

THE CHURCHES, MISSION AGENCIES, AND THEOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS: A TRIANGULAR PARTNERSHIP TO REACH GHANA AND BEYOND FOR CHRIST

David N.A. Kpobi

Introduction

The Christian Church has found a home in Africa. This is the glaring fact of our time. Having heard the Gospel in their languages, Africans have taken it to greater heights and adopted it as an African religion capable of dealing with their existential realities. The advent of the Christian Gospel in Africa beginning in the 15th century was in reality, nothing more than a re-introduction after a break of many centuries. Indeed, Christianity reached North Africa in the very early beginnings of the spread of the Gospel, and Christian Churches had flourished in major north African cities of the time. When the Gospel was reintroduced in the 19th century, it was with much scepticism and hesitation because for many people in the West, it was inconceivable that 'pagan Africa' could be won for Christ. Over the years, the scepticism has proved to be unfounded and the Christian Church has flourished all around sub-Saharan Africa, made possible by many fruitful forms of partnerships which have been mutually beneficial, and which many African churches have come to regard as true expressions of Christian fellowship and cooperation. Undoubtedly, mission partnerships have had their fair share of challenges, usually emanating from factors far beyond the grasp of the partners. It is therefore important to inquire into the future direction of mission partnerships to determine which aspects can reasonably be expected to continue, and those that require restructuring. Even more important is the necessity to forge new forms of partnership to facilitate greater and more enduring outcomes.

In this presentation, we pay attention to partnership and cooperation across three different players in Christian mission, namely, the churches, mission agencies, and theological institutions in Ghana. For the presentation, a church is defined as a body of Christians formed into a worshipping community with an identifiable place and form of worship that

upholds the doctrine of the Trinity (God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). A mission agency is here defined as a Christian organisation established to complement and enhance the propagation of the gospel of Jesus Christ through varied means and which may or may not be linked to a church. A theological institution refers to an educational facility established for training leaders (academic and professional, lay and ordained) for the work of the churches. The common thread that binds all three is the concentration on propagating the Gospel of Jesus Christ in fulfillment of the Great Commission. How can these entities join forces to reach various sectors of Ghanaian society and Africa generally which have either not yet been impacted by the Christian gospel or where the gospel is losing its central place in the lives of people?

Rediscovering the local church

The history of many mainline churches in Ghana shows that the first few congregations that were established were soon grouped into the local, district, and regional bodies and eventually into national synods or assemblies. It was a natural progression that ensured good administration and contributed immensely to the cohesion that the churches enjoyed for many years. The process of evangelization and impacting with the gospel was however a task largely undertaken by the local congregation or local Christian community. This was important because the local congregation was the most visible representation of Christ and its zeal or lack of it contributed much to the success or failure of mission work. Unfortunately, many local congregations have lost this all-important character and have become subject to 'instructions' from above which somehow tends to kill initiatives at the local level and deprive such congregations of time and opportunity to develop their local mission. The importance

of the local church must however not be obscured because the relevance of the church is most impactful because of what happens at the local level. It has become necessary for churches that continue to perpetuate structures that diminish the prominence of the local church to reconceptualise their mission and start dreaming new dreams. This is where the development of various forms of partnership becomes necessary between all entities for whom the success of the Christian mission is a priority. These include the three that we are considering, namely, churches, mission agencies, and theological institutions. All three may not be visibly present at every local level but various forms of cooperation are possible, such that each is encouraged to bring its contribution to the table. Many years of experience with church and para-church partnership relationships have shown how easy it is to develop them but also how difficult it is to sustain them with continuing relevance. Mission partnership is a journey of faith and must always include contingency plans to deal with whatever might happen along the way. The partnership may therefore begin at the local level although it may not remain there all the time.

The Biblical Basis

Like any other concept in Christian mission, a partnership must have a clear biblical basis that energises the process and gives it direction and form. There are abundant indications of this in the Old Testament whose fulfillment we find later in the New Testament. Just one example will suffice. The well-known Biblical prophecy spoken by the prophet Joel points to an important activity that would be part of God's salvation plan for humanity.

Afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people

Your sons and daughters will prophesy

The old people will dream dreams

The young people will see visions...

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Joel 2:28,32)

Here is a clear indication that God had planned the salvation mission well in advance and it was only a matter of time before its implementation would take place. Here also is an indication that God is the owner and source of mission. The concept of *Missio Dei* seeks to emphasise this and to give God his place as

the initiator of mission. It is he who decides when to pour his spirit on all people and it is he who decides what the effect would be (i.e., the prophesying, dreaming, and seeing of visions).

When Joel spoke these words, he was most probably thinking of what all Israelites believed would happen before the 'Day of the Lord' when God would exalt Israel and bring judgment on her enemies. It would be a catastrophic period for the enemies of Israel, but a day of victory and vindication for God's people. In this passage, visions and dreams are indicated as constituting an important step in realizing God's plan, but these should be understood in much broader terms than the normal meaning of these words. It is a prophecy that includes the new enlightenment that God would endow his people to enable them to carry out the mission to which he would call them. Part of this enlightenment is still at work today, enabling us to forge new relationships and partnerships as this paper seeks to propose. I, therefore, have no doubt that what we are doing today (i.e., proposing partnerships and other forms of cooperation is part of the "prophesying, dreaming and visions" promised long ago.

Significantly, this prophecy was quoted by the Apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost, and it was for him a prophecy that had become reality not in the military or triumphalistic understanding of the ancient Israelites but in the sense of God breaking into history "in the fullness of time". As far as Peter was concerned, the future dimension of the prophecy had been exhausted and he and the other disciples were experiencing the dreaming, prophesying, and visions in their time. In other words, Peter was conceptualising mission from a perspective that he had never considered previously. He had acquired a new understanding of salvation that was not based on the efforts and capabilities of human beings, but the enablement of the spirit of the risen Christ (the Holy Spirit). Therefore, when we quote these words today, we must also do so in the spirit of Peter on the Day of Pentecost. Our dreaming, prophesying, and seeing of visions must occur simultaneously with their implementation or possible realization. I, therefore, wish to adopt the words of the crowd on the Day of Pentecost who after hearing Peter's sermon, asked the disciples: "What shall we do?" (Ac.2:37) and to further offer the same answer that Peter gave to the crowd:

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your

sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord will call. (Ac.2:38-39).

Peter directs the crowd on what to do - *'Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus'*

He assures them of what to expect - *'You will receive the Holy Spirit'*

He shows them how broad the promise is - *for you, your children, even those far off*

I refer to this Scripture passage because repentance, or rather the lack of it, appears to be at the heart of the crisis facing the mission of the Church today. Repentance, in its real sense, is about changing directions and adopting new attitudes and postures that will lead to God-inspired action. Such a change of attitude and direction is possible only when the Church begins to accept its proper place in mission by recovering the truth that the Church is not the sender but the one being sent. "*Missio ecclesiae*" (the mission of the church) issues out of the "*Missio Dei*" (God's mission). God sends the institutional church into the world to proclaim the Gospel, but the church may not be the only messenger out there. Other Christian bodies are called to ministry in other ways different from the church's chosen paths and methods. The great truth, repeated over the ages and also in our time, is that the essence of the church's existence (*raison d'être*) is the fact of being sent with a message that is not hers. As David Bosch, the celebrated missiologist has emphasised, the church "exists for the sake of those who are not members of it". (D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1991, p.375).

The church exists for those to whom it has been sent and that is a caution to those of us at the forefront of mission to beware of spending too much time and resources on ourselves rather than on those to whom we have been sent. It is also a caution against thinking that being sent by God implies that we have answers and solutions for all challenges on the mission field, a stance which has unfortunately been adopted in not a few cases in mission history. Church and mission are therefore not two different entities but the same thing where Christian worshipping communities, mission agencies, and training institutions consider each other as messengers travelling together with a common objective of keeping afloat as they head to the same landing dock.

What shall we do?

In the light of the foregoing remarks, it is time to consider what options there possibly might be for churches, mission agencies, and theological institutions in their continuing quest for cooperation and relevance. How can churches, mission agencies, and theological institutions give meaning to partnership in mission in these contemporary times? What needs to change? What new things are possible?

As indicated earlier, mission begins with God because he is the source and the initiator but we also need to add that God is also the destination of mission where everything ends. As we acknowledge God's ownership of mission, we must also seek our inspiration from him. Over the years, churches, mission agencies, and training institutions have pursued a compartmentalised model of mission whereby they operated like departments of a company where knowledge of what the other is doing is not considered very important. The existence of mission agencies in many cases had been understood as a means to fill gaps in the church's mission endeavours. In that sense, mission agencies were seen as complementing the church's work by filling missional gaps. It is for that reason that these agencies have often been referred to as para-church organisations with the understanding that they operate on the sidewalks rather than in the mainstream engagements of the church's mission. The reality, however, is that many of these agencies have often pursued much larger objectives and can indeed, be shown to be more in the forefront of activities on the mission field than some local churches. In a similar vein, theological institutions have been generally known to concentrate more on the training and equipping of potential church leaders for work in the field and have, in the process, paid little or no attention to cooperation with other mission stakeholders after the training period. However, since the products of theological institutions do find their way into the services of churches and mission agencies, there is already a link that can foster cooperation in the cause of the Gospel. What has been lacking is a conscious attempt to combine efforts to achieve the common goal of making disciples of all nations. As labourers in the same vineyard of the Lord, these bodies owe it a duty to each other to do away with any prejudices and obstacles that hinder a fuller and deeper experience of God through cooperation and mutual help. This will however not happen without overhauling not only our various structures but also

our thought patterns through a collaborative effort on all sides. When that happens, the partners may, in the process, come to realise that the values they both cherish and the objectives which they pursue are to be found not in one place or the other, but their joint efforts. That is why the new paradigm for mission partnership ought to emphasise co-responsibility and co-ministry where we are mutually and directly involved with each other. It is in that spirit that I proceed to make a few suggestions for our meditation, deliberation, and possible adoption.

The Ecumenical Spirit

The term 'ecumenism' has been used to describe the efforts of different churches to operate in a manner that does not alienate other Christian churches or bodies pursuing the same objective of fulfilling the Great Commission. Such has unfortunately been the case in the history of the Christian church where a stiff adherence to denominational traditions and teachings has been the source of many conflicts and misunderstandings within the Christian family. Ecumenism, therefore, enjoins churches and other Christian bodies to seek the unity of all Christians to witness in unity to the targets of our mission. (David N.A. Kpobi, *Mission in Ghana – The Ecumenical Heritage*, Accra: Asempa Publishers, 2008, 7-12). It has therefore been gratifying that the 20th Century saw the beginning of efforts by the churches to work together despite doctrinal and organisational differences. The same period saw the establishment of mission agencies and fellowships across denominational lines. Since then, many more such trans-denominational endeavours have come into existence and are making some impact on the ongoing mission of the church. It is again gratifying that today, most mission agencies and theological institutions are known to cherish the spirit of ecumenism and are active and willing participants in ecumenical mission programmes. This is an asset to mission cooperation which must continue to be exploited in all positive ways.

Human Resource Utilisation

One of the most enduring forms of partnership between churches and other mission bodies over the years has been the willingness to utilize personnel or other human resources from among us. This has sometimes taken the form of secondment or part-time cooperation in specific areas. Such mutual

engagements have no doubt made a strong impact because the presence of a person from a partnering Christian church or organisation is one of the most visible indications that we are not alone in our attempt to fulfil the Great Commission. It is a loud statement to the world that the fulfilment of Christ's command is so important that we are willing to cross over from the comforts and security of our cultures and environments to cooperate. It is indeed a strong witness to the world about how far we are prepared to go for the sake of the Gospel, and for that reason, no hindrances should be allowed to block this form of partnership. One obvious hindrance to a partnership of this kind is the inflexible administrative and operational structures of many churches which make it difficult, if not impossible, to engage in common activities with non-church organisations over any considerable length of time. Whilst mission agencies are often willing to offer their services to local churches, the opposite is often not the case. This often results from different mission mentalities of the two sides: whereas mission agencies place their general focus on winning souls for the kingdom of God, churches tend to emphasise winning souls for their particular brand of Christianity. It is time to envisage mission undertakings that are conceived, planned, and executed in partnership with various stakeholders and where success is not considered again for any side but the Kingdom of God. For example, a mission organisation, whilst planning a mission outreach, can link up with a theological training institution to benefit from any existing research related to their mission or the religious landscape of the targeted area. The agency may also make contact with one or more local churches for a joint sensitisation or prayerful accompaniment for the task. Such cooperation is likely to produce a more comprehensive outcome than when undertaken by any one party alone. The partners become participants in a common mission, and feel like members of a common household or fellowship (*koinonia*) with a common destiny. They become partners in the same ship (partner-ship). They exemplify the diversity of Christ's extended family working towards the same goal.

Theological Cross-fertilisation

Beginning from the last few decades of the 20th century, new engagements have been emerging between the older theologies of traditional western Christianity and emergent African and other theologies of the southern hemisphere. There is no doubt that this

new engagement has, and continues to produce interesting results for the church's partnership in mission. There is a wealth of knowledge and experience that can be shared through an interaction of some form of exchange of theologians and mission practitioners from other fields. In our time, no discussion on Christian mission partnership can be complete without reference to exposure to African Pentecostal and Charismatic theology and practice, knowing that it has become the most common feature of mainstream Christian mission. Fortunately, many theological institutions have included such studies in their curriculum and are thereby impacting their products who in turn bring such knowledge onto the field. If this trend continues, there is every likelihood that the partnership of churches, mission agencies, and theological institutions would be enhanced. Effective theological formation in Africa must therefore be founded on sound context-sensitive education, and the continent's cultural resources must be employed to evolve curricula relevant to its context. In other words, it is only a contextual theology that does not ignore the African environment and worldview that can be trusted to meaningfully and effectively connect the seminary or theological academy with the mission agency and the local church. In this way, the theological academy can become an avenue for enhancing the theological knowledge of personnel in churches and mission agencies through special seminars, lectures, and conferences. Similarly, theological institutions must make room for church leaders involved in congregational and other forms of ministry as well as personnel of mission agencies to share their knowledge and experiences on the field in the classroom for the benefit of students and lecturers alike. One would also encourage theological training institutions to consider including mission agencies as places for the practical training attachment component of students who pass through their institutions. There can be no doubt that such interactions have so much to contribute to the mission partnership programme.

The church is what it does. This is the clear message that John Power sought to convey with the statement that: "Mission is not so much the work of the Church as the Church at work". The churches and mission organisations must be seen to be working and urging others to work as well because an idle church or mission body is a contradiction in terms. One means of doing this is continuous engagement with each other which can result not only in encouraging one another in our various endeavours, but also in

discovering other areas that our efforts could pursue. In a similar vein, theological institutions can be seen to be making more impact if their researches and wide knowledge do not remain in their notes or on the shelves of libraries but are made available to the churches and other mission bodies active on the field in a manner that is practicable for the propagation of the Gospel.

Trust and Transparency

One of the most common causes of friction and stagnation in partnership relations is the question of trust and transparency which can and do arise in the course of mission partnership relations. This human failing, when not properly handled, can be the cause of much disaffection within the Christian community. It is therefore important that any intended partnership initiatives take proactive steps as befits a Christian family in any such eventuality. New and creative alternatives to how churches and other mission bodies relate to and cooperate are required to reassert the importance of a relational and reconciling understanding of Christian mission within the body of Christ.

Conclusion

Working in partnership is the missional challenge of our time. Work is always lighter and gets more effectively done when it is approached through a joint effort of those involved in it. Churches, mission agencies and theological institutions have a responsibility to collaborate in mission so that, in the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, the world may believe that God has sent us (Jn.17:21).

The reality of a Christian mission is that a mission agency may be the outcome of the work of a church, and so also may a church come into existence through the work of a mission agency. Similarly, a theological institution may emerge from one or both of the aforementioned. Mission only gets half done or not at all if we disengage any of the important agents who are also pursuing a similar objective of realising the fulfilment of the Great Commission. A triangular mission partnership of churches, mission agencies, and theological institutions has all the potential for giving birth to other partnerships and I urge the three entities to work towards achieving that objective. In conclusion, it is important to go back to the words of the Apostle Peter when he spoke

to the crowd at Pentecost: "... *the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call*". (Ac. 2:39). A partnership is a process, and what we start today maybe even more for the benefit of our children than for us. It is time to start planning towards this triangular partnership. May the Almighty God, the owner of mission, direct our efforts in this endeavor.

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Rev. Prof David N. A. Kpobi is a Professor of Missiology, Ecumenics & Church History at the Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, Ghana. He also serves as Academic Dean. He holds a Ph.D. in Missiology & Church History from the University of Utrecht, Netherlands. His research interests include World Missions and Urban Missions and he is the author of several publications in Ghanaian Church History, Christian mission, the Protestant Reformation, African theology and Ga mother tongue theology, etc. He serves on church committees and in congregational outreach work in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. Rev Prof Kpobi also currently serves as the President of the Missiological Society of Ghana.