



Ecumenical Direct Partnership Relations: aims, possibilities and tasks from an Indian / Asian perspective

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I. Introduction

I take this opportunity to thank EKHN for its initiative in organising this review process and also for giving me this opportunity to present my views on partnership relationship.

A partnership is a relationship between individuals or groups of people in which the partners

have mutual respect, and close cooperation. They share common concerns, goals and responsibilities. A partnership is a union of common purposes where both parties share the loss and benefits, joy and pain, success and failure. Furthermore, a partnership leads the concerned partners into an understanding relationship in which lot of learning takes place.

In the context of the Church, a partnership relation exists for the purpose of face-to-face mutual support and strengthening of mission in the partner's own church. Mutuality being the most important factor in a partnership relationship it is absolutely necessary for the partner churches to be on the same level of 'give and take' It is therefore important for the partners to clearly understand the basis and purpose of their partnership and to know each other's expectations with absolute frankness. In order to build a strong and healthy partnership relation, efforts must be made to involve people at all levels of the community ie. youth, women, lay people and clergy and not limiting it simply to the church leadership.

II. Aims of Partnership

Partnership is built on common aims and objectives set jointly by the partners. They ought to be in agreement with the expectations. Unless conceptual clarity regarding the partner's expectations is achieved the partnership may run into danger. For example, if receiving funds is the only expectation of a partner church, the relationship would be valued on the basis of the amounts of funds received. The partners, then, can never become companions.

Therefore, a partnership relationship should neither begin with a funding project nor develop into a project-oriented relationship. In a north-south partnership the people of the south will never feel equal unless they are able to give something to the people in the north. Dignity comes with one's ability to give.

The following aims of partnership relationship may be considered.

II.1. Deeper Understanding

The partner can not enter into a caring and sharing relationship without a deeper understanding of each other and the context in which they live. Every church has its own identity and operates in a particular fashion in response to a given context. The diversities are to be celebrated and commonalities explored.

Exchange of information and partnership visits will certainly enhance one's knowledge about the partner's culture, beliefs and practices.

II.2. Learning

A lot of good learning can take place in a partnership relationship. Different partners possess varied experience and therefore have expertise related to their activities. Knowledge gained through experience in form of experiments research and initiatives by one partner may be shared with the other to be appropriately modified and used in the later's church. For positive and objective learning it is necessary that the partner sheds away all prejudices and looks to the situation of the companion with open eyes, mind and heart.

II.3. Joint Action in Issues of Common Concern

The partners may have concern for issues that are common to both. Issues such as globalisation, violence, terrorism, religious fundamentalism, gender sensitivity inter-faith initiatives and environmental concerns are just a few examples. As issues affecting the people are no longer limited geographical boundaries, common action plan may be drawn by both the partners for joint action as an expression of solidarity to achieve greater impact on their witness and mission

II.4. Resources Sharing

A caring relationship is a sharing relationship. The partners can express their love and concern for each other's edification through sharing of resources which may be financial, human, experiential, expertise or spiritual. Identification of resources and the needs is very important. Use of a partner's resources demands a high degree of transparency, accountability and honesty. The question should be, 'what can I give' rather than 'what can I receive'.

Emphasis should be laid on exchange of leadership resources and other training materials and mutual training of leadership.

Apart from short exchange visits efforts should be made to exchange personnel for a longer duration (at least 3 to 6 months).

Exchange of Ecumenical experience is another important area of sharing. The growing unity within the partnership relationship should promote wider Christian unity.

III. Possibilities

Partnership relationships are dynamic in nature and therefore know no limits. However, constant efforts should be made through a process of review and planning to explore new areas of partnership engagements. The ring of fellowship should constantly be enlarged to welcome new member churches with similar aims and objectives.

III.1. Intra-Church Partnership

It is generally observed that lot of interest is shown in developing partnership relationship at macro or inter-national level. While this is being pursued attempt should be made to develop companionship at micro level within the same country where the partners would have lot more in common. It is sad that the Indian partners have to come to Germany to meet each other.

III.2. Ecumenical Delegation

The Church to be united an uniting is the need of the Christian community world wide. While some churches are more open to cooperation with other denominations many are not. Many of our church structures are efficient mechanisms for self-preservation and seldom promote ecumenical relationship at a deeper level. At a time when we are placing so much emphasis an inter-faith dialogue and unity among the people of all faiths how much more should we strive to bring unity among the churches.

Will it be possible for partnership delegations to include members from other denominations with whom a partner has close working relationship. This might open new possibilities for cooperation for the Church the delegation visits. I wonder if an African or Indonesian delegate can be chosen to join the Germans during their visit to India and vice versa. This will help the partnership relationship to go beyond financial transactions.

III.3. Exposure to Conflict Situation

Lack of correct information and supply of inaccurate or wrong information about a conflict situation in a partner's country causes separation and further alienation of the people. The partners need to take certain amount of calculated risk to visit areas of conflict to interact with the grass root and assess the actual situation so that they can understand various aspects of conflicts. This will help them to understand the problems and to discuss possible solutions. They can then work to bring awareness about the conflict among the people of their own Church and raise group s for prayers and support.

IV. Tasks

The attempt of the Protestant Church in Hessen and Nassau to evaluate the partnership programme along with their partners is to be highly appreciated. As part of this process, efforts may be made to find out the present involvement and contribution of the people who have participated in the partnership visits in the past.

Secondly, publicity and promotional materials such as brochures, photo albums, documentary films highlighting needs, potentials and challenges may be made available to the congregations to educate them about the partnership programme.

Thirdly, issues of common concern among the partners may be identified and themes be chosen to be discussed at all levels of church life to develop understanding and common action plan

V. Conclusion

Partnership relationship is a beautiful gift God has given to his Church. As good stewards we need to nurture and develop this gift in a manner that the people of partner communities mature into bonds of unfailing companionship. In this partnership journey, optimism, hope, and our faith in God will cause miracles to happen. Together we stand, divided we fall.

May God bless our journey together!