

The Bicultural Facilitator **A Crucial Role in Church-to-Church Partnerships**

by Tom Correll

International “sister church” relationships and church-driven partnerships are two of the significant innovations in cross-cultural missions of the 21st century.

These partnerships have much going for them—not the least of which is the practical outliving of the biblical teaching regarding the unity of the body of Christ as prayed for by Jesus (see John 17). Such partnerships allow for the sharing of resources between Western and non-Western churches in pursuit of a common vision, and they enable the formation of deep and significant personal relationships between believers of diverse ethnic and cultural heritage.

That’s the good news. The bad news is that effective partnerships are very difficult to establish. For example, how do you manage the great disparity of income between a Third-World and First-World church in such a manner that does not create dependency on an ongoing subsidy from off shore? How do you identify a church in the developing world that can stand eye-to-eye with a Western church and tell them that their ministry model which is so effective in North America won’t work in Africa? Who can sensitize extroverted, enthusiastic, and generous North Americans to the nuances of culture in Latin America or India?

Enter what I call the *Bicultural Facilitator* (BCF). The BCF is the person or persons equally at home in either culture. They may be Westerners, typically missionaries, who have lived and served on the field for years. Or they may be nationals who studied and lived in the West. Mission agencies and missionaries are, quite obviously, high on the list of potential BCFs.

How can missions people advance God’s Kingdom and bring glory to God in the role of a BCF? I will make a few suggestions, but first let me establish the setting. It was several years back that I went to the Great Lakes Region of Africa as the guest of an evangelical community development ministry. We met with a number of church partners in multiple cities. We witnessed African congregations who were sacrificially ministering to their communities. It was a great trip. However, on that trip I made the “mistake” of taking along

business cards. Though I didn’t pass out a lot of cards, I did give them to a number of the national leaders with whom we met. I thought nothing special of this until, shortly after my return to the US, I received about four requests for Wooddale Church to “adopt” either them or their ministry.

In this particular situation, a significant ministry partnership between a North American mega-church and a village African church of 200 wasn’t a wise idea, so I simply referred the requestor to the missionaries on the ground. However, I could have easily responded with a \$5,000 gift and adopted a “sister church” in Africa. Unfortunately, Americans in their generosity, compassion, and naïveté are prone to do dumb things, and there are many internationals willing and able to help them. So how does the BCF help avoid the potential train wreck described above?

CONVERSION

Conversion is at the top of the list because there continue to be many who really doubt the value of church-to-church partnerships. Many professionals fear “amateurization” regardless of the profession. This is, unfortunately, true of missions professionals as well. There remain elements of the “pay, pray, and get out of the way” mindset within the missions community. I’m encouraged that this is on the decline, but it still exists. Yes, amateurs are messy; yes, they make mistakes. But when you look at the giftedness of the broader community of God’s people, the possibilities are breathtaking. When you add to this the potential relational and worldview-growing benefits in the lives of both Western and non-Western believers, the upside greatly exceeds the downside. I believe that international church-to-church partnerships are a God-given means for His glory. My encouragement is to embrace them, support them, and serve them rather than fight them.

PROVIDE INTRODUCTIONS

Establishing church-to-church partnerships is a bit like a junior high school dance. The few popular kids are on the floor dancing while all the rest are lined up—boys along one wall and girls along the other—waiting for someone to take the initiative or to introduce them to each other. What all too often

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happens is that the English-speaking church in the major city, or the one attended by missionaries, or the one whose articulate, charismatic pastor has traveled the USA gets the partnership opportunities while a lesser known church that may be more qualified and open to a more Kingdom-focused partnership has none. (I am aware of Third World churches that have “partnerships” with multiple Western mega-churches simply because their pastors have been able to make the right connections in the US.) Who is more qualified to make “introductions” than the missionary or missions agency?

But it’s not enough just to make the introduction; there is a need for a “matchmaker”—for someone who can connect churches that will work well together. For example, two churches serving university students would be a natural connection. A church with 2,000 members might quickly overwhelm a church of 200 whereas a church of 300 could work well with them.

Or if a non-Western church—or group of churches—were committed to community development, the BCF could introduce them to a potential sister church with business entrepreneurs and/or persons of wealth who would be willing to fund start-up business ventures. Partnership works best when there are shared values and experiences and when each partner has the ability to contribute somewhat equally.

HELP MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

Whether it is a marriage, a business joint venture, or a church-to-church partnership, the greatest cause of failure is unmet expectations. The wife expects her husband to pick up his socks; the marketing partner expects the product to be production ready. International church-to-church partnerships are equally susceptible to a crisis of expectation. The African churches who approached me wanted us to fund their building—and pay their pastor. We want to fund multiple churches in projects of outreach or service to a community that they cannot afford to do but not fund “inside” programs.

Third World churches too frequently expect that a Western partner will solve all their financial needs. Westerners are disappointed to discover that their method of evangelism or worship is met with “under-whelming” enthusiasm—or that their local hosts are self conscious about their English skills.

The BCF can help both partners by a) helping all participating churches set realistic expectations for the partnership and b) providing good background information on the churches—maybe even going so far as to arrange for preliminary meetings and/or projects that allow representatives of the churches to build solid relationships and explore possible partnership projects before making longer “commitments.”

TEACH / COACH / MENTOR

In some ways, once two or more churches have decided to partner, the role of the BCF has only begun. BCFs can do

much to enhance the partnership by providing orientation for church members on both “sides of the ocean.” (I would go so far as to state that the introducing BCF should make orientation a requirement for arranging the partnership.)

Unfortunately, we all have stereotypes of persons from other cultures. We don’t know the nuances of other cultures in areas such as dress, interaction between individuals of the opposite sex, giving (or not giving) of gifts—to say nothing of language. Some churches have excellent cross-cultural orientation programs for lay people, but many have little or none.

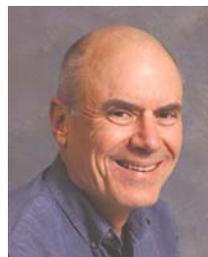
Along this same line, it has been our experience that a missionary facilitator is a welcome addition to a joint ministry activity. He/She serves as an introducer and translator of both language and culture and can also fill the role of on-the-fly interpreter of culture and bridge builder.

An added benefit to such activity is that the North American church people get to see their missionary in action and get a much better understanding of the realities of mission life. We’ve seen a week of intensive time with a missionary be

the “tipping point” of God’s call into career missions. We have tried to make this not just a work time but also a bit of a vacation for our missionaries. In virtually every case our missionaries have seen these as positive as opposed to negative times.

Finally, there is the issue of end-of-day or end-of-trip reflection. Missionaries can be wonderful in facilitating sharing times and times of reflection at the end of a day of joint ministry or at the end of a visit by a short-term team. They have the unique advantage of being able to see the ministry through the eyes of those in both cultures. They can help facilitate two-way conversation and aid in “translating” a comment, question, or suggestion. They can also do follow-up with nationals after the excitement and emotion of the initial trip is over. These can be the basis for enhancing the relationship and focusing the ministry. As relationships between leaders of partner churches strengthens and the confidence of being “understood” builds on both sides, there will be less need for the BCF.

Bottom Line: Church-to-church partnerships can be a wonderful means of releasing the energy, creativity, and resources of God’s people to accomplish ministry that would not be done otherwise. Yet, as Phill Butler of visionSynergy is famous for saying, “Partnerships are messy.” My challenge to missions professionals is to “put on your Kingdom hat,” embrace and help facilitate such partnerships.



Tom Correll is missions pastor of Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, MN, and a veteran of a number of effective international partnerships.

Missionaries and missionary agencies can be crucial in making these partnerships work because they understand both cultures—and have relationships on both sides.

The Facilitator's Perspective



Sara Hewitt, a Wooddale missionary with over 20 years of ministry experience has served in Bulgaria for more than a decade. Tom's enthusiastic endorsement of BCFs is built on Wooddale's experience with high quality facilitators like Sara. We interviewed her for her perspective.

IP: What attracted you to the role of facilitator of Wooddale's sister-church partnerships in Bulgaria?

Sara: Actually, I can't say that I was "attracted" to the role—almost the opposite. I had just started to attend one of the churches Wooddale wanted to partner with, and I knew that the partnership itself would complicate my relationships there. But I saw that there was potential for real benefit, and I also knew from prior experience that miscommunication could not only defeat the partnership but also have a bad effect on long-term ministry.

In other settings I had seen money wasted and feelings hurt, and I wanted to avoid that. And I felt it was important that Bulgarian leaders be treated with respect, given an opportunity to share their ideas, and be known as real people, not just "the nationals." To accomplish that I realized would require someone well acquainted on both sides.

IP: What does it take to be a good facilitator?

Sara: You must be deeply acculturated in the host culture and understand the language. For me, it is crucial to understand the Bulgarian worldview and be able to read the unspoken dynamics of how people are feeling in the middle of a meeting.

IP: What makes the facilitator's role tough?

Sara: You run the risk of both sides sometimes feeling betrayed. For example, you must be honest with the Western church if they have hurt others' feelings or been insensitive about how they have dealt with financial issues. At the same time, you must help the national leaders understand the visitors. In other contexts I have heard Bulgarians complain that they felt manipulated by American sponsors. But on some occasions, the problem was not so much that the Americans were inflexible as that the Bulgarians did not understand that they could say no or offer an alternative.

Money is such a loaded issue! As Americans—being from an affluent country and comparatively wealthy churches, having

access to lots of resources (the very *possibility* of traveling internationally)—we just don't understand how deeply it has formed our worldview.

IP: How has facilitating the partnership affected your relationship to Wooddale?

Sara: The partnership has been an opportunity for me to meet fellow Wooddalers and for them to get to know me. They get to see that career missionaries aren't just something our pastors talk about during Worldwide Week.

IP: Are there prerequisites for success?

Sara: Trust. I could not facilitate Wooddale's partnerships if Tom Correll didn't trust my judgment and was second guessing me or doing end runs all the time. We have been friends for many years. And for the most part, the Bulgarians I work with have trusted me and my motives and my ability to understand Americans!

Balancing different cultural understandings of trust is a challenge in itself. The best description I can give is that the Bulgarian conception of trust is based on proven track record and loyalty, while Americans think much more in terms of total transparency, brutal honesty. Those different values right there set the stage for misunderstanding.

It is so important to me that the Western partners listen to and honor the ideas of the Bulgarian leaders. That's really my greatest motivation for facilitating. There are so many terrific people here, but because of the cultural differences, Westerners might never realize how wonderful, how bright, how committed they are if I didn't connect them at the personal level.

What are your thoughts about the role of bicultural facilitators? What questions would you like to pose about how this person would function or how to identify the best candidate? If you are a facilitator, do you have additional suggestions? The Catalyst website includes an **Interchange Postings Forum** for your reactions at www.catalystservices.org/forum/. We look forward to a stimulating **interchange** of ideas there!

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