

The Practice of Mission Partnership in Chiapas, Mexico

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Partnership is one of the primary principles by which the Reformed Church in America (RCA) seeks to serve others in its global mission program. Working alongside national churches is a practice adopted by early Reformed Church missionaries in places like China and India. This principle has earned the respect and trust of the denomination's mission partners in Chiapas, Mexico, and around the globe.

Partnership is also a biblical concept. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil. 1:3-5). The Greek word for sharing, *koinonia*, is also translated as partnership, participation, or partakers. Commenting on Phil. 1:5, Fred B. Craddock, says that the "common translation of this rich New Testament word is 'fellowship,' but that overused and misused word probably will not carry the freight any more."¹ In today's church, a time of fellowship usually means sharing coffee or juice and cookies after worship on Sunday morning. The Greek word *koinonia*, or "having in common," that the Apostle Paul uses throughout the letter of Philippians (1:5, 7, 2:1, 3:10, and 4:14), says Craddock, "is variously translated according to what is being shared: money, suffering, work, or grace."²

The story of Paul's call to Macedonia and his visit to the leading city of Philippi in Acts 16 is a story of sharing the gospel with Lydia and the women gathered by the river, as well as with the jailer and his family. It is the story of freeing the woman enslaved by a spirit of divination and being used by those who would exploit her for financial gain. It is also the story of sharing hospitality after the suffering and imprisonment of Paul and Silas. When Paul prayed for his partners in Philippi, he prayed with joy, because they participated with him from the first day and through the times when life became difficult and painful.

The story of the partnership between the National Presbyterian Church in Mexico and the RCA in Chiapas, Mexico, is also filled with the kind of *koinonia* that the Apostle Paul experienced with his partners in Philippi. For nearly eighty years the National Presbyterian Church and the RCA have walked and worked together to share the good news of Jesus Christ in the highlands of the mountains and the rain forests near the coasts, demonstrating the grace of God through preaching and teaching, healing the sick, and translating the Scriptures and the hymns of the church into the Mayan languages. They have welcomed each other into their homes, encouraged one another in the faith, and prayed together for

healing and strength as they suffered from sickness, persecution, and now even imprisonment.

The partnership began when the Presbyterian Mission Board in the United States invited the Reformed Church to provide a missionary for the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico. As usual, it was the denomination's Women's Board of Domestic Mission that accepted the challenge. The Women's Board sent a team of four to survey the need in Chiapas; they responded by sending the first of many mission couples, the Reverend John and Mabel Kempers, in December 1925. As the partnership continued, the National Presbyterian Church in Chiapas was formed and began to grow rapidly under the motto, *Chiapas para Cristo*, "Chiapas for Christ." Within fifty years the church formed three presbyteries – the Chiapas, the Chol, and the Tzeltal – each containing thousands of new believers.

In 1972, after a hundred years of fruitful ministry, the Presbyterian Church in the USA and the National Presbyterian Church in Mexico agreed to withdraw all Presbyterian missionaries from Mexico. This action followed a missionary moratorium movement in the worldwide church. At an RCA Mission Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Dr. John Gatu, general secretary of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, had said, "The time has come for the withdrawal of foreign missionaries from many parts of the Third World....to allow a period of not less than five years for each side to rethink and formulate what is going to be their future relationship."³

In April of 1976, the National Presbyterian Church in Mexico and the Presbyterian Church in the USA met in Mexico City to hammer out a post-moratorium working relationship. This agreement, entitled, "A New Relationship in Joint Mission," recognized:

- A sense of the national church's own responsibility, autonomy, and identity;
- A growing understanding of relationship with the world Christian community, including the moratorium itself, by the Presbyterian Church in the USA;
- A sense of interdependence, appreciation, and understanding among the Mexican and American Presbyterian churches;
- An opportunity for ministry in mission together in Mexico, the USA, and other parts of the world.⁴

RCA representatives were present at this meeting, and the RCA's General Program Council accepted the document as a basis for future relationships and work. However, the RCA missionaries were not affected by the agreement because the representative of the Chiapas Presbytery had pointed out that the

relatively young church in Chiapas still needed RCA missionaries, especially since nearly all of them worked with Mayan-language churches. The agreement was then amended to allow RCA missionaries to serve the Mayan-speaking areas until 1980.

RCA missionaries had also developed mission goals and guidelines over the years by which they defined the way they worked with each other and with their mission partner, the National Presbyterian Church in Mexico. These goals were listed as follows:

1. To witness to Jesus Christ as Savior, Healer, Liberator, and King so that many people will respond to him and become responsible members of his church.
2. To build the church in Chiapas so that:
 - a. It develops its gifts of leadership.
 - b. It participates in God's mission.
 - c. Its members responsibly and joyfully give themselves and their resources.
 - d. It develops all the gifts given to it by our Lord.
 - e. It manages its affairs under the Lordship of Christ.

In five "working principles," the missionaries stated:

1. We respect the freedom of the national Christians to do those things for which they already have the skills, and we seek to help them learn necessary skills.
2. We encourage the national church to financially support and develop their own programs to the fullest extent possible.
3. In those cases where urgent program needs arise which temporarily outstrip the national church's resources, we will cooperate in giving assistance.
4. While recognizing that we as foreign missionaries are agents of change, we are committed to respect the integrity of the national church we serve. Therefore we are committed to avoid:
 - a. Creating programs that are beyond the national church's skills.
 - b. Offering new options with financing completely from the outside.
 - c. Controlling decisions about the goals, methodology, management, and financing of new programs.
 - d. Copying leadership styles which do not fit either our personality or that of the church we serve.

- e. Personal lifestyles inconsistent with the standards of the national church.
5. We are dedicated to exercising our Christian conscience with personal integrity, engaging in dialogue with the national church in refining our mutual lifestyle and behavior in accordance with our understanding of the Word of God.⁵

The missionaries sought a relationship with the national church that would be characterized by mutual respect and harmonious cooperation. They wished to serve with the national church as partners in mission, encouraging, equipping, and assisting them in the task of reaching all of Chiapas with the good news of Jesus Christ.

To maintain this partner relationship, The Commission of Joint Mission in Chiapas (*La Comision de Mision Conjunta de Chiapas*) was formed February 10, 1982, and was composed of the Executive Committee of the General Assembly of the National Presbyterian Church in Mexico, one representative of each presbytery in Chiapas, one RCA missionary from each language group, the RCA's administrator for Chiapas, and one representative from each participating Chiapas synod.

The commission agreed on three simple principles that would govern the way they were to work together:

1. The mission of the church is the responsibility of everyone.
2. There shall be a spirit of mutual help between the national church and the RCA that will favor the wise use of available resources.
3. Persons in the cooperating churches shall have a mutual respect and confidence.

It assigned the following responsibilities to the Commission of Joint Mission:

1. Coordinate the mission work already established in Chiapas.
2. Receive new projects from the representatives of the General Assembly, the Chiapas presbyteries, and the RCA. These projects will be evaluated, prioritized, and returned to the cooperating church for approval and modification.
3. Evaluate the personnel of cooperating churches: The sending church must respect basic doctrines, culture, and lifestyle of the receiving church; at the beginning of his/her work, new personnel will be examined by the Commission of Joint Mission in Chiapas.

4. Collaborate with the group or institution to which the fraternal worker has been assigned in matters of orientation, supervision, and pastoral care.
5. Coordinate and evaluate programs of exchange between the cooperating churches.
6. Every proposed project between the national church and the RCA must be presented to this commission.
7. When the time comes to evaluate each project, the receiving church will decide whether to continue the project.

Though the terms of this evolving partnership were clearly spelled out by both mission partners in the language of equality, making a truly equal relationship in an unequal world of rich and poor, educated and uneducated, can be difficult. Three factors are important: who carries out the work of the church, who makes the decisions, and (most importantly) who provides the financial support. In a healthy mission partnership, the work, the decisions, and the finances must be shared mutually by both mission partners.

Working Together to Grow the Church

Laws passed by the Mexican government in 1926 to restrict the activities of missionaries mandated that the RCA missionaries and the leaders of the national church work together in the mission of the church. Foreign clergy were not allowed to administer the sacraments, conduct weddings, or serve as ordained ministers in the usual church functions. This meant that from the beginning, the missionaries were put in the position of assistants rather than leaders.⁶ The missionaries had to depend on the leaders of the early evangelical church in Chiapas to provide the preaching and teaching of the gospel. The presbyteries asked the missionaries to teach theology, agriculture, carpentry, sewing, music, and health care in the Bible schools, as well as to translate the Scriptures and Christian literature into the Mayan dialects. Meanwhile, most of the work of evangelism was done by Chiapas church leaders. This was a task they were best equipped to do, because they understood the language and culture of their own people.

Delegates of the National Presbyterian Church Lead in the Meetings and Decisions

As part of the partnership, missionaries were and still are assigned to a presbytery in Chiapas. The missionaries are expected to attend both the presbytery and the annual Commission of Joint Mission meetings, but the meetings are led by the officers of the National Presbyterian General Assembly. At these meetings, presbytery leaders present reports on the work of the presbyteries as well as on the work of the Bible schools, the John Kempers

Seminary, the paramedic training programs, and human rights issues. They also bring proposals for new projects. When requests for new church programs and tools are proposed by the Chiapas church leaders, both the national church officers and the Reformed mission leaders are asked to consider them for support. The missionaries are given a voice and are often asked to share their advice, but they are not allowed to vote on the proposals. This structure of mission government assures that the voice and the will of the Chiapas church leaders are heard. This method of decision-making follows the agreements of the Commission of Joint Mission as well as lessons taught in the early 1800s by Dr. Rufus Anderson, who served as secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. He suggested at that time that the church in India and China and every other area of the world must become "self-governing, self supporting, and self-propagating."⁷

Program Support Is Shared Equally by the Partners

The true test of any mission partnership is determined by who controls the purse strings. Though the terms of this mission partnership were clearly laid out on paper, the real practice of partnership is determined by who has the funds and thus also holds the power in the decision-making process. The "Golden Rule" of politics is that "those who have the gold rule."

Therefore the sharing of funds in a mutual mission relationship requires a delicate balancing act. One way this balance has been attempted in Chiapas is to abide by the Joint Mission agreement that the RCA and the National Presbyterian Church each provide half of the program support for a Bible school or mission project. When more than half of the support comes from the mission partner, especially from the North, it is easy to assume that since they pay the bills, they should also decide how the funds should be used. This sense of money and power can easily carry over into mission decisions, even though the missionaries do not have a vote on the decision.

It also becomes a question of ownership. If more than half of the budget to operate a Bible school comes from the mission partner in the North, whose school is it really? If a volunteer work group from the United States comes with the best intentions to buy the materials and construct a church building for their poor brothers and sisters in the South, whose building does it become?

The RCA mission program has strived to avoid dependency by providing less than half of the support for Chiapas mission programs and projects. Requests to build or expand sanctuaries are always declined by the commission because those are projects the congregations can do themselves. Work groups have assisted with the construction of Bible school, seminary, and medical clinic buildings because they provide ministry for the broader church.

Agreeing to provide limited financial support also enables the national mission partner to develop good stewardship habits among its members. They learn to trust the Lord for provision rather than becoming dependent on the resources of their mission partner.

Have these guiding principles of mission partnership in Chiapas always been followed? If we are honest, we have to say no, not always. In the early 1990s, the Reformed Church began a major mission fund drive called "Putting People in Mission." Nine million dollars of worthy mission projects were proposed from across the denomination and from its global mission partners. In Chiapas a simple printing press was producing hymnbooks, Christian education materials, and health education literature. It was most effective. However, at that time audio recordings and videotapes were being promoted as powerful tools to help communicate the gospel in new and colorful ways. Seeing a great opportunity, RCA missionaries submitted a proposal to expand the printing press into a media center, complete with a Christian bookstore, a recording studio, and video and projector rental services. In the zeal of putting this new technology to work for the church in Chiapas, the Joint Mission agreements were forgotten. The media center was built and funded entirely with gifts from the RCA fund drive. But the church in Chiapas, albeit a growing church, was not able to sustain the salary and business tax expenses of maintaining the media center, even though the building and all the electronic equipment had been contributed. Today, what began as a high-tech media center has returned to its former status of a simple printing press that serves the actual needs of the church in Chiapas. Ideas, especially great and ingenious ideas from northern neighbors, need to be tested by the real ability of mission partners to use and sustain them.

Another difficult issue for mission partners is deciding when it is time for the missionaries to turn even their supplemental tasks over to the national church. After eighty years of working together, the Joint Mission partners have begun to evaluate the need for mission personnel and have scheduled a reduction of program funds for the five Bible schools, the seminary, and the medical clinics. The role of the missionary is ever changing from that of teacher to advisor and consultant. Most of the work done by missionaries in the past is now being done by Chiapas church leaders. Eighty years ago, the Reverend John and Mabel Kempers explored the villages in the mountains and valleys of Chiapas to share the gospel. Now church leaders from those mountains and valleys are exploring other places in Mexico and beyond that have not yet heard the good news of Jesus Christ. They are praying for the Lord to raise up mission workers whom they will send out to be witnesses to the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. The church in Chiapas has come full circle.

And what does the mission partnership look like now that the daughter church has matured and even grown larger in numbers than its mother church? Can we find ways to learn from each other and work together in reaching out in new ways and new places?

In the past few years, the Reformed Church has sought to develop the next phase of this and other maturing mission partnerships with a program called Classis Companions. This program seeks to provide opportunities for RCA classes to build deep and meaningful relationships with Christian brothers and sisters in other parts of the world. Missionaries and volunteer work groups know from their experience that though they have gone to give and teach, they have always returned having received and learned more than they gave or taught.

Though the Reformed Church still has rich resources, modern technology, and an excellent theological education for ministers, our global mission partners have a vital faith, a spirit of joy, and insights and a zeal for starting new churches that we are missing or have forgotten. In a time when the church in the northern hemisphere is in decline and the church in the southern hemisphere is growing rapidly, we have much to learn from our global mission partners.

Though some RCA congregations have formed “sister-church” relationships with mission partner congregations in places like Japan and South Africa, the Classis of Illinois is one of the first classes to form a Classis Companion relationship with another church body. The classis has already exchanged letters with the Ebenezer Tzeltal Presbytery in Chiapas. Plans are being made for mutual visits between members of the Illinois Classis and the Ebenezer Presbytery. As this relationship grows, it is hoped that there will be a sharing of resources, expertise, and programming ideas that will strengthen each other’s ministries, as well as the sharing of prayer concerns. One concern is that the relationship not become focused or dependent on finances. Guidelines developed for this companionship program suggest that any exchange of contributions should only be given for projects that have been agreed upon by both national churches and by the Commission for Joint Mission. The intent is to provide for accountability of funds and prevent tensions and inequities that might result if some part of the partner churches received more funds than others. The mission partner companions have agreed to a formal Companionship Covenant. This covenant clarifies expectations for the relationship and is to be evaluated, amended, and renewed over the five- to seven-year term of the relationship.⁸ Although missionaries, in this case, the Reverend Jim and Sharon Heneveld, will be vital links to the companion relationship, this evolving program places the RCA classis and the Tzeltal presbytery in direct contact as they walk the road of faith in Christ together.

The practice of mission partnership begins with a vision to share the faith and form lofty principles and goals of how to live and work together. But the practice becomes incarnate when the partners sit around simple tables to share bread and the Bread of Life, singing familiar hymns of faith in various languages. Sometimes it even means suffering together. The practice of partnership happens when brothers and sisters meet face to face, praying, deliberating, and working together across cultures to share their faith, their gifts, and their insights in service to their Savior and Lord. While the mission partnership of the Reformed Church in America and the National Presbyterian Church in Mexico has not been perfect or without problems, it is a good model of how brothers and sisters “have participated in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil. 1:5). For this great privilege, we in the Reformed Church can pray with joy every time we remember our Presbyterian partners in Chiapas, Mexico.

ENDNOTES

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians* (John Knox Press, 1985), 16-17. I also need to give credit to Dr. James Cook, emeritus professor of New Testament at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, for his helpful counsel on this passage.

² Craddock, *Philippians*, p. 16.

³ Eugene Heideman, *A People in Mission: The Surprising Harvest* (Reformed Church Press, 1980), 54.

⁴ “A New Relation in Joint Mission,” 1976, p. 1.

⁵ “Chiapas Mission Guidelines,” rev. 1993, pp. 1, 3.

⁶ Heideman, *People in Mission*, pp. 18, 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸ “Classis Companionship Manual,” produced by RCA Mission Services and available by contacting the mutual mission coordinator, David Dethmers, in the Grand Rapids Regional Office. David can be contacted by calling 800-968-3943 or email: ddethmers@rca.org.