"You are Not Good Partners": Lessons from the Failures and Growth of a Church-Planting Team

By Brian C.

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As we walked into the room, we immediately knew from the chair arrangement that this was going to be a very different sort of meeting. We had partnered with this denomination for four years to train Bible-college students and coach their local church-planting team, and we were accustomed to abruptly called meetings with the president and other leaders of the denomination. We had thought the partnership was going well overall, despite occasional misunderstandings. But as we faced the four main leaders directly across from us, the president of the denomination said, "You are not good partners. You don't attend church activities. We have tried to tell you multiple times, but you are not capable of understanding. So we can't sponsor your visa anymore."

In our hearts we rationalized and defended ourselves. "What do they mean, 'We've been trying to tell you'?" we protested in outrage. "We've done everything they asked us to do!" We commiserated together in frustration and anger because they did not understand our intentions. Their words hit us like a battering ram, and we felt like helpless victims.

Over the following months, we were able to reconcile our relationship. For the past seven years, our team has had the joy and struggle of discovering both what caused our inability to be good partners and what can be done to nurture partnerships that are healthy for both expat and local brothers and sisters in Christ. Relationships, however, are not linear. So allow me to introduce two dear friends and share the most significant stories and lessons we learned through them. It is my wish that though your context may differ from ours, you may be able to see some similar patterns in your context and possibly in your heart as well.

Mike: A Local Church Planter

The first day we met Mike, we sat around a circular table in a dark room with a noisy air conditioner that couldn't possibly keep such a large room cool. Like many local (non-indigenous) Christians in the area, Mike was born on another island, where his ethnic group was majority Christian.[1] He moved to our city to attend the Bible school affiliated with the denomination which had recently started sponsoring our visa. But unlike most non-indigenous, local Christians, Mike felt called to church planting among the indigenous Muslim people groups. The leaders of the denomination knew that we wanted to work with local church planters, so they introduced us. It never seemed quite clear to us what the leaders were hoping, but at the very least we began a relationship together.

It didn't take long to realize that Mike was difficult to pin down. He spoke circularly – meaning that his point was not made at the last sentence of his story but throughout the anecdote that he shared. As

1 When I use the term "local" in this article, I am referring to a national citizen of the country in which we work. When I use the term "indigenous," I am referring to people whose ethnic heritage is uniquely attached to the area—one whose ancestors are originally from that area. An indigenous person has a very different view of their area than one who is simply of the same nationality, or born in the same city, and yet of a very different ethnicity. As such, an expat's relationship/partnership with a brother or sister who is indigenous may look very different from a partnership with those who are "local" but not indigeneous. For that reason, I make this distinction in the retelling of my experiences.

Americans of European descent, we waited with baited breath through his long-drawn-out stories for his conclusion. We always left the time confused. It was even more challenging to us when he spoke in this manner as an answer to what we thought was a pretty simple question.

It took a number of years before his communication started to make sense to us. The aspect of his communication that first became clear was that his stories did in fact contain his answer. Usually there was a person in the story whose behavior in a specific scenario (whether positive or negative) was the principle that he felt we needed to understand. In an honor-shame culture, Mike was uncomfortable speaking ill of us or of anyone else that he saw as an authority figure. We began to understand that when he started speaking in this way, it was because he was uncomfortable with what we were asking. So we stopped asking him direct questions about particular people but about possible scenarios instead.

There was another communication approach of his which we learned to interpret and later to emulate. When a number of people gathered together, after the customary chitchat about ethnicity, family, and work, he would begin the "business" of the meeting by telling a very detailed historical timeline of how each party (individuals or organizations) came into relationship with one another. For example, in the case of a business we started together, he would state in detail who founded it and in what year, who became the next employee, or when another person was incorporated into the group. In the case of a ministry program, he would detail when we first came up with the idea, what we learned from it, what village or church we went to, and how other people joined in. He would then conclude with the last person, who may have even just joined us that particular day for that meeting.

At first, these ways of speaking felt cumbersome and unnecessary to us. I regret to admit that sometimes I even fought anger and frustration. I was ready for us to "get on with it." Even though my intention was to serve and work together, these responses showed a sense of paternalism

deep in my heart. Whenever communication was cumbersome, I felt they were doing it the wrong way. "If only they gave us the opportunity to lead, if only they let us do it our way, then we would get some momentum," I thought.

Yet today I can't help but smile at the genius and gentleness of Mike's deliberate use of history. As I sat and listened, one day it dawned on me he was creating one narrative incorporating us all. Not only was he telling everyone where they stood in the timeline hierarchy (a common cultural way in our context to communicate who has the authority in the group), but he was also graciously bringing the newest people into the timeline. Our individual stories became one integrated story. It was easy to see from the smiles and laughter that this was a very simple way to start the business off with a very powerful Christian message—unity.

It was also powerful because, as I was to learn, how one begins a meeting signals to the listener what is most important. One day on the way home from a training, a dear indigenous friend and I were debriefing some conversations that we had over the course of the weekend. I remember him feeling uncomfortable about a particular person that we had met and how he spoke too much about money. His response to a clarifying question was a lightbulb moment. He said, "Well, whatever someone leads with tells you what they are most interested in." As I meditated on his response, I became horrified at how often I had fallen into this trap.

I too had been leading with what I cared most about, hadn't I? I had often led with strategy, planning, agendas, and the like. What had that communicated to my brothers and sisters? They always started with family, home, culture, experiences, and stories. I had been exposed. I cared more about ministry than being their friend, and thus I had shown them that I would not be a good partner. Though I had come from a so-called "advanced" nation, Mike and other brothers and sisters were the ones teaching me.

Mike also taught me that no matter how close we became, he would always need to distance himself from me at certain points. At times we'd spend weeks working closely together on a training or some other project for weeks, and then I would not hear from him for two or three months. Many years later, I learned that a number of people from within the denomination still believed that our team (comprised of Americans of European descent) had bought him a motorbike, paid for his house, and given him a salary. We were quite surprised by this because for upwards of ten years, he had been a paid staff member of the denomination.

Finances are, of course, a multifaceted issue. But in this particular case, it was clear that Mike wanted the church to be his patron. Whenever the line became blurry as to who his patron was, he would maintain a distance and invest more fully in his local church. We had to come to terms with the fact that within the honor-shame and patron-client culture of Southeast Asia, we would always be seen as potential patrons. And as such, we needed to give freedom to our brothers and sisters to navigate their relationship with us in a different way than they would with their local or indigenous friends.

Once we had developed a long-term relationship with Mike, which took five years, we understood what our ministry partnership could look like. We often got together on a monthly basis and talked specifically about how to tweak Discovery Bible Studies (DBS). We were struggling to persuade local Christians to see these groups as a legitimate way to disciple Muslims. We began working with Mike to do these groups among the churched in order to see what aspects didn't make sense to them. It became clear that if they wouldn't use them to disciple their own congregations, they certainly wouldn't use them anywhere else either.

We each conducted our own groups and trainings in our own networks and then would meet up together and learn from one another. The DBS format included seven to ten simple questions that functioned as the structure or liturgy of the group meeting. Though the questions

were very simple, we constantly had to edit them to get to the intent of the question. Mike helped us in so many ways to find the right phrases.

I will never forget one time while we were doing training sessions together, Mike came up to me during a break and said, "This is really good. Your training is much better than years ago. But that first question . . . it still doesn't work." I was flabbergasted! *How has God blessed you in the last week?* How could that question be too hard? He told me that in the church context the word *blessing* often refers to a financial blessing. Suddenly I understood why 90 percent of the time people would answer the question with stories about insurance payments and surprise discounts, or about someone buying them food.

We learned from him to use a different question all together: "How have you seen God's goodness in your family this week?" It made all the difference. Within two years, we had adapted our DBS-type groups in significant ways. As a result we began to see churches grasp the process much faster than before. Observing, listening, and learning from Mike was the key. As we got better at understanding Mike's context and perspective, it helped us to understand the pastors we began partnering with as well.

Harry: A Local Pastor

We first met Harry on an evangelism trip. Our team, along with those on the local church-planting team, made it a habit early on to have a weekly meeting as well as a weekly evangelism push to some new place in the city. Mike, as was his habit, invited other pastors from the denomination who had a heart for evangelism. I realize now that he was not only networking but doing his part to help define the identity of the team.

Our Western team's involvement in the local church-planting team often caused problems for the individuals on the local team. At the time we were not going to any local church or attending church events

or gatherings. We had been told by our Western leaders to avoid area churches because local Christians "didn't understand security issues" and "didn't care about unreached people groups." Our previous leaders modeled a pattern of doing "house church" with other Westerners for weekly worship. What we did not know was that these actions placed us squarely in the "not safe" box, according to the local church community.

The fateful meeting described earlier and the events that followed taught us that we understood identity very differently, which was a detriment to our relationships. In our Southeast Asian context, community defines your identity. No one simply walks into a new area or town or relationship and has the authority to define themselves. When our team came in and said, "We want to do Muslim church planting," and "We don't go to your church but do our own house church instead," there was no box for that. The local church community decided that we were suspect. In hindsight I would say they were right.

Mike needed to invite others from outside the group. They needed to see that though the Americans were not doing the right thing culturally, the leaders should not be too worried about them and should not ostracize the members of the team. Though it was never communicated that way, I am now positive that this was one of the reasons Harry was there. He could then report back to the head pastor and president of the denomination and put in a good word for the Bible-college students we were training.

But Harry was also there to be a nurturing, mature example for the younger men. He was really impressive. He had a loud preacher-type voice. He was confident and courageous in conversations. He was joyful and encouraging. Mike taught him some of the basics of the evangelism method we were all using, and he actively participated. We hoped that maybe we could do some trainings with him.

Around this same time, we sat down for the meeting in which the leaders said they could no longer support us. Though we acted a bit

defensively, the point of the meeting most likely was not to have a conversation. It was a show of authority among three other witnesses to get our attention. We came home from that meeting frazzled. But as we gathered as a team to pray, I very distinctly heard the Spirit say, "Be humble and listen. You want to be a good partner? This is your chance."

We reasoned that the only specific thing they said was "attend worship." So that is what we did. Our whole team began attending every week. It felt a bit awkward, but many things began to change. Within three months I could see a change on people's faces when they warmly greeted us with a big smile. A few months later, we joined the Christmas services (upwards of five additional worship services on top of the regular Sunday services) and visited the homes of many of the prominent leaders and members of the church during the week of Christmas. We were amazed at how quickly our relationships were no longer strained and what big smiles we received. No one knew us any better as individuals, and no one really knew what our ministry was about, but we had declared by our attendance that we were a part of this community.

Around this same time Harry became the pastor of the local church we attended. Within a few months, he invited us to join the preaching team and preach every other month. I had always misunderstood the invitation to preach. Years earlier, when a pastor friend asked me to preach at his church, I told him no. I told him preaching wasn't part of my ministry calling, and I didn't want to bring attention to myself so as to invite questions of who I was and why I was there.

However, over the course of a few years, I began to see this as a strategic invitation. I had been asking pastors to partner with me to do church-planting trainings. But then I rejected their invitation to preach. I did not realize then that they were extending a hand for a handshake when they gave such an invitation. They were inviting me to come to their church, see their place of ministry, and engage with their congregation, and I kept saying no. They must have been so confused.

During one gathering with pastors, a friend who I had partnered with for many years was explaining the context of his church and congregation. Pointing at me he said, "Well, *he* knows about our church." At another time a pastor from a village met with me and retold the story of a time when I came to his church to do a training and preach on Christmas. I began to see that there is something powerful about walking around in someone else's place of ministry, seeing his context, sleeping in his home, and joining him in ministry. It is a key aspect of partnership.

So when Harry asked us to start taking turns preaching, I certainly was nervous but also excited to be entrusted with this particular ministry activity at his church. Preaching meant coming to chat with him before church started, and that led to monthly meetings in his office. One day after the first time I preached, he told me, "You didn't bring your Bible with you to the pulpit." I explained that I had the text printed on a sheet of paper with my notes. He said, "I understand. But the congregants will be confused. Next time bring your Bible up with you." I was so glad that he told me when I had done something wrong.

Up until that time, I rarely got specific feedback, and I began to ask myself why Harry felt comfortable giving feedback in that instance. Throughout the years, it became clear that in a sense we had put ourselves under his authority by joining his team. The church was his church where he had the authority, and we were representing him. His honor and authority could be negatively impacted by our missteps, so he was invested in making sure we knew the rules.

When he took a leadership role with the denomination, he was given five pastors to oversee. We began working with him to train some of the pastors in this area. He now knew that we were trustworthy, and he had authority over a specific area. He could fulfill his leadership role by visiting pastors and he could be a good patron by bringing them a resource (our training). We jumped at this opportunity.

Of course, things did not always go according to plan, but this partnership became an important part of our journey. For a number of years, we joined Harry for multiple day-long trips. These trips usually involved impromptu stops to visit his friends or visits with pastors along the way (which included prayer for their sick congregants or meals with key members of their churches). We might find out we were to preach at the evening service in fifteen minutes. We inevitably never covered the amount of material we had hoped. But each trip taught us so much about how a church works and how a pastor views ministry.

The next week I would spend a few hours with Harry debriefing the trip. By this time, I knew to ask questions that didn't make it sound like I was disappointed or was blaming him for something not going according to plan. I learned so much by asking him, "Why did so-and-so say that?" or "What was she expecting when she did this?" Months later I overheard Harry with a laugh tell someone, "Whenever he wants to meet, I know he is going to ask LOTS of questions."

Each time we interacted with pastors we learned so much about what it was going to take to train local Christians to do church planting among Muslims. The first thing needed, however, was for us to change our view of local pastors. We were assuming that pastors were wishy-washy, only interested in an event and not follow-through, and distracted by "unimportant" issues.

However, as we spent time with the pastors, we realized they were incredibly invested in the work of the kingdom. Harry told us many stories of his pioneering work ten years earlier to plant a church among the tribal groups in our state. He frequently told of walking a whole day to a village to share the gospel and how on one occasion a local witch doctor poisoned his coffee. Miraculously he never got sick. Another woman doing a pioneering work in a Catholic area endured intense persecution by the Catholic leaders where she was planting a church. Many of the pastors in our trainings pastored multiple small church plants and worked hard jobs during the week. They were anything but lazy and distracted.

Thus we had to change our view of partnership. We had thought of partnership in regards to us training other people to do the work and then leaving when it was done. But that was a very short-sighted view of partnership. Rather, we each needed one another in the work of the kingdom. They did not simply need me, but I needed them. As we led trainings, we turned to small-group work and large-group discussion to create an environment where they felt comfortable sharing and asking questions (doing so directly was considered disrespectful). Our entire format for training and for strategy was influenced in significant ways by those sessions of discussion followed by trial and error. What had started out as sessions for how to start a DBS group had in fact turned into us discovering how local and indigenous Christians understood the gospel itself.

So we discovered that not only were we discipling and training others, but we ourselves were being discipled, trained, and mentored. Maybe Harry would have never said it quite that way. But when he brought us on those long trips, he was mentoring us. He was teaching us about how the "normal" Christian saw worship, prayer, and ministry. He showed us what pastors were experiencing and hoping for. He modeled how to pray for someone, how to preach, and how to lead in that context.

Concluding Thoughts

My intent in telling these interweaving stories is to show that the ways in which the expat learns about good partnership from his or her local and/or indigenous brothers and sisters is a non-linear process of observation and listening. Cross-cultural partnership is much like walking through a room with the lights turned out. With each painful smack of our shins against an unseen piece of furniture, we are given the gift of discovering what it is and why it is there. Each painful event offers us the chance to better understand the room we are in. With many years we can move almost seamlessly through the room and value the shape and arrangement of the furniture.

The local context dictates many of the principles of partnership, making it challenging to give "universal" principles for partnership. I can only offer my perspective as an American of European descent working in Southeast Asia, and even so, most of the following principles bleed over into others. Like a tangled ball of string, when you tug on one strand, you will undoubtedly find two or three others hanging on.

First, we must recognize the ever-present danger of paternalism and superiority in our partnerships. In the stories above I have told of the many ways that I initially judged the local church. I saw their praying, teaching, preaching, leadership, and outreach as "less than." Where did this incessant need to judge come from? As I began to study world history, I came to the understanding that most Western nations were built upon the myth of the superiority of Western, or white, civilization. I saw this evidenced in our founding documents, engagement in colonialism, and dehumanizing policies both at home and abroad toward those deemed "not white."[2] As I considered this history in the context of my partnerships, I began to see how subtle and overt messages of my own importance and superiority influenced the way I entered into local and indigenous partnerships.

Much like those affected (directly or indirectly) by alcoholism or pornography must develop rhythms and rules to keep them on a path of sobriety and purity, I believe we as Westerners must put into our lives regular and intentional practices that root out and guard us from a spirit of paternalism and superiority. It is not enough to simply assume that since one is a missionary one can no longer be racist or prejudiced. We cannot just turn off these ways of thinking like a light switch. We need relationships where we continually open ourselves up to talk about such things in a spirit of curiosity, humility, and love.

2 For an introductory study primarily in the American context see Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (IVP Books, 2019); and Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Zondervan, 2019).

Second, we must also recognize how the problematic ways in which we speak about church planting affect our partnerships. Many of the trainings and materials we consume speak of church planting in a highly linear way. We are most likely all familiar with the steps, principles, strategies, and continuums. We hear words and phrases like *urgency*, *high-value activities*, and *best practices*. None of these words are in and of themselves wrong or sinful, but they can become huge roadblocks to fruitful partnership.

I mentioned earlier the concept of invitation. In many instances we decode an invitation in the wrong way simply because we are looking at the world of ministry as a linear process in which we must accept "high-value activities" and reject "low-value activities." And this is where we see concepts tangled together. Most likely paternalism leads us to decode an invitation at best as an inefficient use of time and at worst an instance of being used or manipulated.

So it is worth questioning what makes an activity high value. What if, in the name of urgency, we have rejected a partner's invitation? I submit that we are often missing out on the great lessons that our brothers and sisters will teach us about the church and ministry—the very lessons we desperately need both in our personal lives and in church planting.

Lastly, we need to recognize that local Christians represent a unique culture worthy of study and contextualization. I regret to admit that it took years before I realized that I had many cultures which I needed to learn—not just that of the unreached people group (UPG). When our team changed the forms and curriculum based on the church context, pastors felt served and valued, congregants had fun at our trainings, and people were empowered to take small steps when they hadn't taken any before. There was forward momentum in every way.

Perhaps those of us in church-planting work have dived passionately into the UPG culture by learning the language and worldview and considering how the gospel can be contextualized to them. But have we

also given that same intensity to the culture of our brothers and sisters in Christ?

The strands of paternalism get tugged as well when we expect local and indigenous Christians to look a certain way, worship and pray a certain way, or be passionate about the same things as us. I have often heard colleagues say things like the following: "Why do they pray that way? I'm not fed by their preaching style. Why do they do ministry *that* way!?" We must give grace to our brothers and sisters at least as much as to our UPG culture, but maybe even more. We may need to contextualize our training, mobilizing, and teaching to our kindred in the faith. Perhaps we don't do this because our focus is not on them. Perhaps we try to switch off cross-cultural learning when we aren't with people from the UPG culture that we serve. Whatever the reason may be, our partnerships suffer when we don't give the time and attention necessary to understand the Christian culture and their unique contribution to the body of Christ.

I mentioned in the earlier stories the importance of being "safe" and understanding what makes one "safe" from the perspective of the local culture. Here again all the strands get tugged. Do I care about being a safe person? What if urgency and high-value activities make me unsafe? What if my culture doesn't value what the local church values? When we come to the point of having to choose between unity with our brothers and sisters and our principles of church-planting movements among UPGs, which will we choose? And what will we rely upon to make such a decision?

The meeting where we were called out by the leaders of the church caused us much consternation, outrage, and anxiety. As I look back upon that day, however, I see it as both a gracious gift from God and an act of generosity from those leaders. They provided for us a moment to see how our partnership was failing our brothers and sisters as well as a chance for redemption and reconciliation. I offer these stories, thoughts, and principles with the hope that our failures and growth, as well as our

deep love and appreciation for our local brothers and sisters, may inspire you to meditate on your partnerships. As expats engaging in partnership with local Christians, I pray we may consistently interrogate our beliefs and actions so we may walk in love and curiosity. May Jesus's prayer be fulfilled in us (John 17:23), that our unity in local partnerships would display the love of God.

Questions for Discussion

- How does Brian's case study relate to your own experience? What dynamics are similar to what you might experience in your context, and what might be different?
- What do you find most helpful in Brian's approach to partnership? What alternate perspectives, ideas, and questions would you add to Brian's approach?