
Tough Questions on Faith and Field Partnerships: A Commentary

Katie Toop and Richard Slimbach

The following is a response by Katie Toop (senior director of transformational development with World Concern) to the three questions Richard Slimbach poses on faith and field partnerships in his article “[Asking Tough Questions About Transformational Development](#),” published in this journal in the summer of 2023 (Slimbach 2023). A follow up comment by Slimbach appears at the end. Both of these contributions were part of a webinar on June 27, 2023 discussing that article; the rest of the webinar content, consisting of two other responses and discussion around them, is published in this issue as well. The full recording of the webinar can be found at <https://vimeo.com/844345288/e970fe8826?share=copy>. The specific questions to which Katie Toop responds are:

1. Does Danladi Musa (2012) accurately portray typical NGO-local church relations? How should Christian NGOs from the Global North relate to local churches in the Global South? What are the best ways to approach such partnerships? What are the major pitfalls?
2. Why do many Christian congregations and development agencies tend to shy away from partnerships with non-Christian faith communities, non-sectarian grassroots NGOs, municipal government agencies, and non-violent protest movements? How accurately does James Davison Hunter diagnose the problem, and what implications might it have for the work of Christian NGOs?
3. What missiological, theological, sociological principles (“theory of change”) are implicit within your organization’s external relationships (partnerships, networks, alliances, etc.)?

Katie Toop

Like Philip and Ravi, I also appreciate Rich's work in writing this article and highlighting these issues. I love tough questions when they produce rich conversation, and these questions do just that. I have the privilege of working on the third topic of faith and field partnerships. The first question is really sneaky, with four great questions all in one. I will not exhaustively respond to any one of them, but I will spend probably the majority of my time on question one and then touch briefly on questions two and three.

Question one asks if Musa accurately portrays typical NGO-local church relations, and in part he is portraying a local church that is on the receiving end of kind of a pre-cooked vision and plan that carries out assigned activities and leverages their relationships for organizational goals. Like the other respondents, I answer only from my own experience, but I would say yes, much of this rings true with what we encounter in the field. The power imbalance that Musa is depicting between INGOs and the local church or between the national or denominational agendas in local churches

is real and tends to lead to a fragmentation of vision, and often of the team itself, that is serving in the church. Gratefully, there has been a growing awareness of this in recent years, specifically among Christian NGOs, and there are models and tools that actively seek to rectify that power imbalance. But yes, these dynamics are at play, and the default narrative or the kind of historical role models of benefactor and beneficiary are still very much alive in these relationships.

The second part of the question is how Christian NGOs from the Global North should relate to the local churches in the Global South. In some ways, I do not want to fully grant the premise of the question, because depending on how one reads it, it could seem to presuppose that people in a Christian organization are sitting at a desk in the Global North and directly driving relationships with the local church in the Global South. And that speaks to the need for a larger shift in a rebalancing of power within the organizations themselves, if we are going to reflect God's design. That is part of what Richard's article touches on in terms of

the next generation's disillusionment with ministry. They are ready for a shift in the balance of power. My response is that Christians and others from the Global North need to be receiving direction from their own leaders in the Global South to guide and inform strategies for local church engagement, which will be and must be highly contextual.

In the third part of the question on how we approach these partnerships, much could be said. I appreciate the perspective of the late Dr. Richard Twiss, a member of the Lakota tribe, and a theologian, author, and pastor, speaking on the relationship between the First Nations or Indigenous Peoples and the church in the US, which really parallels in many ways the dynamics between the Global North and the South. At one point, referring to members of the First Nations, he says:

We would hope...that the church would see us as co-equal participants in the life, work and mission of the church...Out of a sense of mutuality can come legitimate Christ-honoring partnerships and relationships and then we can say together: "what can we do to advance the understanding of people of what it means to really authentically walk with Jesus in the context of who God created them to be?" (2008, 1:52, 2:44)

Perhaps part of the *how* is the establishment of co-equal partnerships in life, work, and mission with the local church. We have to wrestle with what mutuality looks like. We need to ask ourselves not only what we offer in service to the church, but where are we also being led by her? How can we both serve the church and serve alongside her? In terms of *how*, there is a lot to consider as well, in structure, transparency, and myriad other issues, but beyond the mechanics of partnership, we also need to seek to discern organizationally what the Spirit is inviting us into.

I served for several years in a creative access context and spent the first two years evaluating different people's approaches to engagement with the local church, trying to figure out who was doing it right and who was doing it wrong. Then, after about two years of being tied up in knots and pretty tired from all the judging I had taken upon myself to do, the Lord kind of tapped me on the shoulder and said, "you know, has it dawned on you that I may be calling different people with different gifts to serve in different ways? And do you want to stop worrying about what everyone else is doing and know what I have for you to do?" I am not suggesting that we all just pull the God card and do whatever God tells us to do without listening to the wisdom and counsel of others. I am simply encouraging us to invest time and energy as organizations to discern the role that God has for us, because it very well might look different than the role

he has for our neighbor, and perhaps that is going to be okay.

In the last part of this question about the pitfalls, we have recently been asking that of our teams and church partners, and there are a lot of items on the list. Again, I cannot be exhaustive, but here are some:

- Denominationalism. How do we help overcome denominationalism, yet also work within it?
- Inter and intra church politics that create a bit of a minefield for workers who may not be aware of them.
- Navigating theological differences, especially for staff who are not theologians.
- Lack of training on how to engage churches.
- How to speak the language of a church, or of a pastor.
- Hidden agendas at times, and the desire for control, which can show up on both sides of passionate partnerships like this that are so linked to our central mission.

I want to talk just briefly about question two, the question about why many Christian NGOs shy away from partnership with different types of non-Christian actors. Again, there is no simple response, because it is a really complex topic. Still, the first reason that comes to my mind is fear. We all have a fear of what we do not know; it is human nature. There are strong narratives that have turned flesh and blood actors into enemies in place of the powers and principalities that Scripture tells us we are at war with. The most common command in Scripture is "Do not fear." It is easy to see its purpose in preparing for battle, but could it also be a command that is relevant in preparing for partnership? Maybe "Do not fear!" is a good starting point for considering our partnerships. I am not saying "Do not discern!" or "Do not be wise!" or "Do not have conviction!" but "Do not fear!" The reality is fear of the unknown, fear of losing funding, or fear of the enemy we have created. All of these can stand at the root of a lot of what we avoid. And this phrase "shy away from" that is in the question does kind of paint a picture of avoiding. At the same time, there are many who would not characterize their decision as "shying away" but as a thoughtful act of obedience to how they believe God calls us to live. They may point to the guidance of Scripture as their reasons for not entering into partnerships, particularly with non-Christian faith communities. I imagine many would cite 2 Corinthians 6 and Paul's exhortation not to be unequally yoked to unbelievers, or Proverbs 13 about walking with the wise, or James 4 about friendship with the world that makes us an enemy of God. There is a lot that people might bring into this. Both fear and theological conviction can be powerful drivers in decision making

around some of these partnerships, among, of course, many others.

In terms of the question about Hunter's diagnosis, he has definitely spent a lot more time thinking and writing about cultural change than I have, and I have only read a little bit more than what was put in the article in terms of what Hunter has to say. I can only respond with humility. I can agree with him that cultural change is complex and slow and made up of many factors. But I do not know if I can agree with his statement that changes in the hearts and minds of ordinary people are insignificant factors in cultural change. We see in the history of the early church people whose compassion and sacrificial love impacted the hearts and minds of their neighbors and transformed significant aspects of culture in the Roman Empire, in ways that were thought impossible without battle or without a military overthrow. And we should not be too quick to decide who is ordinary and who is extraordinary. Remember that the people of Jesus's day wondered what good could come out of Nazareth. Our perspective on what is ordinary or insignificant is often skewed.

Part of the point being made in bringing up Hunter is that there is more to be done at levels other than the individual. And with that, I do not disagree, and Philip touched on that as well. Systems and networks and the depravities that they carry are significant drivers to entrenched poverty in the cultures that we seek to influence, both in the global North and the South. As organizations, we must wrestle with our role in systemic reform. Are there ways that we are uniquely positioned to raise awareness or to advocate? Are there issues that we ourselves are being called to lead in awakening and repentance and lament? We cannot allow fear to keep us from asking costly questions. We need to be careful not to idolize our own presence in the country, which can lead to us trading our opportunity to speak or pursue justice for the sake of self-preservation.

And, in my last fifty seconds, on the third question of missiological, theological, and sociological principles, we are not going to do a deep dive there. The challenge is for each of us to ask these questions of ourselves. Does a belief in common grace impact how and with whom we partner? Would outsiders looking in know that we believe that there are uniquely beautiful expressions of the image of God in each community by the way we forge our field relationships? Are partnerships a means to mission or a mission strategy themselves? And is that answer universal or contextual? I would just share in closing one aspect of our journey as World Concern. We have done a lot of work in considering our why, and there are a lot of great transactional reasons to pursue partnership. But ultimately for us, the local church is a distinct partner.

We call ourselves a Christ-centered organization, and if we believe the church is the bride and the body of Christ (Eph. 5:25-32 and Eph. 1:22-23), then our commitment to her has to be of an entirely different nature than that of a partner who is merely strategic, because the church is the beloved of the one at the very center of our identity. We are compelled to remain faithful to her even when the projected ROI does not land in her favor. We just pray that we will do that with faithfulness. Thanks so much.

Richard Slimbach

In terms of Katie's comments on Hunter and Ravi's mention of structures and systems, when we have this fourfold repair of alienations, toward God, self, others, and the earth, the "others" seem to be conflated with institutions. They need to be separated, such that institutions, structures, and systems are better theorized. What Hunter was saying is that ideas are very important. To give some negative examples, ideas like individualism, white supremacy, male dominance, meritocracy, unlimited progress, and consumerism as a pathway to happiness are important because they have consequences in history when they penetrate the mythic fiber and fabric of the social order in school, music, film, etc. They reorganize the structures of our consciousness and guide our desires, our impulses. Hunter would say that without a fundamental restructuring of the institutions of cultural formation and transmission, what we hope to be the result of evangelism or, in the larger case, revival, will be neutralized. They will have a negligible effect on the reconstruction of the culture. His call, and the call of a rising generation, is for the church to provide a more thorough and courageous critique of the culture-forming institutions of our society, which are laden with mythological meaning and are oftentimes co-opted and co-opt the church's consciousness. That kind of critical capacity is one of the great challenges for the church today.

References

- Twiss, Richard. 2008. "Hope for the American Church." YouTube video, 3:11.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHKtDoKoD80>.

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