

# **McAloo Partnernships**

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## **Reflections On Contemporary Indo - American Intercultural Missional Partnerships**

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## INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, with a heightened sense of interconnectedness and interdependency, intercultural partnership has become the buzzword, particularly in the political and corporate realms. Barrack Obama, the president of United States, during his visit to India in 2010, spoke at the combined session of the two houses of parliament (Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha) on the close partnership between the two largest democracies in the world. He called the Indo-American relationship “one of the defining partnerships of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Obama 2010).

Partnership has been a major theme of discussion in the church for a long period of time. However, there has been a fresh revisiting of the topic in the light of the emerging global and local realities, the rise of Southern Christianity, as well as the exponential increase in intercultural partnerships and short term missions. In the United States, from 1998 to 2005, the number of churches and mission agencies claiming that partnership is now a primary method for engaging in global missions has incredibly increased by 6900 percent (Lederleitner 2010:206). The number of short term “missionaries” grew from 120,000 in 1989 to 2,200,000 in 2006, and Americans spent an astounding \$1,600,000,000 on short term missions in 2006 alone (Corbett & Fikkert 2009:161).

In the Indian missions scenario, there are divergent views and perspectives regarding its relation with the western churches, mission agencies and charitable institutions. (I have used the term West and Western to refer to Euro-America in colonial times and primarily America in the contemporary era.) During my research for my PhD thesis regarding the persecution of the church in India, I asked many key Christian leaders how they viewed partnering with the West, and if such partnerships help or hurt them. I received a wide range of answers. While many expressed partnership with the West as a positive phenomenon if managed well, there are others who said it hurts, particularly if it leads to financial dependency and cultural domination, which will in turn hinder effective inculturation of the gospel in the Indian context.

There have been other research attempts into this issue. For example, Frampton Fox, in his research on foreign monetary support and dependency,

enumerates four categories of responses from Indian mission leaders – from least to most supportive of use of foreign funds – even though almost all of them were positive about receiving monetary assistance from abroad (Fox 2006: 140,141).

This article primarily draws information from my research data as well as my experiences in the Indian missions community, as a trainer of field missionaries and professor of missiological anthropology. I have used the term “McAloo Partnership” to denote the Indo-American intercultural missional partnership efforts, as “McAloo” is a type of burger introduced by McDonalds in India – a “contextualized” vegetarian version of McChicken (“aloo” means potato) that combines the American enterprise and Indian ethos.

In this article, I shall highlight some key issues regarding partnership between American and Indian churches and mission agencies, and also posit three positions or paradigms of partnership – ethnocentric exclusivity, subservient dependency, and intentional interdependency. Finally, I shall present the biblical ideal of church as the body of Christ as a model for effective interdependent intercultural partnership.

## **DO WE NEED THIS DEADLY DANCE?**

More than 100 years ago, a South Indian Tamil Christian from the Tirunelveli region created much consternation in the historic World Missionary Conference, held at Edinburg in 1910. Azariah – probably the most influential Indian Christian leader in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – concluded his speech at the conference with these words, “Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labors of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We ask for love. Give us friends” (Neill 1962:16).

This talk created such a stir, that an informal meeting was held to discuss the issue and the young Indian speaker. Azariah would later become the first Indian Anglican Bishop and his diocese of Dornakal grew from 50,000 to 250,000 in 30 years under his stewardship. As a result of this exponential church growth, he was involved in an ongoing controversy with Mahatma Gandhi over the issue of conversion, who also considered Azariah as his “Number One Enemy” (Harper 2000:7).

Though relatively unknown to the wider world when he made that speech, he boldly pointed to the Western missionary movement and its leaders that in spite of their great sacrificial service for the Lord, the local indigenous Christians often felt unloved and marginalized as they were not treated equally. They were perceived and paternalized as children and not as friends and partners in the gospel, their contribution reduced to a mere footnote in the annals of the accomplishment of Western missionaries, while the best among the local Christians were showcased as triumphalistic trophies of the Western missionary movement.

A century has gone by and much water has flowed in the Ganges. The context has dramatically changed and the center has shifted – from North to South – ushering in a new matrix for missions, but the issues raised by Azariah are still pertinent for the global church.

American missiologist Miriam Adeney narrates a story, which she had heard from an African Christian leader, that highlights partnership with American mission agencies. The story goes like this:

An elephant and mouse were good friends. One day, the elephant said, “Mouse, let’s have a party.” Animals came from far and near. They ate and drank, sang and danced. And nobody celebrated more exuberantly than the elephant. After the party was over, the elephant exclaimed, “Mouse, did you ever go to a better party? What a blast!” But the mouse did not answer. “Where are you?” the elephant called. Still there was no answer. Then he shrank back in horror. There at his feet lay the mouse; his body ground to the dirt, smashed by the exuberance of his friend, the elephant. The mission leader then said, “Sometimes that is what it is like to do mission with you Americans. It is like dancing with the elephants” (Corbett & Fikkert 2009:161,162).

Often, both Western and non-Western friends of mine object to this story. The Western ones feel that they are portrayed unfairly as if they are solely responsible for the whole problem. Some non-Western friends object to using this story as it portrays America as the dominant one (“elephant”) and the non-Western missions as a weakling (“mouse”), which may then reinforce the hegemony of the West in Christian missions. Both are legitimate concerns. However, I believe that in spite of all the talks regarding the shift in power from North to South, this analogy is valid as America still continues to define and dominate Christian missions in the key realms of ideas, institutions, and resources, particularly finance.

According to Todd Johnson, one of the key trends of contemporary global missions is that while Christianity has shifted from North to South demographically, it is still under the grip of Western influence. He quotes Moonjang Lee, “Though we talk about a post-Christian West and post-Western Christianity, the prevailing forms of Christianity in most parts of the non-Western world are still dominated by Western influences” (Johnson 2010:165).

While a century ago, Azariah asked for love and friendship from Western Christians, this African leader seems to suggest that friendship with elephants will lead to the demise of many mice. If so, is it necessary to partner with American Christians? Do we really need this deadly dance?

Based on this story, it is possible to take two extreme positions regarding partnership. The first position is this: Fearing getting trampled by the elephant, the mouse cuts off its friendship with the elephant, flees from it and lives in its own hole. Like this mouse, some would like to cut off all kinds of cooperation and collaboration with the West, which can lead to an unhealthy, ingrown Christianity. I call this position *ethnocentric exclusivity*. There is also another form of *ethnocentric exclusivity* where the self-sufficient elephant feels that it does not need the mouse and can dance on its own.

The second extreme position is this: The mouse lives in a slavish dependent relationship with the elephant, willing to dance to the elephant’s tune, even at the expense of its own identity and dignity. It turns into a parasite on the pachyderm, and survives by sucking its blood. I call this *subservient dependency*.

There is a third position, which I call *intentional interdependency*. In this story, all the blame is usually placed on the bigfoot, and the elephant is portrayed as the villain and the mouse as the victim, which I think is unfair. For this strange alliance to succeed, both the elephant and the mouse need to understand and accept themselves and each other, which involves loving, listening, and learning. Each must accept their own identity as well as incarnationally identify with the other and be willing to accommodate them so that together they can master the moves that will enable them to effectively dance without dominating or damaging the other.

Let us briefly take a closer look at these three positions – ethnocentric exclusivity, subservient dependency and intentional interdependency.

## I. ETHNOCENTRIC EXCLUSIVITY

In the Indian mission context, while many may not go to the extreme of totally cutting off their relations with their western counterpart, still there is a considerable degree of apprehension about partnering with Western churches, mission agencies, and charitable institutions due to the following reasons.

### *Breeds Dependency*

Too much reliance on the West, particularly for monetary purposes, can lead to slavish dependency, which can result in the loss of one's own identity and dignity. Fearing this tendency, there are many mission agencies that do not receive funds from abroad for their missional purposes, as a policy, even though they are open to partnership in other areas. For instance, the Friends Missionary Prayer Band, a South India-based Indian mission agency with nearly 2000 workers has an annual budget of 56 crores rupees (nearly 10 million US dollars – 1 dollar equals 60 rupees), and almost all their money is raised from Indians, both living in India and abroad. There are many such organizations in India, who as a matter of policy, receive money only from Indians.

### *Hinders Effective Inculturation*

Dependency dehumanizes persons as it reduces a partner to a parasite. An anemic, parasitic church is forced (or sometimes it willingly obliges) to submit to the dictates and domination of the West and to adopt its agenda and strategy, which may not be relevant in the Indian context, thereby seriously endangering its indigeneity.

### *Reinforces the Stereotyping of the Indian Church*

Partnership and close identification with the West tend to reinforce the stereotyping of Indian Christianity as a western religion and the Indian Church as a western subversive agent intent on destroying Indic religions, desecrating Indian culture(s) and destabilizing the nation.

*Leads to Moral Corrosion*

There are many incidents in India where money from the West has been misused or abused. Recently, some of the highest officials of the Church of South India were indicted and punished by Indian courts for swindling Tsunami relief funds from the West. Also, some Indian Christian leaders with western connections – some of them who study and return from the U.S or who go there often for fundraising – tend to create little Americas in their own contexts through their affluent lifestyle and owning prime properties. These islands of prosperity in a vast ocean of poverty create a barrier between the leader and other Indian Christians and also brings criticism from non-Christians.

*Prior Bad Experiences*

Some of the prior bad experiences of dancing with the elephants can lead to severing relations and partnerships with the Western agencies and churches.

I believe, all these concerns are legitimate and adequate caution and utmost care needs to be employed in our partnerships with the West.

The other form of ethnocentric exclusivity is probably far more dangerous and debilitating to true partnership. If the first one was caused by fear – fear of being run over by the dominant other and losing one's identity and dignity – this is inspired by pride, where the haughty elephant tends to look down upon the mouse and decides to go solo. It is a form of Christianity that is self-centered and self-contained and sees no need to learn or receive from anyone outside its fold. Sometimes Western Christianity comes across as if it needs nothing to learn from others, particularly non-Western Christians, just like the T-shirt of a man I saw in Chennai airport, which loudly proclaimed, "I Believe in Myself – No Cautions, No Suggestions, No Instructions, No Advice."

The unwillingness to receive and learn from the other is evident from the fact that many western churches are still shaped by social Darwinism and driven by the mono-directional, mono-cultural understanding of missions, which belonged to the colonial era. Even though there has been a lot of talk in seminary and mission circles regarding multi-directional missions, "from everywhere to everywhere." I truly wonder how much of that has percolated into the American churches. How many American churches, that send a vast number of short term mission teams,

sometimes kids and youth, to “minister” in the non-western world are willing to listen and learn from non-western voices? Frecia Johnson raises this issue and calls for “Reciprocal Contextualization,” as she writes,

The purpose of such reciprocity is to create respect for and recognition in the home churches and training institutions of the value of the perspectives of the receiving peoples .... What have the missionaries and their home constituencies learned about God and His works from the receiving peoples? (Johnson 2005:481)

Unfortunately, for some there is nothing worthwhile to learn from some parts of the world. Franky Schaeffer in his foreword for the book *The Gandhi Nobody Knows* by Richard Greneir, arrogantly questions if there is anything or anyone from India from whom western Christians can learn. In responding to an article in *Christianity Today*, on the title “Learning from Gandhi: Does Western Christianity have anything to learn from the Hindu who learned so much from Christ,” Schaeffer states, “There are undoubtedly regions of the world from which we do indeed have something to learn, but India? Hinduism?” (Schaeffer 1983:vii,viii).

These two forms of ethnocentric exclusive positions, whether inspired by fear or pride, are undesirable, at least for three reasons: biblical, anthropological and practical.

### **(i) Biblical**

The Bible portrays the Church as the body of Christ with both local and global dimensions. The Christian leaders, whom I interviewed, who had a positive attitude towards partnering with Western Christians repeatedly invoked the biblical idea of church as the body of Christ as their main reason for partnership. They said that no matter what, we cannot cut off ourselves from the other because we belong to the same body, with Christ as the Head. The parts of the body may vary in their shapes, sizes, and utility, but all are interconnected and interdependent. Ethnocentric exclusivity overlooks the fact that all followers of Christ, as the body of Christ, are intricately and irretrievably interwoven with one another.



## (ii) Anthropological

An ethnocentric exclusive position is undesirable, just as is extreme cultural relativism in the field of anthropology. It hinders meaningful relationships with the ‘other’, which will also stunt the potential for growth. In any culture, we need both the *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) viewpoints. While the *emic* view is essential, the *etic* view is also needed as cultures can develop blind spots and fresh eyes are needed to locate them. This is highlighted by a Chinese proverb, “If you want to know what water is, don’t ask the fish” (Zacharias 2000:ix). We need each other to become better, wholesome followers of Christ by listening and learning from one another. A note of caution – while the *etic* view is needed, adequate care should be taken so that it does not muffle or mute the *emic* views and voices.

## (iii) Pragmatic

In an increasingly globalized world, where interconnectedness and interdependency is the order of the day in the economic, political, and technological realms, the ethnocentric exclusive position becomes untenable from a pragmatic point of view. Organizational anthropologist Geert Hofstede writes that in the light of many global challenges facing humankind, “intercultural cooperation has become a prime condition for the survival for humankind” (Hofstede *et al* 2010:426).

## II. SUBSERVIENT DEPENDENCY

In the Indian mission context, subservient dependency is common, particularly in the realm of finance. I shall briefly highlight how dependency in the area of money and technology can mar true partnership.

### *Money Matters*

Money matters do matter a lot. Jesus spoke more about it than any other issue and there are at least 2,350 verses in scripture that deal with money and resources (Lederlaitner 2010:101).

During my research, many of the Christian leaders were vocal and vehement in expressing their reservation for receiving money from the West. There are some, however, who said that it is better to receive monetary help only for

socio-economic projects for the poor and marginalized and not for evangelistic purposes. There are still others who said that there is nothing wrong to receive fund for mission efforts within the government prescribed legal parameters, as other religious groups and charitable organizations also receive western help.

Money is needed, but it is not everything. While I personally do not object to receiving funds, with proper accountability and monitoring structures and also within the legal parameters set by the government, I would like to highlight some of the unhealthy practices in today's mission scenario due to an overemphasis and improper handling of finances.

### *Purse Strings and Puppet Strings*

If not handled carefully, receiving money can lead to subservient dependency of the Indian churches upon the American churches and mission agencies, which will also subjugate them to their domination. The hands that hold the purse strings also tend to control the puppet strings, thereby reducing persons and partners into mere puppets. In a partnership, when dollar is valued more than people and rupee is exalted at the expense of relationships, then such a partnership is neither biblical nor desirable from a kingdom perspective. Also, the deification of the dollar can lead to the pathetic prostration of Indian Christian missions at the feet of the West.

### *Dependency and Cultural Insensitivity*

Financial dependency also makes some Christian leaders – both American and Indian – to indulge in practices that may be culturally insensitive and detrimental to Indian missions.

A good friend of mine who is also a mission trainer recently confided to me that a teaching material developed by an American pastor was sent to their organization to find out if they would teach it to Indian Christians, and that Americans would pay the bill for running the program. The first illustration in the material was related to an incident in the field of baseball. My friend expressed his apprehension to them saying that he himself, who has visited and studied in America, does not understand baseball and hence the other Indian pastors definitely would not understand it. So he enquired if he could modify the illustration to suit

the Indian audience. The answer was a big ‘no,’ and that he should neither change baseball or even the name of the person in the illustration. So his organization rejected the offer. When I pointed out that in India there will always be takers if the price is right, even if his organization has done the right thing by rejecting the offer, he said another famous institution gave in to their demands and are now running the program.

Unfortunately, in many cases, there is not much concern if the material is suitable to the audience or culturally relevant to the context. Too often, there seems to be a willingness to bend backwards to accommodate Western workers and teaching materials. The reason is not necessarily the content of the course material but the Western contact and the money factor. For the right price, it seems that there are some Indian Christians who may be willing to even translate the American phone directory into the vernacular, and teach it as a course and send reports (of course with photos!) to the West saying that it was a blessing to many.

In the Indian mission context, there seems to be an affinity for mission strategies that emanate from overseas. Uncritical acceptance and uncontextualized application of some of these mission strategies and mega movements – that seem to originate from the classrooms of California or boardrooms of Boston – may have serious ramifications for the future of Christian missions in India.

Some mission programs are often conceived and executed in a militaristic manner by “mapping” the local area, fixing “targets” and conducting “campaigns.” The militarization of Christian rhetoric is particularly offensive for people living in countries that have experienced colonial subjugation. Unfortunately, many Indian Christians do not look into these issues critically or they choose to keep quiet due to their over-dependency on the West for their resources.

Donors must also be missiologically educated, as there have been many instances in India, of donors (including Indian donors) insisting on contributing something or building a church in a particular pattern, which may not be compatible to that particular cultural context. Yet the donor’s dictates are diligently followed lest they offend them and lose out on their resources. A mission leader of one of India’s largest mission agencies told me that a South Indian sponsor was willing to donate money to build a bell tower in a church in Punjab. However, this leader, who is anthropologically well-informed, objected to it, saying that one should not needlessly introduce something (like a church bell) that does not exist in that

culture. But the promotional director of the agency insisted on building the bell tower and said, “If we don’t get the money and build it, another agency will do it and we will lose the donor and the money.”

### *Hi-Tech Dependency*

Dependency is also created due to the importation and implementation of technology that may not be relevant in a particular culture. One of the key factors for the dependency of mission movements in the two-thirds world on Western powers is that they have unfortunately imbibed the Western values of viewing mission as a capital-intensive, technology-driven, entrepreneurial enterprise, where efficiency and time-bound results are glorified.

Rene Padilla cautions against the Americanized “culture Christianity” and its obsession with numbers and technology;

In order to gain the greatest number of followers, it is not enough for “culture Christianity” to turn the gospel into a product; it also has to distribute it among the greatest number of consumers of religion. For this the twentieth century has provided it with the perfect tool – technology. The strategy for the evangelization of the world thus becomes a question of mathematical calculation (1985:16,17).

American missiologist Charles Taber highlights how this inordinate obsession with technology has facilitated dependency in missions;

So efficiency requires the maximum use of advance technical devices – all aimed at saving time. And this begins to affect our attitude towards all reality. Is the task evangelism? We immediately think of money for travel, honoraria, media, printing bills, rental of facilities.... We quite literally lack the capability to imagine doing things other than this capital-intensive, technology-intensive way. And we bring these ideas along wherever we do the Lord’s work. Even where technology is inordinately expensive. Even where believers are all but destitute. And even where the most abundant resource is willing minds, willing hands. Soon, however, it becomes apparent that local Christians can’t pick up the tab. And because

they also lack the know-how to operate the system, we end up taking over (quoted in Adeney, 2003:86).

To minimize this dependency, Miriam Adeney gives us few insightful questions to ask ourselves when involved in “culturally-sensitive transformation” in cross-cultural situations:

- (i). Does the project fit with local worldviews, concepts, and values?
- (ii). Does the project fit with local social structure?
- (iii). Does the project fit with local economic resources? (2003:96-102)

### *Short Term Visits and Long Term Victims*

The exponential rise of short term missions in contemporary missions has facilitated closer and deeper relations in many inter-cultural partnerships. However, short term visitation by teams can also lead to long term victimization of the hosts if it is not handled correctly. While most Indians are good hosts and very hospitable, many may not disclose their discomfort or correct the shortcomings of the short term teams due to cultural factors (like saving face, being a gracious host, etc.) as well as pragmatic concerns like fear of losing the monetary benefits.

Recently a group of Christians from an Asian country landed in an Indian city. They went to a temple and started to prayer-walk around it. A friend of mine gently reprimanded and reminded them that this could cause serious trouble for the local Christian community. This zealous group of young people, who could hardly converse in English or in the local language, would create serious conflicts and then leave for the safe confines of their home country. The backlash will be borne by Indian Christians. What we need today is common sense, prayerful people with insights, rather than praying at non-Christian religions sites.

Within India, I have heard repeated complaints from both indigenous and cross-cultural witnesses serving in North India regarding big groups of South Indian sponsors visiting their area of work, which creates not only logistical problems but also implants suspicion in the minds of the local community. When they share this problem with their leaders, they tend not to listen because of their financial dependency on these sponsors.

In Gujarat, a cross-cultural witness had developed very good rapport with the local people and had bought a place to build a church. However, a big group of people from South India, who were supposed to sponsor the church building, visited this site. The next day, when the worker went there, the very local people who were favorable to him previously, beat him up. He told me that this big group created a suspicion in the minds of the people and hence they turned hostile.

### III. INTENTIONAL INTERDEPENDENCY

While one must be cautious to avoid the two extreme positions, ethnocentric exclusivity and subservient dependency, the third position, intentional interdependency, enables us to have partnerships that are biblically compatible, culturally relevant, and practically useful. The biblical ideal of the church as the body of Christ helps us to better understand this intentional interdependent partnership.

#### *The Body of Christ*

The Bible portrays many metaphors to help us understand different dimensions of the church, so that we can arrive at a holistic picture of what a church is. One of the metaphors, which I think is pertinent to the issue of partnership, is that of the church as the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:12-31).

As mentioned earlier, during my research, many of the key leaders in India said that there must be positive relations between the Indian and Western churches as we all belong to the body of Christ. As the research was focused primarily on Gujarat, I believe the mercantile ethos and the widespread diaspora of the Gujarati community all across the globe may also be a factor for the positive view of the Gujarati Christian leaders regarding partnering with Western churches.

What was interesting, however, was the theological justification they gave for such a partnership with their Western counterparts by repeatedly invoking the biblical metaphor of the church as the body of Christ. This theme of being part of the local and global body of Christ would be raised repeatedly in my interviews with my research participants.

*The Church as Swadeshi (local) and Sarvadeshi (universal)*

In the light of the ongoing discussion about the partnership between Indian and Western churches, it is imperative to emphasize that the Church is truly glocal, with both local (particular) and global (universal) dimensions. The church in India has both a unique expression in its local context (of course, even within India, there are multiple unique expressions based on the local contexts) and also has a universal presence as it belongs to a wider community of people as well.

C. V. Mathew writes, “Christian church is always both a universal (*sarvadeshi*) and local (*swadeshi*) entity. If one is nullified, the other becomes meaningless and the Church ceases to be the Church” (2002:58). Andrew Walls points to the “indigenous” and “pilgrim” dimensions of Christians, which highlight both the rootedness of the gospel in a particular culture and also the translatability and universality of the gospel in all cultures. He writes,

Just as the indigenizing principle, itself rooted in the Gospel, associates Christians with the *particulars* of their culture and group, the pilgrim principle, in tension with the indigenizing and equally of the Gospel, by associating them with things and people outside the culture and group, is in some respects a *universalizing* factor (2006:9).

These two dimensions have to be kept in tension and an overemphasis on any one may result in a distorted notion of a biblical view of the church. On the basis of the biblical metaphor of the church as the body of Christ, I believe we cannot cut ourselves off from the global dimension of the church and we must have a dynamic partnership based on equality, integrity, and interdependency. However, the danger is that if the local dimension is not adequately rooted in the native soil, and if the global dimension tends to dominate the local expressions, then the church will lose its authenticity and will be seen as foreign and alien in the local context.

The biblical paradigm of the body of Christ presents us important themes for an effective interdependent partnership (I Corinthians 12:12-31). I shall briefly highlight four of them.

## (i) Equality

True partnership is possible only when we grasp the biblical truth that all the parts of the body, though they may differ in sizes, shapes, and functions, are inherently equal, with Christ alone as its head. This equality is evident in Creation (All created in the image of God – Genesis 1:27), Redemption (All have sinned – Romans 3:23), and in Consummation (Redeemed multitudes from all the nations and tribes stand before the throne and the Lamb is on the throne – Revelation 7:9). If this spiritual dimension of equality is not understood and appropriated, we will tend to look down on each other based on money, influence, status, and numbers.

Indian social scientists like Sudhir Kakar and Pavan Varma have pointed out that Indian society exhibits strong hierarchical tendencies and high power distance which may not affirm the equal value and worth of all individuals (Kakar & Kakar 2007:7-24, Varma 2004:21-26). At the same time, there is a propensity in Western and other materially affluent societies – influenced by cultural evolutionism and social Darwinism – to consider themselves perched at the apex of world order. They also tend to exhibit – in the words of an Indian Christian development practitioner – a “god complex” that denies the equal worth of other human beings (Corbett&Fikkert 2009:65).

## The Church is Flat?

Thomas Friedman in his best-selling book *The World is Flat* claims that the globalized world is increasingly becoming flat due to various factors (2005), a fact that may not be entirely correct. However, the true church as the body of Christ must be “flat.” The church has only one Head – which is Jesus Christ. No one particular place or region or individual or institution can claim or act as if it is the head.

The notion of privileging a particular place or region as the center of Christianity – whether it is Western or Southern Christianity – creates a geographical center of the Christian world, which invariably tends to act as if it were the head. Lamin Sanneh argues that there are no geographical or cultural centers, but only plurality of peripheries with Christ at the center. He writes,

Christianity triumphs by the relinquishing of Jerusalem or any fixed universal center, be it geographical, linguistic or cultural, with



the result that we have a proliferation of centers, languages and cultures within the Church. Christian ecumenism is a pluralism of the periphery with only Christ at the centre. (Unpublished paper, quoted in Frykenberg 2003:3)

## **(ii) Integrity**

A body can function well as a unit only when there is integrity and trust based on truthfulness. As William Barclay writes,

We can only live in safety because the senses and nerves pass true messages to the brain. If in fact the senses and the nerves took to passing false messages to the brain, if for instance, they told the brain that something was cool and touchable when in fact it was hot and burning, life would very soon come to an end. A body can only function accurately and healthily when each part of it passes true messages to the brain and to the other parts. If then we are all bound into one body, that body can only function when we speak the truth. All deception impairs the working of the body of Christ (2002:184).

A lot of partnership breakdown happens due to a trust deficit, and the failure – of both the donors and receivers – to create an environment of trust, transparency, and truthfulness. It is imperative to have a proper accountability process for fundraising, receiving, implementing, and reporting. However, if the donor has a skeptical scrutinizing spirit and acts more like an IRS agent than a fellow Christian, a trust deficit occurs. At the same time, if the receiver tends to hide information or hype their results, a trust deficit will also occur.

An American friend of mine, who has been involved in assisting Indian missions for many years told me, “If all the reports that emanate from India are put together, India would have been saved many times over.” Sadly it is true. While a few are involved in willful deception and distortion (adding, or multiplying) results to satisfy their donors, there is also a duplication of numbers. However, the American church also must reflect on and rectify its glorification of numbers, obsession with bigness, and drive for result-oriented efficiency, which results in mere report producing ministries. George Barna comments on the American church,

For several decades, the church has relied upon greater sums of money, better techniques, bigger numbers and facilities, and more impressive credentials as the means to influence society at large. These elements have failed us; in our efforts to serve God, we have crowded out God himself (quoted in Webber 2002:132).

Obsession with statistics also leads to the objectification of people as members of a community are reduced to mere numbers.

In the Indian context, some mission agencies ask their workers to set targets (number of “souls to be saved”) for each month and year. This has resulted in malpractices in the mission fields like inflated numbers, hurried baptisms of new believers, and a serious negligence of post-baptismal care and nurture. This has also led to an alarming attrition of new believers, particularly among the *adivasis* (indigenous communities) in India.

### **(iii) Responsibility**

The concept of the church as the body of Christ as a model for interdependent partnership also enables us to grasp our responsibility to one another – both locally and globally – and to be sensitive to one another’s needs, peculiarities, and particularities. Each part has to look out for the other because all parts are intertwined and interdependent for effective functioning. No one part can willingly injure or impede the other. We are responsible for one another and we must be careful in every way not to endanger our fellow Christians through our actions, attitudes, and articulations.

Western Christians and mission leaders must act with wisdom when they make statements regarding India or the religions of India. In this global era of satellite television, a statement made in America can harm Christians in India or elsewhere. When Jerry Falwell made a disparaging remark against Muhammad on American television (CBS 60 Minutes), there were protests in Kashmir (*The Hindu*, 2002a) and Gujarat (*The Hindu*, 2002b) in the following days, seriously jeopardizing Christian-Muslim relations in India.

The critics of Christianity in India are “consistently scanning and monitoring the Christian world, both inside and outside India” (Lobo 2002:142). The Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) cautions us to be careful of “what we

say or write for any medium at all, including letters, reports, songs, prayers, and material on the Internet, for the boundaries between in-house and public domain are disappearing” (Howell (ed) 2002:190). The Evangelical Fellowship of India has also published guidelines for using non-offensive language in witnessing, which is helpful to both Indians and the global Church.

Vicious verbal attacks on the gods of Hindus, propaganda banners like “India for Christ in 10 years,” hype regarding church growth and the number of Christians, all must be avoided. Stan Guthrie cites Ralph Winter’s negative comments on Hinduism in the November-December 1994 issue of *Mission Frontiers* magazine, which created a huge outcry in India. Ralph Winter later apologized and has withdrawn this offending article from the *Mission Frontiers* website (Guthrie 1999:471).

A Indian Christian leader offers two important suggestions to international mission leaders regarding the role of rhetoric in Christian mission:

1. That we will not use language behind the back of a non-Christian about him and his culture and his location that we will not use face to face when we are witnessing to him and sharing the message and love of Christ.
2. That we will acknowledge that what is right in America is not necessarily right for India (or other pre-dominantly non-Christian nations) and that we will have a major review of international Christian publicity and reports put out by the major alliances, networks, and federations (Guthrie 1999: 476, 477).

#### **(iv) Unity in Diversity**

The body can function effectively, not only when every part does its work well individually, but also when they can work collectively and in unity. This unity is not uniformity, but a unity in diversity. While in many issues there may be a divergence of positions and a difference of opinions, unity is brought about by oneness in Christ and by sharing a common cause. So, in the body of Christ, diversity is not tolerated, but celebrated as each part of the body does not compete with the other, but complements and completes the other. Understanding cultural differences is critical for forging this unity in diversity.

## PARTNERSHIP AND CULTURAL ISSUES

Many of the partnerships that begin with noble intentions collapse due to a lack of awareness regarding cultural differences and how to deal with them effectively. Lederleitner claims that cultural issues like status, face, and time, and also cultural differences regarding money, can play a critical role in debilitating vibrant partnerships (2010:33-66). She writes,

Partners from different cultures and contexts start working together with the hope of accomplishing great things for the kingdom of God. Yet despite their noble dreams and aspirations, working through cultural differences that surround money can become overwhelming at times. Over the years I have witnessed often that these cultural differences about how funds are utilized and accounted for cause cross-cultural partnerships to come unglued. (2010:21)

Due to cultural differences and historical situations even the term “partnership” may mean different things to different people. Duane Elmer narrates an incident in a conference held in Canada where he spoke on the theme of partnership. Some two-thirds of the participants were Canadian missionaries and one-third were First Nations people. Duane asked the whole group this question “What comes to your mind when you hear the word partnership?” The missionaries said sharing, mutuality, respect, cooperation, collaboration etc. After some silence, a member of the First Nations said, “When we hear the word partnership, what comes to our mind is that this is another way for the white man to control us” (Elmer 2010: 11).

Sherwood Lingenfelter narrates a personal story, regarding a workshop, which he and his wife conducted in Cameroon that brought together Western and African partners from fourteen African nations (2007:45-48). At the beginning of the two-week workshop, he separated the Western and African participants into two groups and posed three questions to them: (i) Define partnership, (ii) What are the character qualities you expect in your partners, and (iii) What do you expect to contribute to this partnership. The answers differed significantly.

The Western partners primarily defined partnership as “relationships to complete the task” whereas the Africans viewed it as “relations of commitment to

God and to one another for the work of ministry.” Regarding the character qualities expected from the other, the westerners emphasized “work values” like reliability and commitment to achieving the goals, whereas the Africans’ emphasized “social values” like willingness to love others and be generous. The Western partners viewed their contribution to the partnership in the realms of “training, money and facilitation of the project” whereas African partners viewed their contribution as “relationships that were complementary, meaning mutual sharing of differences in kind, but of equal value and priority.” They also valued “open sharing of all available resources in a process that emphasizes mutual, rather than superior/inferior relationships.”

Lingenfelter makes an interesting observation. While the two groups at the beginning of the workshop expressed their differences and difficulties in forging meaningful partnership, even after the workshop ended they continued to operate with assumptions regarding the supremacy of their own cultural values. Hence, “they were unable to negotiate effectively either their cultural differences or their spiritual commitments in order to engage together in kingdom work” (2007:47). This shows not only the deep rootedness of our cultural conditioning, but also the need to constantly scrutinize and evaluate our cultural values and ethos in the light of Scripture and kingdom values.

## CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the rich diversity that exists within the kingdom of God that calls us to not only worship but also work together, Native American scholar Randy Woodley writes, “God’s new song cannot be sung solo. We must all sing it together, embracing and not restricting our diversity” (2001:35). By God’s grace, let the “mouse” and the “elephant” hold their hands together, and walk and work unitedly, not tolerating but celebrating their diversity, serving with a spirit of humility, equality, integrity, and interdependency.

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