

From Partnership to Inter-Dependence

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Our theme today is the third phrase of Micah 6:8: 'walking humbly with your God'. My wife often points out that men and women who seek to walk humbly with God may sometimes appear insensitive, and even arrogant, in the eyes of others. This is because humble men and women want to please God more than they do others, including their employers and 'donors'; their fear of God trumps their fear of men; and obedience to the word of God is more important to them than protecting status or defending their public reputations.

So, I want to invite all of us to have the courage to 'walk humbly with our God' – to forget about what others may think or say about us, to learn to think 'outside the box' and raise the kind of questions in our churches that few ask about the language we use, including terms such as 'mission', 'partnership' and 'community'.

Churches in the Two-Thirds World are fragmented and deeply divided among themselves, and these divisions are accentuated by foreign interventions in the name of 'global missions'. We are at the receiving end of various initiatives from rich churches in the US, Britain and East Asia. There is little we can do to stop the deluge of glib, obnoxious tele-evangelists, books on 'end-times' and Christian Zionism, alpha courses, courses on the 'purpose-driven church', 'people-group' methodologies, and so on. Popular American preachers and writers are better known in middle-class Indian churches than are Indian Christian writers. African voices are rarely heard in the pulpits of suburban American and European churches, and are even rarer in South Asia or Latin America. But youngsters from white, suburban American churches go routinely on so-called 'mission trips' to Africa. Money and power control our relationships and shape our practices; and given the dominance of American material resources in world mission, these trends will continue, even as the majority of long-term cross-cultural missionaries will be from the Two-Thirds World.

We can have no objection to sending people or money to support Christian ministry in other places. But the important questions to address are: Who takes the initiative in making these decisions? And do those who come from abroad work alongside and even under the leadership of local people? I remember listening to a friend working in rural India, who was being supported by an affluent Singaporean church. He poured out his frustration with the mission board of the church who could only see the medical work that he and his wife are doing as a prelude to 'church-planting'. They had no understanding of the religious and political sensibilities of the situation in rural India, nor were they willing to unlearn the theology of mission they had absorbed from popular American authors.

Not surprisingly, a number of us in the Two-Thirds World are cynical of the language of *partnership* that is increasingly common in evangelical mission agencies and relief & development NGOs. For what it amounts to, in practice, is not a new attitude of mutual listening and collective deliberation, but rather a posture of 'We have a mandate from God; so we have decided what your country needs; we will send the funds and you find the local people to implement the programs.' Thus the language of 'partnership' becomes another guise for neo-colonial paternalism.

Moreover, these foreign-based organizations divert people as well as funds away from locally-initiated projects and ministries which have much lower overheads. But, more importantly, there is no ownership of these foreign programs by local believers let alone by the poor themselves. Local staff are disempowered; they are merely the people who implement the programs conceived and funded by foreigners.

So, despite all the development rhetoric of ‘participation and empowerment of the poor’, this rarely happen- whether in the case of secular international NGOs or Christian NGOs. The agendas are set by well-to-do professionals, not in consultation with the poor. Social transformation is often reduced to setting up programs and managing projects. This is largely because short-term ‘projects’ are easy to fund; long-term investments in equipping people and communities do not attract donors. Have you ever wondered why ‘child sponsorship’ programs are so hugely popular in the US when hardly any grassroots development practitioners encourage them? It is because these are very effective fund-raising strategies.

There is no shortage of Christians in poor nations who have learned the skills necessary to court donors from rich nations. They know how to craft funding proposals for projects that chime with the ‘flavour of the month’ as identified by rich-nation donors. But these may not be what is most important in that particular context at that particular time. That some foreign donors may *want* to be educated does not seem to register on the thinking of many local leaders.

I would personally prefer we drop the term ‘partnership’ altogether because of these skewed power relations. It also reflects the contractual relationships of the corporate world more than Biblical images of the Household of God or the Body of Christ. Both in families and physical bodies, what we find is *interdependence*, not partnerships. In the Church we don’t have ‘donors’ and ‘recipients’ but rather a community of *mutual* learning where people both give to, and receive from, one another.

The language of integral mission sometimes, unwittingly, reinforces our divisions. There are local churches and foreign-initiated evangelical NGOs which take ‘integral mission’ to mean ‘My organization or local congregation has to be doing *everything* – not only providing health care or microenterprise loans but also proclaiming the gospel’; indeed, if evangelism is what distinguishes us as Christians, then if we don’t evangelize and see ‘converts’ our work is not properly ‘integral mission’. This can sometimes lead to manipulative relationships with vulnerable groups that damage the credibility of the entire Church in that nation. In many situations of need, especially where Christianity has been associated with colonialism and paternalism, the people giving practical help are usually not the best ones to be talking about Jesus/God (and especially if they represent the rich world)- unless, of course, they are specifically asked to by the recipients. However well-intentioned, it can be seen as unethical proselytism that provides ammunition to those Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims who are hostile to the Church’s involvement with the poor and with children.

Furthermore, this mindset shows little awareness that each church or organization is part of a much bigger Body of Christ, comprising other local churches and organizations which are also engaging in ministry among the poor in the same locality. Hence there is no attempt to learn what others have been doing in the past, and are doing now, or how they can share

resources as well as receive from others. Surely, the Church of Jesus Christ is all about *inter-dependence*, about different persons with different giftings and different ministries. No single organization can do everything- and to attempt to do so only shatters the unity of the Body of Christ. It leads to needless duplication and competition.

The Micah Network itself is part of a much larger worldwide Church, and no single member should think that it is self-sufficient, that it is 'All up us, and us alone'. Even when it comes to personal evangelism, aren't we all part of a chain of people and events that God normally uses to bring people to faith in Himself? How many of us can look back on our personal story and point to just one person or one event that led us to faith?

The kind of co-operation in the global Body of Christ that would be desirable goes beyond the giving and receiving of money, or the giving or receiving of personnel.

Learning and Practicing Inter-dependence:

(1) A good case can be made, both theologically and historically, that neither local churches nor Christian NGOs are the principal means by which God brings about justice in the world. God ordains the institution of government and doing justice is the fundamental calling of governments. The biblical picture of the ideal king (e.g. Psalm 72) is of one who renders justice to the afflicted and downtrodden. What encouragement, then, do churches, theological colleges and the Micah Network give to those Christians who work *through* governments (and not merely *with* them) as politicians or civil servants, to promote justice?

Moreover, the normal way that a local church influences society is through the work of its members in different secular walks of life. Thus Christian musicians, economists, journalists, filmmakers and teachers have a profound role to play in articulating and communicating a different understanding of human flourishing to the rest of society. It is imperative that such people are taught an integral Gospel and to think in an integral way about their vocations. So often, their work is divorced from bringing justice to the poor, and if and when they do start thinking of 'helping the poor' it is to leave their secular employment and join a Christian relief agency or else to start a poverty program in their church.

Over the past decade, we have seen an increasing number of evangelical/ Pentecostal Christians getting into politics and even advocacy campaigns, but often with little understanding of what the historical Christian tradition has to say on these issues. Christian politicians either are isolated by their local churches or are expected to promote their church's interests rather than the common good. The staff and Board members of many Christian development organizations often speak a secular 'NGO jargon', with little theological undergirding of their work. The result is that they often jump on 'bandwagons' when it comes to social campaigns without exercising spiritual discernment.

Also, churches and NGOs can often be unwitting instruments in the hands of those governments who want to abdicate their responsibility to their poor citizens (and, indeed, the poor elsewhere who are affected by their policies). Governments are increasingly controlled by corporate interests, and they would rather have the churches and NGOs alleviate the social discontent arising from their misplaced priorities. This we should do, but not at the price of silent complicity in those policies.

(2) What is called a 'local church' depends so much on both our ecclesiastical tradition and where we happen to be living. In my part of the world, many so-called 'local churches' are family affairs, or built around authoritarian personalities, or mono-ethnic ghettos. Evangelical churches usually have an individualistic understanding of the Gospel and so do not see the need for working with other churches, let alone with local Christian NGOs that may have considerable experience of working with the poor, How can we talk of 'confronting the powers' if we cannot confront one another in love?

Local Micah Network affiliates must learn to share resources among themselves and also strategize together about what needs to be done in their local or national situations. Some may even decide to close down their operations and encourage their staff to work with other groups, whether Christian or secular. Some MN members enter countries without adequate consultation with local MN-affiliates, show little interest in understanding the local political, historical and ecclesiastical contexts, and start throwing money at local churches and individuals to begin 'projects' that they will resource and supervise. Accountability is solely to the donors in the parent country, and not to the national church. If local leaders do not protest, it is either because (a) they are cowed and feel that nothing they say will change things; or (b) they don't see a problem because they themselves have an individualistic faith and do not understand the centrality of Christian unity to the witness of the Church.

Christians coming into a new situation have a moral obligation to make the effort of researching which local churches, organizations or individuals are already working (with their own limited resources) on something that they feel especially burdened about. Ask them what they need to do their work better; and what, if anything, you can do to help. But please don't turn up in the South with a pot of money and invite people to use it for *your* projects. You will find plenty of takers. But it will scuttle the integrity and witness of the Church.

(3) In multi-faith contexts, it is important to motivate and train MN members to collaborate not only with governmental agencies but also social organizations of other faith-traditions at the grassroots level, while maintaining and articulating distinctive Christian contributions in ways that attract rather than alienate others, as far as possible. I would also like to see more evangelical Christians joining international secular NGOs such as Amnesty, the Red Cross, Oxfam or Friends of the Earth, and raising questions within these organizations about their presuppositions and worldviews even as they work with others on common concerns.

It is strange that the issue of 'evangelism' only surfaces in the Micah Network when discussing our relationships with the poor, and not with those in governments and other organizations with which we collaborate. This common 'blind spot' may be because the image of 'proclamation' that is propagated is that of preaching at a passive audience who cannot answer us back! The separation of 'dialogue' and 'evangelism' has been disastrous for the Christian witness in Asia.

(4) Those of us who live in centres of political and financial power can, through simple neighbourly actions- writing a letter to a national newspaper, buying shares in a corporation so that one can attend the annual general meeting and raise questions about that corporation's global practices, organizing a peaceful public protest, and so on- have a real influence on what is happening elsewhere in the world. The actions would express our solidarity with

those we call our 'family' in the world Church. It is troubling that mission has been *reduced* to what we (the relatively well-off) do in other cultures and places, and does not seem to apply to what we can do for others from *where we are*. In our interconnected world, what we do- or fail to do- in our backyard can have ramifications, for good or ill, in remote places.

Let me give two examples of where Christians in rich nations can help us in poor countries like Sri Lanka:

(a) While claiming to extend democracy and the rule of law around the world, the US and the EU are turning a blind eye to a financial system that is operating largely outside any framework of law and governance. With the use of tax havens and other elements of a 'shadow' financial network, vast sums of illicit money are being transferred daily throughout the global economy virtually undetected. This money is generated by three kinds of activities: bribery and theft; organized crime; and corporate accounting activities such as tax evasion and falsified pricing in international trade. Through the combination of low or no taxes, little financial reporting requirements, well-defended secrecy and lax regulation, tax havens have grown to the point where they control an estimated \$21 trillion in assets. That is the recent estimate by the Tax Justice Network- it amounts to more than the combined GDPs of the US and Japan. Switzerland, the Cayman Islands, the Bahamas, Lichtenstein and the Isle of Jersey have long been notorious in this regard, but banks in Singapore and Dubai have the lowest levels of transparency. Compare the \$50 to \$80 billion a year that flows as overseas development 'aid' to poor countries with the \$500 billion to \$800 billion that the World Bank estimates is being sent illegally out of these same poor countries. For every \$1 given across the table, the West has been receiving \$10 back under the table.ⁱ

'This outflow of illicit money,' write Raymond Baker and Eva Joly, 'is the most damaging economic condition in the developing world. It drains hard currency reserves, increases inflation, reduces tax collection, widens income gaps, forestalls investment, stifles competition, and undercuts free trade. Until development experts account for total capital going into and coming out of recipient countries, aid will continue to be offset by a much larger counter-force of fleeing capital.'ⁱⁱ

So, the best way you here in Switzerland can help us is to mount a public campaign to raise awareness about the role your banks play in this criminal financial system, and to help us get back from these banks the billions of dollars that have been siphoned out of our countries by unscrupulous politicians, arms-dealers and corrupt businessmen.

(b) Whenever we challenge the Sri Lankan regime's human rights record and call for investigations into its alleged involvement in war crimes, the response we receive from the pro-government media is either outright denial or the protest, 'If the Americans and Israelis are never held accountable, why are we?' So, while we still seek impartial investigations, it is hard not to agree with the regime's anger at the hypocrisy and double standards being practised. It is only poor and weak nations that are subject to such criminal investigations. President Obama not only refused to seek the prosecution of senior members of the Bush administration and its lawyers for breaking international agreements on torture that the US government had ratified; but he has also legitimised extrajudicial killings in countries with which the US is not at war, and has expanded the use of unmanned drones in heavily civilian areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

All this undermines the efforts of human rights activists and churches to hold accountable governments in poor countries like Sri Lanka. The silence of American evangelical media- and even justice organizations- on torture and war crimes committed by US forces is a source of deep pain and bafflement to us. I wonder how many Christians in the US write to their political representatives or their national newspapers on such issues? If American Christians can exert pressure on their government too to submit to international treaties and human rights norms it would certainly make talk of ‘mission partnerships’ with Christians in the South meaningful. And, unlike us, they do not run any risk of imprisonment or assassination!

Concluding Remarks

One of the memorable moments during the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 was the heartfelt cry of V. S. Azariah, a young, newly ordained Anglican from South India, who went on to become the first indigenous Anglican Bishop in India. Speaking to the overwhelmingly Western missionaries present, Azariah said, ‘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!’ⁱⁱⁱ

Real friendships are based on equality and make us vulnerable to the other. They involve taking a genuine interest in what the other is thinking and experiencing, and re-aligning one’s priorities for the sake of the other.

Azariah’s plea was made in the context of the struggle against racism and colonial paternalism. The American church historian Dana Robert observes that we can also take it as expressing hope for change. Azariah believed in cross-cultural friendship because he knew its power firsthand. Personal friendships were crucial to the way Christianity spread across cultures in the twentieth century. Quite often missionary failures could be traced to the lack of such friendships with local people. And European and American missionaries who befriended Asian or African church leaders, and learned from them, quickly became passionate advocates for Asian and African Christianity back in their home churches, enabling the voices of these leaders to be heard in the centres of power. They thus challenged the ethnocentric perspectives of so much Western theologizing and church life.

Does the Micah Network have a future? Only if we intentionally cultivate the kind of relationships that enable us to speak truthfully in love to one another. We cannot expect transparency on the part of banks and governments if we are not transparent among ourselves and in the wider Body of Christ. At present, this rarely happens among MN leaders within countries let alone across nations and continents. Perhaps we need to cut back on the number of ‘partners’ we have in a country simply so that we can have more *friends*. And we need to think beyond ‘programs’ and ‘projects’ to genuine face-to-face dialogues of various kinds in which we are *all* transformed: transformed from ‘development specialists’ to being men and women who walk humbly with the God who loves justice and builds true community.

ⁱ Raymond Baker and Eva Joly, 'Illicit Money: Can It Be Stopped?', *New York Review of Books*, Dec 3-16 2009

ⁱⁱ Baker and Joly, p.62

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 125