From Paternalism to Mutuality

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On January 12, 2010, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake wreaked havoc on the nation of Haiti. More than 220,000 people were killed, 300,000 injured, and 1.5 million left homeless. This was the first coordinated response to a major disaster I participated in as director of Covenant World Relief (CWR). We were overwhelmed with phone calls and emails from individuals and churches desiring to donate to the relief effort. The generosity of Covenanters was tremendous. CWR received more than $1.3 million in donations designated for Haiti earthquake relief, which was distributed to four different partners responding to the disaster. In addition to generous donations, we also received numerous requests from people desiring to travel to Haiti to volunteer on site. However, due to the magnitude of death and destruction and the chaotic conditions, our partners requested that we not send volunteers, particularly during the early stages of the response.

Two months after the earthquake, two CWR partners in Haiti invited me and a few other ECC leaders to come see their ongoing relief and recovery work. As we were standing in line to board the plane for the two-hour flight from Miami to Port-au-Prince, we saw several groups wearing brightly colored matching t-shirts with slogans like "Help for Haiti's Helpless" and "Save Haiti." When we arrived in Port-au-Prince, we were overwhelmed by the mounds of debris from buildings destroyed by the earthquake and the resulting gridlock at the airport and throughout the capital city. During our brief stay we learned how the United Nations was coordinating the response through regular cluster meetings

of those organizations focusing on specific needs such as food, water and sanitation, medical care, shelter, logistics, and security. We saw how our partner organizations were participating in these cluster meetings and collaborating with other local and international NGOs.

We also learned about the "SUVs"—spontaneous, uninvited volunteers—pouring into the country to help with the response. Although they came with good intentions, for the most part they were actually causing more harm than good. Most had no language ability in French or Creole, little if any understanding of Haitian culture, and minimal experience in disaster response. One of the CWR partners in Port-au-Prince told us about a large group of medical doctors who arrived at their door soon after the earthquake, expressing the desire to help in any way they could. Yet, because they were uninvited, had no place to stay or means to care for themselves, and had no proficiency in French or Creole or knowledge of Haitian culture, our partner politely said, "No, thank you." The doctors angrily returned to the airport and took the next plane back to the US.

Paternalism: Robbing People of Their God-Given Dignity

Over a decade of working with CWR, I have received numerous inquiries from people wishing to go to other countries and serve poor and marginalized communities. These people sincerely desire to be the hands and feet of Jesus to those who are in great need. However, in spite of what I am convinced are genuinely good intentions to help the poor and the vulnerable, I usually try to dissuade them from going without first receiving appropriate training in missiology, cultural sensitivity, language acquisition, and holistic community development. Whether it is for two weeks or twenty years, some level of this kind of training is indispensable for intercultural service.

Beyond training, I believe we need to understand a more fundamental reason many of the volunteers to Haiti caused more harm than good. We in the West, particularly those of us from the dominant white culture, tend to be infused with deeply ingrained paternalism, which is often accompanied by a sense of superiority. With the help of many colleagues and friends around the world, including many in the US, I have come to see my own blindness in this area, realizing that as a white Westerner, paternalism is in my bones. I believe most of us in the West were raised in such a way that we unconsciously possess an attitude of superiority, which causes us to behave paternalistically toward the vulnerable and the marginalized, particularly those of other ethnicities.

There are many ways to define paternalism. In intercultural mission,

paternalism can be understood as "a top-down approach to helping others: those with the resources decide what's good for those without resources and impose their ideas on a community. This can foster a sense of helplessness within those being helped. It can also reinforce the idea among those who give aid that those they are helping really are helpless."[1] In our desire to engage in God's mission to love and serve the poor and vulnerable, rarely are we westerners consciously aware of our paternalism or our attitude of superiority. We truly desire to care for others who are in desperate need. But as Duane Elmer says, "Superiority cloaked in a desire to serve is still superiority."[2]

Missiologist Allan Tippet provides a helpful description of paternalistic or colonial mission:

> The old approach to mission was based on a wrong assumption that change was a one-way process. The stronger controlled the weak, the superior the inferior, the adult the child—and likewise the "advanced" people supervised the growth of the "child" races. Colonialism was based on these fallacies and colonial missions consciously or unconsciously went along with them. This was the root cause of our ingrained superiority and our paternalism.[3]

Tippet writes as if colonialism is over. However, I believe that the mindset of colonialism, with its paternalism and attitude of superiority, remains ingrained in postcolonial Western culture, including Western Christian mission, disaster response, and community development.

At the 2017 Africa CWR partners consultation in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, ECC executive minister of Serve Globally Al Tizon led a session on lament for the effects of colonial mission in Africa. Al asked the leaders of partner organizations to share their experiences of colonial mission. At first the tension and discomfort were palpable in the very silent room—after all, the leadership of the funding sources for their programs, and the event itself, were all present. After a long period of silence, one of the African leaders shared his painful experience of colo-

[1] Amber Van Schooneveld, "Does Sponsorship Encourage Paternalism and Dependency?" Compassion International, September 24, 2013, https://www.compassion.ca/blog/does-sponsorship-encourage-paternalism-and-dependency/.

[2] Duane Elmer, *Cross Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 17.

[3] Alan Tippet, *Introduction to Missiology* (Littleton, CO: William Carey Library, 2013), 87.

nialism. One by one, the rest of the African leaders shared the negative impacts of colonialism in their countries and their personal lives. As this time was nearing an end, one African woman raised her hand and said, "I hope you are not going to close this session by apologizing to us for the negative impact of Western colonial mission, because the reality is that colonialism continues even today."

As with so many problems, recognizing our ingrained paternalism is the first and most important step toward overcoming it. Corbett and Fikkert describe fives basic forms of paternalism and their false assumptions in their seminal book *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor and Yourself*.[4]

1. Labor paternalism falsely assumes that doing things for others is an effective way to help them—and allows the doer to feel good about themselves in the process. The reality is that simply doing things for others only serves to perpetuate their disempowerment and demonstrates disrespect.

2. Resource paternalism falsely assumes that when working in vulnerable and marginalized communities it is always necessary to bring resources from the outside. The reality is that no matter how dire a situation, local resources—human, material, and financial—are always available to some extent. In fact, resources brought from the outside can actually be harmful to the local economy and create unhealthy dependency. According to Paul Farmer, "Those who believe that charity is the answer to the world's problems often have a tendency—sometimes striking, sometimes subtle, and surely lurking in all of us—to regard those needing charity as intrinsically inferior."[5]

3. Managerial paternalism falsely assumes that the poor and marginalized are not capable of leading change in their communities—at least not with the efficiency of westerners. The reality is that community transformation can never be effectively imposed by outsiders; rather, the best leaders of change in any community are insiders.

4. Knowledge paternalism falsely assumes that those from the more economically developed West have the best ideas about how things should be done. The reality is that local people best understand their own context and culture. After frequently hearing mission teams on construction

[4] Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 115–19.

[5] Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block, eds., *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez* (New York: Orbis Books), 38.

projects say, "That's not the way we do it back home," one Covenant missionary began to respond, "Fine. Do it your way when you go back home. While you are here do it the way the local leaders tell you to do it." According to Melba Maggay, "To be 'Jew to the Jew' and 'Greek to the Greek' requires humility and a certain plasticity, an adaptive power that is possible only to those who are prepared to be subject to other people's norms and values, to lay down their preconceptions, and affirm the life systems of those whose ways of doing things are vastly different from our own."[6]

5. Spiritual paternalism falsely assumes that the materially poor are also spiritually poor. This attitude of spiritual superiority is evident, for example, when mission teams request to offer vacation Bible school or to preach. The reality is that the materially poor are quite often more spiritually mature than we rich westerners because they are more dependent on God by necessity.

After thirty-seven years of mission and ministry in the ECC, I believe we have much to learn from our international partners when it comes to proclaiming the good news of the kingdom in both word and deed, without bifurcation.

Developing Partnerships Based on Mutuality and Respect

This deeply ingrained paternalism and attitude of superiority in Western culture has implications for how the Western church should participate in transformational community development, in local communities and around the world. I am convinced that one of the most effective ways for the church in the West to participate in God's mission of transformation and justice in the majority world is to enter into partnerships with local organizations marked by mutuality rather than dominance, humbly submitting to the leadership of the local partner organization.

There are many pragmatic reasons for partnering in God's mission with local organizations. Community development programs led by organizations located within or near marginalized and vulnerable communities have greater longevity and sustainability. Proximity to communities of engagement also means program expenses are far lower than if an outside organization relocates staff and ships supplies from a great distance. Proximity also increases the likelihood of contextualized expertise, as local organizations frequently have a superior understanding of their

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[6] Melba Maggay, *Global Kingdom, Global People: Living Faithfully in a Multicultural World* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Global Library, 2017), 103.

communities as well as shared language and culture. Furthermore, local partners usually have established networks.

Collaboration with local churches, NGOs, community leaders, and government is essential to holistic community development. An example of such collaboration is Fundefam, a nonprofit organization engaged in holistic community development in Monterrey, Mexico. Fundefam was organized in the late 1990s by Covenant missionaries and originally included effective ministries of parenting and marriage enrichment classes as well as a ministry to families of children with Down syndrome. Eventually Monterrey became too dangerous for the Covenant missionaries to remain. Because the missionaries had identified and empowered effective local leaders, Fundefam has flourished in the years since. They have broadened their impact and established much deeper roots in their community—developing an elaborate web of collaborative relationships with churches, schools, universities, government, businesses, the local community, and outside organizations, including CWR.

I believe Western Christian churches and NGOs should avoid working in any intercultural context without partnering with established local organizations, which may be either churches or Christian NGOs. This should be a non-negotiable starting point for Western development efforts in the majority world. But it is not enough. As we partner with local organizations and seek relationships of mutuality rather than paternalism, we must address the issues of power and ownership.

A 1964 *Wizard of Id* comic strip depicts the king proclaiming "Remember the Golden Rule!" from his castle balcony. When one of the subjects below inquires what the Golden Rule is, another responds, "The one who has the gold makes the rules." International partnerships typically include a local implementing church or NGO and one or more funding organizations from the West. Guess who usually has the power in these partnerships? One of the greatest obstacles to genuine mutuality in partnerships is the failure of funding organizations to divest themselves of the power that comes from possessing the gold. The following statement from the Cape Town Commitment is helpful here:

> Partnership is about more than money, and unwise injection of money frequently corrupts and divides the Church. Let us finally prove that the Church does not operate on the principle that those who have the most money have all the decision-making power. Let us no longer impose our own preferred names, slogans, programmes, systems and methods

on other parts of the Church. Let us instead work for true mutuality of North and South, East and West, for interdependence in giving and receiving, for the respect and dignity that characterizes genuine friends and true partners in mission.[7]

Effective and impactful holistic transformation requires development programs that are locally initiated, led, and owned. Unfortunately, this is often not the reality for international partnerships engaged in community development in vulnerable and marginalized communities. Many Western NGOs boast that most or all of the staff carrying out their community development programs are local people. However, the reality is that these are often hired staff, mere agents of the Western organization; real ownership of the program lies with the outside partner, who acts as the initiator and leader of the program. Maggay writes, "It is an open secret that part of the ineffectiveness of many programs on the ground is that these originated not from the wishes and desires of the people but from the priority concerns of the funders. So-called participatory processes are merely efforts to make the people buy in and own the programs being offered."[8] Jorn Lemvik asserts that ownership of programs should extend beyond the local implementing organization to the local community itself: "Local ownership has to be found at every level of the 'development system' ladder, from the local projects, through the local organizations. If local populations do not feel a sense of ownership to the project activities, or if they have not been part of the process of setting up goals for development work, it is usually better to leave it undone."[9]

Although critical of much of the current community development being done through international partnerships funded by Western Christian organizations, Maggay suggests a better way forward:

> Clearly development needs to be deconstructed and reinvented as a location specific narrative that honors a culture's idea of a desirable future. While there are certain universals that all human beings rightly aspire to—prosperity rather than

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[7] Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action* (The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, 2010), 45, https://www.lausanne.org/docs/CapeTownCommitment.pdf.

[8] Melba Maggay, *Rise Up and Walk: Religion and Culture in Empowering the Poor* (Oxford: Regnam Books, 2015), 304–305.

[9] Jorn Lemvik, "Partnership: Guidelines for a New Deal," in *Power and Partnership*, ed. Knut Edvard Larsen and Knud Jorgensen (Oxford: Regnam Books, 2014), 120.

poverty; justice as against inequality and oppression; health and not sickness; peace, community, and stability rather than conflict, isolation, and perpetual insecurity—the path to these are best determined and sustained within a people's own set of values and resource base.[10]

In light of Maggay's words some might conclude that it would be better for international organizations not to enter into partnerships at all and instead leave holistic community development to local churches and NGOs. However, the reality is that genuine need exists for financial resources from the West to supplement local human, material, and financial resources in the work of community development and disaster response in the majority world. Moreover, the West also enters international partnerships with genuine needs. Western Christians have much to learn from majority world believers when it comes to dependence on God, peace-making, creation care, and treatment of the marginalized and oppressed with dignity and respect—to name only a few areas. In relationships of mutuality, both needs and benefits should go both directions. I believe one of the greatest advantages to the approach of CWR in partnering with local organizations is that we in the Evangelical Covenant Church have the tremendous opportunity to learn from our partners and be transformed through these relationships. This requires that we humbly submit to our partners in the majority world whom God has given us as mentors and teachers.

Moving Forward

The Cape Town Commitment calls Western Christians to move from global partnerships beset with paternalism and the perpetuation of unhealthy dependencies to relationships based on mutual love, submission, and sharing.

> We urgently seek a new global partnership within the body of Christ across all continents, rooted in profound mutual love, mutual submission, and dramatic economic sharing without paternalism or unhealthy dependency. And we seek this not only as a demonstration of our unity in the gospel, but also for the sake of the name of Christ and the mission of God in all the world.[11]

[10] Maggay, *Rise Up and Walk*, 61.
[11] *The Cape Town Commitment*, 19.

Having completed my service as director of Covenant World Relief, I pray that the new capable staff will take CWR to new heights. I pray for a broader vision, for brilliant new ideas, for deeper engagement in God's mission in the world, and for greater impact on the ECC. I also pray that no matter what new changes come, CWR, along with the rest of Serve Globally, will continue to seek partnerships with local organizations that are based on mutuality and respect. That we will humbly seek relationships in which our local partner organizations are in the driver's seat while we count it a privilege to sit in the back seat as we journey forward together, participating in God's mission of transformation in our broken world.