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Mission and Church Partnership Dynamics: Lessons from SIM-ECWA in Nigeria

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What happens when an international, interdenominational faith mission agency decides that a national church it birthed has reached maturity and is ready to assume full responsibility for the church and related ministries? SIM (formerly Sudan Interior Mission, now Serving in Mission) has asked that question in several countries but none more significantly than in Nigeria, its first field of service beginning in 1893. In a simple ceremony on November 19, 1976, in Jos, Nigeria, SIM transferred full responsibility for all its ministries and properties in Nigeria to the national church it had birthed, known then as the Association of Evangelical Churches of West Africa, now known as the Evangelical Church of West Africa (ECWA). This large and influential evangelical denomination in Africa’s most populous nation boasts more than five thousand churches, three million members and 1,500 of its own missionaries. As early as 1950, when the pioneering stage of SIM’s work in Nigeria was ending, mission leaders sensed that SIM’s role was changing. SIM had to turn over the work to an established, indigenous, national church. Consequently, ECWA’s legal organization in 1954 led to the full handover twenty-two years later. Harold Fuller details these events in his 1980 book.

Many factors led to this landmark step that SIM leaders took despite concerns and reservations. SIM leadership around the world held prayerful consultation with Nigeria’s ECWA leaders. Of particular concern was the counsel of trusted Nigerian political leaders warning of potential post-colonial political fallout and its effects on Western missions and their related churches. The gale-force winds of political independence and anti-colonialism were blowing. The implications had to be reckoned with, especially for Western-dominated missions with major land holdings. These realities made for a difficult but critical decision. Delicate negotiation, divine wisdom and right timing were vital.

Some leaders involved in the decision were schooled in the three-self mission theory developed in the writings of John Nevius, Roland Allen, Rufus Anderson and especially Henry Venn, who as secretary of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) has greatly influenced SIM’s development in Nigeria. As SIM leaders sought to understand the gentler winds of the Holy Spirit’s divine purpose, they concluded that the pioneer vision of early SIM was essentially complete: Establishing a mature national church with trained leaders. A new paradigm and mission role was not only appropriate but, in fact, necessary.

Defining and communicating SIM’s new role to nationals and missionaries would prove to be a difficult, time-consuming process. One reason was that few, if any, precedents existed where an interdenominational, international mission had fathered a daughter church in Africa and ended up as a “partner” to that church.

This is all the more an oxymoron in African culture. No societal context exists in which two people are strictly equal counterparts, especially in family and work relationships. Nigeria has a hierarchical culture. Age makes one superior, such as in a parent-child relationship. Because SIM gave birth to its daughter church (or “son” in Africa), ECWA, it is difficult, if not
impossible, for ECWA to view herself as an equal with SIM and thus truly an interdependent partner with her "father." On the day of turnover, ECWA's president, David Olusiyi, said, "We are making history today. This will be a great joy to our parent, SIM, that her baby has grown to the state of manhood to take up her full responsibilities" (Fuller 1980, 225).

Likewise, for SIM missionaries this transition entailed a radical paradigm shift. While training nationals had been a priority for most ministries, missionaries had been in charge. All its institutional ministries (such as schools, hospitals, book stores and printing ministries) had been the direct result of SIM missionaries' vision. Funding came mainly from churches and supporters from the missionaries' home countries. In many cases, missionaries had administered these ministries with typical Western efficiency and firm control, especially over finances. To step aside and pass control to Nigerians who had been their students or employees was in some cases a challenge to their Christian grace, if not their sanctified egos. Some feared what might happen to these ministries given their experience with Nigerian leaders and their methods of decision-making and practices of financial accountability. Some missionaries adjusted. Others sought reassignment to another field.

A critical concern at the time of the turnover was helping both nationals and missionaries understand the dynamics of mission and church "partnership." Among ideas considered was "moratorium," or as Venn advocated, "euthanasia"—completely ending SIM’s ministry on the field. This plan was rejected, partly because the national church sought the continued presence of SIM missionaries. Instead, SIM and ECWA decided that SIM would enter an "international partnership" with ECWA. SIM would provide "consultation and prayer, and recruitment of missionary personnel and finances for projects...mutually agreed upon by this international partnership” (Fuller 1980, 294).

The practical dynamics of what this partnership would look like and how it would function would work out over time. A persistent issue of concern was the administrative structure of the mission and the church and missionaries’ roles in it. No one could have imagined that striking a balance would take twenty-two years of trial and error. It called for prayer, many consultations and huge doses of patient endurance by two generations of missionaries and national leaders. By 1998 they came to a mutually workable understanding in this dynamic kingdom experiment. The result has been the etching of important lessons on the sensitive canvas of mission–church relationships. ECWA and SIM have forged a cutting-edge relationship that has developed and survived though seasons of great harmony and kingdom productivity, as well as conflict, testing and potential disaster. Serious misunderstandings, disputes, arguments, broken promises and personality conflicts have strained and tested the relationship. But by God’s grace, today ECWA/SIM in Nigeria serves as a model for other mission and national church partnerships.

This study aims to reflect on the years between 1976 and 2004 to discover the lessons learned about church-mission partnership. It is my prayer that others in similar partnerships and those forging them might be encouraged and instructed.

**LESSON #1: Communication of Concepts Must Be Clear and Accurately Illustrated**

The nature of SIM’s new role was misunderstood from the first day of turnover. Though words like “partnership” and “sister organization” were used, confusion resulted from a visual illustration employed by the then-SIM field director who had struggled to communicate to both nationals and missionaries what was about to happen. He attempted to help Nigerians understand the change in responsibility for the ministries by holding up a white umbrella with SIM printed on it. In Nigerian culture this symbolized a chief’s authority. It shadowed a black umbrella with ECWA printed on it. Then the SIM umbrella was closed and brought under the raised black umbrella (Fuller 1980, 273).

Many Nigerians interpreted the symbolic action to mean that SIM was merging into ECWA
and would cease to exist as a separate organization in Nigeria. While today, this is the reality from the government’s official perspective (expatriate workers’ visas are granted to ECWA), this was not the intended meaning. In fact, the planned organizational structure included giving SIM’s field director, who was to be called “chief liaison officer,” direct administrative accountability to both the ECWA executive and the SIM international director.

A joint SIM-ECWA leadership team was to explain the turnover and answer questions. That plan failed because within a few months, both church and mission team members went overseas for graduate studies. The field director’s furlough replacement, a capable veteran whom ECWA respected, developed brain tumors and died. ECWA also changed leadership, causing loss of understanding and synergy. The resulting lack of continuity confused nationals and made SIM members apprehensive of how the partnership would develop.

Other misconceptions have marred efforts to convey a clearer understanding of the partnership. The fact that SIM is a mission agency that plants churches and is not itself a church caused confusion among ECWA leaders. A good knowledge of church history is needed to understand that an interdenominational mission agency is not a church but rather more like a religious order. Many Nigerians did not understand that SIM could never be a church. Some even thought that all SIM-founded churches in Nigeria should be called “SIM churches.” Evidence of this misunderstanding surfaced years later when some ECWA leaders questioned SIM’s right to partner with churches other than ECWA.

Problems that arose in the early years after turnover were traceable to the fact that no formal documents were signed in 1976. During the turnover process, key players wrote documents that communicated the terms and agreements. Official minutes of meetings held on both sides also laid out some particulars. But anyone who has worked with Nigerians knows their love for elaborate wording and ambiguity, especially in formal documents. This allows maneuvering around agreements if things do not work as expected. Significant ambiguity remained until the signing of formal documents following discussions and negotiations in 1981. As it turned out, every five years adjustments have been needed. In 1981, 1986 and 1991 leaders signed new documents.

In 1998, leaders signed the Memorandum of Understanding, which has been a mutually beneficial document. Renewed in late 2003, it spells out the independent identity and complementary functions of the church and mission in an interdependent partnership for: the common purpose of glorifying God by building the Body of Christ. This goal is achieved by mutually striving to plant and strengthen churches, minister to human needs, and disciple believers to fullness in Christ equipped to fulfill Christ’s Great Commission. (1998, ECWA/SIM Memorandum of Understanding, 1)

**LESSON #2: Church-Mission Partnerships are Dynamic**

The ECWA/SIM partnership illustrates that such relationships constantly change. The church and her leaders matured in time. Turnover of ministry leadership and responsibility had come because times had changed and political factors in post-colonial Nigeria necessitated it. Other dynamics that have affected the practice of the partnership include personnel turnover, regional and cultural church growth patterns, expanding and changing ministry opportunities, available resources and technology and new leaders with different ethnic backgrounds, gifts, personalities and leadership styles. Each new set of church and mission leaders has had to work out the practical dimensions of the partnership.

Another dynamic comes from the fact that SIM is an international mission with missionaries from as many as ten different countries working together in Nigeria. Add the differing generations of Western missionaries (builders, boomers, busters and now Xers) and it is evident that all parties need heavy doses of cultural understanding and flexibility to make the ministry partnership work.
Given the tribal and cultural diversity that characterizes Nigeria, it is no surprise that the Nigerians have coped well with this aspect of partnering. African culture, however, highly values tradition. For new SIM missionaries to work effectively in Nigeria, an understanding of the African worldview is essential. They also should know the history of Christianity and of SIM in Nigeria. Each generation of church and mission leaders must understand and appreciate that history before addressing the changing demands of ministry in partnership.

One long-term SIM leader has described the ECWA/SIM relationship as being like a marriage that has progressed and developed. Marriage relationships are not static and are not meant to be. SIM and ECWA's partnership of necessity also has changed. At times the changes are for better and at other times, for worse.

LESSON #3: Interpersonal Relationships Are Crucial
I have interviewed many SIM and ECWA leaders who have served since the 1976 turnover. Every interview has emphasized the need for a trusting relationship as the sine qua non foundation of an effective church-mission partnership. True in most human relationships, trust is even more important in relating to Africans in light of their communal and relational culture. As one former SIM Nigeria director said, “Where there is trust and mutuality, a bad agreement on paper will still work. Where there is suspicion, any agreement, no matter how good it looks on paper, will not work.” For a healthy, growing church-mission relationship, leaders must relate well in transparent, trusting friendships that make understanding and good communication possible at every level.

I was appointed as SIM Nigeria acting director in July 1997 during a particularly difficult time of negotiating a new understanding of the SIM/ECWA relationship. A communication breakdown between mission and church leadership caused major strain. Organizational healing could only come as God granted the leaders reconciliation. ECWA leaders graciously received my attempts at befriending them. We began to reestablish trust. But when the General Church Council of about one hundred church district leaders met in October 1997 to discuss partnership issues, many remained distressed over what they saw as a strained church-mission relationship. At headquarters, SIM and ECWA leaders had healed their rifts. But how were we to communicate that healing to the field church workers?

As acting director, I knew that the nationals saw me as a “Big Man,” the typical view of leaders in the African context. Ever since I had become aware of this cultural concept, pervasive even in the church, I had sought ways to teach and model the biblical ideals of humility and servant leadership. Biblical humility would have to be evident to regain trust at all levels of SIM and ECWA leadership, especially given the conflicts that had hindered the relationship. I needed the Lord to provide wisdom and opportunity, and he did.

For the October 1997 gathering of national church leaders, I sensed God’s leading to speak to errors in previous efforts to communicate the nature of the ECWA/SIM relationship. In my address, I said that a new analogy of the SIM/ECWA relationship was needed. Then I followed Christ’s example in John 13 by washing the feet of the ECWA president and general secretary. God used that action to change the dynamic of not only that meeting but also the negotiations over the proposed draft document. Within four months, leaders wrote and signed the 1998 Memorandum of Understanding. It addressed all items of concern. The ongoing result has been healthy, trusting, working relationship to the glory and praise of the Lord who reached out to us in grace and forgiveness. He gave us the model and picture of true servant leadership in his act of humility in the Upper Room.

LESSON #4: Money Issues Must Be Honestly Addressed
Every mission working in the developing world struggles with the issue of money and potential pitfalls of dependency. Books have been written on the hotly debated subject. To
Some SIM missionaries began ministries and institutions such as schools, publishing houses and hospitals that generated revenue. The aim was to train or reach people with the gospel. By the time of the turnover, these ministries had become employers of many nationals whose primary motivation was work, not outreach. Dr. Yusufu Turaki, in his comprehensive work on the history of SIM/ECWA in Nigeria, writes:

For some ECWA members, it appears as if take-over meant stepping into the missionary’s big shoe, inheriting the missionary status, privileges and position, enhancing one’s social standing, income and the opportunity of having a good job, and moratorium to the Mission. These conceptions compounded mission-church relations over the years. (Turaki 1999, 609)

All levels of the church have battled the problem of the African mindset toward finances and accountability. To the credit of persevering leaders in both the mission and the church, the ECWA/SIM partnership has become a model of progress in the delicate area of financial accountability throughout ministries and church structures. Given Nigeria’s notoriety for graft, bribery and financial scams, it is significant to note the safeguards now in place. These include mandatory auditing of financial books and an auditor employed in each ECWA district where local offerings are collected and distributed. ECWA leaders were teachable and showed resolve in setting in place financial policies that are decidedly countercultural. On this point, the 1998 Memorandum of Understanding reads:

In recognition of orderly financial accountability to their respective constituencies, both the Church and the Mission shall have valid annual audition of their respective accounts.

In projects in which the Mission assists the Church with finance personnel, or in which the Mission transmits funds from other organizations to the Church, the Church shall provide the Mission with audited statements of account and/or report showing that all such funds have been used for the agreed-upon purpose. Similarly, in projects in which the Church assists the Mission, the Mission shall provide the Church with audited statements. The Mission shall promptly, in the spirit of stewardship, inform the Church about all financial assistance, gifts, or support for her, the Church.

It is important to note another financial problem. Church leaders candidly confess their frustration when missionaries have started and funded ministries. But when they left the field and pulled their financial support, no other means existed to maintain the ministry. The result was the missionaries’ accusation: “We started the wonderful ministry and the nationals killed it!” To guarantee this unfair, hurtful scenario is not repeated, policy now states that the ECWA/SIM Joint Committee must approve missionary-initiated ministries, which also must be mutually funded. For example, for a new film evangelism ministry, SIM raised the equipment and maintenance costs while ECWA paid the national staff salaries. Although the initiating missionary has left the field, the ministry continues.

**Lesson #5: Partners that Communicate and Pray Together, Stay Together**

Phill Butler said:

Partnerships are more than coordination, planning, strategies, and tactics. Ultimately ours is a gospel of restored relationships. Effective partnerships understand this and spend time actively building and maintaining relationships of trust and concern. Good communications, prayer for one another (not just for high-sounding ministry issues), and sharing experiences like the communion table—which has a uniquely powerful ability to bind us together and to Christ—all contribute. (Taylor 2000, 28)
The recent history of ECWA/SIM’s partnership has borne this out. The main forum for interaction laid out in the Memorandum of Understanding is the regular meeting of the ECWA/SIM Joint Committee, which provides “a forum for communication, interaction, and/or consultation concerning matters of mutual interest between the Church and the Mission” (MOU, 3). The preamble to the committee’s purpose statement reads:

The history of the Church/Mission relationship confirms and underscores the necessity of frequent, open, and honest communication between ECWA and SIM. In order to strengthen and facilitate a viable working relationship and/or create an enabling environment for a sustainable friendship, it is essential to establish an effective forum for communication. (MOU, 3)

The Joint Committee is the established forum for open, regular communication between the leadership of the church and mission. It is the centerpiece of the Memorandum of Understanding and has served a vital purpose since its establishment. From the start, meetings have included fellowship, sometimes over a meal. The meals have proven essential to promoting friendship. One time SIM invited the families of ECWA personnel to a picnic to enjoy a fun, relaxed day with their SIM missionary colleagues. Heavy workloads unfortunately make such occasions rare for missionaries and nationals.

At the Joint Committee and other meetings, prayer is usually a major item. In our experience, nothing binds missionaries and church leaders in partnership for kingdom purposes such as praying together. Nothing better empowers kingdom progress than believers of different cultures who, as missionaries and nationals, are experiencing the blessing of unity and friendship as they work jointly for God’s glory in a country such as Nigeria. I have been challenged and blessed by the example of fervent prayer in meetings with my ECWA colleagues.

**Lesson #6: No Pain, No Kingdom Gain**

Missionaries and nationals who forged the SIM/ECWA partnership over the years have encountered a kingdom synergy that comes only through the crucible of real, often painful experience. Tackling difficult, emotionally charged problems in a cross-cultural context has taught us to lean together on the Lord of the harvest for help and wisdom beyond our combined human resources. Together we have endured pain and frequent disappointment, sometimes as combatants and other times as beloved comforters. In the process, we have experienced the ecstasy and glory of growing up together to a fuller measure of the fullness of Christ and seeing his multi-ethnic bride become more beautiful.

As testifies Harold Fuller, SIM field director during the turnover:

During those years of difficult relationships, my heart was pained by both expatriate and national leaders/personnel. Yet I know that it was the only way that they and all of us would learn...anything less is theory. (1980)

We have learned that God is faithful. Mission-church partnerships can work, even through the failures of human partners.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

Much debate has centered on what course a pioneer church planting mission should chart once a church birthed in a given location has reached maturity. Forty years before the SIM turnover to ECWA, Kenneth Scott Latourette prophetically identified the crux of the issue: “What will most contribute to an ongoing Christian community?” (Latourette 1936). In the case of SIM’s work launched in Nigeria 110 years ago by a band of three visionary youthful pioneers, the answer has been turning over responsibility to the national leadership and establishing a dynamic, interdependent partnership with her mature and honorable son, the
Evangelical Church of West Africa. The progress and health of this relationship testifies to the blessing of God, as does the growth of ECWA and the kingdom in Nigeria. It is crucial that the lessons learned not be missed by others seeking to forge similar mission-national church kingdom partnerships to the glory of Christ.

References

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