Sharing Resources in Contexts of Poverty

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For some time now discussions of *partnership in mission* and *indigenous church planting* have talked past each other as if one were a substitute for the other. The principles of indigenous church planting apply to contexts of pioneer church planting. The principles of partnership apply to churches and missions that possess their own identity, autonomy, and self-reliance. Failing to account for the *differences in context*, however, may explain a great deal of the confusion about giving and receiving money in international church and mission relationships.

It is not my purpose in this article to explore issues of Western missionary affluence in contexts of poverty, as Jonathan Bonk so ably does in his book *Missions and Money* (2006). Nor is it my intention to address issues of fiscal integrity, as Mary Lederleitner does in her helpful book *Cross-Cultural Partnerships: Navigating the Complexities of Money and Mission* (2010). Rather, my aim is to show how two independent organizations, whether church or mission, each possessing the qualities of selfhood, autonomy, and self-reliance, can successfully share resources across the wealth divide.

Indigenous Church-planting Principles

It sounds odd, but the basic assumptions of indigenous church planting have become obstacles to sharing resources in the work of the gospel. When you understand indigenous church-planting principles, you expect them to be the starting point to sharing resources, not an obstacle.

The basic premise of indigenous church planting is that the young church must take responsibility for itself from the earliest stages of growth. The role of church planters is to cultivate the emerging church in such a way that they one day withdraw from the church and move on to plant other churches. Indigenous church planters are to work themselves out of a job. When they have done their job well, the church they leave behind will be self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating, and possess a self-image rooted in its own culture as well as in the *Body of Christ* (Plummer and Terry 2012, 164-170).

Indigenous church-planting principles are fitting to pioneer church planting. They are not, however, fitting to all church and mission relationships. In fact, they say very little about how established churches are to relate to each other.

Henry Venn, one of the originators of indigenous church principles, once wrote that he had learned "…to follow divine guidance instead of his own principles in missionary affairs, "for principles which may apply to one mission may often be inapplicable to a different field, as well as different stages of advancement in the same field" (Beyerhaus and Lefever 1964, 71).

Venn's caution is well founded, but it should not be construed to mean that the principles of indigenous church planting have no place in new contexts.

In general, the qualities of selfhood, autonomy, and self-reliance are always necessary. A church or mission cannot be itself without them. But once established, the church must be able to collaborate effectively with other parts of the Body of Christ. In today's globalized world, that often involves crossing barriers of language, culture, nations, and economies. In this new context, how is the church or mission to relate to others outside of its context?

We need an expanded framework that includes the qualities of the indigenous church and the ability to collaborate in our common identity and mission. The principles of partnership in mission provide such a framework.

Characteristics of Mutual Dependency

Before exploring the characteristics of partnership, it is helpful to examine the characteristics of mutual dependency.

By way of introduction, consider two brief scenarios. First, suppose there is a North American missionary who receives one hundred percent of his or her support from outside for thirty years. Does that constitute unhealthy dependency? Second, suppose there is an indigenous mission that receives thirty percent of its support from outside for thirty years. Does that constitute unhealthy dependency?

Maybe your experience was like mine. The first scenario was easy to answer. I didn't have to think about it. There's no question, the missionary wasn't at risk of unhealthy dependency. There might be other concerns such as job performance, but that's a different issue.

The second scenario wasn't as easy. I had to think about it. Perhaps that's how it affected you. My hesitation was in weighing the risk of creating unhealthy dependency.

In these scenarios, the North American missionary is three times more dependent than the indigenous mission. Yet we don't regard that as a problem. What makes dependency acceptable for the North American missionary?

Upon careful reflection we can make five reasonable assumptions about normal relationships between missionaries and their mission. In a healthy relationship, one would expect to find the following characteristics:

- **RECIPROCITY:** Mutual giving and receiving

- **ACCOUNTABILITY:** Being answerable to implied expectations as well as explicit policies, goals, and objectives. In missionary relationships, accountability is less about compliance to standards and more about the power of identity and belonging.

- **EQUITY:** A sense of fairness. The missionary's financial support is enough, not excessive. The arrangement is fair for the mission as well as the missionary.

- **TRUST:** Confidence in one another. The mission has confidence in the character, calling, and commitment of the missionary. The missionary trusts the mission to do right by him or her.

- **MUTUAL DEPENDENCY:** Counting on each other to do their part. The mission relies on the missionary to achieve things they deeply value. The missionary, in turn, relies on the mission to provide leadership, prayer, and moral support, and to care for him or her in times of trouble. They count on each other to be authentic, dependable, and loyal.

In view of the fact that a certain kind of dependency is not only acceptable but desirable for the North American missionary, what is stopping us from having the same kind of dependency with a Nepalese, Malian, or Indonesian missionary?

Here's where I'm going with this: Is it possible to have all the characteristics of reciprocity, accountability, equity, trust, and mutual dependency in a relationship with an indigenous church or mission?

Putting together the five characteristics of mutual dependency with the core principles of indigenous church planting, we have the framework for sharing resources in the work of the gospel. Taken together, the eight elements describe nothing less than partnership in mission. The qualities of autonomy, selfhood, and self-reliance describe the prerequisite characteristics of partnership. The qualities of reciprocity, accountability, equity, trust, and mutual dependency describe the relational characteristics of partnership.

We must remember that partnership is more than the eight elements; however, they are the crucial elements to sharing resources in ways that enable and ennoble the servants of God in contexts of poverty.

Partnership Principles for Sharing Resources

Now that we have the essential characteristics for sharing resources, what do they look like in practice? How can they serve as guides to giving money in contexts of poverty? To answer the question, we can define each term and extrapolate several questions that will help detect the presence or absence of the qualities in a given situation.

AUTONOMY is freedom to determine one's own actions. The autonomous church or mission makes its own decisions and charts its own course. It appoints its own leaders and governs its own affairs. Although it may be under the authority of a local denomination, it is independent of any foreign church or mission. The autonomous church is self-governing and self-determining.

SELFHOOD is the quality of knowing who you are. It is rooted in one's sense of identity and belonging. The church or mission that is aware of who it is, both in Christ and in society, is able to distinguish itself from others and make a unique contribution to the work of the gospel. A clear sense of self, especially one's unique self-in-Christ, is both a source of dignity and honor, and the first line of defense against exploitation and harmful dependency.

SELF-RELIANCE is an attitude about one's self. It is confidence in one's own judgment and ability to do things. For the Christian, such confidence is rooted in the all-sufficiency of Christ. Self-reliant churches and missions do things for themselves. They take responsibility and invest their resources to accomplish their aspirations. Self-reliant churches make the most of local resources. They know and believe they have gotten to where they are by their own efforts and the providence of God. They welcome outside help only for what they cannot accomplish on their own.

In places of profound poverty, the dynamics of self-reliance appear paradoxical. On the one hand, the goal of economic development is self-reliance. On the other hand, growth in self-reliance is often highly dependent on outside facilitators (Burkey 1993, 213). Those who would partner in the gospel must understand the tenuous differences between doing for others, and others doing for themselves.

RECIPROCITY is mutual giving and receiving. Partnership presupposes reciprocity. People enter into partnership because they want to achieve something they could not achieve without the relationship. Both have something to give and something to receive. The key to reciprocity is not in what is given and received per se, but in how it is valued by each partner. Reciprocity does not mean equivalency. In international church and mission relationships, reciprocity is often asymmetrical. What Paul offered the church of Philippi was different from what the church offered Paul. He was the founding apostle and spiritual leader. They were a church that assisted Paul with his material needs. Although Paul could not reciprocate in kind, he regarded them as partners in the gospel (Phil. 4:10-20).

ACCOUNTABILITY is being answerable for one's actions. It involves being able to explain the reasons for one's actions. Accountability is, of course, understood differently in different cultures. In cross-cultural relationships, it requires understanding how accountability works in each culture and forging a shared understanding for mutual benefit. When it comes to sharing financial resources, accountability is established by agreement about the use of funds and the ability to verify that the expectations of both partners were satisfied. Financial records that meet accepted standards show a willingness to be transparent and provide the means to check how funds were used.

EQUITY is the quality of being fair with one another. The sense of fairness, however, is individually defined and requires the kind of dialogue that leads to mutual understanding. Equity must not be confused with equality. People with very different gifts and opportunities can be fair and evenhanded without being equal. “Not everyone is equal,” Robert Lupton argues. “To pretend that, given equal opportunity, all people could do equally well is a romantic and altogether unhelpful notion. We are equal neither in capacity nor potential. We are equal only in responsibility” (2007, 71).

TRUST is a product of the positive expectations we have of others. We trust those who meet our expectations. We assume they will act in ways consistent with our expectations of them. Distrust occurs when those on whom we depend appear unwilling or unable to meet our expectations. In partnership, trust is a product of common ground in basic beliefs and values; a demonstrated interest in one another’s welfare; transparency in open, two-way communication; and the demonstrated commitment of all parties to keep their promises.

MUTUAL DEPENDENCY is a product of our ability to connect with each other, and befriend each other, and love each other. It is when we depend on each other as members of the Body of Christ that the body “grows to full maturity” (Eph. 4:16). In partnership, members depend on each other to do their part, live up to mutual expectations, and keep their promises. Everything valuable we get out of partnership is a product of mutual dependency.

Questions to Answer before Giving Money

The following list of questions is important to go through before giving money in contexts of poverty.

1. **Do you understand the needs as the local church or mission sees them?**

2. **Do you have a clear picture of what the financial resources can achieve?**

3. **Do you have a mutually respectful and supportive relationship with the local church or mission?**

4. **Are you aware of how cultural differences may affect the use of funds?**

5. **Have you defined mutual expectations about how the funds will be used?**

6. **Do you have the resources and skills to keep your promises?**

7. **Have you assessed the capacity of the local church or mission to receive and handle outside funds?**

8. **Will the money be given to an established church or mission?**

9. **Does the church or mission have an active board of directors, or equivalent, to oversee the use of funds?**

10. **Does the church or mission manifest a healthy self-image as members of their society and the Body of Christ?**

11. **Does the church or mission have a history of making the most of local resources?**

12. **Does the church or mission demonstrate dependence upon God, and not money, as the source of ministry success?**

13. **Is the funding amount sensible relative to other projects run by the church or mission?**

14. **Does the church or mission demonstrate transparency and financial accountability?**

15. **Does the church or mission have a track record of faithful service in the work of the gospel?**

A "yes" answer to these questions would represent a viable opportunity to effectively share resources across the wealth-divide.

When it comes to sharing resources in contexts of poverty, it is not enough to merely give to those in need. The best way to give is in the context of a mutually respectful and supportive relationship. It takes a relationship to understand the needs, assess the risks, and manage the inevitable missteps and variations in the course of ministry. Without a relationship characterized by mutual dependency, financial help might be little more than throwing "money at people we know only casually in an effort to solve a problem we understand only minimally" (Rowell 2006, 167).

The core principles of indigenous church planting, coupled with the principles of mutual dependency, provide the framework for effectively sharing resources in the work of the gospel. ■

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This article first appeared in the January 2015 issue of EMQ, P.O. Box 794, Wheaton, IL 60187, emis@wheaton.edu. Reprinted by permission of Evangelism and Missions Information Service (EMIS).