

“You Need the Challenge of a Cross-Cultural Partnership”

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Let me present three scenarios that may or may not sound familiar.

Scene 1: A number of years ago I got a telephone call from a church in Malawi. The conversation went something like this:

“Abusa, do you know people at _____ church in such-and-such town?”

“Yes, I know a few people there. Why do you ask?”

“They are building a building for us, and there are now some problems, and we need help sorting them out.”

“A building? What kind of building?” I had been to that community in Malawi, and I was surprised by their response. I continued, “Tell me, do you need such a building in your community?”

The Malawians replied, “No, not really. It will be nice, though, and the Muslims have all started to admire it because we have well-wishers in the USA.”

“Did you tell your friends in the USA that you didn’t need that building?”

Well, we did not. But it’s almost done. All that is remaining is a certain part of the roof.”

I braced myself, but asked the question: “Well, what do you want me to do about this building you’re not sure that you need?”

“The problem is the plans that they have sent. They are very complicated drawings and our local craftsmen can’t understand them. It appears as though they are calling for us to use materials that we do not have, and a type of construction we do not know how to do, and that will lead to maintenance that we cannot afford. We need you to get them to change the plans and tell us how to finish **their** building. They have stopped answering our calls and are withholding any money until we can prove that we are doing things according to plan. Will you fix this, Abusa?”

Scene #2: I got a call from a young woman who had been deeply touched by a lifetime of witness in a missional congregation in the USA and several international mission experiences. At the time, she was in a long-term mission placement in a developing nation. She was also in tears.

“Pastor Dave, don’t know what to do. I am here, but I am not doing what they said I would be doing.”

“What’s going on?”, I replied.

“The ministry said that they needed someone to do _____. I know that I can do that; I’ve done that in other places in the US and in other countries; I am ready to grow here. But the problem is that the local ministry leader does not trust me. I found out that he didn’t want to have any Americans here, but was afraid that the funding he gets from America would stop if he said ‘no’. I tried to talk with the leadership of the board that runs this organization, but they said that I was not accountable to them, but to the onsite leader – the man who doesn’t want me. He is spreading lies about me to the local workers; he is not letting me do anything that I’m trained to do, and all I do is sit in

my room and wonder why I am wasting my life here. I'm afraid to talk with anyone at home about it, because they all think that I am changing the world and doing all kinds of great ministry here. Plus, they gave me money to come. I'm embarrassed to think that their money is being wasted, and I am frustrated that my own gifts and education are being wasted, and I am saddened because I know that the things I've been trained to do could make a real difference in this community."

Scene #3: Each year, our church takes a trip to the Mexican border region in Texas, where we work with the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and local partners on housing rehab and construction for those affected by natural disasters. For several years, we had the same local site coordinator. As we got to know this man, he invited us to his small church. Our team shared meals, laughter, etc. with this man and his community. One day he came to me and said,

"Pastor Dave, is there anyone that you know in Pittsburgh who needs help with their house or anything?"

"Oh, sure... There are homes in my own neighborhood that need help. Why do you ask?"

He continued: "We are working with the young people in our community – you've seen these kids the past few years; they are gifted, smart, energetic... but the problem is that people up north keep sending help and mission teams down here."

I was taken aback, and said, "Wait! Are we causing you a problem? We came to help?"

"No, the problem is that for years and years and years, all that the local Hispanic culture is doing is receiving. We are teaching our kids that they don't have anything to offer; that they don't ever need to give anything because the richer churches from up north will come and provide everything. We are teaching our young people that they don't have any worth. I would like to take a group of kids to the north and have them give something to someone else. I would like them to grow in service, and from what I've seen, your congregation is a place where people will come and let these kids serve somehow. If you let us come to your neighborhood, we can become givers, not just receivers."

Chances are that you've probably not had those exact things happen to you... but you probably have seen dozens of occasions like that. Helping is good. But sometimes, helping can hurt – it can hurt everyone. And I know that there is a book entitled ***When Helping Hurts*** (Steve Corbett, et al, Moody Press 2014), and from everything I can tell, that is a sensational book. I also know that I have not read it, and so I don't want anything that I say to be construed as my reaction to that piece of work. When the organizers of this conference sent me the early draft of the schedule, this session was called "When Helping Hurts" and I asked to change it because I don't want to sully that book's reputation with my thoughts. I was asked to offer some personal reflections on partnership and development and what it means for us to do ministry together in a broken world.

To that end, this presentation has been titled "You Need the Challenge of a Cross-cultural Partnership". Let's unpack that for a moment.

Partnership. The Body of Christ is only effective as it works in and through partnership. Paul states this explicitly in I Corinthians 12: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” When everything is functioning as it should, anything that any of us do we do because we are seeking the health of the entire body. We – especially the church in North America – have to understand that in every way that matters, we are equals in the eyes of God. We can only stand together in partnership and humility, therefore, and seek to offer and receive encouragement, admonition, assistance, inspiration, and more in our day to day lives. We are together. Everyone has something to give. Everyone needs something. Any congregation or group of Christians that believes anything different believes less than the complete Gospel.

Cross-Cultural. I know that there are specific fields of study which seek to pinpoint the meaning of this term, and that you can go to some of the finest universities in the world and spend years and years defining it, but the reality is that any partnership with another person or entity is, in some way, cross-cultural. When I have a couple of 22 year olds who come into my study and want to talk about getting married, one of the first conversations we need to have is about the cultures in which they’ve grown up – they may both be white, or attended the same school, or whatever, but each of them has absorbed a culture – a world-view – in which “everybody in my house knows” that the mother pays the bills in a family or the father cuts the grass or that men can’t be trusted or that a woman’s first job is to get pregnant or... That’s the “culture” with which each person is familiar. The problem is, of course, that “everybody knows” different things – which is why pre-marital conversations are such good ideas. And if that’s true in a relationship wherein two people who’ve known each other intimately for a few years are coming together, how much more true is it in a relationship where two churches are coming together across town or across the globe?

As we develop into partnership, we are obliged to give some real thought to what we know, and how we know it, and how that knowledge affects the way that we work.

For example, some years ago I was privileged to participate in a short-term pastoral exchange wherein a Malawian colleague and his wife came to our congregation and walked with me for six weeks. Some time later, my family and I moved to Malawi for the summer and did the same thing. One of the first thing that my friend the Rev. Ralph M’nensa noticed about me was that I was always wearing t-shirts around my neighborhood. As time passed, he came to see that I could do that because I’d been in this neighborhood a long time; our congregation is fairly small, and on this side of town, everyone knows me, what I do, and where I live. Finding Pastor Dave is not a problem.

When we went to Malawi, however, Ralph and I wore clerical collars everywhere. You see, Ralph was the minister in charge of three congregations and another thirteen different prayer houses/worship sites. In the Malawian church, pastors typically stay in a particular call for only three to five years before rotating to a new parish. Ralph was the only clergy serving approximately 10,000 people, very few of whom had ever met him personally. If he didn’t wear the collar, he would be less able to be of service to those who needed, but did not know him.

Another example of cultural awareness has to do with the simple concept of asking a friend to help with a project. In the USA, if I need you to help me unload the truck, I send you a text, or I call you and say, "Hey, I've got a load of firewood and wonder if you can come over and help me get this done." In the context of our Malawian partners, however, the "ask" is typically much more involved. I stop by your house and you make me tea. During the first cup of tea, we talk about our families: how is everyone getting along, etc. During the second cup I might mention how it sure is getting cold and hasn't it been a great summer, etc. On the third cup of tea, I excuse myself to go unload the truckload of firewood and ask if you are free to come join me. Sometimes the American custom of "getting right down to business" seems hurried and pressure-filled to our Malawian friends, where as we can be frustrated by the fact that "everything takes so long in Africa".

None of the above is innately right or wrong; we simply have to realize that we all start someplace different.

There may and will be places where we come to believe that one or the other partner is, in fact, mistaken in theology or practice, but we can only address those things in the knowledge that we are not all the same and that we have different starting points. And that leads to the fact that every Cross-Cultural Partnership is a...

Challenge. Any relationship is hard work. The marriage that we referenced earlier? If it succeeds, it will be because both partners keep working even through tough times. The young person stuck in a foreign country with a boss who mistreats her? The only way through that kind of pain is to name the difficulty and trust in God's healing.

I'd like to go out on a limb here and suggest that if you are in a partnership that you perceive to be "effortless", I bet that your partner feels otherwise. If you think that there are no difficulties, no challenges, no changes that need to be made... perhaps your partner is absorbing a great deal of that to which you are ignorant. We have to always be learning, always be willing to grow, always be willing to stand corrected, always be willing to adapt our own theology or practice if God reveals through partnership that the situation could be other.

The key to all of this is the Christian virtue of humility. Remember the passage in Philippians 2, where we are told to "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus..." Good marriages, good friendships, and good mission work are not about demanding your rights; nor about being treated like a servant or a dog. It's about discerning where God is calling us together and figuring out a way to get there.

Having said that, let me offer a brief word about money, which can be absolutely **cancerous** to partnership, even with the best of intentions.

I became personally aware of this while serving on the pastoral exchange in Malawian parish that was unaffiliated with the partnership in the late 1990's. As I visited churches that had partners and churches that did not, it was easy to see a spirit of rivalry and envy developing as the congregations in Pittsburgh were engaging in unregulated giving to local African congregations. One church would get, unexpected and unannounced, a financial windfall equivalent to the yearly salary of five or eight full

time workers. Another would have a manse built – all without the input or oversight of leadership bodies on either side of the partnership. I saw then that one of the things that money can do is turn “partners” into “sponsors” or “donors” or “well-wishers”. There’s nothing wrong with being any of those things. Philanthropy is a worthy endeavor and a satisfying hobby. And if you want any of those things, great! But just don’t call it partnership, because it’s not.

I am thrilled by the fact that recently five young people from my own small congregation have approached me and asked me if I could take them to Africa. When I asked them why they wanted to go, I was blessed by their response. They said that they had seen changes in me as I have encountered our partners in Malawi and South Sudan, and they saw that I act different than a lot of the people that they know in America. They told me, “We know that being in a place like this can really effect us, and we know we need to be changed.” I said that if we do it right, a trip to visit our partners would really screw them up as they tried to fit in with the consumerist, materialistic, acquisitive culture that is so dominant in the 21st century USA and they said, “Exactly! That’s what we need.” If you participate in a partnership trip (either by traveling or by hosting) and it does not change you somehow, you are doing it wrong.

A related point comes from one of the early criticisms of the partnership between Blantyre Synod and Pittsburgh Presbytery. There were some who condemned Americans who visited Malawi as nothing more than do-gooders who would rather help poor Africans than deal with racial/social justice in Allegheny County. Such critique had best not be true; if we travel well in the spirit of partnership, we will undoubtedly be equipped to be better voices, more sensitive ears, more generous spirits in our own homes. The way that we shop, the places that we live, the manner in which we educate our children, the choices we make about food – all of these are up for reflection, evaluation, and improvement as we learn more about the world from those whose experience is different.

You Need. As I have indicated, sponsors and donors and well-wishers are hobbyists. Philanthropy is a nice way to spend your time, and do something good with your money. But none of those things are essential, and none of them are partnership.

I get it: travel is a blast! Our churches and universities are filled with opportunities for people of every age to go somewhere, get a cool shirt, learn some characters or phrases that will make a great tattoo, or give us the opportunity to toss off phrases like “when I was in Peru...” But travel is not partnership. One of the dangers of the church is where we are training generation of wealthy young people in practice of “voluntourism”. That happens when we invite someone to put their regular life “on hold” and then go and spend a couple of weeks building a medical clinic or a school. We find ourselves holding a starving orphan for an awesome social media post that shows the world how a)amazing and b)sensitive we are, and when the trip is over we come back to resume our regular lives.

Partnership is something we each need because we need to grow. We need to learn, and re-learn, and re-re-learn, that none of us is complete and no one has all the answers, all the resources, all the wisdom. We do partnership because it is essential to the living out of the Gospel in its fullness.

One of the best pieces of writing that is a part of the PCUSA tradition is the passage from our Book of Order containing the “Great Ends of the Church. The sixth and final “great end of the church” is “the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world”. We become more Christlike, more heavenly, when we move together in partnership. I don’t go to Malawi or South Sudan because I am a nice guy; I go (and receive wisdom from) there because I am incomplete. I am less than Christ-like as I move through my daily life, and I need the constant reminders that my sisters and brothers from the rest of the world bring to me.

I can’t think of anything on which I work harder, at least in certain times of the year, than International Partnership. I don’t do it because I think that Blantyre Synod or the South Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church need Dave Carver to save them; I do it because I know that I need them to save me. I need the challenge of a cross-cultural partnership to remind me of who, and whose, I am, and of my responsibilities in the world that in which God has placed me.