



Partnership: the aims, chances and tasks from African perspective

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I. A Definition of partnership:

Partnership today means different things for different people, depending on the one using it.

However, the Collins Dictionary defines Partnership as "contractual relationship between one or more persons carrying on a joint business venture with a view to making profit, each incurring liability for losses and the right to share in profit."

Direct Partnership relationship make concrete the experience of faith in Jesus Christ between churches or congregations in different countries and continents. It expresses a willingness to create new ways of expressing our faith and witness together as a people of God.

"Partnership is a common listening to God's word, it is a common asking for God's Commission which each partner has in his or her own context and which both have in common." (Jorg Schnellbach)

In 2000 when the districts, of Presbyterian Church of Ghana, in the north had a workshop to review both internal and external partnership relationships they concluded:

"Partnership is friendship between districts or congregations, presbyteries and groups, both local and foreign. These friendships yield positive results—spiritual and material support. Such friendships have generally been helpful in the realisation and fulfilment of the church's holistic ministry to the world that is the whole Gospel to the whole person based on Jn. 10.10, Life in fullness for all."

"Partnerships continue to serve as good avenues for mutual encouragement. The fundamental understanding upon which these bond of friendship are fostered is that we Christians are a people of God scattered all over the earth. We therefore need to foster relationship with each for the welfare or well being of each other. Our understanding of the Church as the body of Christ therefore remains an important bedrock upon which we establish and nurture this friendships. For this body to function properly, it is important that we do not remain apathetic to needs, limitations, crisis and shortcomings of one another for if one part suffers, the whole body suffers." (Northern Mission Field Document).

II. Biblical Basis for Partnership

The workshop also considered some biblical and theological foundations which it believed were crucial to the establishment and maintenance of ecumenical partnership relationships.

1. God's love makes us one with God and each other (Gal 3:28).
2. All we Christians confess Jesus Christ. In this fellowship we are brothers and sisters. Partnership is about bringing into reality this understanding brother and sisterhood of all Christians.
3. The experience of the early church in Acts 4:32 where resources were pooled and shared to meet the needs of all, was considered as the ultimate blue print for partnerships. "*Our understanding is that we do not own all what we have, they remain God's resources for the use of all, (see Ps. 24:1; Hag. 2:8), therefore our divers spiritual financial and material endowments should be shared for the collective benefit of all God's people wherever they may be.*" (1 Cor 12:4,5-7)
4. Eph. 4 2b-6, which calls on all Christians to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace, emphasizes that all we Christians are called to one hope and reiterates that there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all of essence and faithfulness.
5. We need direct partnership relationships for the realisation of the high-priestly prayer of Jesus Christ in Jn. 17:11, 20, 21 'that all may be one.'
6. Direct Partnership relationships enables us as the people of God to show mutual concerns for each others and to share burdens among us as we are exhorted to do. (Gal. 6.2)

III. Some Aims of Partnership

1Tim 2:3-4 clearly states that it is the wish of God, our saviour that all people should come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved. The aim of every partnership therefore should be that we partake in the witness and service of the church (mission) so that all may come to the saving grace and knowledge of God, praising and thanking him.

From the theological prognoses and biblical passages above it can be established that partnership should be aimed at:

- a. strengthening each other in faith and in witness - *discipleship*
- b. accepting each other as worthy members of the body of Christ.
- c. sharing resources and responsibilities etc., since all partners have been endowed by God with some special gifts– resources, spiritual or otherwise for the use of the body of Christ.
- d. Providing a way for solidarity with churches small, isolated and even persecuted. Each of us has a story to tell, gifts, resources and convictions to share and hope to nurture as we relate to each other in partnerships.
- e. providing the opportunity for our members to identify themselves as a people of God worldwide, seeking the unit of the church as they share their common faith, enriching each other in their belief and worship life
- f. providing platform for the sharing of the whole gospel to the whole person in the whole wide world through the witnessing of the partners at both local and global level, so as to fulfill the Great Commission (Mat. 28, 18-20).

- g. Bringing us to the recognition that as a people of God we are interdependent. (Rom 12.4). It should show how dependent we are on each other. Our interdependence is also dictated by globalization .
- h. providing platform for a new dimension of relationship to which friends can enter into as and live in mutual trust and interdependence like a marriage relationship which to my understanding should be perpetual for better for worse, in poorer, in richer, in sickness, in health till death do us part.
- i. providing an understanding, which embodies our belief that the church of Jesus Christ is one body with different parts complementing and supplementing each other. *“All have received and all can give. Christian joy is experienced in both giving and receiving. Christian faith and witness are authenticated by the spirit of true sharing in the body of Christ.”* [Sharing in obedience (Escorial Spain 1982)]

Partnership, in simple terms, should have these aims:

- Partnership should help to enrich each other in our faith and worship life.
- should help Build mutual openness and honesty in our relationship with each other and other persons in the wide world.
- should help us identify ourselves as a people of God and to share our common faith through visit, prayer, liturgy etc..
- should help promote the unity of the Christian Church, the Great Commission, as we live in obedience and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and seek to extend the Kingdom God to all the world.
- should help us enjoy and celebrate our relationship as the people of God and the body of Christ.

IV. Some Tasks or Challenges of Partnerships

IV.1. Partnership and the challenges of globalization

Jesus told his disciples that he had come that people may have life in all its fullness. This biblical statement in Jn. 10.10 is the mission statement of my church. In deed it was also the theme for 24th General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) meeting in Accra this year.

After the evaluation of our church some years back, it came to a realisation that to achieve the tasks set out in our mission statement we had to discard some of the existing structure. We had a new constitution, we re-organised ourselves to bring life in fullness to the people of our land. However, the desired outcomes are still a long way off. In today's world of globalization, poverty, inequality and conflict have become closely interrelated. Poverty is not just a matter of low income levels but is also exclusion, being denied access to education, health, food and legal systems. This system makes poor people voiceless and powerless. The complex nature of poverty—denial of basic necessities—and oppression often makes it difficult for people to break the cycle of poverty on their own and allow them grow up with better opportunities.

Given the tremendous advances made in the last century, it is disgraceful and unacceptable that almost half the world's population is living in poverty. The brutal reality of the issue is this: half the worlds population would be better of as a cow; the

average European cow receives 2,20 US dollars (£1.40) a day from the tax payer in subsidies and other aids, while 2,8 billion people in our world live on less than 2 US dollars a day. The irony of the whole issue is that even this cattle goes mad and has to be destroyed again at the taxpayers expense. Meanwhile governments in the poverty-stricken- countries are not allowed to subsidise their farmers to obtain food security which they badly need.

We, the people of God, should be committed to a world based on justice where everyone can have an existence worthy of human dignity. This is routed in our understanding that the human being is created in the image God, that every human being is of infinite importance to God. We need to be aware that a world based on justice where everyone can have an existence worthy of human dignity will not come about by itself or on a silver platter. The failed World Trade Organisation conference in Doha not long ago clearly points to this fact.

Debt and corruption have left most of our countries in Africa too much dependence on global financial institutions. At this point, let me express our gratitude to you, our partners for the Jubilee 2000 campaign for debt cancellation, which led to Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) and Enhanced Highly Indebted Poor Country (EHIPC) initiatives. This in turn brought about some cancellation or reduction in the debts of some poor countries including Ghana. However the flow of speculative finance and the cost of crude oil have increased a hundred fold eroding whatever gains HIPC initiatives might have brought to these countries. In many places in Africa families cry out for daily bread. As partners we need to seek together a way for greater economic justice, a way in which all benefit equally in the global market place. I believe our primary tasks in this world of globalization will be:

1. expose the fundamental injustices of existing world economic order which favours trade for profit over economy for life.
2. to create a counter movement for the benefit of redistribution of global wealth.
3. to strengthen local communities and democracies for peaceful collaboration between various different perspectives of life.
4. to support all efforts for more democracy, accountability and transparency in the Breton Wood institutions, IMF and World Bank.
5. to network with national and ecumenical organs to covenant for economic justice.
6. to work together *“towards self-reliance and self-determination; committing ourselves to a common discipline of sharing among God's people, participating in the decision-making process between North and South and promoting through words and deeds the holistic mission of the church.”*

(Guidelines for Sharing, El Escorial Spain 1987)

IV.2. Partnership and The Challenges of HIV & AIDS

HIV & AIDS is a problem world wide constituting a great threat to life especially sub-saharan Africa, irrespective of age, race, gender, sexuality, faith and socio-economic status. HIV and AIDS can no longer be ignored, there are human faces in the bulging statistics. Our response to this task should be:

1. to seek together as partner churches a common theological ground on HIV & AIDS so as to encourage our communities to be caring to people living with HIV & AIDS (PLWA).

2. to encourage our communities to provide healing, and caring places for the counselling of the families of the dying and for the dying to be accompanied on the journey homewards.
3. to assist partner churches exchange ideas and strategies for the education of their members and communities on this deadly pandemic.

IV.3. Partnership and The Challenges of Violence, Conflict and Peace-building

I live in a region of my country where conflict and violence is becoming a yearly affair.

1994 conflict broke out engulfing more than 10 ethnic societies in this region. More than 1,000 persons lost their lives. Many more were injured, traumatised and some are limbless. Several millions of US dollars worth of property were destroyed in this poverty-stricken area.

In 2000, 2001, 2002 conflict in various dimensions broke out in Bawku and Yendi, leaving more than 150 persons dead, several injured. Ghana is not an exception to this phenomenon. Sudan, Ivory Coast, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, to name a few, are all engulfed with conflict of some nature. The situation in Africa and in deed the world, is that civil strife, conflict, urban and domestic violence are on the increase. Equip ourselves as partners and our communities or churches:

1. to lift up peace and reconciliation as a way of life as envisaged in Eph. 2:14-22,
2. to have in place credible institutions for peace and reconciliation. 2 Cor 5.16-21

IV.4. The challenges of honouring our diversity and multiplurality

We are men and women of many colours, young and old from many cultures but we are one in Christ. Most of us live and worship as religious minorities. Yet many people within our communities are excluded on account of their age, gender, ethnicity, disability or for some other reasons. Our task will be to find out:

1. how we can witness to faith in Jesus Christ, which transforms exclusion in pluralistic milieu.
2. how to make the gospel challenge traditions and social norms that suppress the gift of women and the disabled persons in our societies.
3. how to support structures, groups and organs that work towards general equality, and where there are no such structures to create them.
4. how to help with production of educational material that will address this issue.
5. how to discern a common theological perception of the issues of gender equality, exclusion and honouring diversity.

For me all the tasks outlined above could somehow be shown to be interrelated. So we should have :

- *economic dimension* which should aim at people so that they benefit from an economy that will enable them to earn a decent living by utilising all production means and economic resources available to them.

- *Political and legal dimension* whereby people are enabled to influence political decision making process acquire respectable socio-economic position in society, and a place in the economy as well as access to public domain.
- *Human dimension* – to create access to basic social needs— to assist people to have sufficient access to health care, education, clean water and food.
- *Socio-cultural-dimension* - people deserve respect and dignity and they should be enable to participate in effective social networks locally and globally.
- *The protective dimension* - people need individual security and protection by law against disasters, we need to promote measures for the reduction of vulnerability and promote democracy.
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However, Partnership as has been practised over the past 30 or so years, as witnesses in the MOU agreements did not adequately reflect the socio-geo-political, economical issues which invariable have limiting effects on the relationships in mission.

“If ever we to make a meaningful contribution to eradication of poverty and oppression; end conflicts and violence in our societies and offer peoples the opportunities for meaning development we have to work from these complexities. This implies we have to work at different levels: local, national, international and work with different actors in public, private, social and civil sectors.

For example if the local and national civil societies are strengthened and linked with global civil society in the Christian family it will help create a movement for global reform in which economic goals are balanced by political, environmental and social goals.

V. Future Dream and Conclusion:

Partnership is costly. It means trying out, opening up and letting go. It is the Easter Story all over again.

I have a dream: I am looking forward to time, when all our Partner churches will commit themselves to contribute to the partnership according to ability, receive according to need, and together own and steward the common material and non-material resources for the benefit of the mission of all. Each church becomes accountable to all: Through this model churches are enabled to develop together new approaches to the mission task of "all in each place".

Theologically this pattern of relation sharing and holding in common shall be a sign of the eschatological community where all live and work in true interdependence. The new power structure will help our churches to grow out of inherited identities and develop a more biblical understanding of who they are as mission churches.