

FORMULA FOR CHURCH/MISSION RELATIONSHIPS

J. Allen Thompson

Dr. Thompson, Miami, Florida, U.S.A., is
General Director of the West Indies Mission.

"Effective partnership between Christians of the West and the Christians of Asia and Africa is one of the vital needs of the Christian mission of our time." Since Canon Max Warren wrote those words in 1961, broad and intense discussion on church/mission relations has dominated world mission thinking. Books and articles have been written, congresses convened, surveys taken. The end is not yet.

In all, the debate has been helpful. Volunteer mission societies with superficial ecclesiastical roots have been forced to restudy the doctrine of the church and discover principles for their relationships. Denominational boards with a settled ecclesiology and fixed church/mission outlooks have been challenged to reexamine their structures as possible causes of apathy in fulfilling the Great Commission. As a result, relationships between churches and missions that appeared fixed are giving way to new forms that give evidence of the dynamic of God in life and service.

Basically, two types of relationships built on distinct truths form the spectrum of current patterns.

Integration. Based on the view that the church of Jesus Christ is enduring and the agent of evangelism, most denominational societies follow the policy of amalgamation so that their missionaries from abroad become part of the structure of the emerging church overseas. Paul Rees, an exponent of this view, writes:

Some form of parallelism may serve as a temporary measure but it is not the wave of the future. It is the gurgle of the past. Neither continuing parallelism nor planned withdrawal is what the Asian and African Christians want from the missionaries. They want integration, membership, the kind of mutual commitment that makes of twain one.

In a more recent editorial, Dr. Rees contends that confusion in church/mission relationships arises from the unresolved question of the "comparative validity of the church on the one hand and, on the other, the separate missionary society."

Separation. The opposing view, built on the premise that mission societies are not churches but "friends of the church" commissioned to proclaim the Gospel, holds that missions should retain their identity and work alongside the emerging church. C. Darby Fulton of the Presbyterian U.S. church wrote in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*:

The key word is cooperation — a mutual recognition of the autonomy of each, and a resolute mind to work in harmony of purpose and program. The functions of the two bodies are different. The mission is not a church. It does not engage in ecclesiastical control. It therefore offers its services to the national church ... by presenting

itself as a task force.

A similar stand was taken by the delegates of the mission congress held in Wheaton, Illinois, in April, 1966:

The proper relationship between churches and missions can only be realized in a cooperative partnership in order to fulfill the mission of the Church to evangelize the world in this generation The missionary society exists to evangelize, to multiply churches and to strengthen the existing churches. Therefore we recognize a continuing distinction between the church established on the field and the missionary agency.

It is too simplistic a view, however, to presume that the question of church/mission structures is resolved by this dichotomy. In fact it borders on distortion. Far too many actual relationships have elements of both concepts. This either-or dichotomizing methodology commits us to a rigidity incapable of adjusting to the rapid march of history, incapable of creative "experimentation and response" to the tremendous opportunities of our day. Form must remain fluid if it is to be effective.

How can this be done? In this paper I propose an *approach* to church/mission relationships, not a structure; a methodology, not a specific pattern. The formula I submit includes three elements: biblical principles as foundational, a strategy that is dynamic, and a "mentality" that is open and sacrificial.

Isolate biblical principles

The Bible provides broad and basic principles, not detailed organizational patterns. Therefore it is very difficult to isolate specific guidelines that defend a particular church/mission structure. Granted this problem; I contend that the discovery of related principles provides the *modus operandi* which will bring release, freedom, and answers to the dilemma we face in given situations. The principles once isolated are applied according to the needs of culture, stage of church growth, effectiveness, and possibility. The following principles enunciated by leaders of the old China Inland Mission as they faced transition in the mid-60s illustrate my point:

1. **The missionary** — The validity of the role of the missionary arises from the continuing function of the New Testament apostle. He proclaims the Gospel to the unbelieving world (Romans 1:5; Galatians 2:7-9) and organizes converts into local congregations (Acts 14:21-23; Titus 1:5). This role is distinct from the prophetic and pastor-teacher roles (Ephesians 4:11). Furthermore, the missionary is as permanent an expression of the life and witness of the church as the pastor-teacher. From this, we conclude that missionaries are to be part of God's work until Christ returns.

2. **The mission** — The New Testament distinguishes between structured local congregations (churches) and the structured apostolic band called by God to evangelize the heathen and plant new churches. Whereas the apostles were of the Church, their corporate ministry of missionary outreach necessitated among themselves patterns of leadership and organization, recruitment and finance, training and discipline, distinct from comparable patterns within local congregations. This significant distinction gives biblical

sanction to today's structured missionary fellowship.

3. *Church and mission* — Because of the absence of biblical precedent, it seems questionable for any missionary society to allow itself to become fully assimilated into any local ecclesiastical structure. Its functions cannot be successfully duplicated by any one congregation or by several congregations working together. If attempted, this eventually reduces the missionary task of God's people to mere church-to-church interchange, something that would soon eventuate in no one "coveting earnestly" the apostolic gift (I Cor. 12:28-31). Hence, if God intends both church and mission to retain their separateness there must be some solution to the tension that currently exists between national church and western mission.

4. *Cooperation in mission* — The Apostle Paul in his missionary activity never sought to commence a new work in any locale without first seeking to relate himself to that which God had begun in the area prior to his arriving on the scene (Acts 19:1-7; Romans 15:23, 24). A parochial outlook was foreign to his spirit and practice. Today's missionary must likewise be concerned to strengthen the life and witness of each congregation he touches, while not losing his sense of priority for "the regions beyond."

5. *Flexibility in mission* — Missionaries are not to regard themselves individually or corporately as either central or enduring when compared with the local Christians and churches that have resulted from their ministry. In the final analysis national Christians and local congregations, by their permanence of existence and possibilities for continuous outreach, are God's tools for preaching the Gospel to every creature (Acts 19:10). On the other hand the permanence of the apostolic calling implies the inevitability of its constant change and adaptation.

These principles suggest the following implications:

1. God has ordained that world evangelism should be the responsibility of his church. Churches are therefore responsible and accountable to God to carry out his missionary purpose.

2. Historically, God has raised up organizations to assist and serve the church in fulfilling God's missionary purpose. Christian organizations that remain unrelated to the church must justify the reason for their existence. "Missionary agencies that administer their affairs without authority *from*, consultation *with*, or accountability *to* the churches must find their models elsewhere than in the New Testament."

3. While retaining its identity, the mission should increasingly surrender its functions as the church is able to assume them. The church may mature to such a stage that the presence of the mission is no longer needed even in a secondary role. In such a case the mission may consider its objectives completed and rechannel its resources to other unevangelized areas, alone, or preferably in conjunction with the national church.

4. Missionaries are to identify with the church on their field, worship and serve through it, and be under its authority in this relationship.

Develop a dynamic strategy

Step two in our formula is the structuring of a strategy that incorporates the principles agreed upon. Most of us in missions are activists,

not theologians. For that reason we are not enamored of biblical presuppositions. Beyond that we are "talkers," not strategists, and react rather negatively to action plans.

Ralph Winter in reviewing Max Warren's edition of Henry Venn's writing makes an apt observation. Whereas Venn gives insights that today would be regarded of the "latest" variety, they were written well over a hundred years ago! "If these ideas are not really recent," Winter asks, "do they not work or are they too difficult to apply?" His conclusion: "I would rather believe that then, as now, relatively few missionaries study and reflect upon the strategy they are following." This fact among others is one of the contributory causes of friction and tension in church/mission relationships. The lack of tomorrow-mindedness, the failure to design a course of action that takes into account the many variables in world evangelism and church planting, is one of our besetting weaknesses. When tensions in church/mission relations arise they catch us off guard. This shortcoming is tragic, but correctable.

My objective in this section is not to go into a detailed exploration of strategy planning but rather to give an overview and thereby demonstrate areas vital to church/mission relations. Keep in mind that we are using the word "strategy" to refer to the overall boundaries within which plans are to be carried out.

Viewing Lower Zax as an unevangelized area, let us project a 10-year plan of evangelistic action. The strategy could contain elements as suggested in the following diagram.

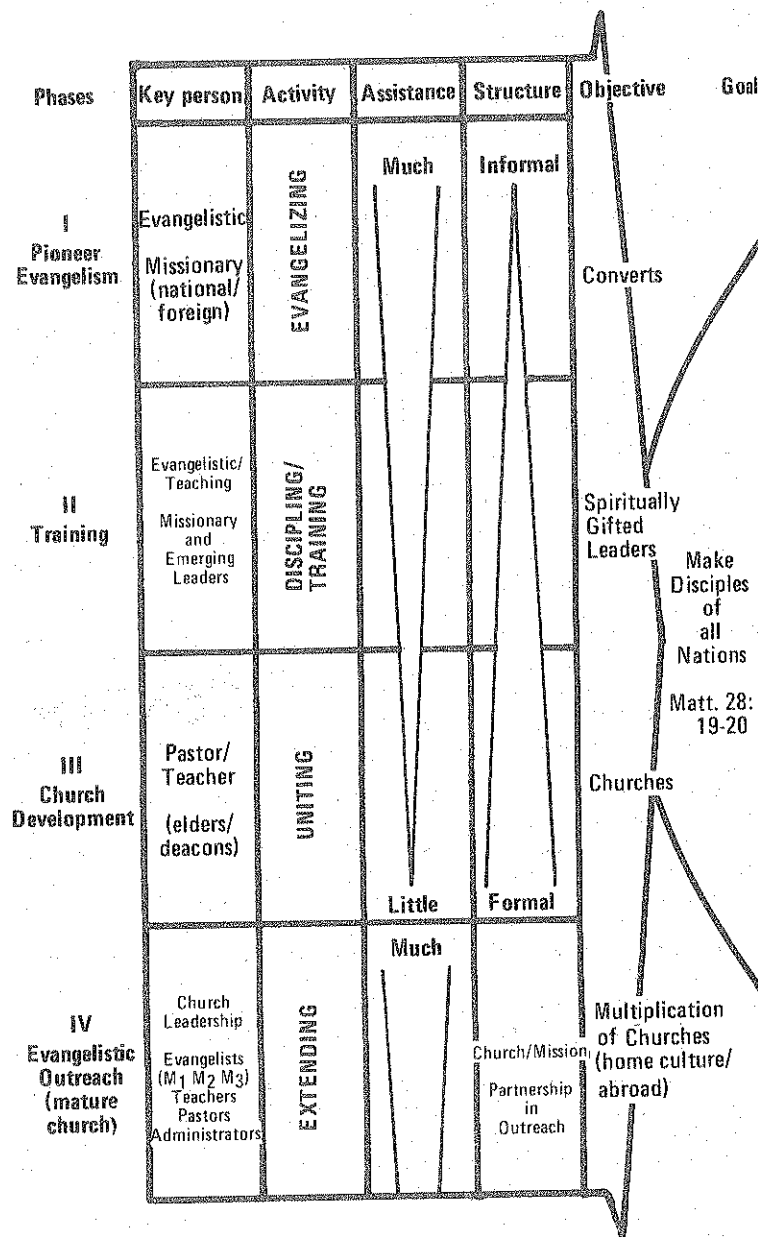
Notice first, the goal. It is not limited to the evangelization of Lower Zax, but from the beginning accepts responsibility for world evangelism. This means that the pioneer evangelist has a long-range view of reaching areas beyond Lower Zax. This motivates him to keep abreast of happenings in other areas, to pray for the work of God worldwide, and to communicate world awareness from the beginning to his converts and young churches.

Objectives narrow the goal. They move from the individual, to the group, to the world. Always a new dimension is added as a former one has gained momentum. Of course, to be measurable, the objectives are assigned specific numerical and qualitative expectations.

Next, consider the four important variables, each of which affects greatly the type of relationship established and mood set in each phase: key person, principal activity, assistance, and structure. The pioneer evangelism phase is the easiest in terms of relationships because of the excitement of the work, the absence of friction among comparatively few leaders, the good spirit that assistance and cooperation bring, and the informality of structure.

Tension appears or accelerates in Phase II as transition in roles begins. The temptation to hold back leadership is strong. The role of the evangelistic missionary (whether national or foreign) is often threatened. Here the seed of future church/mission relationships is planted. If emerging leaders are taken into confidence, treated as equals, trained in an atmosphere of self-respect, and involved in the work, then the basis for true partnership is set.

The process by which roles are exchanged is also a critical factor in determining whether relationships remain wholesome. The basic cri-



terion for assigning tasks should be the presence of spiritual gifts validated by the church, not race, rank, or tenure. Foreign missionaries as well as national workers should submit to the judgment of the church regarding their gifts and be assigned to tasks accordingly.

A second source of tension is methodology or the principal activity. At times missionaries have innovated, not being fully aware of what they were doing. At other times they have digressed and initiated ministries that appeal to their interests, or that are applauded in the sending country, or provide quick sources of funds. A great deal of discipline and heart-searching is needed at this point. Objective interaction with fellow workers about approaches, determination to be governed by objectives, and a passion to put method under critical judgment are necessary qualities.

A third area of tension involves assistance — finances as well as personnel. My view is that at the beginning of any evangelistic church-planting cycle much assistance is needed, preferably from national churches but also from abroad. Churches must send and support workers as they pioneer these areas. As the work grows, however, leaders from the outside must be curbed. Local leadership is now emerging. Offerings and participation are rising. A continual flow of imported leaders or too much outside money can quickly kill initiative in a growing work.

Most of the tensions in finance, as I have observed or been a part of, are due to lack of open communication between church and mission. A frank exchange of views and careful decisions regarding the use of funds and the deployment of personnel can do much to influence the spiritual vitality of the church. Outside money when needed should go to the church, not individuals, to be used to assist the work primarily in opening new areas, and given on a decreasing scale. Never should money be given in a way that curbs the autonomy of the church.

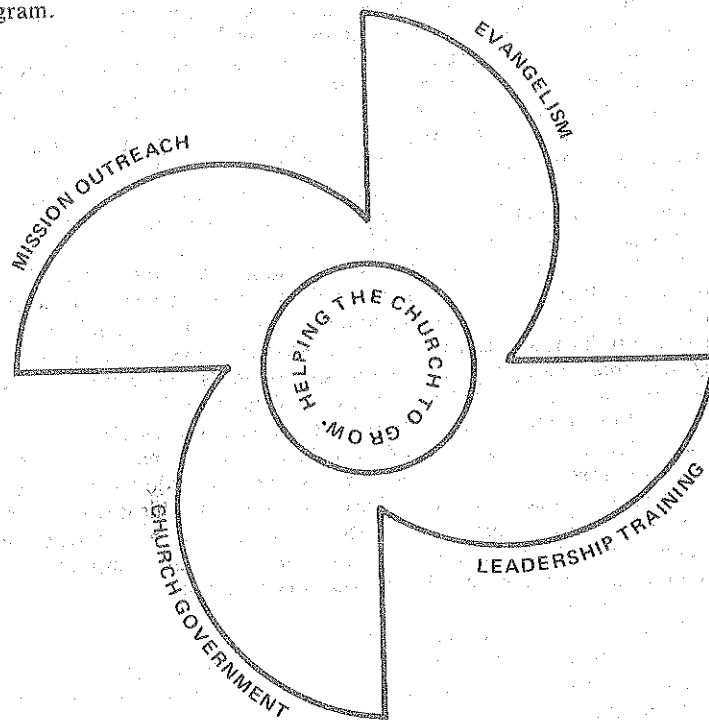
The fourth delicate area is that of formal structures. Better to build strong interpersonal relations of trust than to expect that written agreements will resolve conflicts. Most confidence breakdowns result from lack of communication, not from lack of documents. This is why I suggest postponing written agreements until Phase IV of the strategy plan. Perhaps the most critical area here is not one of assigning responsibilities to church and mission, but that of joint decision-making.

Suggestions:

1. Agree mutually on *objectives*.
2. Confer together (national church and mission) regarding plans to move into a new area and try, if at all possible, to undertake the project as a joint endeavor.
3. Establish a procedure for continued decision-making that assures open and full discussion between church and mission leaders.
4. Formalize working relationships in writing, not to avoid responsibility or place blame, but to facilitate review and evaluate progress.
5. Share administrative insights and establish management training programs.
6. Design an evaluation system that requires realistic appraisals at specified intervals.

A final word regarding "dynamic" strategy. Peter Wagner has right-

ly been critical of short-sighted missions caught in the "church planting syndrome." Once the church is planted in a given place, those missions believe their work is over and withdrawal begins. It is better to move on to Phase IV in your work and prepare for the most exciting and dramatic period of evangelistic outreach. As the mission joins hands with the national church reaching new people either in the same geographical area or in a cross-cultural situation, God's blessing begins to flow. In response to missionary vision, introspection gives way to selfless involvement in others. Resources of men and money begin to appear, and the church and mission in partnership reap a harvest. A hidden dividend soon is evident. The church and mission deeply involved in evangelistic action forget to squabble. In addition, a new cycle of strategy has been initiated that has the inner resources for continual recycling as illustrated in the second diagram.



Dynamic Strategy

Cultivate a servant mentality

A final ingredient in our formula for achieving effective church/mission relations is a self-emptying, open disposition. Principles and strategies are devoid of life until implemented. Then people touch people. And this is an important clarification to keep in mind, that a church and a mission cannot relate apart from the activity of persons.

Breakdowns in relationships most often are due to the inability of persons to relate to each other instead of inappropriate working agreements.

Pointers:

1. Maintain a high degree of personal identification with people you serve. This requires deep motivation, complete understanding, and mutual acceptance.
2. Take the road of service. Max Warren, calling for a new initiative in church/mission relations, says, "Essentially the newness of this approach will be found in the humility which will be demanded, the self-emptying of much pride of possession which will be involved, and the readiness to take the form of a servant. Recently Eduardo Velasco, a Brazilian student at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, made a similar plea:

Missions should work through national churches, be they strong or weak. This would be accomplished through responsibility in partnership. This is not a new solution. It is avoided because it costs. It costs not dollars but lives. It involves the setting aside of bias and prejudices in each partner in such a way that the Holy Spirit and his calling on each other be the only realities in their partnership. This is the beginning and the end of any fruitful and lasting mission.

3. Recognize and respect equality and mutuality. Even the closest of identification does not mean the loss of identity. It means the sympathetic entering into the life of another. "Partnership in missions is a sacred and comprehensive concept of equals bound together in mutual confidence, unified purpose, and unified effort, accepting equal responsibilities, authority, praise, and blame; sharing burdens, joys, sorrows, victories, and defeats. It means joint planning, joint legislation, joint programming, and involves the sending and receiving churches on an equal basis."

4. Embrace an attitude of partnership. George Peters makes a strong case for church/mission relations as an "attitude, a spiritual, social and theological relationship, a philosophy of ministry, a way of life and missions."

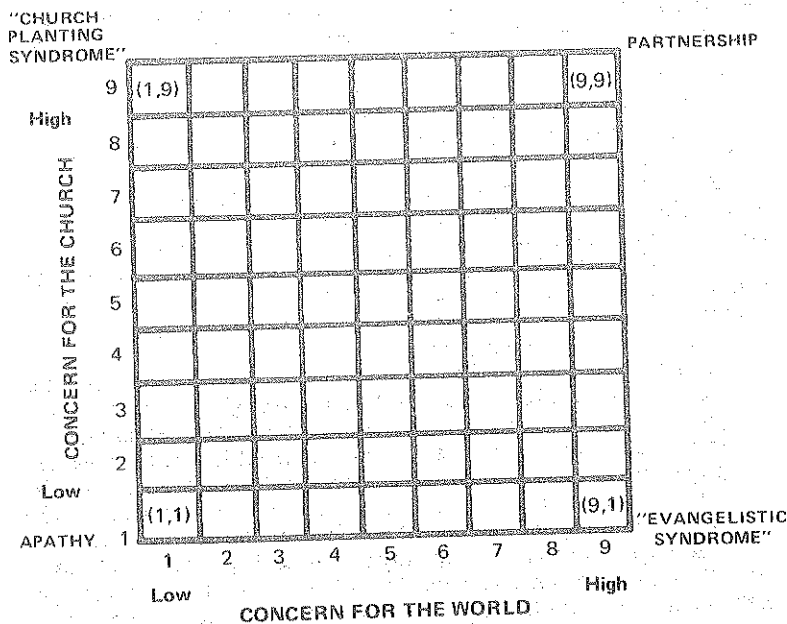
This attitude is built on a deep recognition of a Christian's identification with the body of Christ and a response to the fellowship of the Spirit of God.

Conclusion

Two truths, interrelated and basic, undergird church/mission relations: (1) God greatly desires that the world be evangelized; (2) God loves the church and has ordained that it be his agency for evangelism.

In applying the formula suggested in this paper, these truths must be maintained in proper balance. The emphasis on one to the exclusion or negligence of the other will produce serious aberrations. Careful and constant application of both will result in growth and effectiveness.

Perhaps a graph transferred from the management world will serve to crystallize this point.



Concern for the world

The church/mission grid depicts concern for the church on the vertical axis and concern for the world on the horizontal with increasing degrees of interest. Numbers in parentheses correspond to the major styles of relationships. The 1,1 pattern, devoid of interest in world evangelism or the church, is an IMPOVERISHED, APATHETIC approach. The 1,9, emphasizing solely ecclesiology, is caught in the "Church Planting Syndrome." The opposite extreme, 9,1, with a high concern for the world but no concern for the church, is the "Evangelistic Syndrome." The balanced approach, of course, is represented by the 9,9 PARTNERSHIP position, equally committed to the church and world evangelism.

Hopefully, under God, *partnership* of church and mission can become the style of our relationships. It will go a long way to remove the unbiblical pattern of a "churchless mission" or a "missionless church."

INTER-MISSION RELATIONSHIPS

S.O. Odunaike

Mr. Odunaike, Yaba, Nigeria, is Personnel Manager of the British Petroleum Nigeria Ltd. He is also General Supervisor of the Foursquare Gospel Church in Nigeria and Chairman of the Nigeria Evangelical Fellowship.

"Master," said John, "we saw a man casting out devils in your name, but as he is not one of us we tried to stop him." Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him, for he who is not against you is on your side" (Luke 9:49-50).

"Some of course, are preaching the Good News because they are jealous of the way God has used me. They want reputations as fearless preachers! But others have purer motives, preaching because they love me, for they know that the Lord has brought me here to use me to defend the truth. And some preach to make me jealous, thinking that their success will add to my sorrows here in jail. But whatever their motive for doing it, the fact remains that the Good News about Christ is being preached and I am glad" (Phil. 1:15-18).

"Let God's curses fall on anyone, including myself, who preaches any other way to be saved than the one we told you about; yes, if an angel comes from heaven and preaches any other message, let him be forever cursed" (Gal. 1:8).

1. The biblical ground for inter-mission relationships

I hope the above Scriptures sufficiently lay the groundwork for our treatment of this vital subject. Two of the Gospels, Mark and Luke, record the incident in which our Lord strongly rebuked sectarianism. The context was the same in both records. Jesus was in Capernaum and while on his way to a house, the disciples had engaged in some private discussion among themselves. The topic was of great interest to all of them, for it majored on position, influence, and authority. "Who should be the greatest?" This seems to be the one thing that bugs most religious circles today. The plague is still with us. Everyone wants to be a leader. So it was with the disciples. Jesus had been talking about his forthcoming death in Jerusalem. "The son of man shall be delivered unto the hands of men." But this sublime truth they did not understand. I doubt if they even tried to understand it. There was something else that engaged their thoughts and which they understood perfectly. Jesus was speaking about a new order. They all wanted to be part of the new order — whatever it meant. More important to them, the new order must have some leadership — and each one wanted to be that leader. This resulted in a dispute among them. Is it not true today that the "leadership plague" is crucial to the barrier to relationships which ought to exist among Christians?

Our Lord's answer was simple. He allowed them all to have their little talks. Then on getting into the house, he asked them for a confession: