

Transformational Mission Work—A Definition¹

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Abstract: Navigating collaborative relationships involved in effective and successful international church partnerships requires knowledge gained through study as well as experience learned through years of practice. This article attempts to define an appropriate approach to international partnerships and then identify some of the difficulties encountered as those partnerships are developed and maintained.

On August 29, 2006 in Wichita, Kansas, the International Management Team (IMT)², met to discuss vision and mission for each of the four regions in which they were working around the world—Africa, Asia, Eurasia, and Latin America. Members were responsible for managing the partnerships and relationships that the LCMS held, were maintaining, or were developing with other national Lutheran church bodies around the globe. Though there were many other items to discuss and work through in those few short days, understanding and developing appropriate partnerships were key to robust and sustainable relationships that not only supported the partners, but also allowed and expected formation of the LCMS.

A speech given by Condoleezza Rice, at that time, the United States Secretary of State, formed the basis for a discussion at that meeting. She had found that, in working with international partners around the globe, there were certain postures, expectations, methods, and strategies that she wanted to develop with those partners. In that speech—given at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, on January 18, 2006 addressing transformational diplomacy—she said,

I would define the objective of transformational diplomacy this way: to work with our many partners around the world, to build and sustain democratic, well-governed states that will respond to the needs of their people and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system. Let me be clear, transformational diplomacy is rooted in partnership; not in paternalism. In doing things with people, not for them; we seek to use America's diplomatic power to help foreign citizens better their own lives and to build their own nations and to transform their own futures. . . . Now, today, to advance transformational diplomacy all around the world, we in the State Department must again answer a new calling of our time. We must

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begin to lay the diplomatic foundations to secure a future of freedom for all people. Like the great changes of the past, the new efforts we undertake today will not be completed quickly. Transforming our diplomacy and transforming the State Department is the work of a generation, but it is urgent work that must begin.³

Though it might be argued that the United States, like most other states, ultimately is self-serving and self-interested, i.e., in its own welfare, and will always determine whether the welfare of another will benefit itself, the words spoken by the Secretary of State sparked a great conversation which led the IMT to rethink its posture and approach to LCMS partnerships around the globe. The conversation was dynamic and robust. The IMT was intently interested in understanding how partnerships were not only understood by us, but in how they were interpreted by the other partners around the table. So, with prayer and determination, the IMT took on the task of rewriting Condoleezza Rice's statement. It took significant word-smithing and a substantially different starting point and end goal than those of the United States. It required from the very beginning that meaning for any partnership begins and ends with the grace shared by God the Creator through Jesus Christ, moves into the world through the sending of His Holy Spirit, and continues to be sent through the church, His ecclesia. It develops so that not only Christians, but all people, hear the Good News found in the Savior of the world. It means that partnerships are about God's mission and not a foreign power interested in its own welfare.

What developed was a paragraph that tried to succinctly describe a partnership built on Christian respect and mutual admiration in Christ. At the end of the two days, the IMT expressed its understanding of transformational mission as follows:

We would define the objective of transformational mission work this way: To work with our many Lutheran friends around the world in a posture of partnership, in order to build and sustain missional, well-developed, and well-managed national churches⁴ (including our own LCMS, for the conversation goes both ways) that will respond to the needs of people (spiritual and physical), while being held accountable for efforts in the international Lutheran movement. Succinctly said, 'Shared Risk + Shared Responsibility = Shared Rewards.' Transformational mission work is rooted in partnership, not paternalism, in doing things with other people, not for them, and often being directed rather than directing. For that goal, we offer, when requested, LCMS resources and power to help our national partner churches around the world increase their own capacity and transform their own future and anxiously and humbly covet the same for ourselves from our partners. To advance transformational mission work all around the world, we in the LCMS, must rise to answer a new historic calling and be transformed as well. We must begin to lay new foundations to secure a strong and viable and vital future for world-wide Lutheranism. Like the

great changes made to accomplish LCMS efforts in the past, new efforts we undertake today will not be completed tomorrow. Transforming the LCMS is a work of a generation. But it is urgent work that cannot be deferred. (Paraphrased from Secretary Condoleezza Rice’s speech previously noted).

Though the definition developed may not capture all that is needed or required, it does establish a solid foundation to begin the conversation and practice of partnership. Based on this definition, the IMT then considered the partnerships that had developed and were being developed around the globe. Though numerous items related to partnerships were identified, the following more significant issues emerged that affect excellent and robust partnerships.

“Passing the Baton” Phenomenon

Many have used the phrase, “passing the baton”⁵ to describe next steps in the partnership process with national churches. In the case of the historic missionary activity of the LCMS, missionaries worked long and hard to help establish national churches. They served in positions of authority and power. They planted local congregations and trained the local leaders. They helped build hospitals, clinics, schools, church buildings, and leadership training centers. They wrote grants to fund projects to reach the local community. They supplied funds for micro-enterprises, for erecting latrines, for purchasing school books and materials, for sending leaders to schools, Bible colleges, and seminaries. LCMS missionaries have given their hearts and lives to help build the capacities of the emerging national churches.

As the national church bodies grew in numbers and leadership capacity, the hope and prayer was that someday, the national churches and their leaderships would assume the responsibility of managing their own church. Missionaries would eventually fade into the woodwork leaving behind a solid foundation on which national churches would continue to build and grow. There would be some overlap—leaving behind some missionaries to serve as consultants or supporters, continuing conversations how each might continue to work together to advance God’s mission in that place. The intent was never to abandon the partners. But the goal was to pass the baton of leadership and ownership to the national churches and their own leadership.

What has in fact happened in many places returned a different outcome—a dependent national church unable to carry that baton. Passing the baton to the national church is less easy when the baton built developed Western models and structures with assumed definitions and expectations. Unintentionally, a Western church model resulted, requiring the same types of resources to manage it as it needed before it was handed off rather than the baton imagined by the national church.

And, those resources with the same definitions and expectations were often not available. Seminaries needing significant amounts of income for the daily running and management of the plant, along with staff and professors, no longer had that full support, or if they did, support was diminished on a sliding scale over a set number of years. Buildings that required repair and upkeep simply outpaced the capacity of the national church's resources. Equipment repair and management skills, which had been the responsibility of the missionaries, now fell to the national leaders. Those leaders who were trained in Western colleges and seminaries with a worldview very different from the local context and who were now considered the obvious recipients of the roles missionaries held, brought back Western ideas of leadership and authority that often clashed with the local understanding of leadership. Seminarians who had learned a Western, systematic approach to the Scriptures now began to apply that approach in ways which made sense to the missionary or seminary professor and student, but missed the mark when local people tried to connect the scriptural insight with local questions and lifestyles.

The baton, which once looked so right and effective and successful, became a burden placed on the national leadership.

This is not to say that the baton of the past has been unsuccessful. There are many national churches that are now carrying the baton, moving forward, and have the capacity to carry on a robust ministry. But there are also those struggling to run with the baton handed them.

If a church continues to insist on a colonialist approach, it is imperative they understand the difficult situation being created when it is handed to the national church. Continuing a flow of resources from the West to the rest is simply not possible. Resources are not endless. Professionals trained in and by institutions in the West may return as marginalized leaders. Transplanted institutions and governance structures are at odds with local contextual structures. Buildings and land acquisition may hinder the original purpose of the missionaries. Though unintended, this colonial posture, which demands and commands a Western defined level of capacity from the national church in order to carry the baton forward successfully, creates less than equal partners and keeps them in a lap dog posture at the mercy of the original owner.

The “Money Police” Problem

Finances have been and will continue to be a significant issue when developing appropriate partnerships. In the past, support for the partner church came in various ways. Initially, dollars flowed into a country and often into the hands of a local Christian who had made contact in some way with generous and caring people in the West. An honest relationship developed between a person of God in a country who deeply desired people to meet Jesus Christ in his village, town, community, or

country. Individuals, a local congregation, or a church group raised funds, shared those funds with the local individual and/or ministry, and intended and tried to visit the ministry on site. At times, this relationship developed into an opportunity by the Western church to send missionaries – short term and longer term, as well as career people. And so, support arrived in the form of missionaries who served – church planters, teachers, and support staff. Goods were then purchased by the missionaries – planks, tin roofs, cement, books, school supplies, brick and mortar. And of course money followed – dollars for projects or tuition or rent or salaries.

There are still individuals in various parts of the world who somehow connect directly with a congregation or group or even an individual, and who then receive support. And of course, missionaries are still being sent. That has not changed. Most national churches around the globe, if asked, would readily receive people to support the ministry of the national church, and goods are still being purchased by missionaries for projects they consider valuable and helpful.

Noticing a need in a particular ministry, missionaries on the ground (either on their own or in consultation with national congregations or the national church) developed these projects, sent the request to the church, and received the funds to move the project forward. The dollars generally flowed to the missionary who managed the project, while using local skilled people and resources.

But as the national church matured, more and more responsibility was given to them. They were expected to imagine projects, develop the proposals, and, if funded, find local people and resources to complete the project. As the project moved forward, the missionary or church would release funds to them. The release of funds was always tied to good project reports or receipts that had been accumulated and submitted. Very infrequently would funds in total be released to the local congregations or the national church before the project began or before receipts or invoices were submitted. In this way, missionaries maintained their control over the funds even though the project was approved by the church, the project was part of the national church's ministry vision, and the local church was more than capable of managing the project and funds. The national church was not trusted, or its capacity to ably manage the project and its funding were questioned. Missionaries began to be seen as the money police.

This practice continues today and fuels the perception by national churches that their leadership is not trusted or lacks capacity.

Funds, Power, and Partnerships

Though the practice has been disparaged and criticized for decades, the model still continues: tying resources and decision making power to partnerships. The old model looks something like this: A conversation begins between an established

national church and a partner church. There is a request for support—either funds or people—for the local ministry to move forward. Once the request is clearly understood, the church develops a proposal for implementation. It might look something like this:

The Mission Office of the American Church prayerfully wishes to establish a formal strategic partnership with the Seminary of the African Church in order to mutually share the responsibility to strengthen the mission identity of the African Church.

In order to accomplish this partnership, the following goals have been drafted:

- 1) To facilitate close cooperation between the partner seminaries to strengthen the mission of the Church in Africa with a sound Scriptural identity.
- 2) To strengthen the theological voice mutually between the partner seminaries.
- 3) To strengthen the academic educational standard making the African Seminary a premier seminary in Africa.
- 4) To develop a more efficient and accountable system for managing and reporting on all American Church support and the handling of American visitors to Africa.
- 5) To support the African Seminary's operational budget to the extent feasible until it becomes self-sufficient.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

American Church Responsibilities:

- 1) To facilitate a closer partnership between the two church's seminaries.
- 2) To help support theological educators as visiting faculty to the African Seminary.
- 3) To build the capacity of the African Seminary faculty through ongoing theological education.
- 4) To provide an operational subsidy of \$60,000 US or above as needed and available per fiscal year for the African Seminary until it becomes self-sufficient.

African Church Responsibilities:

- 1) To provide satisfactory and timely reports to the American Church's mission board and accept directions for improvement.

- 2) To consult the American Church's mission director on matters concerning any visiting faculty, lecturers, teachers, presenters, or professors coming from the American Church.
- 3) Courses pertaining to the Scriptural teaching related to worship and doctrine to be developed in consultation with the American Church's theological scholars under the guidance of the mission board.

PARTNERSHIP RELATIONS

- 1) The African Seminary President shall share with the Mission Board Director issues regarding non-theological matters.
- 2) The African Seminary President shall share with the Mission Board Director of Theological Education issues regarding theological matters.
- 3) The aforementioned Directors shall consult with and report to the African Church President and the American Church's Director of Church Relations as appropriate.
- 4) Regarding visiting instructors, the African Seminary President shall consult either of the aforementioned Directors before allowing an instructor to visit.

DURATION AND IMPLEMENTATION: This agreement covers a period of three years, after which it may be extended by written agreement.

As one reads this partnership agreement with a set of lenses formed by the IMT's definition of partnership, glaring contradictions are evident. The most obvious is tying significant funds to the activity of the national church. In addition, it is also evident that the partnership with the seminary is tied to an American expectation of proper and appropriate reports and authority channels, appropriate oversight of the development of courses, and appropriate individuals approved by the American Church regarding who would be allowed to teach at the seminary.

Returning once again to the IMT's definition of partnership and the approach taken to develop those partnerships, it is noticeable that it does not try to define the prospective national church's capacity by a list of metrics developed by the church. It does not attempt to assess a national church with a SWOT analysis and subsequently assign the national church a percentage number from 1-100% indicating their capacity to partner effectively.

And though this example may seem to be "over the top," it is shared in this article from a real-life example taken from a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) sent to a partner church in the last two years. Appropriate partnerships do not require adherence to rules and regulations developed by another partner. That is not a

partnership. It is a contractual relationship built on cultural expectations and power by one party over another.

Asking for Support without Fear

Let one more issue suffice for this paper. National churches often don't voice their real needs or vision in partnership conversations because they are afraid that if they voice their vision, other partners around the table may have another vision and, therefore, not support the partner's vision with resources and funds.

This statement deserves an explanation. Though this may not be a worldwide phenomenon, when wealthy partners—partners with resources, people, money—come to the table with other less wealthy partners, the collaborative conversation is already weighted toward the wealthy partners and is often experienced in the following way:

- 1) A visiting mission team interested in investing significant time and energy in a partnership with a national church visits and meets with the leadership of the national church.
- 2) The visiting mission team asks the right questions: How can we help? What do you need? What do you desire? They are searching for answers to questions that will move forward the vision of the national church.
- 3) The response from the national church is often couched in the following language: What gifts (people, resources, money, skills, ideas, expertise) do you bring to bear on this place? What are you able to do?
- 4) The visiting mission team then lists a number of skills, resources, ideas, suggestions, and ministries that they could support or carry out.
- 5) The national church suggests and points out that one or two of the many things on the list are exactly what would move their mission and vision forward.
- 6) The visiting mission team is excited that they will be able to support that important vision of the national church.

A quick read of this process does not seem to raise any red flags. The visiting team asked for suggestions. The national church responded with ministries that matched the resources available. But if read more closely, notice that the national church did not indicate its vision. It simply defined the vision by identifying items on the resource list of the visiting mission team which they would appreciate. Those items may, of course, be exactly what is needed by the national church. But rather than the national church's sharing its vision and finding the visiting mission team unable or unwilling to fulfill its request, it would rather receive whatever help a visiting mission team might offer and take advantage of any investment in its ministry in whatever fashion the visiting mission team is able to supply it.

It seems to the visiting mission team as if the conversation between the two partners is real and collaborative, both sharing their vision and passion and finding a

way to connect each to one another. But in reality, it is the weaker partner's simply trying to find a way to keep the visiting mission team interested in supporting the local ministry. Many national churches are afraid that their real vision may not connect with the resources standing right in front of them, or that the visiting mission team finds the national church vision uninspiring and then does not feel compelled to invest in that vision.

Some national churches would rather have visiting mission teams invest in whatever manner they choose rather than lose the investment opportunity. This has sometimes resulted in buildings erected but never used, ministries started but never completed, land purchased but the vision for that land never accomplished. Yet, the building and land become additional assets of the national church. National church leadership is trained, but that training is now being used in non-ministry work.

This scenario is not just related to visiting mission teams from congregations or judicatories. While I served as Regional Director—Africa, LCMS WM, project proposals from national churches and emerging partner churches arrived on my desk each year. Often, a national church would send in six, seven, and even more proposals requesting project funding from \$500 to hundreds of thousands of dollars. And then, by virtue of past experience and protocol, those multiple requests not only forced us to decide which projects from among all the national churches LCMS WM might support (after all—resources are limited), but also forced us to determine which projects were priorities for each individual national church, as evaluated by LCMS WM.

In further conversations with each of them, LCMS WM clearly indicated that the funds available were limited, and subsequently asked for project proposals ranging between certain dollar amounts (depending upon the funds available any given fiscal year). Secondly, LCMS WM communicated to the national churches that, although LCMS WM funded a variety of ministry projects, there were certain projects it would not consider (no different than other funding organizations). Finally, and probably the most important, it was communicated that each national church was to prioritize its project proposals. LCMS WM would begin its deliberations with the highest prioritized proposal submitted from each national church. And it was made clear that, regardless of LCMS WM's perspective on any proposal, it would still fund the national church's vision and priorities as it was able.

Very few national churches believed that LCMS WM would approach the assessment of project proposals with that posture. They felt that unless their vision matched LCMS WM's vision for them, they would receive no project funding. Thus, the partners worked hard to determine which projects on the list that LCMS WM would fund found better reception in deliberations, and then would submit those particular types of projects. It took several iterations of budget years before national churches believed the rhetoric: LCMS WM funds the priorities of national churches. It began to break down dependency postures and system manipulation.

Partnerships need to be built on trust and mutual admiration for one another, with each partner bringing to the table the resources, gifts, skills, and wisdom that they are honestly able to supply, and that whatever those assets are, they are enough. When partnership conversations begin, both sides need to be willing to share their vision—the visiting mission team (or judicatories or even, as with LCMS WM, large national churches) and the national church and its skills and resources and true vision and hopes and desires.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this paper, the insights shared come from being in the mix, with “boots on the ground,” and instigating those courageous conversations so necessary to develop the important partnerships church bodies need to move God’s kingdom forward. So please allow me to conclude with one more story that highlights the learning curve still evident as partnerships begin to grow and mature.

As I began my work as Regional Director—Africa LCMS WM in 2005, one of the items laid on my desk was a partnership agreement being developed entitled, “Guiding Principles for the Working Agreement between the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) World Mission and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY).” Since it was less than three pages long and in process since 1996, the goal was to complete the agreement as soon as possible.

One of my first African meetings was with the President of the EECMY in March 2006 to discuss the document. We spent several hours working through the document, word-smithing, changing phrases, and trying to develop appropriate language satisfactory to both sides. At the end of the day, we still had work to do and we both indicated that we would plan another meeting to address the formal partnership. Over the next two years, we met a number of times, with little if any progress.

One day, I received an email inviting LCMS WM to the EECMY’s annual partnership gathering scheduled for January 2008. I returned to Ethiopia for the 29th annual partners meeting, the “Committee of Mutual Christian Responsibility.” The partners were from all over the globe—mostly Europe and North America. They included LWF, PCUSA, RCA, NLM, and many others—a total of 40–45 partners with whom the EECMY had a formal relationship/partnership. Each of them had signed a partnership agreement MOU that had been written by the EECMY.

It was an unexpected discovery. The EECMY had developed its own agreements. I took copies and asked LCMS WM in St. Louis to look at them and determine if they could serve as the platform for partnership with the EECMY, rather than have the LCMS WM and the EECMY try to draft and write a separate

document. Except for a few items, LCMS WM responded that the documents could be the platform for a signed, official partnership.

Another partnership meeting took place in April 2008, four months after the annual meeting. I indicated that I had discovered and read the EECMY partnership agreements already developed. The president informed me that the “Standard Partnership Agreement” was for all partners, and the EECMY even allowed room for discussion if there was any article that was not clear or needed some modification. With that understanding as the backdrop to the meeting, and with the president at the table with both the LCMS WM MOU that had been in draft form for years, and with the EECMY’s own partnership documents in front of him, he asked me, “Which one should we use—the MOU being drafted between WM and the EECMY or the EECMY’s own document?” I told him to rip up the LCMS WM MOU and to work with the EECMY’s document.

Within one hour, the agreement was signed. After another two hours, a more concise partnership agreement of the EECMY, the “Specific Agreement,” was being discussed. Once LCMS WM agreed to allow the EECMY to determine what agreements were appropriate to use for official partnership with their church, the meeting moved along quickly. After 10-plus years of conversation and at least 4–5 years of working with a 3-page draft document that LCMS WM initiated with a posture clearly indicating to the EECMY who was in authority, it took only four months (from the discovery of the EECMY documents in January until the April meeting) to agree to move forward to sign a working agreement between the EECMY and LCMS WM. The simple equation shared earlier in the IMT’s partnership definition captures this well: Shared Risk + Shared Responsibility = Shared Rewards. Each partner brings the capacity it has and the wisdom it can offer, and it is enough. Partnerships.Are.Not.One.Direction.

Some Personal Reflections as a Postscript

Though it has been several years since I have served in an international position, I have not been absent from the conversation nor from observing the present practices as international partnerships move forward. Though it is only my humble opinion, I believe that the present direction being forged in partnership development and management has been to return to older practices, models, approaches, and postures rather than moving in the direction as described in the definition shared in this paper.

I have observed a dependency model being used as an approach to strengthening partnerships or beginning them. In some instances, money has been closely tied to partnerships agreements. Explicit and implicit control has been connected to instructors and professors who teach in institutions and seminaries. National churches have been instructed to consult the LCMS on matters concerning any

visiting faculty, lecturers, teachers, presenters, or professors coming from the West. Outside influence has been applied to national churches as they choose their own leaders to instruct at their own institutions. Partners are rated according to their abilities and capacities to be effective partners based on criteria defined and delineated by the Western church. The three-self formula that allows for many and varied ways for national churches to define their own capacity as sustainable, governing, and propagating bodies has been replaced with Western-defined criteria with little input from the national churches themselves.

I have noticed that rather than partnering and advocating for and coming alongside of our international friends, involvement in litigation and court cases has become more common. The present trend seems to be directive rather than partnership, and that done even with litigation. That partnerships include support, advice, conversation, and dialogue, even when it needs to be courageous, should be expected. But outside partners should not choose which side to support in a national church's struggles and conversations. An organization may choose not to partner with another organization, but litigation brought or supported by an outside voice intending to influence the decisions of a national church should never be used. In my opinion, those decisions are strictly and only the responsibility of the national church in that place.

I have also observed people being removed from missional leadership roles. Since 2010, nearly fifty international missionaries and twenty individuals from the home office with proven abilities, cross-cultural competencies, and hundreds of years of service have resigned, been removed, or been repositioned. Though the reasons for these remarkable changes are not all known, the reality is that these changes have occurred in the recent past and a significant number of years of experience in mission have been lost in the international missionary movement. Since WWII, LCMS missionary efforts have intentionally built upon the work of previous generations to establish indigenous churches that themselves produce missionaries, resulting in a powerful global network of Lutheran church bodies and new mission efforts. That continuity of mission, a distinguishing hallmark of LCMS missionary efforts for nearly seven decades, is now being severed, and the chain of cumulative mission knowledge and experience broken.

In addition, in numerous instances these missionaries have been replaced with others who do not always bring those same gifts and experiences. In my opinion, individuals have been placed into significant leadership positions in international contexts or in roles explicitly connected to international partnerships who bring little significant missional theory or practice or proven ability to competently navigate the difficult waters of cross-cultural ministry. Missional theory accompanied by extended experience is important, for without them, one is doomed to repeat what appears to be a good idea, when, in reality, experience indicates that it is not.

Without good theory coupled with extended experience, one is reduced to one's own wisdom and worldview yet untested by reality.

Finally, limitations have been placed upon those who are sent into international contexts where church planting or theological education is the main focus, namely, ordination and an M.Div. degree, effectively eliminating many who could serve faithfully and successfully. These changes affect the capacity of the Western church to partner appropriately and finally, successfully.

These are simply my thoughts, reflections, and perspectives. Though some might agree, others will disagree, which makes for a wonderful, robust, and transparent conversation as the church, the people of God, moves together into the world to reach those who still live without Him and the gift of grace so freely offered. May that always be the goal. To His glory alone.

Endnotes

¹ Though this paper aims to share an appropriate approach to developing partnerships with national churches throughout the world, it does so from an experiential perspective. The issues raised in this paper have been seen throughout the world. They are not centered in one place or with any particular type of national church. And though the few issues noted in this paper are important, it is surely not an exhaustive list. The intent is to raise awareness of what might begin to constitute an appropriate approach to developing those partnerships and, subsequently, what to watch for as those partnerships move forward. Finally, though this paper reports the issues from a “boots on the ground” perspective, the issues have not been processed in a vacuum. Years of study and research have helped to shape this response.

² Today known as the IMT, its make-up included the four Regional Directors for Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod World Mission (LCMS WM) along with the Associate Executive Director for International Mission.

³ From a speech given by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, on January 18, 2006. The entire speech may be found at <http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/59306.htm>.

⁴ In this document, the word “church” refers to a sending church, a church normally from the west. The words “national church” refer to the local church in a different place, in another country, often referred to as a receiving church.

⁵ This phrase used in mission circles was popularized in a book entitled, *Passing the Baton*, by Tom A. Steffen (La Habra, CA: Center for Organization & Ministry, 1997).