

THE BLESSINGS OF INTERNATIONAL MISSION PARTNERSHIPS

As people of God we are called to both ministry and mission. Ministry is what we do to build up the life of the church, the body of Christ. Mission is what we do to build up the life of the world. Both tasks are essential and interdependent. Faithful ministry in the church makes fruitful mission possible. Fruitful mission in the world makes faithful ministry necessary. Mission begins at the church door and extends to **the ends of the earth**. We are sent out into the world, near and far, individually and corporately, as agents of God's grace and mercy.

In 1991, and in light of this great commission, Pittsburgh Presbytery and the Synod of Blanytyre (Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian) formed a mission partnership that has been renewed every three years. Since then more than 600 Pittsburghers and western Pennsylvanians have traveled to Malawi for different lengths of time and in various capacities of service. Nearly the same number of Malawians have been hosted in Pittsburgh.

When this partnership began, we had little idea of the personal and corporate blessings that would accrue to each partner nor the profound impact it would have on participating congregations. Neither had we anticipated the ecclesiastical and theological gifts that would come to each partner. Looking back we can identify five blessings experienced by individuals, congregations, and presbyteries through international mission partnerships.

First, international partnerships teach faith obedience. When forming these partnerships there is no one-size fits all descriptive map to follow. Each partner is required to **"go out not knowing"** (Hebrews 11:8). That's the way it often is in matters of faith. Obedience to the gospel often involves leaving the safe and known and trusting God with the risky and unknown. So it was with Jesus' disciples. When called to follow him they had little or no idea what following would ultimately mean. So it was in forming this partnership. We, too, were invited to take one step at a time into unfamiliar territory, trusting that the Lord our God would go before us. In retrospect this experience of going out not knowing happened many times over. From the Partnership's start we underestimated how many projects would be birthed and how many people's lives would be touched and renewed. We discovered, learned, and grew together, but only as we stepped out in faith.

Second, international partnerships enable participating congregations and their members to connect with the church universal. Partnering enables people to participate in the one world-wide church of Jesus Christ and to discover and experience a fellowship far more encompassing than any one congregation or presbytery can provide. In the letter to the Ephesians we read: *"There is one body, and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **one God and Father of all, who is above all, through all, and in all**"* (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Former president of the World Council of Churches, D.T. Niles, maintained that any branch of the church that is not open to hearing and receiving the truth of God from the larger universal church is destined to become a reflection of and often a prisoner to the cultural values in which it is found.

A man I knew in a small Ohio town once described a church near where he lived that flew a large American flag over its front door as a *"good old American church."* Ultimately, there is no such thing. The body of Christ is universal or it is nothing. Partnerships are a reminder of this essential truth and enable the participants to avoid this parochial pitfall. An African proverb says: *"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."* Mission partnerships enable the church to go far.

Third, international partnerships allow each partner to share a greater abundance of gifts God freely offers. This promise is made clear early on in St. Paul's letter to the Romans: *"I long to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you"* -- then the author pauses, backs up, corrects himself, and writes: *"or rather that we may be **mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine**"* (Romans 1:11-12).

No congregation or branch of the church has all the gifts of faith. To thrive, congregations and branches of Christ's church are dependent on and graced by the gifts that come from beyond themselves. That's why Christians gather in congregations and why Presbyterian congregations gather in presbyteries. That's also why we must partner with churches worldwide. Doing so enables the varieties of God's gifts to be received and shared. We are only the richer for the gifts that have come to us from other national and world-wide expressions of Christ's body. Malawian Christians have generously shared with us their gifts of joyous music, grace-filled hospitality, sacrificial generosity, costly faith, and courageous witness in the face of stifling poverty, rampant disease, and untimely death. Because each can become more than either can be alone, in mission partnerships one plus one always equals more than two.

Fourth, international partnerships transform lives for the good. In his second letter, John writes: *"Although I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink; instead I hope to come to you and talk with you face to face, so that **our joy may be complete**"* (2 John 12). Scores of western Pennsylvanians, including students from several colleges, have had their lives transformed by face-to-face encounters, new friendships, the influence of vibrant African

worship, and have returned knowing the Lord our God in new and powerful ways. It is our hope the Malawians have had their lives spiritually enriched through the hospitality and friendships offered to them here.

Initially, and naively so, I anticipated that we American Presbyterians would likely contribute more to our partners than we would receive. While not negating the good our visits have contributed to our Malawian hosts, the truth is quite different. Most of us return realizing we have received far more than we have given.

Fifth, international partnerships provide foretastes of the Kingdom of Heaven. In the Revelation of St. John we read: *"... the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and **God himself will be with them**"* (Revelation 21:3). True to that vision and promise there have been moments in the Partnership when God's presence has become especially real. One such occurrence happened in the home of Silas Ncozana (the Partnership's co-founder). Following a common meal, Malawians and Americans spontaneously circled the table with arms linked and sang together: *"We are many parts, we are all one body, and the gifts we have we were given to share. May the Spirit of love, make us one in deed. One, the love that we share; one, our hope in despair; one, the cross that we bear"* (Marty Haugen). I remember it as a foretaste moment.

Another occurrence happened in Pittsburgh. Partnership hosts were gathered in a church hall waiting to greet their Malawian guests. As our partners arrived and entered the room there were loud shouts of recognition and welcome, boisterous singing, and affectionate hugs. For several minutes pandemonium reigned. One of our hosts was accompanied by her three year-old daughter. In the midst of the joyous confusion and noise, she tugged on her mother's sleeve and shouted: *"Mommy, is this heaven? Mommy, is this heaven?"* No, it wasn't heaven, but it was a taste of heaven.

Partnering means people meeting together, listening to each other, learning from each other, and growing in love for one another as they experience and celebrate, if even briefly, the good news of the gospel.

The degree to which each congregational partner experiences these benefits varies widely, but is greatly enhanced by the committed involvement and support of the pastor and church session.

The Pittsburgh mission story continues and has now evolved into a three-way partnership that includes the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of South Sudan. As this new tripartite entity makes its way toward fulfilling its purpose and potential, it calls for a fresh vision and renewed commitment.

What can we hope for and expect from this expanded partnership? Our presbytery's call to mission will move toward an even broader engagement in the global church. More people and congregations will have the opportunity to embrace new understandings and new involvements in the ministry and mission of Christ's one universal church. We can look forward to that with profound thanksgivings.

William M. "Bill" Paul
Pittsburgh Presbytery, H.R.
pghpauls@zoominternet.net
721 Norman Drive
Cranberry Twp., PA 16066
724-591-5264