

**AUTHENTIC INTERDEPENDENCE IN THE MISSION OF GOD:
WHY YOU SHOULD SAY NO TO MY MONEY AND NOT LET ME PREACH
IN YOUR CHURCH!**

BY REV KEVIN BIRD¹

1 Introduction

The word partnership is used to describe all sorts of situations. Typing the word ‘partnership’ into my computer’s search engine for example produced 112,000,000 results in twenty-seven seconds. The world obviously thinks partnerships are significant and has a lot to say about them. But the world out there is not alone because we in the church are thinking a lot about partnerships as well. When I added the word ‘church’ to my previous search I still had 8,420,000 results. I conducted one final piece of research and added the word ‘mission’ to my previous searches. This time I was presented with 3,570,000 results. Partnership is big stuff regardless of from where you come at it.

In the midst of all this information I am on a search for a particular kind of partnership: a partnership characterised by ‘authentic interdependence’.

The premise behind this paper is a longing to see God’s kingdom come and the sneaking suspicion that the means to such an end is the global church walking together in ‘authentic interdependence’. In an attempt to better understand how we can do this today the paper will:

1. Briefly summarize where the western church has come from and where it is at today
2. Consider what we can learn from the New Testament regarding the nature of partnership
3. Propose four macro questions we all need to ask of missional opportunities.

2 Partnership in global mission through western eyes

In 1804 when the British and Foreign Bible Society was formed, its founders described the Society as ‘The handmaid of the Church’. While from our perspective the language is quaint, it never the less re-

¹ Rev. Kevin Bird pastors a Baptist Church in Brisbane, Australia. He read this paper at a conference in September 2009.

flects an underlying notion of partnership as a dimension of mission. And while it is true that ‘partnership’ is the word of the moment in discussions concerning global mission, the concept is not new. I would argue that partnership has always been a factor when looking at global mission through western eyes. What is new is the nature of that partnership.

I attend a middle class Australian evangelical church, which has a rich history in Global Mission. As I reflect on our experience I would say it mirrors the experience of many western churches. For us Global Mission has meant challenging people to go, to give and to pray. And they have. Over the years we have sent out and supported over thirty people who have gone to different parts of the world as career missionaries. In addition significant amounts of money have been raised for various projects, and short-term teams have gone throughout Australia and to different parts of the world.

In each of these instances we have partnered with an Australian based Mission Agency. Yes, for us it has always involved partnership. From our perspective our partners, the Mission Agencies, have helped us see and understand what is going on in the world, showed us opportunities and provided ways for us to be involved. Through our partnership with them we have had a connection with the worldwide church but not necessarily a partnership, let alone an authentic interdependence.

Today we have Partnership Agreements with each of the Agencies through whom the members of our church’s Global Mission Team serve. And while I wouldn’t suggest we enjoy the same level of involvement with each of these partners, nevertheless we are intentionally walking down a road which makes it clear that we are part of the missional enterprise.

All of us readily recognize that the world of the twenty-first century is not the world that gave birth to the western missionary enterprise. This has been a real challenge for us as western churches and their associated Mission Agencies. We know how to do what we knew how to do but as David Bosch wrote, “traditional forms of mission embody a response to a world that no longer exists.

Appendix 1 – *Global Mission Trends from a Western Perspective* – is one attempt to summarize these changes and how the western church has responded. This changing nature of our world, the church and mission itself has resulted in a multitude of responses and strategies from

the west. One of these is exemplified in the experience of a neighbouring church (Church X) in our city and another in an opportunity our own church is experiencing.

The Church Growth thinking of the 1970's and 80's shaped Church X² and by the 90's it had become a large and significant church in our city. Recognizing the significance of church planting as a means of extending the Kingdom of God, this church like many such churches adopted a philosophy of cloning. It sought to plant "X style churches in other places." They had the resources (people, money, experience and technology) to basically do whatever they liked. As the means of achieving this goal they established their own sending vehicle, "X Ministries International" and sent people to different parts of the world.

Interestingly in this instance there was limited success and the church has since abandoned "X Ministries International" in preference for partnerships with Mission Agencies. In the words of the current Mission Pastor, "The key problem in going without an agency is the lack of coaching, support, and accountability that an agency provides on field. We have occasionally sent missionaries without an agency since then, but there are extenuating circumstances leading to greater confidence that they will not become isolated or disillusioned ... in general our policy is to prefer agencies that offer good support for our people".

The second example comes from our own experience. In addition to sending people through Mission Agencies we have more recently found ourselves with an opportunity to partner with a group of national churches in Northern Thailand. This partnership was born out of a personal relationship and is developing slowly. From our perspective this has been something God thrust in our laps and has used to force us to start thinking beyond the walls of the traditional paradigm as the only way of doing global mission. From our perspective it is early days and we have much to learn.

While the expressions will be different the one thing we can guarantee is that the western church, indeed the global church wants to be more involved. Something has been unleashed and there is no stopping it. This is both fantastic and terrifying all at the same time. Many of us don't have a clue what we are doing and we will make heaps of mis-

² Italicised comments are direct quotes from email correspondence with the current Missions Pastor.

takes. But if there is one thing we can learn from church history it is that God does amazing things through willing vessels despite their myopia and arrogance.

I would argue that the way forward is still in partnership, but not naively to be found in identifying the perfect vehicle with which to partner. If that becomes our focus, we run the risk of merely tinkering around the edges and potentially missing the opportunities. Regardless of the vehicle, effective missional partnerships will be formed out of a shared understanding of what partnership means and identifying the macro questions; these will naturally emerge out of that understanding, and will therefore need to be asked of missional opportunities as they arise.

3 The Paul-Philippian missional model of partnership

The Apostle Paul finds immense joy in the Philippian church's "partnership in the gospel" (1:5). But what is the nature of that partnership? Luke uses two different words to describe the relationship between the fishermen Peter, James and John (Ch 5). They were *metochos* (7), which comes from a word meaning to share or participate and describes a sharer or by implication an associate or partaker. They were also *koinonos* (10), which is, to share in common. The picture Luke is painting is not simply one of men working together as casual labourers. They have a business together. They own the boat together and benefit from the profits together. Their futures are bound together. They share life together.

A contrasting picture of partnership is described in John 5:7: "...no one to help me". This man wasn't looking for anyone to share a common life with him. He simply needed someone to give him assistance, to give him a lift at the appropriate moment. When Paul writes to the Philippians he is describing the former. From his perspective he and the Philippians shared in a common life together: they were in *koinonia*.

We see numerous examples of this in his letter. Since Paul first preached the gospel in Philippi some ten years earlier (Acts 16) they both belonged to Christ and shared in His life (1:7; 2:1; 3:20). They were both committed to making the gospel known (2:16; 4:3). They both needed each other's prayer (1:3-11; 19). They were both concerned for each other (1:7-8; 4:10). They both took risks (1:12-30;

2:30). They both gave according to their gifts and abilities (1:12-18; 4:15; 4:14-16). They both shared people with each other (2:19; 25). They were both in it for the long haul (4:15-16). They were both focused on a common reward (3:17-21).

The picture painted for us in Philippians is alluring. It suggests the possibility of more as we look around us at a church dominated by power struggles, egos and carnal agendas. In contrast to much of what we see today, the Paul-Philippian partnership was an interdependent partnership. It was a partnership that reflected the very nature of God Himself. And while throughout history, and yes today, we see different expressions of missional partnerships, I would contend that the picture painted for us in Philippians challenges us to strive for something which truly reflects the nature of God and thus brings glory to Him. Mission is not just about getting the job done; it is about being the Kingdom of God here on earth now.

If this is something we should be striving for then we need to discover together how to find a way forward that takes us beyond merely 'doing' mission together into missional partnerships characterised by the interdependence pictured in Philippians.

4 Finding a way forward

Any casual reading of the journals or searching of the Internet will produce a plethora of excellent articles concerning missional partnerships³. Many of these focus our attention on the various practical steps we need to put in place if we are to 'do' mission together. Yes we need to look at the pragmatics. Yes, for example, we need to ensure there is financial accountability, but finding a way through these pragmatic issues is not the critical challenge. Instead, we have to find a way, in the midst of our diversity, of sharing life and moving forward together. With this as our beginning place we can build real opportunities together.

The *koinonia* experienced by Paul and the Philippians was a partnership flowing out of the life they shared in Christ. This was life lived out of "being united with Christ" and in "fellowship with the Spirit" (2:1). Theirs was a partnership built on the Cross and the Spirit. I would like to suggest that the way forward for you and I will be discov-

³ See Appendix 2.

ered as we “take up our cross and follow” Jesus, and as we move forward in dependence on a “demonstration of the Spirit’s power”.

This of course is easier said than done. But in an attempt to at least take a step towards interdependence I would propose asking of every missional opportunity four questions. Two will focus our attention on what it means to take up our cross and two on what it means to depend on the Spirit.

Question 1: Does this missional opportunity reflect the values of “mission from a position of weakness”⁴?

We in the western church, like much of western culture, have been influenced by the ‘power-philosophy’ of Nietzsche.⁵ As a consequence we have tended to pursue power as a means of living in and extending the Kingdom of God. Weakness however is celebrated in Scripture as the human arena in which Christ’s power is best displayed.

Not only do we see this in the way Jesus ministered to marginalised people (sinners, publicans, women, and children) but more so in the way through these encounters that he challenged people’s reliance on the existing means of power within the culture. This was most obvious in the way he used children as a means of confronting the disciples pride and self-reliance⁶.

Paul demonstrated this idea of weakness as opposed to power when he challenged the power structures of Corinth and chose to go to them not “with eloquence or superior wisdom” but to rather “know nothing while *he* was with *them* except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:1-2). He cemented its significance for you and me when he celebrated it as the very basis of his ministry (2 Cor 4:1-12; 12:1-10). This question has a lot to do with where we place our dependence and what we value.

Question 2: Is this missional opportunity characterised by servanthood?

Closely aligned to ministering out of weakness is the character of the ministry it generates. Jesus came taking upon himself “the very nature

⁴ Paul Yonggap Jeong, *Mission From a Position of Weakness* (Peter Lang Publications Inc, 2007)

⁵ John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Marshall Pickering, 1990), p. 273

⁶ See Luke 9:46-59; 10:21-24; 18:15-17.

of a servant” (Phil 2:7) and calls us to be likewise. Hence Paul’s challenge to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ Jesus (Eph 5:21) or as he put it in Philippians, “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves” (2:3). This is not a question of ministry or leadership styles because these will change from culture to culture and generation to generation. But it is more about the character of the ministry and leadership regardless of the particular style.

Luke records the dispute between the disciples during the last supper as they fought over who would be the greatest (22:24-34). It is instructive for us to notice Peter, even after Jesus established the principle of servanthood leadership, attempting as it were to get the last word and thus establish his pre-eminence over the other disciples (33). John completes the picture when he records Jesus’ post-resurrection dialogue with Peter (21:15-23). Jesus once again challenges Peter with the realities of servanthood and the personal sacrifice it will mean for him (18-19). This was a call to take up his cross and follow Jesus. Peter however doesn’t want to know about it and turns away, but Jesus doesn’t let him get away with it and once again calls him to “follow me” (22).

When we turn to Acts it would appear that Peter did finally get it. He describes the task Jesus has given the twelve as ministry, *diakonia* ... servanthood (1:17; 25). For Peter leadership becomes an act of willing servanthood to be undertaken with humility towards others (1 Pet 5:1-7).

Ministry, therefore, is not about me or what potential gain I might receive; it is about serving. As the church we are the servants of Christ Jesus. We are called to follow Him. This is something we in the west need to re-learn. Unfortunately like much of our culture the church continues to live out the consequences of several generations of selfishness. This, I would contend, continues to be the biggest challenge facing the western church today.

Question 3: Is this missional opportunity a work of the Spirit of God?

It is interesting for us as we sit in this context to remember how Paul got to Philippi in the first place (Acts 16). He had been “kept by the Holy Spirit from” (6), not allowed by “the Spirit of Jesus” (7) and had a

“vision” (9). All this resulted in him “concluding that God had called” (10) him to Macedonia. Paul got to Philippi because his apparent strategic approach, which was both appropriate and reasonable, was interrupted by the Spirit of God.

To be open to the Spirit in this context is to be sensitive to what God is doing and being willing to be part of that. This was the challenge the disciples struggled with as Jesus talked with the Samaritan woman in Sychar (John 4). Just as he said to them, Jesus continues to say to his disciples today, “Open your eyes and look at the fields.” It is when we see where the Spirit of God is at work and become part of that, that we see God working powerfully. I have had to recognize this all too often in my own journey. More often than not God does a work and we have to run to catch up with what He is doing. This will require all of us holding our pre-determined positions lightly lest we exclude the very work God is doing.

Question 4: Is there room in this missional opportunity for mutual dependence?

A unique characteristic of being the community “in fellowship with the Spirit” is that here there is “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). We are a community of equals. All of us have received the promise of the Spirit (Acts 2:38-39; Rom 8:9-11; 1 Cor 12:3; 13) and all of us have been gifted by the Spirit for the common good (Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor 12:7-11). As such we need each other (1 Cor 12: 14-27) because we, the Global Church, are mutually dependant on each other.

This will require us discarding historic postures where some see themselves as those with something to give and others see themselves as those in need. If we are to move forward as interdependent partners all of us need to rediscover how we complement each other today.

To stop and revisit our existing partnerships or be willing to look at our potential future partnerships through the filter of these questions is risky. It could challenge what we are doing and how we are doing it. John Stott however provides us with wise counsel as we step out. He wrote, “It is only when we are brave and humble enough to allow the Spirit of God through the Word of God to radically call into question our most cherished opinions, that we are likely to find fresh unity

through fresh understanding.”⁷ So, a view of authentic interdependence emerges as we pose these questions.

5 Conclusion

So why should you say no to my money and not let me preach in your church?

When it comes to global mission the easiest thing for me to do is come on a preaching tour of your country. You would graciously welcome me as a partner in the gospel. I’d bring a band and we would take lots of photos.

When I got home I would tell the stories and show the photos. I would say to our church, “See how we are partnering with our brothers and sisters”, and feel all ‘good’ inside, but be left with the lingering doubt whether anything of lasting significance really happened.

The easiest thing for you to do is ask me for money. “Just send money brother,” you would say, “We have the people to do the job, and we just need to support them”. We would raise the money and send it to you. You would receive it and talk about our partnership in the gospel as I would with our church, but I would be left with the lingering doubt that we have just created a whole new dependency like thousands have done before us.

Yes, both could in fact be good things to do. My fear however is that we will miss God’s best by settling for something we tell ourselves is a good thing to do while God is longing for us to sit down together and discover what He wants to do. In this way we will enjoy an authentic interdependence.

⁷ John Stott, *The Bible: Book for Today* (IVP, 1982), p. 50.

Appendix 1 Global Mission Trends from a Western Perspective

Period	Dependence Pioneering – Parenting Phase 18th - 19th Centuries	Independence Partnering Phase Post WW II	Interdependence Participating Phase 21st Century
Global Trend	Colonialism	Nationalism	Globalisation
Source of Significant Christian Influence	William Carey – 1792 An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens.	Roland Allen – 1912/1927 Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?	Participants in the International Congress on World Evangelization 1974 The Lausanne Covenant
Source of Power	Sending Church	Indigenous Church	Global Church as Equals
Approach of Western Church	Benefactor	Consultant - Assistant	Participant

Appendix 2 - Readings on Missional Partnerships

- Alex Araujo, *Accountability Without Control; Freedom and Dependency in Christian Partnerships* (1996)
- Phil Bourne, 'The Hand Cannot Say To The Eye I Have No Need of You', *St Francis Magazine* Nr. 3 Vol. IV (December 2008) (see www.stfrancismagazine.info)
- Pete Cossey, 'Church Mission Partnership' (2006), see, www.strategic-missions.org.nz
- John Frankfurter, 'Reflections on the Role of Expatriates in Supporting National Christians in Fulfilling the Great Commission', in *St Francis Magazine* Nr. 3 Vol. IV (December 2008) (see www.stfrancismagazine.info)
- Free Methodist Church in Canada, 'Building a Responsible Mission Partnership: Principles and Practices', (March 2006)
- Lorry Lutz and Luis Bush, *Partnership: the New Direction in World Evangelism* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1990)
- Daniel Rickett, *Dependency in Mission Partnerships; Getting Beyond Money Problems in Missions Partnerships* (2001)
- Kang-San Tan, 'Who Is In The Drivers Seat?' (June 2008), see www.redcliffe.org/encounters
- Phil Tom, 'A Resource on Developing Mission Partnerships' (2008), see www.pcusa.org