Effective Partnership Between the West and the African Church

Jim Harries

Abstract

This article challenges intercultural partnerships, especially those instituted by Christians and churches across the cultural divide between Africa and the West, that can become a means of exploitation, of limiting people’s freedom, and of introducing and encouraging corruption. The author observes a massive influence on African communities by the West. Material and financial dependency discourages speaking out against a system that orients communities towards the pleasing of foreigners even when what the latter bring is neither understood or in some ways desired. Definitions of ‘success’ have in parts of Africa become integrally linked to the pleasing of donors. Three case-studies illustrate outcomes of foreign donor-based partnerships. This article advocates for the institution of some partnerships, focusing especially on Western and African churches, that are rooted other than in the superior languages and resources of the West.

Introduction

Partnerships have so profoundly affected the Christian scene across vast tracks of Africa that it would be hard to imagine how things would have been in their absence. Those partnerships between Western and African Christians and churches that form the focus for this article demonstrate powerful ways in which God is continuing to work in the hearts of his people. They have undoubtedly deeply influenced and inspired thousands if not many millions of people on all sides of the Atlantic Ocean. They represent a period in the history of the world that stands like a beacon of light: There has probably never been another time when three great continents (Europe, Africa and North America) have been able to meet and engage with each other not only very amicably, but also compassionately.

My consideration here is of partnerships in intercultural context. The size of the inter-cultural gap between one church and another, or one person and another, of course varies. That is to say – no two people who enter into a partnership agreement or any other agreement, ever have exactly the same ‘culture’. The amount of difference between their cultures presumably varies. Our focus is on partnerships that cross a wide divide, which has resulted from the peoples concerned having had little or no relationship for centuries,
or longer. An example of such is the cultural gap between many African people and those of European origin.

My perspective in writing this article is that of a northerner, who was born and raised in the North of the United Kingdom, but who has since the age of 1988 lived in the South. I have in those years entered into numerous ‘partnerships’, in the broad sense of this term. (If I define partnerships as; ‘interpersonal or inter-group relationships that involve some mutual obligation’.) I have also been closely involved in a number of more formal partnerships between the North and the South. Some of my understanding of partnerships arises from my experience of living closely with African communities with whom people other than me in the West have entered into partnership. I have observed partnerships entered into by secular organisations as well as by Christian ones.

Some of the content of this article is critical in nature. I ask my reader to bear with me. I believe the Christian command that needs to underlie partnership is the command to love one another. Love is not easy. Power inequalities that quickly and easily arise in partnership arrangements can cause tensions. These come under particular scrutiny below. My concerns about inter-cultural partnerships in general and inter-church partnerships more specifically tend to overlap. Thus the categories that form the subheadings below demonstrate my effort at making a clear articulation of the issues concerned.

My own practice of relating closely with African people around me in the rural community of which I am a member prompts many of the thoughts that I want to share in this article. I have lived since 1993 in one community in western Kenya (before which time I had already spent 3 years living in rural Zambia). I have looked after local orphan children in my home for over 15 years. Since coming to Kenya from Zambia in 1993 I have endeavoured to stay close to the people in my home community through functioning as far as possible in local languages, and refusing to use outside funds to subsidise key activities, relationships and ‘projects’ in which I am engaged.

I appreciate that one of the difficulties of the case I am making, is that what I say below is a subjective interpretation of events. It is an interpretation that I have learned to make as a result of being vulnerable as a Westerner. That is in a context in which Westerners are rarely vulnerable (I am defining “vulnerability” in this context, as using their languages and resources in key ministry). The problems that arise from partnership contexts that I attempt to unveil in this article has me advocate not so much that practice in partnership be radically changed, but rather that some Westerners ‘change sides’. That is; I invite some westerners to attempt to see how partnership works through the eyes of poor ‘traditional peoples’. Once they have done this (which in my estimate takes 10 years plus of vulnerable exposure) then they should fault me in my critique. In the meantime the reason I am a lonely prophet may be because truths I am telling are hard for others to see.

**Fellow Westerners**

While living closely with African people, I have cause to frequently reflect on the activities of ‘my own’ people. That is, I find that my ‘African’ home in western Kenya is massively and constantly impacted by the actions of westerners. The level of this impact seems to rise as the years go by. It does not need special effort to engage one’s thoughts with ‘the West’; in much of Africa the West is ‘in your face’. Activities being engaged by Westerners are frequently on the agenda. Sometimes this is prompted by my presence as a westerner. Very often it is in view anyway on the agenda. When one looks around from the perspective of many Af-
rican people, much appears to originate from the West: concrete, reading glasses, books, short skirts, English, formal education, coca cola, second-hand clothes, shoes, mobile phones, people's 'modern' attitudes, women's fashions, preferred foods, knowledge of time and appreciation of its importance, to mention just a few things.

As people consider their own lives, they evaluate the impact of others, including the West, on them. That evaluation is at times relatively neutral, at times complementary, and at times critical. Sometimes I am sure that discussions pertaining to the impact of the West on them are engaged in my absence. Those I am aware of include me or are engaged within my earshot. They cause me to consider and to reflect. My own reflections will be different from those of my African colleagues, in so far as I have an understanding, arising from my having spent my first twenty four years immersed in the West (I lived in the UK), that many of my African colleagues do not share. Questions are raised in my head that my African colleagues may not perceive, or that they perceive differently. Having this foundation enables me to communicate with and relate to the West in a relatively unique way. Being in this unique position raises questions, such as of my moral obligations in relation to what I am coming to understand. My conscience obliges me to speak up and underlies my motivation for this writing. My conscience requires me, prayerfully and carefully, to write things, even if I know that sometimes my Western readership may prefer not to read them.

The activities of other westerners constantly impact what I do and how local people choose to relate to me in Africa. The nature of this impact saddens me; it saddens me to find that my own people's great and genuine efforts can be receiving anything but the most hearty appreciation on this continent. To have begun many years ago to perceive a lack of appreciation for what my people (Westerners) are conscientiously doing for people in Africa, saddens me. As the years have passed, this small critique has grown in my own mind. It has been unsettling to find myself agreeing with African people. To their critique I can add my own; arising from my privileged access to the West mentioned above.

A prophet is required to be attentive to the words of almighty God. What goes on around us as people is understood through interpretation. Interpretation is subjective and subject to partiality and whim. Prophets must have their ears tuned to God's guidance. Prophets can be unpopular; that seems to be part of their role. True prophets face opposition through their consistent telling of truth and not through changing the truth to suit powerful people. Amongst the 'powerful' involved in the setting up and implementing of intercultural partnership in Africa are Westerners. It is tempting not to speak out against people with the money. Unfortunately kowtowing to the powerful can leave important truths concealed.

As someone who attempts to work with African people (mostly in Western Kenya) without dominating or setting the terms of my relationships using foreign money, I can find myself implicitly under siege through practices of other westerners. Not surprisingly, people compare. Not surprisingly, it is easy to 'value' a partner according to their financial/material generosity. A decade ago, tears marked the resignation of a successful fundraiser from a key executive position in Western Kenya. His success could be gauged by the number of new buildings he had erected using foreign funds. By implication, a westerner who works with people on the ground but does not build buildings is not a 'success'. The higher the bar is raised by those who are backed by donors, the greater the efforts other Westerners need to make to achieve acclaim, or
sometimes even acceptance, by Africans for their efforts. In this way the donor activities of other Westerners in partnership with Africans can make life more difficult for Westerners who do not want to be known as donors.

The above is aggravated by the way in which cultural learning and fundraising activity tend to be mutually antagonistic. I will say more about this below. One factor here is that time taken raising funds from the West, then ensuring that the funds are properly accounted for, results in less time being available for language learning and other activities that help towards achieving cultural familiarity. Another factor is that those who raise funds tend to end up associating with people of the upper classes who are more distant from their ancient traditions (the upper classes in Africa tend to use English in conversation with family and friends, a practice that conceals aspects of their people’s traditions) A widespread and common outcome of fundraising on the part of certain westerners on behalf of their partners in Africa is to make it more and more difficult for them, and then by extension for other westerners, to draw close to and identify closely with indigenous people. This contributes to the growing degree to which the ignorance of outsiders is more highly valued than their understanding about the indigenous context: People who are firmly rooted in the West are often the most adept at raising funds. Cultural familiarity with Africa can detract from the above role.

A prominent donor presence makes it more difficult for a non-donor to get an audience in an African community. This applies whether or not the non-donor is African-born. That is, by comparison with outsiders who are able to implement their ideas with bountiful funding, it becomes harder and harder for innovative Africans to get an audience with their own people. Local people’s informed views being overridden by those of relatively ignorant outsiders, is one of the pernicious impacts of the recent rise in partnerships from the West to Africa. An outcome related to the above is that the innovativeness of Africans that comes to be the most rewarded is their ability at pleasing donors, and not their ability at interacting with their own people. In other words in many African communities today, ‘success’ for young entrepreneurs, innovators, and potential leaders entails first and foremost the ability to draw and hold on to western donors. The latter remains the most important key for their ongoing ‘successes’.

As the activities of Christians in the West in engaging local African churches and Christians in partnership makes it more difficult for a missionary on the ground to acquire an effective voice in their own local African community, the same difficulty is met by Africans. The ‘partners’ who are pulling the strings are inaccessible. They do not speak the local language, they do not comprehend local issues and contexts, and they are not available for informal exchanges of ideas. Local managers that they appoint are directed by people in far flung countries who must be spared certain kinds of feedback because they are unfamiliar with local contexts. The last thing a ‘local manager’ can afford to have happen, is to have another local set up direct communication with his donor independently of him.

My reader may be thinking that it is important that donors who sit in far-flung countries work through local managers. Widely accepted wisdom is that funds received by locals are empowering them by enabling them to better do what they were anyway doing. Instead of going to talk with people at the source end of funds; why not talk with those implementing projects at the local level? The problem is – that local implementers of projects are not very ‘free’. Their key relationship(s) being with distant and relatively ignorant donors.
makes them wary of people with local knowledge who in any way appear to threaten those relationships. Although themselves often very familiar with local conditions, local managers are engaging in a balancing act: They are trying to ensure a match between their donors’ relatively uninformed view of what a particular project should be doing, and the reality on the ground that is visible to them. They are aware of local conditions but do not have the freedom to truly respond to them. The primary nature of the need to satisfy a donor means that constraints put by a donor on the implementation of a project easily results in limited local ‘fit’. The donor and their people must often be kept in the dark. Westerners being easily and visibly identifiable as amongst the donors’ people make it especially hard for them to be on the ‘inside’ of projects.

The involvement of ‘invisible’ outside donors can easily undercut the activities of westerners who, in the interests of living closely to local people and so as not to create dependency, choose not to root their activities in outside funds. The donor who knows the least has the greatest impact. Local people are forced to engage in concealment and lies in order to keep the donor happy. Ontologically it is almost as if – donors are little-understood powerful spirits that need to be given appeasing feedback even if provision of that feedback requires irrational or contrary action. The position taken by local people in respect to donors and their activities is of course that of the prosperity gospel; the presence of Christian donors means that the Gospel of Jesus is valued for the prosperity that it brings.

Case Studies

1. Dave is an enthusiastic born-again Christian living in an African community. His hard work on the family’s farm has enabled him to make free time in which he would like to teach others the truths of Scripture. Dave puts much effort into reading Bible. He is attentive to the preaching and teaching of older Christians in his community. He truly loves God’s word, and is popular amongst church leaders and laity of a variety of Christian denominations. Dave decides to call a meeting of interested people in the hope that he can begin a theological education programme. People respond to him as follows:

Person 1. “You cannot teach unless you have formal qualifications.”

Person 2. “I will not join a theological education programme unless it is accredited, and allows me to transfer credit to an institution that is recognised by the government.”

Person 3. “Our troubles are caused by spirits, and I don’t see how theological teaching can help us to overcome them.”

Person 4. “We cannot work with you through fear that if our overseas partners do not approve of what you are doing that could result in a cut in our supply of funds.”

Person 5. “You must find a donor before beginning. I cannot afford to get involved in a programme that has not yet identified its donors. It is possible to acquire up to $100,000 for a theological education programme, so why begin one without first having an agreement with a donor?”

Dave’s initiative completely fails to take off. Dave has no choice but to further his aspirations in Bible teaching by joining a western-run theological college. To do that he first has to raise funds for English classes. He has to pay handsomely for his course. The education he will receive will be of limited relevance to the context in which he lives. His fellow students will encourage Dave to forget about going back into a life of ‘poverty’ in his village. They will try to persuade him to use his qualification to get a job with an international NGO. Dave himself can easily get discouraged about going back to
engage in his home community. Even should he still be intent to endeavour to fulfil his original vision, he knows that the most important thing to enable fulfilling of the vision – is to impress and please a Western partner.

2. Enthusiastic Western donors want to partner with a national in the setting up of church clinics. Stephen, an African, makes an international trip, so meets up with these donors. The donors visit Stephen’s church. They are impressed by the enormous respect that church members have for Stephen. The whole church is enthusiastic about the building of the clinic which they say is desperately needed and will be an enormous help. The donor agrees to help the church to build and equip the clinic. The donors want to see locals build the foundations and walls using local resources before they release their money. The donors take this position to ensure local ownership of the project.

The problem now faced by the local church is that the large amount of money needed to complete the clinic project will only be made available once the foundations and walls of the clinic building have been erected. Various frantic efforts are engaged in. Church leaders approach local money lenders with a copy of the letter from the donor. A colleague is found who has received an amount of money intended for another project that has been delayed through the death of the local manager. He makes that money available to the church for the purpose of building the foundations and walls of the clinic, on condition that he is repaid with interest as soon as they receive the funds from their donor. The need to pay back the money to cover the building of the walls and foundation unfortunately means that the funds from the donor are no longer adequate for completion of the clinic. Relations with the donor, who accuses the Africans of misappropriating funds, go sour. Half way through the building process, the church headquarters becomes aware of the activities of this branch of their church. Local church leaders are reminded of church by-laws, which state that foreign currency received by a local church must be processed by the national church headquarters. The local church had ignored those by-laws. The project having become a point of great contention, the leader of the denomination decides to transfer Stephen, the pastor of the church that was building the clinic, fearing that if he did not do so many other churches following his example would result in an unacceptable loss in levels of accountability for funds. Church members’ refusal to accept the transfer of their beloved leader Stephen results in a denominational split. Intermittent shedding of blood in the course of the ensuing conflict hitting the national media headlines damages the reputation of the church nationally.

3. African pastor Ian was very appreciative of the help that Peter from Germany was giving him. Peter didn’t mind roughing it. He was courageous enough to live in an African community. A few times he found himself sleeping on a mud floor with merely a grass mat instead of a mattress. Ian did not discourage Peter from talking to other people in the community. Paul was jealous of Ian’s ability at befriending foreigners, especially because of the help they extended to Ian and his family and close friends. Paul had a good education. He enjoyed talking with Peter. In fact, he seemed to get Peter’s jokes even when others didn’t. The two would laugh together. Paul’s ability at laughing together with Peter built a deeper collegiality than was normally found between Westerners and Africans. As Paul and Peter spent more time together, Peter built a deeper collegiality than was normally found between Westerners and Africans. As Paul and Peter spent more time together, Peter learned more of Paul’s view of the African context. Paul more clearly articulated and explained what was happening than Ian had ever done. Peter began to raise funds for Paul’s projects.

One day Ian found his friend Peter behaving coldly towards him. ‘What was wrong’, he asked himself? ‘Confidants told him that Paul
was now a better friend to Peter than was Ian. Peter’s interest in Paul increased. Paul received an increasing proportion of the donor funds that Peter managed to raise. Ian was no longer so important to him.

‘Paul has stolen my Western friend Peter! What should I do about it’ Ian one day asked his friend Brian. ‘You don’t know how to look after a white man’ responded Brian. ‘If you leave him free to interact with other people, someone who has a sweeter tongue than you will end up wooing him’ he said. ‘It is important to protect your white man. You can do that by telling him that it is too dangerous to live in the village. He has little choice but to believe you. The best thing to do is to put up your white visitor in a hotel in town. Don’t let other people know where he is. You and your family and a few trusted friends look after him. Be careful to warn him that your community is full of con-men. When you go with him to the church, arrive late so that you find the congregation already sat down. Once he has preached, take him away before people have a chance to talk to him. That way you won’t loose him.’ ‘Oh, I see’, responded Ian.

Response

Much of what I have described above is probably not all that startling or new. The kinds of dynamics that I have articulated have been troubling human communities for decades. Life has to go on despite concerns such as the above. Resources are, after all, needed by everyone. Even if their delivery is messy, some will argue, we have to continue to provide them anyway.

My concern in writing this article focuses on resource provision as a part of mission. Given the problems above, my suggestion is not that resource provision by the better off for the poor cease. There is a strong case to be made for its continuation; despite the problems that such continuation brings. The appeal that I would like to make – is for there also to be some mission including some partnership in mission between Western and African Christians that is not rooted in resource provision. For many of the reasons given above, and others in addition, I consider this to be essential.

The question that then arises is – how can partnerships that do not include resource provision be engaged? I think it must be conceded that this could make the initiation of partnerships more difficult. There is a risk that Christians and churches in Africa may be much less enthusiastic about entering into partnerships with Western people in the absence of material or financial incentives. While in some ways it makes the continuation of partnerships more difficult, I do believe in the long term that it will result in much healthier partnerships that can survive for much longer and make a more positive contribution to the Kingdom of God.

How are inter-cultural partnerships between churches that do not include a material/financial component be set up and followed through? These days, I suggest, wisdom being sought in endless discussions and massive efforts on the part of the church in the West to set up partnerships, almost all presupposes that part of the partnership will include a net flow of resources from the capitalist West to the poor world. Much of current wisdom and teaching on how to do partnerships may therefore not be relevant to the kinds of partnerships that one could enter into that do not include the creation of resource dependency. The kind of wisdom we will need to look for in non-dependency creating partnership relationship is much akin to biblical practice. Partnerships entered into in biblical times did not include making partners materially dependent.

The kind of partnership that I want to consider here is that of the ‘loan’ of Christian workers from one part of the world, or from one culture, to
another. Whether it is from Africa to Europe or from America to Africa – I suggest that it is the responsibility of the sending church to take care of the immediate physical needs of their missionary. These material needs could be met in a whole variety of ways. If we take, as is our main study here, a missionary from the West to Africa, those needs could be supplied by employment undertaken by the person concerned alongside their ministry engagement. Alternatively, it could be supplied in the way of funds directly from the sending church(es). Meanwhile their missionary agrees not to use foreign-sourced funds to boost his or her ministry.

Before going on, I need to concede that the contents of the above paragraph do not necessarily describe the ideal. The ‘ideal’ arrangement is often, in my view, for a missionary who is sent to become dependent on the provision of the community to whom they are sent. Whether it be a missionary from Africa to Europe, or from the West to Africa, being kept economically by one’s host people while doing ministry would seem to be the ideal way to build close relationships with them. This is a biblical model (1 Timothy 5:18), although Paul seemed to make an exception with the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 11:5-15). (Presumably he made the latter exception because he wanted to be able to speak out freely against the problems that he met in the Corinthian church, which he felt he could not do if he was dependent on them for his funding.)

An additional difficulty that arises with Westerners’ taking commercial employment in Africa is the corruption that they are likely to face. This alone can prove very difficult in almost any career path that someone might pursue. It usually, to my understanding, would make it very difficult for a budding Western missionary (or any other Westerner) to work in Africa for anything but an internationally managed company.

Because of the above difficulties, there are good reasons for suggesting that Western missionaries in Africa be supported from outside of the continent. If this happens, it be understood that resources they receive should be confined to their personal upkeep and that of their family, rather than for subsidy of whatever ministry (including if it is a development project) in which they are engaged. (Unless such a missionary invest in a project that is relatively disconnected from their main ministry, i.e. their key relationships with African people. This can be advisable in order not to give the impression that the missionary (or development worker) is unconcerned for the physical wellbeing of others. Such giving should be done carefully, so that it not be used to ‘buy’ unfair advantage in ministry.) The aim behind doing this is not to privilege the foreign worker in their interaction with local people on the side of access to resources. That is, to enable foreign missionaries to use their God-given gifts in a way that local people can imitate, on a level playing field.

It should be clear that many of the issues that arise when partnerships involve resource transfer are avoided by the approach advocated here. Acute problems between Westerners and African or other majority world nationals frequently revolve around resource use, and economic imbalance. These would be eradicated. Other issues would be ‘minimised’. Accountability structures checking on the work being done still need to be in place, but will not be as desperately needed as they tend to be these days. Mutual-learning would be aided, as reluctance to speak out would be curtailed given the absence of fear about the cutting of funds should the wrong thing be said; people will be more free to speak honestly. This approach, of not taking advantage of superior resources in ministry in the majority world (our focus has been on Africa) is known as vulnerable mission. [subscript and in italics] The other component of vulnerable mission is that foreign workers engage using indigenous languages; more
discussion on the latter falls outside of the scope of this article.

Conclusion

Endeavours at setting up partnerships with African churches and communities that are being reproduced around the Western world are a wonderful demonstration of compassion for others. Unfortunately even such compassion has mixed motives. Good intentions do not guarantee helpful outcomes. This author, having discovered problems that beset inter-cultural partnerships on the African mission-field, is endeavouring to advocate strategies and approaches that could overcome such.

As a result of observing a great deal that is foreign in their host cultures, it can be difficult for Westerners in Africa to notice the depth and breadth of penetration of Western ways of life, especially in the material culture all around them. Many African people in my experience greatly appreciate what they have acquired from the West, at the same time as regretting being so strongly dominated by foreigners. The existence of gross levels of dependency, economic and otherwise, obliges African people to play the game of ‘compliance’ while looking for outlets through which they can express more of what is in their hearts. The clash between these two can bring negative outcomes. It would be fantastic, if only some Western-African partnerships could be empowering what is indigenous without at the same time imposing foreign cultural ideologies.

While certainly we are not going to be able to evade all messy relationships, this article proposes that there is a way of designing partnerships that avoids a lot of them. That is – partnerships that block resource dependencies by not including transfers of resources from the start, and in which the complex task of engaging inter-cultural translation are shared between partners instead of being loaded only in one direction. (In my experience there is these days a growing reliance in mission from the West to Africa on African people to do the required translation.) These kinds of partnerships that would operate on the basis of what we call ‘vulnerable mission’ refuse point blank to incorporate resource transfers, and operate in the language of the people being reached. They are in effect partnerships in which one church or Christian community offers a human resource to another. An African church wanting to share in ministry in the West will prepare someone to minister in a Western language but will not load this person with gifts or financial rewards with which to boost his ministry; the same for a Western church wanting to offer someone to share in ministry in Africa. This is in many ways a Biblical style of ministry.

My major concern, writing as I am in English, is with Western churches’ efforts at developing partnerships with Africans. The most effective, sustainable, and empowering partnerships in the interests of African people, are those in which the Western partner commits to engaging in ministry using African language(s). This, plus refusing to purchase power in ministry using ‘own’ resources, will force those engaging in such a Western mission effort to consider very carefully what they are doing and how. Working in partnership in this way, will challenge the Westerner involved to think and work in the light of African contexts that the use of European languages and domination that was possible through privileged access to resources used to occlude from view. This way of operating will, to be honest, open up a new world of missionary challenges, and opportunities – a ‘new world’, of course, which reflects ways in which ministry was done in the past, including in Biblical times.