels the money that he raises. After one supporting church with missions experience withdrew their oversight, he found another experienced church to manage his funds, but they also withdrew due to the lack of accountability. His solution was to find a small church with limited missions or cross-cultural experience to be the funnel for his funds. In this context, partnership is viewed as “send me the money and I will keep the impressive reports flowing.” The questioning of integrity is unfortunate because I believe there are very good intentions on both sides. Without mediation, we can only watch the unintended consequences from the sidelines as disciples with good intentions fail to create a partnership that honors God.

### **The Apostle Paul on Partners in Mission**

The failed partnerships in mission that I have observed over the past fifty years have motivated me to ask what we can learn from Paul. From Acts and Paul’s letters, we can identify 38 co-workers involved in his ministry and mission. He used nine different terms like *brother*, *servant*, *fellow-slave*, *companion*, and *partner* for his fellow workers with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Working together with others became a fundamental value for the mission ministry of Paul. He also sought the collaboration of churches in the mission of God.

Four Greek terms have been translated “partner” in the English Standard Version; 70 percent of the time they mean collaborator, where both parties share in the profit and benefits of the relationship. Paul had a special relationship with the church in Philippi through their “partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil 1:5). Apparently, their support was one aspect of that partnership because he confirmed that, from the time he left Macedonia, “no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving” except the Philippian church (Phil 4:15).

Eckhard Schnabel describes this close connection between Paul’s co-workers and the mission of their churches as a fulfillment of their relationship with Paul.

The majority of Paul’s coworkers came from the new churches that he had established. Some came to Paul as “delegates” of their home churches (Col 1:7; 4:12–13; Phm 13). They represent the “messengers of the churches” (*apostoloi ekklesiōn*; 2 Cor 8:23; cf. Phil 2:25). The “home churches” of these coworkers acknowledge that

they share in the responsibility for the expansion of the kingdom of God by providing missionary workers who help Paul. Their participation in Paul's mission "makes up" what their churches owe to Paul (1 Cor 16:17; Phil 2:30). The churches participate through their envoys in Paul's mission.<sup>23</sup>

Imagine Timothy in Thessalonica (1 Thess 3:2–8) and Titus in Corinth (2 Cor 8:23) telling Paul that he can't tell them what to do because their support comes from some other church. The power of the relationship of Paul with these churches and his partnership with Timothy and Titus created the spiritual influence that led these churches to mature. He leaned on this family relationship and *koinonia* with Philemon. "The point of all Paul's rhetorical art is to convince Philemon that for Philemon to maintain his position of partnership and *koinonia* with Paul, he will need to look through the lens of kinship and do what is right for Onesimus as a brother in Christ."<sup>24</sup>

Can we find a better term than "partnership" to describe what God has been calling all of us to do together in mission? At this point I can't find one. I concede that we just need to find a better way to define, develop, and execute partnerships in mission, acknowledging that our relationships find purpose and definition in our mutual partnership with the God of mission and fellowship (*koinonia*) in Christ.

Is it possible that the story of the hidden figures in the NASA space program in the 1960s could serve as a parable for the hidden figures in the mission of God? We all might be guilty of waiting too long to acknowledge, appreciate, and affirm the analytical designer of the redemption of humanity—thus our feeble, and often failed, attempts at cross-cultural partnerships. We cannot view one another from a human point of view and maintain a healthy cross-cultural partnership.

Is our mission a partnership? Yes. With whom? The God who empowers, the Son who redeems, and the Spirit who renews. When we get this primary partnership right, we might do better with all other partnerships.

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<sup>23</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 255.

<sup>24</sup> Alan B. Howell, "'Old Man' as Cipher: Humor and Honor-Shame Rhetoric for Reading Philemon in Mozambique," *Missio Dei* 11 (2020).