

Beyond Religious Tourism: Twinning as a Missionary Method

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The early 21st century has seen partnership in mission entering a new mode. No longer is it a centrally run operation driven by the headquarters of a church mission board or independent missionary society. Now it is becoming a radically decentralized form of engagement as local congregations make direct connections with their overseas counterparts. There is no question that this new method has rejuvenated missionary vision and enthusiasm in many congregations. Yet it is already apparent that it is not without pitfalls. While there are remarkable and enticing possibilities offered by twinning as a model for mission in the 21st century, it would be quite wrong to present it as a panacea. On the contrary, it must be acknowledged that the model itself has formidable challenges to meet. Its potential as a force for renewal in Christian mission may be measured by the extent to which it is able to meet the following challenges.

Mere Religiously Themed Tourism?

Holiday travel is a feature of the affluent lifestyle of the Western world. Long-haul flights carry the wealthy to beach resorts on every continent for rest and relaxation. Some holiday-makers are keen to explore an exotic location. Themed holidays which offer participants insights into the local situation have become increasingly popular. These can sometimes include active participation, perhaps in a project which is perceived as being of benefit to the local community. This is the economic and cultural context in which the rise of twinning as an approach to world mission has taken place. Is it therefore no more than a variant on the themed vacation for the wealthy who can perhaps salve their conscience with some good works while enjoying a foreign adventure? Samuel Escobar, a senior Latin American mission thinker, has commented on the increase of short-term mission visits: “the trend we are observing today could well undermine the long-term missionary enterprise. In the final analysis it could become just a form of glorified tourism.”¹ Compared with the strategy of deploying missionaries who devote a lifetime to living out the gospel of Christ in their country of service, does not the twinning approach appear trivial and insubstantial? Will it prove to be a distraction from the real task of the church in the world?

It has to be acknowledged that twinning *could* be carried out in a way which is ephemeral, dissipating substantial resources without making any lasting impact. However, there are steps which can be taken to avoid such an outcome. The first is to ensure that there is depth to the faith dimension of the twinning. This sets it in a different key to the artificiality of themed tourism. It means that people are engaging at a level which has the potential to be transformative. From such a basis the twinning can be developed in a way which has clear missionary intentionality. Rather than just offering an ephemeral experience, it is geared to bring lasting change in Christ’s name – at both ends of the twinning relationship. For this to occur it is hugely advantageous if the twinning is not a stand-alone effort but rather part of a long-term, sustained and wide-ranging common commitment. Here the twinning draws strength from being embedded in a partner church relationship which has significant history and a strong ongoing commitment which is much wider and stronger than the individual strand which is represented by the twinning. Where missionary intention is built into the twinning arrangement it will not remain an internal church affair but will have elements of connection with, and outreach to, the wider community.

Western Indulgence Imposing on Non-Western Partners?

For fifty years the missionary movement has been engaged in the struggle to achieve an equal partnership in the gospel between churches based in the West and their counterparts based in

the South. Yet, on the face of it, it would be difficult to argue that the move to adopt twinning as a primary means of interaction has been equally driven from both sides of the partnership. To a great extent it has been an initiative of the Western partner to which the partner in the South has felt obliged to respond. It has often come in a context where the Western partner has, however reluctantly, been cutting back on appointments and grants so that the move to twinning is the only remaining means of continuing a cherished relationship. By and large, there has been no active choice on the part of the Southern partner. In fact, in some cases it may have come as an unwelcome imposition. Traditions of hospitality mean that great effort is put into the reception of visitors, using time, energy and resources which are urgently needed for other work. The new arrangements also give expression to the inequality by which the relationship is marked. The twinning visit is relatively straightforward for the wealthy Westerner but much less so for their Southern counterpart. As John Hull has pertinently observed: “The iron curtain has passed away and even the bamboo curtain hardly exists, but the place has been taken by the money curtain. We in the two-seventh rich world are surrounded by a money curtain which is like a one-way mirror. It is invisible to those of us on the inside because we can see right through it, but to the poor majority outside the money curtain it stands as a glittering barrier through which they cannot pass. We can go to them but they cannot come to us. Globalisation has conquered every area of human life except people.”² This harsh reality is borne out in the visa application process which makes it abundantly clear that it is much easier to move in one direction than in the other. Ease and adventure for the Westerner contrast with anxiety and frustration for the Southern partner. This imbalance is compounded by unequal access to communication technology. While the Westerner might well have easy internet access in their own home, receiving and sending emails might be an uncertain and expensive logistical exercise for the Southern partner.

It should be observed, however, that contact between those on either side of the “money curtain” may prove to be a significant lever to achieve change. Direct experience of the disparity of resources available to Western and Southern partners brings home the need for greater justice in the world economic order more powerfully than any number of statistics. In particular, Westerners who have been exposed to the harsh realities of poverty in the South are often the people who take the lead in such initiatives for economic justice as the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign or “Make Poverty History” in 2005. By aligning themselves, through partnership, with the most excluded and most disadvantaged sections of the global community, sharing their life and speaking with them and for them, Western partners are motivated to become part of the solution and not just part of the problem in a divided world. It may be that it is active church partnership, sustained over generations and given renewed personal expression today, which can break through the invisible curtain between the “parallel worlds”.

It is also empowering at a deeper level. At the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference the great Indian bishop V.S. Azariah gave expression to a profound aspiration of churches of the Global South in relation to their missionary founders: “Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for *love*. Give us FRIENDS.”³ The moratorium of the 1960s expressed the same desire – not for a breaking of the relationship but for a more equal and closer partnership. Is twinning possibly the answer to the prayers of a century? Certainly it is providing the opportunity for churches to relate to one another beyond the institutional and national leadership level by mobilising the grassroots of the churches to engage with one another. Bishop Azariah, we have heard you – we offer you love, we give you friends.

Communication Failure

A further major challenge to the twinning model is the possibility of failure at the fundamental level of communication. It might seem that this is the least of our problems.

Instant worldwide communication opens up unprecedented opportunities for the twinning method to flourish. In terms of the mechanics there is a great variety of possible methods of communication – email, instant messaging, telephone, mobile phone, texting, skype, video link. In most situations, one or more of these methods will be possible. However, the “digital divide” leaves many people in poorer countries lacking access to the modern communications network. Far from bringing partners closer together it is possible that the modern communication infrastructure emphasises how much they belong to different worlds.

The communication challenge, however, extends far beyond the technical aspect. Often a twinning seeks to bridge two vastly different contexts. As Jim Harries observes: “The more distant the context of communicators, the lower the level of understanding. It is hard to imagine a more distant context than between some Northern and Southern societies.”⁴ Even the language with which they communicate, which might seem to provide a bond of connection, can express the gulf that is set between them: “... the use of foreign languages will always leave the foreigner in a dominant position. It will not (given the vast cultural gap between North and South) be able to accurately express Southern truths or address Southern contexts. It will severely hinder the opportunities for Northerners to learn from Southern contexts – so that as well as dominant they will be ignorant.”⁵ Even the faith which is the basis of the relationship may reveal the great distance which divides the two partners. In connecting with a partner in the Global South, Western partners will find themselves engaging with new and unfamiliar expressions of faith. Philip Jenkins has pointed out that: “Southern Christianity, the Third Church, is not just a transplanted version of the familiar religion of the older Christian states: the New Christendom is no mirror image of the old. It is a truly new and developing entity.”⁶ The possibility of completely misunderstanding one another is a real one.

Without a deep awareness of the extent of the communication challenge it is unlikely that any twinning relationship is going to succeed. Jim Harries offers a starting point: “it would be helpful to consider the church in the South as a mystery, to be approached with humility and wonder, and not a knowing confident assumption of superior knowledge that results in an over-quick assuming of the role of ‘teacher’.”⁷ There is, in fact, a need to enter the twinning with the expectation that it is going to be a transformative experience. Whether or not it is possible to literally learn a new language there is need to be prepared to enter a world of understanding that is wholly different from the familiar one. As we may learn from a Czech proverb – “as often as you learn a new language, you become a new person”.⁸ It is true that a twinning can easily be defeated or frustrated by the issue of communication. Yet where this challenge is met, communication opens up the path to transformation. Extraordinary journeys of personal and communal growth and discovery lie ahead.

The “Love Miles” Dilemma

Twinning thrives on contact and interaction. What better than to arrange exchange visits? These often prove to be the beating heart of a successful twinning arrangement. The aspiration of any church discovering this potential would be to encourage as many exchange visits as possible. Ironically, just as this noble aspiration has begun to take effect widely, a major new ethical consideration has registered itself. Rising environmental awareness has led to the realisation that long-haul flights are among the worst culprits in the production of the carbon emissions which are causing global warming. If we wish to be responsible global citizens we have an obligation to minimize or even eliminate our air travel. For short flights it may be not too problematic to use surface transport instead. For the long-haul flights, on which the exchange visits depend, there is no readily available substitute. This poses a serious ethical dilemma.

As George Monbiot has concluded: “... it has become plain to me that long-distance travel, high speed and the curtailment of climate change are not compatible. *If you fly, you destroy*

other people's lives."⁹ The lives, moreover, which you will destroy first are the lives of the poor who are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Here is an irony: having been awakened, through involvement in a twinning, to the injustices which cause extreme poverty, you find that the flight which you took in order to bring the twinning to life has, in fact, deepened the plight of the poor. Monbiot recognises this dilemma: "The people who are most concerned about the inhabitants of other countries are often those who have travelled widely. Much of the global justice movement consists of people ... whose politics were forged by their experiences abroad.... When you form relationships with people from other nations, you accumulate love miles: the distance between your home and that of the people you love or the people they love.... Who could be surprised to discover that 'ethical' people are in denial about the impacts of flying?"¹⁰ When we talk the language of love we are talking the language of twinning. The more successful a twinning becomes, the more those involved will love one another. The more they love one another, the more they will want to make the long air journey in order to spend time with one another. The more long air journeys they make, the more damage they do to the earth's atmosphere and the more they endanger the lives of the poor and ultimately the continuation of life on earth.

Is there any way out of this Faustian dilemma? First, we might ask whether there are alternatives to air travel. Within a certain range, rail travel is possible and long distance rail links may increase in both quality and quantity as the world responds to climate change. Presently intercontinental travel by any means other than air is not possible without a large investment of time and effort. Will we have to start making that kind of investment? Secondly, we can consider other means of achieving direct communication and building the relationships which are key to the success of a twinning. Live video links, for example, offer the opportunity of interaction without any of the participants having to undertake long-distance travel. In Scotland, the use of this technology to strengthen twinings has been pioneered by the World Without Walls initiative which has provided the equipment, training and networking to enable live interaction by digital means.¹¹ Thirdly, it can be argued that, even admitting that there must be a drastic reduction in long-distance air travel, there could be a limited lifetime allowance for each person to take a small number of flights. In the event, that some form of rationing is introduced, the question would be whether some would be willing to use their allowance for the development of a twinning. Clearly responsible citizens are going to become much more sparing in their use of long-haul flights. It may soon represent a significant sacrifice to spare a major part of our allowance for the sake of a twinning. For there can be little question that it is on the immediacy of direct human encounter that twinings depend for their inspiration. The challenge they now have to face, in view of climate change, is to make a little go a long way.

Inter-Church Aid rather than Mission?

The twinning model is organised around two congregations in different locations forming and sustaining a relationship with one another. It might therefore seem, to recall distinctions made in the debates of the 1950s, that it is a matter of inter-church aid rather than missionary outreach. It might appear to be about an "in-house" church activity, albeit one with wide geographical extent – two churches contributing to one another's development without any focus beyond their internal life. A study of a sample of short-term mission trips undertaken from the USA found that "3.5% of short-term missionaries travel to the least evangelized world ... with 12.5% of short-termers travelling to the somewhat evangelized ... and fully 84% of short-termers going to the 33% of the world which is most evangelized."¹² The twinning model is equally vulnerable to such imbalance, since it is driven by the need to find a "twin" with whom a strong partnership can be forged. The potential weakness here is that its energy can be consumed simply within the family of faith with none left for outreach to those who have yet to hear the gospel of Christ. It might appear to have no impetus to take its energy to the missionary frontier, to the point where faith meets unbelief. Where is the

dynamic, built in to Christian faith, which has impelled the church to reach out to the poor, the needy and to all who have not heard and received the good news of Jesus Christ?

If we are serious about mission we have to meet the challenge of the distinction laid down by Lesslie Newbigin: “While all the activities of the Church have a missionary *dimension*, there are needed specific activities which have the *intention* of crossing the frontier between faith and unbelief – and that frontier is no longer the old geographical one, but runs through every land.”¹³ It must be acknowledged that the danger of a twinning is that it exhausts the outward looking energy of a congregation in a relationship with another church. However, there is evidence that a quite opposite dynamic can be released. The twinning can have a galvanising effect on both the congregations which are involved so that they think and act afresh in regard to mission to the surrounding community. As they challenge and enrich one another in relation to the question of the purpose of the church, an outward-looking impetus can develop. The twinning, moreover, can be developed in a way which is open and inviting to the surrounding community. In some cases, the twinning has provoked within the community a far greater interest in the life and witness of the church than had ever been apparent before. The twinning often does not stop with the church but is adopted by other community institutions, such as schools. Far from necessarily closing the church into its own internal life, a twinning can have the effect of re-igniting the missionary impetus to engage the wider community with the message that Christ is risen.

Successful twinings do not come easily. There are forces working against them which can easily prevail. Yet when the pitfalls are identified, strategies emerge which can ensure that the twinning achieves its transformative purpose. Then its missionary character and value will be beyond all question.

¹¹ Samuel Escobar, “Mission From Everywhere to Everyone: The Home Base in a New Century”, [Hwww.towards2010.org.uk](http://www.towards2010.org.uk)H accessed 26 November 2007.

² John M. Hull, “Mission, Education and Globalisation”, Churches Commission on Mission Annual Conference papers, Durham, Sept 2000.

³ V. S. Azariah, “The Problem of Cooperation between Foreign and Native Workers,” World Missionary Conference, 1910, *The History and Records of the Conference*, Edinburgh & London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier; New York, Chicago and Toronto: Fleming H. Revell, 1910, pp. 306-15 [315].

⁴ Jim Harries, “Mission to South, Words to the North: Reflections on Communication in the Church by a Northerner in the South”, *Exchange: Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research*, Vol. 36 No. 3 (2007), p. 285.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 214.

⁷ Harries, “Mission to South, Words to the North”, p. 287.

⁸ Kenneth Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions 1846-1914* (London: Epworth Press, 1995), p. 107.

⁹ George Monbiot, *Heat: How to Stop the Planet Burning* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), p. 188.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

¹¹ See [Hwww.worldwithoutwalls.org](http://www.worldwithoutwalls.org)H

¹² Robert J. Priest and Joseph Paul Priest, “‘They see everything, and understand nothing’: Short-Term Mission and Service Learning”, *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXVI No. 1 (January 2008), p. 65.

¹³ Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 164.