



MRN
MISSION RESOURCE NETWORK

**PARTNERING
WITH INDIGENOUS
LEADERS**

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Come to the Table

You likely have noticed how sharing meals with people from other cultures requires lots of learning and flexibility. We end up navigating new foods, different table manners, and surprising expectations. Cross-cultural partnerships are also like coming to a table. We should not, though, approach partnership with indigenous leaders like meeting them at a board room table. Instead, we need to be thoughtful of power dynamics and humbly approach one another at a common table.

Research shows that cultural differences create a huge challenge to healthy collaboration. When Western partners are asked if they believe they are in equitable relationships with their global partners, a majority answer “yes.” Yet when indigenous leaders are asked the same questions, they unanimously respond that the partnerships are unequal, and they feel disempowered.^[1] MRN's own research supports this feedback. During the COVID pandemic, MRN hosted listening groups that included national church leaders around the world. When asked about

partnering with the Western church in global missions, national leaders suggested that the West relinquish control for the good of the whole and take on a humbler approach.¹²¹

We at MRN believe that this is a crucial time for churches and organizations to reimagine partnerships with our global partners. We invite you to consider these guiding principles and postures in order to become more effective in our collaborative work with the global church. What follows here will certainly require discernment in order to make it applicable in different situations, but this is a doorway into important conversations for evaluating how we can best come to the table of partnership together.

A Partnership Analogy

In our conversations with global Christian leaders, the analogy of a four-legged table has been a useful one for considering the various components of partnership. This can be a helpful way to begin to build healthy partnerships, even in the cultural waters of patron-client systems. Building this table will take time, but it will be worth it!



Table Top: local (regional) ownership

- Oversight group of at least 3 respected leaders in the region not under the control of beneficiary of the support.
- Local equity with financial stake appropriate to their capacity - the first money comes from the worker's home network.

Table Leg 1: local (regional) design from overseers

- Significant local contribution to the who, what, where, when, and how of ministry
- American partners can speak into the vision cautiously but should not be the only or dominant designers.
- American partners should be able to identify how the local leadership shaped the ministry design from what they would have created alone.

Table Leg 2: established trust

- Built through meaningful interaction with existing partners in the ministry network prior to funding conversation.



Table Leg 3: proven doers

- Only fund people to do what they have proven they can and will do

Table Leg 4: community dynamic

- Proven ability to work with other people at a collegial (equal) level

Additional Elements

- Once built, Americans should partner with the team (table) not merely a single individual receiving support.

- It is acceptable to set up a pontoon bridge (temporary structure) while the concrete bridge (permanent structure) is being created, but there has to be a reasonable time frame set up for the concrete bridge with benchmarks and timely progress.
- Americans must respect local (cultural forms) to incarnate these principles.
- Don't turn stories into strategies!
- There is no way to remove judgment/wisdom from this process. The human element is always in play.
- Failure is inevitable - but we must determine our risk tolerance.



Guiding Questions to Ask Ourselves

- 1. What assets, skills, labor, wisdom, faith, and resources are the local people already contributing? Is our partnership likely to cause locals to conclude that their solution to their problems is most easily found outside their own community?**

If there is no contribution in any of the above resources, find better ways to partner. We need to listen to Jesus' instruction to "give to those who ask" (Matt. 5:42) and intentionally be generous and thoughtful in ways that will bless the church over the long haul. It will not serve the long term interests of the church to give in ways that are destructive. It is tragic when outside assistance that is supposed to strengthen the community ironically ends up weakening it. The principle here is that every group involved should be bringing something (be it time, talent, or treasure) to the table.



How can we supplement and support local solutions rather than meeting the entire need? A small contribution might be more effective at building long-term sustainability than a large contribution.

2. What will happen when this situation of need arises again (as it likely will)? Who will solve it?

The answer should be them (maybe with our help). If the answer is us, we probably are building an unhealthy dependency upon outsiders and decreasing the likelihood that the nationals will be able to sustain the work after we are gone. When a community comes to believe that the solutions to their problems will come from *outside donors* instead of *from within*, they have been robbed of the opportunity to find a creative solution themselves. This results in unsustainable missions.

Be aware of what precedent you're setting with your involvement.

Before partnering, let's also ask ourselves: Does our partnership build self-esteem or undermine it? When communities constantly receive outside assistance, it erodes local initiative and risks entrenching problematic perceptions of who the "haves" are and who the "have nots" are.

We must also receive from them to strengthen the sense of local ownership. It is dignifying and empowering.

Am I strengthening local participation and sacrifice in the project or undermining it? If our involvement undermines local participation, then do not partner. Do not be too quick to jump in with a solution but hold back and see what solutions local leaders come up with first.

3. How will locals perceive our contribution or resource?

When outside partners contribute significant amounts of money or resources, it can make the tiny contribution locals might have to offer seem insignificant. Local believers ask themselves, “Why should I give towards this need when it is so small



compared to what the foreigners give.” Some then redirect their energy towards finding outside benefactors instead of seeing their own contribution as important. (Might this dynamic change if the Western partners were truly submitting to their global brothers and sisters?)

Does what we're contributing (money or resources) undermine local giving? Can we give in ways that spark and accelerate local giving?

4. Does our partnership redirect accountability?

Outsiders who bring resources or make large financial contributions quickly become the ones who frame the expectations, whether they like it or not. Accountability shifts away from the local leaders and the people themselves toward the outside partners.

Are we strengthening local leadership or weakening it? Who determines what counts as success? Can we humbly show up at the table in ways that encourage our partners to pay even more attention to (and not neglect) one another?

5. What impact am I having on local power dynamics?

If we choose a single inside leader through whom to work, support, or represent us to their people, we are likely creating a power-brokering patron in the local community. Outsiders should not choose inside leaders for the community; we should recognize the existing leaders who have been locally chosen and work through them in full awareness of other leaders in their community.



6. Is my partnership with the whole community or dependent on one or two local contacts?

If my partnership is with only one or two local contacts, then it is time to evaluate the partnership and consider a strong warning: *do not partner*. If we partner only with individuals, we are likely imposing individualist cultural norms on a collectivistic society.

7. Does the local community really own and want this solution?

Is this solution (or vision) shared by locals or held only by us? One litmus test is to determine if they want to pursue this solution if there are no financial incentives offered by the Western partner. We should arrive at the table with open hands and hearts, asking what it is that they want to do.

8. Who decides who goes when foreign nationals send workers as cross-cultural workers?

If we are going to raise up workers from the harvest, the churches within the harvest should take the lead in determining who should be sent and they should have an equity stake in their sending. Outsiders such as an American church or ministry like MRN may help with training and assessment, but the initial list of candidates needs to come from the churches/leaders in the community from which the workers originate. Remember, we will need to listen longer at the table to hear who our partners think should be sent.

9. Are the cross-cultural workers operating outside of their economic structure/resources?

In conversations with international partners, we have listened to the suggestion that Western churches should only provide long-term support for foreign workers who are working cross-culturally and cannot operate on any local resources.

If they are “near-culture” cross-cultural workers, help them develop local resources and support as part of their discipleship. If you provide any support from outside, there should be agreement on the length of commitment and on how to scale down outside funding sources within a short period of time with a locally or regionally sourced replacement funding strategy (e.g., 20% scale down per year over 5 years).



Background Principles for Healthy Partnerships in Patronage Cultures

As the Western Christian world acknowledges the colonial and paternalistic mistakes of its past, there are ever-increasing efforts to create more equitable partnerships with Christians in the global world. This search for improved partnerships is also affected by the fact that we are leaving an era where Christian mission was understood as emanating from the West. The original strategies of the missionary movement were designed for one-way traffic: for sending and for giving. We are now clearly entering a thrilling era where we see movements of people taking the gospel from anywhere to everywhere! It is truly an exciting time.

However, we must now face the reality that being a global Christian minority will be new for us in the West. The future will require a shift in perspective where the Church in the West increasingly becomes partners alongside God's work through others in the global world rather than the initiators of works globally.

As such, the Western Christian world is making an ever-increasing effort to relinquish control and create more equitable partnerships with Christians in the global South. Yet, partnership in global mission is complicated, and there is still a sense of ambiguity about how the West can achieve mutually beneficial cooperation that empowers the global church and increases long-term kingdom fruit.

In a healthy missional partnership, believers from different backgrounds collaborate and give to each other. This relationship is built on trust, mutual recognition, and reciprocal exchange. It avoids the separation created by expressions of “senior” and “junior,” “parent” and “child,” or even “older” and “younger.” It is a term designed to show how different parts of the church belong to one another and find their fulfillment through sharing a common life.¹³¹

A healthy partnership is built on trust, mutual recognition, and reciprocal exchange.

We are convicted that partnerships with the global world need to be built around interdependent relationships that are as genuine in relationship as they are in their pursuit of task; that collaborate with and empower local vision rather than foreign objectives; and which work with communities rather than with individuals themselves.

Each word in the preceding statement holds principles and values that we find vital to improving the health of Western partnership with global work.

Perhaps the biggest take-away from our research is the conviction that the West should never function as the exclusive patron in foreign partnerships. For the most part, the West has been oblivious to the social rules that govern patron/client cultures. As such, we have often not been aware of the scope of the impact



that providing money and other resources has. Our global partners in a patron/client context have often felt a moral obligation to submit as clients to agendas that are not their own. This lack of sensitivity and cultural insight has quietly led to unequal partnerships with the West in charge and often oblivious to it.

The contrasting approaches of mutuality vs. control is a central problem in the mission partnership discussion. The task orientation of Western cultures often views mission as a goal to be accomplished and people as objects to be used to accomplish the goal. However, when relational cultures feel they are objects to be used to achieve goals, it is insulting and degrading. Our emphasis on accountability to our goals and metrics which we use to measure our progress often perpetuates dominance, not mutuality.

Partnership Recommendations

within Patronage Cultures

1. A partner who funds a project becomes the patron, and the recipient of funding becomes the client. The cultural norms and social rules of client/patron relationships now define the partnership, not the Western cultural norms of the giver.
2. When Western partners become patrons of indigenous leaders, this client/patron relationship will most often work around and take priority over existing leadership dynamics and accountability.
3. Partnerships in patronage cultures should mirror Christ's example of virtuous patronage, not the world's practice of self-serving patronage.
 - a. There is a clear distinction between a worldly patron and a godly patron.
 - i. A worldly patron consolidates power for his/her own benefit. **A godly patron does not keep power but empowers others.**
 - ii. A worldly patron is interested in their own ends and honor. **A godly (virtuous) patron is most interested in honoring God and others.** *All partnerships should ask the question, "Does this partnership give honor to God and others, or is it focused on building honor/status for our own ends?" (See Philippians 2.)*
 - iii. A worldly patron clings to control of finances, which is the means of maintaining position and control. A worldly patron is resistant to being accountable to anyone. **The godly patron is benevolent, finding joy**

in giving away the resources that have been given to them. A virtuous patron has the spirit of John the Baptist, *"I must decrease, he must increase"* (John 3:30).

- iv. **A virtuous patron values resources as entrusted to them by God to be used to serve their clients.** Their personal identity and value are rooted in their relationship with Christ, not the control over the resources. This contrasts with a worldly patron who values resources as essential to their personal identity and value and will use these resources to ensure their own security and comfort before their clients.

4. **A virtuous patron helps other patrons grow into their roles and is delighted to reproduce other patrons.** That is, the clients of Jesus are empowered, not disempowered. They became "friends" (equitable partners) and are ultimately released to do even greater things than He (John 14:12).
5. Instead of partnering directly with individuals, churches or groups should ideally come into agreements with local authority structures who will oversee and support those individuals.
- A partnership in a patronage culture is most organic when it is group-oriented.
 - When the Western partner contributes money and resources, these resources should be given to the local group leaders to dispense and not directly to an individual.
 - 80% of the world is not individualistic like us in the West; rather, they are collectivists. When we partner with individuals, we create contexts where the individual is obligated to be more accountable to the Western donor rather than

to his or her community. This dynamic furthers paternalism, worldly patronage, fosters corruption and dependency, and undermines the local community's sense of ownership in vision and accountability.

- i. Leaders in collectivistic societies are usually chosen and affirmed by the group. If a Western partner preemptively chooses a leader by giving them the resources of a patron, that leader will have an impact only if outside resources artificially prop up him/her. Once those resources are removed or depleted, the patron loses their influence



- d. Local leaders should be chosen by the local community and not by foreign partners.
6. Partner with a local sense of vision rather than our sense of vision for them. Paternalism is when we seek to help others with “our” sense of goals or our understanding of what they need that we developed for “them” but without “them.”
- a. Find ways to supplement and support local solutions rather than meeting the entire need yourself.
 - b. Include local people as equal partners (preferably the lead partners) in figuring out the solution in situations of need.
 - c. Partnerships that circumvent the local community's leadership will create new and foreign systems of leadership that are not indigenous.

- d. If local vision is absent or unclear, come alongside and coach/mentor to assist the local leaders in clarifying the vision. *Avoid telling others what their vision should be.*
- 7. Partnerships with global partners should value the relationship as much as or more than the desired outcome or agenda.**
- a. **Healthy relationships lead to healthy partnerships in the collectivistic world.**
 - b. **Global partnerships should strive for relational interdependency, not just task accomplishment. Our global brothers and sisters are family members, not projects. We can gain as much from them as they can from us.**
 - c. **Partnerships progress at the “speed of trust” (Covey), so spending time developing a foundation of trust is worth it.**



- 8. Adjust partnerships to cultural context and values.**
- a. **Partnerships are most healthy when both sides understand each other's cultural values and differences. Because every culture and context is different and quite complex, applying the same partnership agreement to different cultures will inevitably cause misunderstanding and conflict.**

9. Partnerships should never be exclusively built on money.
- Money will help a sound system operate more smoothly. Conversely, adding money to a broken system will not fix it but only multiply bad fruit.
 - Money should not be seen as the answer to partnership problems. It can serve as a catalyst for healthy partnerships.
 - Rather than overwhelming local giving by giving a disproportionately large amount, be sensitive to the scale and amount of giving.
 - Before giving funds, make sure both parties are intent on building the Kingdom of God instead of building their own kingdom. One way to discover this is by building relationships with the local patron's own clients. Be intentional about listening to them for clues about how local leaders use their influence and what they use their influence for.
 - Understand the power of precedence when initiating a new partnership. The initial agreements will set precedence, which eventually becomes tradition. It is extremely difficult to remove or even reduce salaries once started.
 - There are ditches on either side of the narrow road of healthy western financial involvement. Too much money will inhibit local giving and ownership, resulting in dependency. Too little money in impoverished settings will likely result in a strategy that cannot build enough momentum to overcome the poverty obstacles to stability and growth. Therefore,



seek to determine the amount of financial input that will achieve a balance between these two extremes.

- g. The amount of outside money should be commensurate to the stage of the movement. It is a mistake to pour in cash in the initial stage or to cut back in the later stages when the movement is growing quickly and has greater training and logistic needs. Western patrons who unilaterally stop or reduce funding will irreparably break trust and relationships in client/patron cultures.

10. We must also be accountable to our global partners.

- a. Accountability is a two-way street. They should help us understand our usefulness to them as well.



- b. Agree in advance about where accountability will be directed.
- c. Be sure to celebrate everyone who contributes, no matter how small.
- d. When it comes to collecting metrics and measuring outcomes - collect no data that does not benefit the local body of believers. What we measure needs to be tied to local understandings of results rather than our understandings of results, and what we measure needs to be perceived as a benefit to those of the local mission.

- e. Our reporting of what is happening in the field should be driven by the needs of the communities on the field rather than our needs back home.
11. Aim for interdependence and mutuality. The term for “one another” shows up about 100 times in the New Testament, so thoughtful consideration of others is not merely nice, it is necessary!
- a. For example - When people see us partnering with our global brothers and sisters, they should have a hard time discerning who is serving who.
 - b. We should work more towards *solidarity* than *charity*.

Conclusion

Joining one another at the table of partnership is key for fruitful and faithful participation in the mission of God. We will wrap up with two concluding thoughts.

1. Many westerners are unfamiliar with mediators or and assume they only are needed in situations of conflict. But, in non-western cultures, mediators or brokers play a role in many situations. So, when we are developing good partnerships in patronage societies, we do not need to do this on our own. There are people who can help you mediate a way to create a partnership at the table. Majority world Christians are used to using mediators and often expect that as a way to move forward and navigate complex relationships.
2. Let's remember that we serve a Lord who meets us at the Communion table - we are not on our own. So, coming together around the communion table for connection and worship with others is a great place to start in developing Christ centered partnerships. In this document we have considered complicated challenges, but these can be navigated with assistance from Christ and from Christ-like mediators. God is partnering with us, the people of God, as we seek to partner with others in mission.

Notes

[1] *Cross-Cultural Partnerships: Navigating the Complexities of Money and Missions* by Mary Lederleitner , 2010. Duane Elmer attended a conference where 2/3 of the audience were missionaries and 1/3 were First Nations believers. He asked the audience, "What comes to your mind when you hear the word Partnership?" The missionaries offered words like mutuality, sharing, respect, cooperation, and collaboration. After a long silence, a First Nation believer revealed, "When we hear the word partnership, what comes to our mind is that this is another way for the White man to control us." This feedback is supported by MRN's own research. During the Covid pandemic, MRN hosted listening groups that included church leaders around the world.

[2] The listening groups were hosted by MRN staff from June to October of 2020. A summary document summarizing major themes was published in November 2020.

[3] J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission?: Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), 184.

Additional Resources:

- "Patronage" - a visual definition at <https://honorshame.com/patronage-a-visual-defintion/>
- 7 Differences in Global Cultures at <https://honorshame.com/infographic-7-differences-in-global-cultures/>



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