

Like a Mask Dancing: Partnership in Mission Enters a New Mode

Kenneth R. Ross

“The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place.” Ghanaian proverb

Introduction: from Partnership to Twinning

It was the Whitby meeting of the International Missionary Council, held in 1947, which powerfully gave currency to the concept of “partnership” as a way in which churches could engage together in the missionary task. It was an innovative and inspiring idea to a generation of missionaries who had begun their life’s work with the assumption that it would fall to them and their compatriots to provide leadership to the “daughter churches” which were emerging as a result of the work of the missionary movement. Their closeness to the emerging indigenous leadership ensured that it was, not always but often, highly rewarding for the expatriate missionaries to move to ancillary and supportive roles while able local Christians took up the leadership positions. For the latter it was no less inspiring. Having often grown up in a colonial context and in many cases having been involved in the struggle for political independence, it was a momentous and historic step for them to accept responsibility to lead their churches. In most cases the former missionary leadership and the new indigenous leadership continued to work together in close association for a generation or so. It was a revelation that they could be associated not on a basis of superior and inferior, parent and child, but on a basis of equality and mutuality. Hence the representatives of older and younger churches gathered at Whitby coined the phrase “partnership in obedience” to indicate this new understanding of the relationship in which they stood.¹ The second half of the 20th century saw a one-way understanding of mission give way to one where “mutual relationships were seen to originate in obedience to the living Word of God in Jesus Christ.”²

With the passing of the years, however, partnership began to pose problems. In some cases the partner relationship seemed to have diminishing content. The long-serving missionaries who had built up an intimate knowledge of the local language and culture were replaced, if at all, by mission partners who served for shorter terms on a philosophy of “working themselves out of a job”. Opportunities to build up mutual confidence were limited and the relationship between the two churches gradually became more a matter of cherished history than of living reality. In other cases the relationship continued to exist but was bedevilled by vast and growing disparity in the resources available on either side of the partnership. It was difficult to develop any common programme without lapsing into dependency on the one side and a patronising approach on the other. Many a partnership consultation found itself returning to the question of “the meaning of the partnership” and participants struggled to find a convincing answer. At the same time, a motion to give up on the partnership would be sure to be defeated. Those involved

cherished a sense of common belonging even when uncertain of what it really meant or where it was leading.

Towards the end of the 20th century new dynamics began to emerge in the quest for authentic partnership and these have continued to strengthen in the early years of the 21st century. The communications revolution has made it possible, as never before, for local congregations to link directly with their counterparts overseas. At the same time, a decentralized way of working has quickly gained ground in commerce and culture. In the imagery of Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, it is a change from the spider to the starfish. A spider is organised from the centre – there is a brain which tells the legs what to do. Not so with a starfish. It is a network of cells each with its own autonomy and it functions in a completely decentralized way.³ This is the direction being taken by business. Where once a corporation with a strong HQ would put goods on the market, now E-bay allows buyers and sellers to interact in a totally decentralized way. Where once music was produced by a few large companies and put on the market for sale, now music can be exchanged on the internet through completely decentralized networks. Mission is not immune to this great change. Where once mission enthusiasts started a mission society and developed a strong HQ to run it, now they are more likely to take action themselves and to participate in mission through a decentralized network.

In church terms this has led to a move away from an HQ-led approach to mission towards more of a local-to-local approach. There has been an upsurge of presbytery-to-presbytery and congregation-to-congregation links. In the Church of Scotland, for example, the *Church Without Walls* Report, something of a charter document as the Church entered the 21st century, called on congregations to: “research an area of the world church and establish a personal partnership with a congregation or project”.⁴ In shorthand, these kind of relationships have become known as “twinning”. Rather than depending on a specialist missionary, congregations are taking ownership of particular relationships and developing them through direct involvement. To some extent this is making virtue out of necessity. The life-long missionaries around whom congregations built their global horizons in the 19th and 20th centuries were fast disappearing. If congregations were to continue having an active overseas connection they had to find a new model through which to work. Twinning was an idea whose time had come.

For congregations which have become involved in twinning with counterparts on other continents, it has been a mind-blowing and faith-stretching experience. The Church of Scotland General Assembly of 2007 heard, for example, from members of a congregation from Ruchazie, generally regarded as being among the most deprived areas of the city of Glasgow. They spoke movingly of how their church and community had been affected by a twinning with the congregation in Baula in northern Malawi. They described it as a “life-changing experience” and spoke of how they had come to think of people in Baula as part of their own family. The visit of Malawians to Ruchazie had had a startling effect. People stopped in the streets to greet them. Young people, in particular, struck up a rapport with the visitors. Many more people have come to the church as a result of the Malawi connection, speaking with the

minister and church members about what it has meant to them. The church has gained the attention of the community in a new way. A genuine missionary impact is being made and the church members are clearly excited by the discovery of new dimensions to their faith and new possibilities for their Christian witness.⁵ One Assembly Commissioner, Aaron Stevens, commented that: “The enthusiasm of their reports, and sincerity with which they shared their positive experiences was both moving and convincing. Churches that become involved in twinning benefit from that involvement.”⁶

New Eyes to Read the New Testament

As has happened often before in church history, new circumstances, new questions and new approaches to mission have stimulated a new reading of the Bible. Becoming alert to the possibility and the importance of local congregations relating to one another across wide distances, proves to be a hermeneutical key to unlock a neglected but significant biblical theme. Biblical passages which have been accorded little attention in earlier times now have striking resonance for people engaged in this new mode of partnership in mission. Paul’s letter to the Romans, for example, has been the basis for many sermons which have drawn on its profound doctrinal statements. But how often has attention been paid to the final chapter which is devoted to the greetings which Paul extends to no less than 26 individuals? All were people whom the apostle had met at different points in his many journeys and all were now based in Rome. The links, the friendships, the relationships which bound Paul to these people – these were a big part of his Christian life and experience. As he looked forward to visiting Rome he expressed what the visit would mean to him: “I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.”⁷ (Rom. 15:29) Far from inconsequential add-on, this relatedness, this giving and receiving of hospitality seems to be somewhere close to the core of what it was to profess faith in Jesus Christ.

We can sense from his words how much the relationships with these 26 people meant to Paul. Yet it is not just a matter of one remarkable individual who had a genius for friendship. It seems to speak of the mode in which the early church operated. Besides individuals he mentions 5 households, each of which was the base for a church congregation. The book of Romans witnesses not only to core beliefs but also to a way of life – marked by radical openness, wide connections, and loving relationships across boundaries of distance, language and culture. The congregations found in the New Testament did not operate in isolation. They put much effort into sustaining relationships with one another, even when they were far apart geographically. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, thanked God for his “partnership” with the church in Philippi.⁸ This kind of relatedness, uniting people through faith across wide distances and vastly different contexts, is being re-discovered on a large scale. The possibilities to discover and express the special qualities of church-to-church relationship have expanded out of all recognition. Relating to the church in distant parts of the world and in very different cultures was once the province of the dedicated few. Now it is something in which we all may have a part. Rather than this being an inconsequential add-on, growing

numbers are discovering that this is a core element of what it means to be a Christian.

The Place of Twinning in the Transformative Purpose of God

Should the “missionary experience” metamorphose from something enjoyed by small numbers of people over long periods of time to something enjoyed by large numbers of people over short periods of time, there are sure to be “pros and cons”. The strengths of classical missionary service – deep knowledge of language and culture and cumulative growth in effectiveness – will not be replicated in a short-term experience. On the other hand, the potential effect of a short-term trip should not be underestimated. As Robert Priest and others have argued:

Like pilgrimages, these trips are rituals of intensification, where one temporarily leaves the ordinary, compulsory, workaday life “at home” and experiences an extraordinary, voluntary, sacred experience “away from home” in a liminal space where sacred goals are pursued, physical and spiritual tests are faced, normal structures are dissolved, *communitas* is experienced, and personal transformation occurs. This transformation ideally produces new selves to be reintegrated back into everyday life “at home”, new selves which in turn help to spiritually rejuvenate the churches they come from, and inspire new mission vision at home.⁹

Moreover, the transformative short-term experience may well prove to be the seed-bed from which longer term participation in the mission of Christ will grow. As Ted Ward has commented: “Although in the case of some of these people, at least in the short run, such experiences may be a waste of time and resources of the mission agency, for many of these Western adventurers such overseas junkets are the spark that ignites mission consciousness and awakens a concern for more effective forms of missionary presence.”¹⁰ It need not be a case of *either* short-term *or* long-term but could be a case of the one leading to the other. It may be that the need is for a “mixed economy” where a larger number of short-term participants generate a smaller number of longer-term agents in the missionary enterprise.

Twinning, however, while it may include “short-term mission trips”, potentially represents something much more substantial and enduring. One essential feature of a twinning is that it is primarily about a relationship. Aaron Stevens comments that,

... one of the strongest advantages of the word ‘twin’ [is] the familial aspect. In talking about twins, we acknowledge siblingship, our sharing the same parentage. Furthermore, when talking about twins we describe siblings of equal rank. Some international Church relationships in the past and still today have been characterized by a tone of paternalism, in which the older church exercises a kind of authority over the younger one. At times such a disparity in status between the two parties has been attributed to one’s having been instrumental in the founding of the other. On other occasions, the church from the more ‘civilized’ or ‘progressive’ culture has showed

condescension towards the other one. As the term suggests, there is no room for such attitudes in twinning relationships.¹¹

As with any relationship, to enter a twinning you have to be willing to open yourself up to the other, you have to be prepared to be changed and influenced by the relationship, you need to be ready to embark on an experience of challenge and growth.

This calls for a decisive move away from the inherited model of understanding the “mission field”. The thinking of many is still governed by a 19th century linear model of mission, where it is all about the transmission of something *from here to there*. Willem Saayman has pointed out that: “In such an understanding the ‘sending’ church acts only as starting point and provider of personnel and resources. The ‘sending’ church *in its essential nature*, though, *can be left totally untouched by the process...*” By contrast Saayman proposes that: “the process and progress from church to mission to church should rather be seen as cyclical, and specifically as an ascending, never-ending spiral. From the very beginning, therefore, the progress is not in a straight line *away from the ‘sending’ church to some far-away unreached ‘mission field’*, but rather curving back to it throughout.”¹²

Anyone participating in a twinning must do so with an openness to their own transformation. It is a profound spiritual experience which lies in store. As Andrew Walls writes: “Since none of us can read the Scriptures without cultural blinkers of some sort, the great advantage, the crowning excitement which our own era of Church history has over all others, is the possibility that we may be able to read them together. Never before has the Church looked so much like the great multitude whom no man can number out of every nation and tribe and people and tongue. Never before, therefore has there been so much potentiality for mutual enrichment and self-criticism.”¹³ When people embrace a twinning with this kind of expectation the way is open for all involved to be transformed through a deeper appropriation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

No one should imagine that it will be an easy thing to do. No one should imagine that it will leave them in their “comfort zone”. They need to be ready to have their priorities and lifestyle challenged in ways they never expected. Their faith will be stretched as they learn to understand the gospel from a different perspective. It is, in fact, a great adventure in discipleship. Reflecting on the words of Paul to the Galatians when he thinks of his role in terms of the pains of childbirth, John Taylor once said that “Partnership between Churches in mission means an apostolic concern from one to the other to help one another to present the likeness of Christ more clearly; being in travail for one another until we all are formed in the shape of Christ.”¹⁴ It is that spiritual ambition which is the driving force of a successful twinning relationship.

Conclusion

To adapt a Ghanaian proverb, faith is like a mask dancing – if you want to live it well, you do not stand in one place. Twinning provides the opportunity for

many Christians to stand in a different place, to see the world with different eyes, to hear the gospel with different ears. The potential for spiritual prosperity is vast. Yet there are significant challenges to be met which will be addressed in a companion article to this one. The conclusion stands, however, that partnership in mission is entering a new mode and it is one which is ripe with potential for deepening and broadening Christian witness in our time.

¹ See William Richey Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations: A History of the International Missionary Council and its Nineteenth Century Background* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952) pp. 340-41.

² Birgitta Larsson and Emilio Castro, "From Missions to Mission", in John Briggs, Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Georges Tssetsis, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement Volume 3 1968-2000* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2004), p. 142.

³ Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* (New York: Penguin, 2006), pp. 34-35.

⁴ *Church of Scotland General Assembly 2001, Report of the Special Commission anent Review and Reform* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 2001), p. 36/5.

⁵ Church of Scotland General Assembly 2007, authorized recording of proceedings on 21 May 2007.

⁶ Aaron C. Stevens, "In Fatherlands and Foreign Countries: Congregational Twinning as a Missionary Practice for the 21st Century", unpublished paper, 2007, p. 5.

⁷ Romans 15:29.

⁸ Philippians 1:3-5.

⁹ Robert J. Priest, Terry Dischinger, Steve Rasumussen, C.M. Brown, "Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement", *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXIV, no. 4 (October 2006), pp. 433-34 [431-50].

¹⁰ Ted Ward, "Repositioning Mission Agencies for the Twenty-first Century", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 23/4 (October 1999), p. 150.

¹¹ Stevens, "In Fatherlands and Foreign Countries", p. 5.

¹² Willem Saayman, "'Missionary by its Very Nature'. A Time to Take Stock", *Missionalia*, Vol. 28/1 (April 2000), pp. 19-20.

¹³ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (New York: Orbis, 1997), p. 15.

¹⁴ John V. Taylor, *The Uncancelled Mandate* (London: Church House, 1998), p. 10.