

MentorNet #38

National Church Management and Foreign Partnerships

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I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Philippians 1:3-6

National churches and organizations round the globe now form multiple partnerships with foreign churches and organizations. Such co-operation can prove energizing and lead to greater evangelistic and development effectiveness besides garnering foreign funds. However, unwise co-operative agreements can lead to misunderstanding, disappointment and even distrust.

As your church organization reviews its partnership agreements made with foreign missions and organizations, be aware of these eight mistakes of churches that have caused some partnerships to go sour. Each mistake arises from weaknesses found either in the national church or with the partnering organization. Praise God, those weaknesses can be strengthened !

1. **Church independence:** Forming mission partnerships without a guiding strategy.

When a co-operating mission's personnel have a strategy that differs from yours, they will soon become frustrated. If your strategy includes the multiplying of new congregations through the mentoring of novice shepherds, then make sure that a potential partner shares that conviction by showing its effectiveness in helping churches to reproduce. Thus, you must keep your vision clear, your strategy intact, and your methods current, lest you lose your partners and stunt your church's impact across your nation.

2. **Church autonomy:** Believing that one mission partnership has nothing to do with another.

Forming partnerships with missions can prove akin to polygamy. As multiple wives must vie for their husband's favour, so partners can become competitive for your co-operation, and some will soon seek a divorce. That is, in forming partnerships, your church loses something of its autonomy, and must be able to co-ordinate the inputs and efforts of your various partners. This is especially so when partners each partner thinks that it has a superior programme that your church should adopt. Thus, your task becomes more complicated, never less so.

3. **Economics:** believing that mission partners can deliver unlimited services at a lower cost to your church.

There is no free lunch, and every foreign bank note comes with a demon riding on it. It is well documented that your church members will normally give less to the church when they know that foreigners donate funds to it. The most effective partnerships work on a principle of proportional giving. Require that your partners give only when your church members give, and that they work only when your church members work. Partnerships will cost you more.

4. **Self-management:** Assuming that once a mission partnership agreement is signed the management is done.

You have a formidable task in assessing potential partners, their capabilities, resources, and reliability. You will have served well in managing your church's interests by forming partnerships that bring more vision, expertise and passion into your church's role across your nation. However, balancing and accommodating their disparate efforts, theologies, personalities and resources will require all the management skill that God will give to you. Your work will increase.

5. **The enemy:** Thinking of the co-operating mission as an enemy to defeat in partnership negotiations.

Only foreign churches and organizations just getting started can be cajoled or bullied into accepting purely subservient roles. There are plenty of other national churches who are looking for true partners amongst equals before God. Thus, while negotiating partnerships, continually revert to the biblical principle of equality: each partner contributing to the needs of the other. Does your church need training? Materials? Advocacy? Your partner has needs as well, maybe legal advice, travel arrangements, simple hospitality, language helpers, accounting reports? “The wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives.”

6. **Resourcing:** The notion that cheap foreign help is the key metric, discounting other important factors.

Your church’s strategy envisions a multiplication of congregations amongst every class and social group across the nation by continually raising up novice shepherds and by sending its own missionaries. Cheap or free foreign personnel and funds can help, but those alone bring as many problems as they do blessings. Your church requires continual spiritual renewal, fresh training initiatives, relevant materials, and technical expertise that will not go home on the next air flight. Look for partners who have the kinds of knowledge and skill that you need as well as a commitment to transferring that knowledge and skill to your personnel, even at a cost.

7. **Steady state:** Believing that your co-operating organisation will never have to change.

Frankly, organisations change, especially those coming from countries whose culture and economy change rapidly. New organisational leaders bring changes in vision, strategies, methods and funding. Foreign organisations will not be offended by your forming agreements on a one-year or a two-year basis. Review both your partners and your agreements regularly and propose amendments when the time is near. If your partners cannot change to suit your strategy, then you may have to bless them in Jesus’ name and look elsewhere. Your partners do not own you; you belong to the Lord. You sometimes must show ‘tough love’.

8. **Organizational competency:** Believing that supervisory capabilities necessary to manage partnerships exist in your church.

God gives to his church apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers (Eph. 4:11), he always does and always will. However, Spirit-giftedness does not come with complete maturity, skill or wisdom. Your church may not yet have enough experienced personnel or personnel with enough experience to provide supervision to your partnerships. Recognizing this reality earlier can lead to growth and competence rather than to frustration and unfair criticism. Ask your partners to help train your personnel or to get them trained. If you require foreign supervisors, make then sure that they have apprentices who can learn quickly. Although some may become more competent managers than you are yourself, most of them will remain loyal to you who trusted them.

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