

Partnership between the local church and the missionary

Partnership is a real buzz-word in mission today. Or if you are really up with the jargon, you can try 'strategic alliance'. Whatever you call it, however, we have to recognise that it is a concept founded on a biblical principle and therefore needs to be taken seriously. Many conferences have been held and much has been written on the topic of partnership, but most of it has dealt with the subject at the ministry or organisation level. In this article, let's have a look at it from the perspective of a sending church and its missionary.

In doing this, we are helped by what Paul records in the letter to the Philippians concerning his relationship with the church at Philippi. The NIV makes the subject even clearer in Phil 1:5 by actually translating the word *koinonia* by 'partnership' - ". . . because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now . . ." What did Paul have in mind when he spoke of this partnership or fellowship that he and the Philippians enjoyed? His statement in 1:5 that it was partnership 'in the gospel' immediately identifies the common goal that provided the foundation for all their partnership. There are at least three practical aspects of this partnership referred to elsewhere in the book. The first is found in 1:19, where he testifies that "I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance." Here Paul links himself with the church and the Spirit in partnership, as the church prays and the Spirit acts. Their prayer support is an integral part of what Paul sees taking place. This really portrays prayer as an aspect of mission work itself. It is not praying **for** mission, but prayer **as** mission. Is this how it is seen or taught in our church?

We find a second clue in 1:24-26, where Paul speaks of being with the church again "for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me." This was a partnership where each was to contribute to the growth of the other, and so Paul speaks of how he is going to contribute to their progress in the faith. This was not just a missionary coming on home assignment to say thanks for your gifts. This was not to be a dash around the churches to show the powerpoint and press on. There was mutual ministry in the partnership and it was accepted by both partners, which is why the sending church was going to be so joyful at his return. The sending church had given to the missionary through prayer and now they were going to grow as they received the missionary's ministry. Such a situation presumes that the returning missionary will spend TIME with his sending church, which isn't always the situation today. Perhaps we are missing out on something.

The third clue is found in 2:25 where he refers to Epaphroditus as the one "you sent to take care of my needs." Here is the church taking its responsibility for pastoral care and practical encouragement. There is no 'out of sight and out of mind' syndrome operating here. They heard of his situation and took steps to respond to it in as practical and appropriate a way as possible.

The fourth clue is in 4:14-19, where he speaks of their financial support. But even this he describes in terms of partnership, for in 4:15 he speaks of it as "giving and receiving" and includes the idea of 'what may be credited to your account'. This was not the notional missions budget, the 10% that a 'good' church sets aside for missions. Here we have partnership in action, a mutual ministry through which each partner grew and became strong in the Lord.

How's your church going? Built any good partnerships lately?