

Two for a Tango:

The delicate relationship between Church and Mission

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This paper focuses on the relationship between Church and Mission Agencies. It will only look at some aspects of that relationship, and mostly as a personal reflection based on more than 20 years of first-hand experience as a partner in the tango between Church and Mission.

I believe the two parties in the tango are in need of each other, but there are certain inherent areas of tension at the interface. The fact that I will focus on the interface between Church and Mission Agencies and its frictions, means inevitably that I paint a one-sided picture of the tango; this is hard to avoid. When I take my car to the garage because I have a problem, I am not going to list all the things that work well in my car, but I come quickly to the point and list the problems. In order not to end in a mire of problems, I will in the end of this paper also offer some balm that may lessen the friction.

1 Whose Dream?

In 1985 I began dreaming of moving to the 'Mission Field' to serve in this part of the world. Three years later, I bought my ticket and landed, in July 1988. The years of preparation were years of dreaming: 'What shall we do in this country.'

The mission agency that I was related to, gave me a list of possible job openings. As far as I remember, all of those jobs were with Para-Church organizations. These were all respectable organizations and all the jobs that were offered were meaningful and important.

I accepted the job of research worker in one of those organizations, but between the moment I was accepted for that job and the time I landed, the job description had been so radically changed that I had to decline. No problem really, because I had a good Christian friend, with a Para-Church Sunday school ministry, and he needed some help to start a publishing house and to publish a Sunday School curriculum for children. I had my dreams of being involved in the daily work of that organization, but I soon found out that he did not need me for that. He had other dreams, so I had to change my course again.

I had my dreams before I left my own country, and I had my dreams after landing. My mission agency did its best to prepare me, but did I listen? It took me some years before I began to wonder whether my ideas were maybe not so relevant for the actual situation in my land of service. The concept that the local Churches should play a role in shaping my dreams of how to serve was certainly never part of my dreams, even though my mission agency definitely wanted me to grasp the need of aligning myself with the local Church.

I had begun my dreams for the course of my ministry in my own country, in my own Church, in my own culture. It is predictable that this resulted in a rather Western individualist approach, and a dream that reflected my own Church background as well. This seems to be a predictable pattern, and I have come across so many interesting examples of this. I remember this 19 years old – rather young - blond European girl. She had a great dream. She wanted to come for relating to Muslim teenagers, in order to create a Church of those young people by using drama and mime. I also remember this old and highly regarded denomination in my country that wanted to change its denominational alliances in the Middle East. They asked me whether I could help them find Churches with a theology that supports Israel, so that they could begin to pour their personnel and money into those Churches.

It is very hard, maybe impossible, for denominations that send mission workers abroad, mission agencies, and individual missionaries, not to dream their own dreams, ones that are informed by their own cultures, and the theologies that are formed in the context of those cultures. This is an amazingly interesting aspect of friction between missionaries and the receiving Churches. Theological colleges in the Western World, denominations in Latin America and Asia, local Churches in the Europe, they all create missionaries with dreams that are perfectly aligned with these European, American and Asian colleges and cultures, and with the Church life that fits into those cultures. But those dreams are arguably, per definition, ill aligned with what the Churches in the Arab World perceive to be their missiological agendas.

2 Missionaries and Ecumenism

Of Jesus Christ we read that he 'gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.' (Eph. 3.11-13a, ESV) Leadership in the Kingdom for God exists for helping the Church, the Body of Jesus Christ, 'to attain unity of faith.'

Most protestant missionaries have an evangelical background. I do not think I need to argue the fact that they usually come with a rather limited ecumenical understanding of the Christian faith. This is, I believe, both a cultural and a theological problem. The cultural individualism of the modern world makes an ecumenical theology hard to comprehend for people of such background – and I include myself in this. 'What is all

this fuss about Church unity, if I feel happy in my own congregation?’

Our individualism is so pervasive. In our own societies we are habitual Church-hoppers. If there is something in a Church that I do not like, I will search for another Church, and if that other Church does not like me, I will start my own. This is not an attitude that supports ecumenism.

Our individualism translates into our total understanding of the Bible. When I became a Christian, I was told to read the Bible as a love letter of God to me personally. It took me a few decades before I began to see that most of the writings in the Bible are addressed to the whole congregation of God’s people – as one body- and not to me as an individual. The Bible as a love letter to me individually creates a spiritual understanding of the Christian faith where the focus is on me and on my relationship with God. The Holy Word, itself, focuses on the Church as the body of Christ, as the expression of Jesus Christ and his love.

In the community, the koinonia, of the Church, Christ is presented to the world. In this community, division is unacceptable. So mission and the unity of the Church are inseparable. Our Lord Christ prayed for his followers in John 17:23, ‘...that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me.’

This communal view of the Church did not come naturally to this Western gentleman. Hence these concepts, though solidly Biblical, were not part of my theological framework. It was all about my testimony, my relationship with God, my ministry.

When we speak of the unity of the Church, we must not exclude the ancient Churches. It took me a while before I began to appreciate the ancient Churches of the Arab World. The average perspective that new missionaries have of those Churches is that they are either dead as a doornail, or idol worshippers. The idea that the Lord Jesus Christ expresses himself in congregations that are very different from my evangelical home Church was a tough nut to crack for me, and it is a problem for almost every new missionary who arrives. Let me quote one respected leader in mission in the Arab World who underlined this issue. He wrote to me two weeks ago:

About Catholic, Orthodox, and liberal Churches, [...] some are idolatrous, inasmuch as their loyalty to a denomination or religious tradition is greater than their loyalty to the Kingdom of God. But the [...] communities [I work with] are based on the Bible and seek to comply with it in theology and practice, and they succeed about as well as Bible-based Churches anywhere else.

I cannot accept the idea that it is somehow enough to ask that small local Baptist Church around the corner for its views of our work; I cannot accept that we do not get input from the Maronite Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Coptic-Orthodox Church, the Episcopal Church, and the Roman Catholic Church, in our plans and work as foreign Christian workers.

3 Church Planters

But what happens often? Missionaries feel more at home in the spirituality of the team of their mission agency than in the Churches of the Arab countries where they serve. Instead of becoming part, in one way or another, of Church life in this land, we behave as outsiders to the Churches, especially to the historic Churches, and even to the major Protestant Churches. That makes it very hard to learn to appreciate those Churches as valid and true expressions of the Body of our Lord Christ.

The existing teams of missionaries have a strong impact on newcomers and they also play a major role in replicating their behavior in newcomers. There is a strong subculture of missionaries who teach one another – molding the views of each person in the group – and this often happens totally separate from the local Church.

For many mission agencies, Church planting is the keyword. We see individuals and groups who negate the realities of existent Churches, and who with enthusiasm decide to start their own ‘Church’. When they are able to get a good group of people together, it is clear that they are mostly stealing sheep. A very small number of these ‘church plants’ also get a few Muslims in their orbit. The idea that the Churches of in the lands where we serve should have some say in all this, does not seem to be a concept that these Church planters have embraced.

These missionaries are usually strongly supported by their home Churches. Those Churches love the idea that one of their people has started a new Church in the Arab World. Never mind the realities of sheep stealing and whether there is any need for yet another small group. But, if you are from a Church in the USA or Europe or Korea, where this is seen as perfectly normal, we really face a problem. I have grave doubts about the validity to begin a Church anywhere in my own country without consultation with and strong support of other Churches in the area. But to come as a cultural outsider to Lebanon, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan or Yemen and to then do as I please should be strongly resisted, I believe.

But do not blame those individual missionaries too much for this behavior. They simply implement what they have seen and learned as basic Christianity in the Church and the culture where they grew up. Does this not suggest that these Churches we come from have an ecclesiology and a missiology that should be revisited?

The pressures of some home Churches on their missionaries can be enormous, especially if they come from societies where SMART goals with measurable successes are important. Perform fast, start projects, begin bible study meetings, report about good numbers of participants, then funding will continue. If not, come home. We all know of the problem of the newsletters that must be sent to the home Church. I wonder why so few missionaries are prepared to show their newsletters to their colleagues.

4 Tango with the local Church

But there are also many mission agencies with a very high view of local Churches in the Arab World, that endeavor to steer their personnel into a more ecumenical approach to mission. Some organizations speak about cooperating with national Churches, or serving national Churches, or partnering with national Churches. I do appreciate this a lot, but I continue to have many questions.

What do we mean by cooperation and by partnership? Using these terms suggests that we, as a Para-Church organization, or as an individual missionary, can be in partnership with the national Churches of our lands of service. Can denominations partner with Para-Church organizations? Does partnership not assume equality? Are we not enormously presumptuous by saying to the Churches of Lebanon, or Jordan, or Egypt that we are in partnership with them, or that we cooperate with them? If we use the term partnership, does this not entail a level of accountability to one another that in practice hardly exists?

The fact that I ask these questions is one thing, but what do the Arab Churches actually think of the terminology of how we relate? What terms would they want? How would they want to see the interface between Church and Mission?

And what does it mean that we speak of serving in partnership with the Church? Which Church? The little Baptist Church around the corner, where maybe 35 people congregate weekly? Or do we mean that we have an agreement with the Maronite or the Coptic-Orthodox Church on a national basis?

My experience, and I have seen this is lot, is that mission agencies or their personnel often handpick a local congregation where the missionary has some access to leadership, and then systems of co-dependence are created. I do not want to question the motives of those involved. But I also see that such relationship does not automatically mean that the missionary allows the wisdom of the local Church to influence his or her agenda. It does mean the mission agency is satisfied, it creates much content for newsletters, the sending Church is satisfied with the work and the impact of the missionary they support, and the missionary is part of a Church community that creates an environment in which the missionary can do his work. I think that as missionaries we must be very critical of ourselves.

I believe foreign Christians can play very positive roles in Church in the Arab World; they show, for instance, that Christians in Morocco, Egypt, Iraq, Oman, are not forgotten by the rest of the world. They can symbolize the meaning of Christian ecumenical relations. They may also have fields of expertise that are less developed in the churches in their lands of service. They can bring experience from other cultures that can help those Churches to think outside the box. They can prophetically challenge those Churches to change their course, if that is deemed needed. But I want to underline, they can only play this role as participants, insiders, in the Christian

community. I can mention many other potentially beneficial results of the presence of ecumenically minded missionaries in the Mission Field. But what do the Churches of that country really need and want from expatriate Christians? Ideally? And when we ask them about the performance of missionaries in their midst, do we get honest answers?

We must not close our eyes to the fact that Churches often like to have some missionaries around because of other sorts of needs than what the missionary considers his or her primary reason for service in such church. I think, for instance, of the fundraising needs of Churches. A missionary is often seen as an easy way to access money sources. Having missionaries involved in Church can sometimes create image for a pastor. They also mean cheap labor for some Churches. If you need a secretary who is fluent in English, do not pay a decent salary for a graduate from the American University of Beirut (AUB), but have a missionary.

Some Churches – even denominations – use missionaries as the conduit for relationship building with denominations or mission agencies. I have seen how, on this basis, people have been appointed in teaching roles in certain institutes who should never have been appointed, but the sending agency or the denomination had to be pleased, because accepting their personnel kept the money source open.

Am I too negative now? I would hope so. But even if all this is true, I can fully understand why Arab Churches, when they meet a missionary, think mostly of what they can get out of that relationship. How often do missionaries stay long enough to make a serious investment in a worthwhile relationship for the local Church? No wonder churches often gravitate to tangible goals, like money, when they see a missionary. We see these expats come and go. They often remind me of the yellow sticky paper: very easy to attach, very easy to take off again, and they cost almost nothing.

5 Sticky Paper

With that image I like to proceed to some final ideas. Let me offer you a handful of sticky tapes with ideas that may help us in greasing the areas of friction in the relationship. Based on my earlier comments, I have some suggestion for all parties involved...

5.1 Arab Churches:

- Have a long term strategic view of what your personnel needs are – what are your own goals, and what sort of people do you need? Why do you need a foreigner?
- Be critical of yourself. Do not take people as they offer themselves if you do not already have a job opening for that sort of foreign personnel.
- Offer them a salary similar to what local personnel in the same positions would get. This creates clear lines of authority and it also shows the missionary that he is valued.

- Give them a formal contract, preferably with a work permit. Make sure you can use them 40 hours per week.
- Never use missionaries for image reasons or for relating to their sending Agencies or Denominations.

5.2. Sending Churches:

- Enter into real and meaningful ecumenical relationships with Churches in countries where your missionaries are received.
- Do away with the concept of duplicating yourself in mission and accept the idea that missionaries serve existing local Churches other than your own.
- Make sure that your missionaries are not put under pressure to fulfill the goals of the Sending Church – but those of the receiving Church.
- Accept that missiology for Lebanon, or Yemen, is defined by the receiving Church, not by the sending Church.
- Look seriously into the issue of ecclesiology and not just from a (post) modern viewpoint.

5.3 Mission Agencies:

- We need an ecclesiology that is biblical and in line with historic Christianity.
- Theologically define what we mean by cooperation and partnership.
- Think contextually; what do the Arab Churches in your country need and want? Do not allow the Sending Church to define the agenda.
- Imprint on missionaries that mission and ecumenism are inherently linked.
- Ensure that the existing local missionaries teach newcomers good habits and do not allow the local ‘team’ of missionaries to be the major place of worship for the missionaries.
- Lay our cards on the table – what is the agenda of the agency? What do local Churches think about this?
- Are we prepared to allow Churches in our Arab lands that are different from our own to inform us about what we should be doing?
- Do not use Churches for being a handy platform. This is bad for Mission and bad for those Churches.