

**GLOBAL CONNECTIONS: GROWING PEOPLE CONFERENCE
HIGH LEIGH CONFERENCE CENTRE
18-20 FEBRUARY 2002**

MUTUAL CARE

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(The relationship between mission partners and the Christians who live in the locality)

In this paper we will be looking at the relationship between the mission partners and the Christians who live in the locality. How have they related in the past? How should they relate in the 21st century? And how can they provide practical and spiritual support for each other in the work of the Kingdom?

In the past this relationship has been fraught with problems, but I believe there is a vision and a New Testament pattern here, which COULD transform the way we work with those from different cultural backgrounds. If we could see this happen it would be a wonderful witness to the power of God to break down barriers and bring greater health to the Body of Christ around the world.

But before we look at this vision, I'll tell you something about my own experience in this area.

MY OWN EXPERIENCE OF MUTUAL CARE

I was very fortunate to work in a place where mutual care worked well. I was a member of staff at Hebron School in south India for 17 years and I can look back and name several Indian men and women who were an example to me of godly Christian living and who had a real impact on my spiritual life and growth during time. Through their preaching and their deep knowledge of God, I was challenged in my own life, and would have gone to any of them for help and prayer in a time of trouble.

By way of background –Hebron was a very British school in a bustling Indian town. It was founded by British missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century for the education of missionary children, and for many decades it continued its British style and character (caps and blazers and a Boy Scout flavour!) and recruited all its teachers and boarding staff from the West. In those days, the only Indian staff were those who did the cooking, cleaning and menial work.

As Hebron became more international during the 1970s, and 1980s, and pupils of many nationalities were added to the community, the school began to recruit Indian teachers and house parents to join the staff. This was an important step and opened opportunities for friendship and fellowship in living and working together,

The same thing was happening in the local church. In the 1950's and 1960's, the Western missionaries were still running the churches and automatically assumed leadership roles. But as the numbers of missionaries slowly decreased, and loosened their grip on church life, mature Indian Christians assumed their rightful place and are now running the churches and doing the work.

As a result, I was blessed and built up by Indian leaders and by fellowship with mature and godly men and women in the church.

AN EMBARRASSING HISTORY

But when you look back at mission work in a country like India, you can see that attitudes on the part of Western Christians have been not just old-fashioned, but sometimes paternalistic, arrogant and blatantly racist. Western mission partners have often arrived in a developing country assuming their innate superiority, not just in terms of their education and professional qualifications, but in terms of their spirituality and holiness.

We like to think that we have moved on from that era, but I suspect that these attitudes still lurk deep within our hearts. I have also discovered in my work as a counsellor to Christians in training that racial discrimination is alive and well in the Christian church throughout the world and is an evil we must confront.

Why do Westerners expect to have a prominent role in the local church? Is it because they are used to being leaders of churches, house groups and departments. Or is it that they assume that the local Christians are inferior in some way or not up to the job? It is all too easy for fresh new mission partners to feel that they have come to help the poor and needy in various ways and not to realise how patronising it feels to those who are on the receiving end of their ministrations, and the “ordinary” Christians with whom they worship.

SPIRITUAL NOURISHMENT FOR THE MISSION PARTNERS

In the past, this assumption of superiority also led to the belief that white mission partners should get most of their spiritual, pastoral and psychological support from the home country in the West. This may take the form of prayer, books, tapes of “good preachers”, magazines and regular visits home in order to get “topped-up” spiritually. This package of support is felt to be the only one, which is culturally appropriate. Is there an underlying assumption that this package of support, especially the spiritual bit, is surely better than anything which exists in the host country?

I think we have to repent of these racist and patronising attitudes and begin to think differently about the whole matter.

Lets look at the local church in relation to the mission partners:

WHAT DOES THE LOCAL CHURCH HAVE TO OFFER?

A Dynamic Faith

In many parts of the world, Christians have been converted from pagan or animistic religions and the contrast between their former life and their life in Christ is dramatic. Converts have suffered for their faith, - they may have lost families, jobs and security.

As a result their faith is strong and they are tough and courageous people. Converts like these are often passionate evangelists and soul winners and their enthusiasm is a challenge and stimulus. Compared with the “softness” of Christianity in the West, this is not just a healthy corrective, but a strong medicine which we all need.

Real Discipleship

Christians in these cultures usually have a simpler life-style than their Western counterparts. Not only do they live on a fraction of the money supplied to a mission partner, but the climate and the tradition will often encourage a simple style of house and an uncluttered environment. Hospitality and attention to people is often more important in their culture than the accumulation of possessions.

Because of this, many of them live more closely to the model and teaching of Jesus, living day to day and trust God to supply their needs. This aspect of discipleship brings its own reward in terms of spiritual maturity and effectiveness.

Faithful and Ongoing Service

Local Christians are physically rooted in their communities and most of them will be there for the rest of their lives, in contrast to the mission partners who can fly home for a family wedding or “good” medical treatment. Jackie Pullinger talks about this in one of her books.

“Ah Ping could really talk when he got warmed up, and today he was going to say what most of them really felt. “You Westerners” he continued, “you come here to tell us about Jesus. You can stay for a year or two, and your conscience will feel good, and then you can go away. Your Jesus will call you to other work back home. It’s true some of you can raise a lot of money for us underprivileged people, but you’ll still be living in your nice houses with refrigerators and we’ll still be living in your nice houses with your refrigerators and we’ll be living here. What you are doing really has nothing to do with us. You’ll go home anyway sooner or later.” (Chasing the Dragon).

Hospitality and Practical Love

In terms of more practical support, local Christians are in an ideal situation to provide hospitality and friendship. This need not involve elaborate meals or expensive arrangements but simply offering friendship and the sharing of lives. Ideally, the mission partner can confide in, and pray with local friends, study the Bible and receive spiritual help, and in turn give the same to others. The home becomes a place where the joys and sorrows of life are shared.

FUNCTIONING AS THE BODY OF CHRIST

However, there is more to being the Body of Christ than being friends and sharing meals together. In Ephesians 4 Paul speaks about the challenges involved in being organically linked together with our fellow church members.

We have to recognise first of all that God has given gifts to all his people in order to prepare them for service and to build up the body of Christ (v.11). This means that all members of the body are important and are to be respected. And that there WILL be tensions as we grapple together over sound doctrine (v.14) and there WILL sometimes be disagreements and confrontations and the need to speak the truth in love (v.15). There will be difficult relationships and power struggles but we must keep at it because it will result in growth and maturity.

“By speaking the truth in love we must grow up in every way into Christ who is the Head. Under his control all the different parts of the body fit together and the whole body is held together by every join with which it is provided. So when each part

works as it should the whole body grows and builds itself up through love.” (Good News Bible).

TIPS FOR SENDING AGENTS

How can we help to bring this vision into being? Perhaps we can look at things in a slightly different way.

- 1) See your mission partners as potential members of the Body of Christ, which is already in existence in the locality. We are not sending a pioneer in a Godless place where he will blaze a trail of glory by stopping to minister to the unfortunate down trodden heathen. God has been there all the time and Christ has been patiently building His Church there without our help. Your person will be a new addition to it.
- 2) Encourage your mission partners to see the local Christians as their brothers and sisters in Christ, equal in status and gift and worthy of honour, respect and genuine friendship.
- 3) How about making contact with the local Christians during the process of recruitment and preparation. How about writing or emailing them and explain that there is someone who wants to come and join the work and ask them what they think about it? Do we consult with others in these matters; do we only consult with the Westerners in the area or do we just go ahead anyway?

A letter like this might read as follows:

Dear.....

Greetings from the Body of Christ inI understand that you are one of the leaders of the church inand I trust that God is blessing you all as you work for Him.

We have a young doctor in our organisation who wants to come and work in the River of Life Hospital near you in the town of He is a fine Christian and wants to bring his wife and family for three years in order to help set up a special unit for children's diseases.

He would like to join a local fellowship while he is three. I wonder if you could help us by welcoming this family in the Lord's name and showing them love and friendship? We will be helping through prayer and finance of course, and we would very much like to work with you in other ways. We also hope that this family will be able to contribute to the life of your church and be a blessing to you, as well as receiving fellowship. I am wondering if we could be partners together in this work?

I look forward to hearing from you.

This is just an example of how we might do things differently in the future. There IS spiritual food and spiritual drink available for the mission partners. There are rich friendships and love and support available for every member of the body of Christ, possibly right on their doorstep. It's just that we may have been looking in the wrong direction.