



Why Partnership? Partners as Mentors

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In these days of neoliberal economics, where invisible, impersonal market forces instantly determine prices and decree feast or famine for millions around the globe, some people would say that a missiology of partnership is far too cumbersome. Working in partnership takes too much time; rather than "doing mission" immediately, partnership forces us to involve ourselves in the difficult, laborious, and sometimes messy task of being in relationship: first understanding, then valuing, and then trusting the insights of our neighbor. "We appreciated getting to know folks from the local church," summarized one work team, "but our group could have gotten the health clinic built in four days if we didn't have to wait for them to contribute the bricks."

Partnership makes us dependent on another member of the Body of Christ—their schedules, their priorities, their organizational weak points, their values. In the international context of PC(USA) mission relationships, partnership often pushes us into relationship with poor and oppressed members of the body of Christ—and that is a feeling I do not enjoy. Embracing my insurance policies, second helpings at mealtime, and comfortable home, I prefer not to be reminded that many of my partners (read: "brothers and sisters") are experiencing, even today, the sharp ache of hunger, another night of homelessness, or the long wait for refugee processing. And yet this intentional binding of ourselves to particular members of the body of Christ is proving to be a vehicle of God's saving grace to our church—a church considered one of the wealthiest in the world partnered with some of the materially poorest partners, a church of declining membership partnered with some of the fastest growing churches in the world, a church rent by theological divisions partnered with some churches that have discovered remarkable unity around issues of mission, service, liberation, and evangelization.

To work in partnership is to bind oneself to persons who may know much more than we do about what it means to share sacrificially, to rest fully in God's provision, and to persevere in faith through suffering. On a personal note, I think it's fair to say that I've very rarely been "out-given" in my relationship with partner Christians in the "Two-Thirds World." I am almost

always given the best seat, the first choice, the biggest say, and the largest portion. On more than one occasion I have eaten a feast prepared with the last chicken or measure of corn flour that the hosting community had left. And while I often calculate exactly how much I should put in my local church's offering plate (so as not to create unhealthy "dependency" on my contribution), I am daily confronted with extremely poor Christians who, like the widow of Luke 21:1ff, give out of their own poverty with what seems to me to be sheer reckless abandon. This sense of abandonment into God's hands is not a natural, but rather, a learned response.

Two weeks ago, I took a trip to Ayacucho, a region in Peru's Andean highlands characterized by extreme poverty, 42 percent illiteracy, and deep and festering wounds from the 15 years of the political violence that raged between the Peruvian government and the Shining Path Liberation Movement . In the town of Callqui (Quechua for rocky, unproductive soil), I had a long and intense evening conversation with a group of mothers, many of them single or widowed, who are deeply concerned about helping their children live a more abundant life than they themselves have experienced.

I am learning not to seek these kinds of meetings unless I am prepared for deep and painful personal transformation. Perhaps it was in order not to hear fully the pain that these women had experienced from the years of dehumanizing poverty at the hands of both government soldiers and terrorists that I busied my mind with the details of development planning—what a quality children's education or water well project might look like, how much it would cost, which donor agencies we might contact for support, etc. As the meeting ended late that night, an older woman with long braids who had slipped out at the end of the meeting came up to me with tears in her tired eyes: "Thank you for coming," she said simply, and gave me a carefully wrapped package. A local friend later explained to me that Ana's husband had been murdered 12 years ago when Peruvian government troops, acting on an erroneous tip-off, arrived suddenly during a worship service of the Callqui Presbyterian Church and rounded up and shot seven men. They were accused of terrorism, but no charges were made or proven. No questions were asked. Ana's husband, a farmer and long-time Presbyterian elder, was among those executed. She now makes her living by embroidering and selling three or four white cotton tablecloths each month. Ana's gift to us was a beautiful white tablecloth with the words "His Love Makes Us Whole" embroidered on it in bright red, blue, and yellow thread. And though her gift represented perhaps a fourth of her monthly income, she arose from a late night meeting and walked all the way home to bring to me a gift from the heart. A token of gratitude for the past and hope for the future. I later learned that Ana has been a pillar of support in that grieving community, organizing the widows, encouraging single mothers, even

cajoling the Presbyterian session into action (!) to help the children of the rocky, yet now productive, soil.

Ana represents to me a kind of person that I have met often on my own path of discipleship with Jesus Christ. A person who knows what really matters in this incredibly complex, yet remarkable simple world of ours and can give out of her own poverty because all she is giving is love, which miraculously multiplies when given freely. Ana has learned, as a more faithful follower of Calvin than perhaps I will ever be, to rest fully in her faith in God's providence and provision. She knows what it means to persevere in her faith, even when human wisdom can offer no reason to continue to believe.

Perhaps Ana is one of the reasons that brought me to work in Peru—because by God's grace, I have become aware of the hole in my own soul that is being filled daily by God's love and forgiveness and grace extended to me through the ministry of persons living in extreme poverty of possessions but extreme wealth of the spirit. Persons whose love, together with Christ's, makes me whole. Persons I am privileged to consider as partners on this road toward personal and societal transformation.