Should We Partner? Frontier Church Planting and Existing Churches

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My family and I relocated to the Middle East almost ten years ago with the goal of seeing a church-planting movement among an unreached Muslim people group. In the midst of language learning and evangelistic attempts, we discovered there was already an Arabic-speaking church in the city! Ten years, three cities, and three local church partnerships later, we have experienced varying degrees of both fruit and failure.

Not all missionaries serve in places with existing churches. Those who do face unique opportunities and challenges for disciple-making and church planting among the unreached. Informed by my experience in the Middle East, this article focuses on frontier church planting in contexts where a local, near-culture church exists, proposing a framework for partnership and a set of guiding principles for when and how to partner with local churches.

The Middle Eastern Context

Churches in the Middle East claim roots from the Day of Pentecost, when Arabic speakers in the audience heard the Apostle Peter preaching in their language (Acts 2:11). Most of these churches today are in the Eastern Orthodox or Catholic traditions, but in the last two centuries,

some congregants broke with these churches to embrace new traditions and Protestant theology. These churches often emerged from the efforts of foreign missionaries and span Protestant, evangelical, Pentecostal, and other affiliations.

For those of us in the Muslim world who identify as evangelical,[1] it can be encouraging to find small, gospel-centered churches in our target-language.[2] In terms of cultural identity, the local church may share much with the unreached peoples around it such as a common language, a shared foundation of cultural values and norms, and shared geography. However, there are often significant differences, including dialect and vocabulary, social circles, tribal affiliations, and frequently, a legacy of conflict with (or persecution from) other people groups. In some cases, these churches have ceased any attempts at evangelizing their neighbors. While the local church is much closer to their neighbors culturally than the foreign missionary, the differences and historic legacies of conflict can hinder outreach.

The presence of local churches compels missionaries to consider many questions: how should we relate to existing evangelical churches? Should we attend regularly? Should we join the church membership? Should we partner in ministry? Should we accept formal leadership roles in these churches? Does this local church present an opportunity or an obstacle for church planting among the unreached?

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1   The first Protestant missionaries arrived in Ottoman Syria in 1840, and set up churches primarily drawn from members of the Eastern Orthodox churches.

2   For this article, I define "evangelical" as a broad, ecclesiastic identity containing roots in the Protestant Reformation. In terms of belief, evangelicals claim the authority of the Old and New Testaments and celebrate the Reformation doctrines of *sola scriptura*, solus Christus, sola fide, sola gratia, and soli Deo gloria. In terms of practice, evangelicals emphasize evangelism, individual and societal/moral transformation, and a global mission.

Common Concerns about Partnership

Partnership is not always the obvious choice. Many frontier church planters choose not to partner with local churches and instead venture out on their own for evangelism, disciple-making, and church formation/reproduction. Those who choose not to partner often claim the local church is not positioned to help in church planting. The church may have no evangelistic vision or may be culturally different from the unreached people groups in the area. They may speak a different dialect or follow different social norms, which leads some missionaries to ask, "Why should we expend energy with an additional people group to reach our target people group?"

These are valid concerns. I have observed Arab Christians function in a cultural bubble, using greetings, phrases, and spiritual vocabulary different from the majority culture around them. One wonders whether these insulated believers are willing to engage in contextualized communication with unreached peoples around them.

Sometimes local churches, including evangelical churches, are hostile to outside missionaries. I am aware of unfortunate cases of existing evangelical churches persecuting outside missionaries and reporting their activities to unsympathetic government authorities. Understandably, this prevents partnership in these contexts.

The form of the existing local churches may be very different than the form, which missionaries believe is needed for a viable movement among an unreached people group. In our context, we believe a house-church model of small churches, interconnected in a mutually supportive network, and led by leaders from their own people, has the best chance of long-term reproduction. By contrast, the local evangelical church in my region usually consists of one large congregation that meets regularly in a rented or owned building. Seekers and new believers are invited to attend and grow the attendance of the single congregation, which

leads to the question: can such a traditional church partner to plant house churches?[3]

This is not an exhaustive list of concerns about partnership; there are certainly more reasons that have led some to work independent of local churches. Many are valid concerns, and sometimes partnership is not feasible, as I discuss below.

Notwithstanding these concerns, I propose that in contexts where there is an existing near-culture church (such as in the Arab Middle East), partnership can be a viable, and even desirable, option for those seeking fruitful church-planting movements among the unreached. While there are sometimes good reasons not to partner, partnership between foreign church planters and the local body of Christ can bring benefits and multiplying effects that are hard to achieve any other way.

In what follows, I present a brief biblical framework and outline several benefits of partnership. I examine a few scenarios when partnership can be counterproductive or simply impossible. Finally, I propose some fruitful practices for navigating partnership drawn from our experience in the Middle East.

The Biblical Paradigm for Partnership: One Body

The New Testament metaphor of a body provides a paradigm for relationships in the wider church.

> Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all
> its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For
> we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one

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3   Let us foreign missionaries remember the forms of churches in which we ourselves have been nurtured prior to moving abroad. Many of us seek to plant churches that take a different form from our "home" churches. If the Lord can call and equip us for this task, can he not do so for local evangelical believers already present among an unreached people group?

body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many...The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 21-27, NIV)

This is our model for working together, both on the local level and as a global church. Different parts of the body working together involves reciprocity in the relationship with mutual giving and receiving—and shared suffering and rejoicing. When we seek to plant churches among an unreached people group, we should seek to learn from our brothers and sisters already living there. The local church should also recognize that God has indeed called outsiders to enter their culture and plant churches, and that they should therefore consider assisting missionaries. A healthy partnership forms when we receive from and give to the local church.

Given this theology of church which celebrates the global body of Christ, we might expect missionaries to hold a bias in favor of local church partnerships. However, it is often the case that we often enter our mission context with an unexamined bias *against* partnership with

local churches. Those of us who are westerners can hold unexamined cultural preferences for independence, innovation, speed, and efficiency. These values propel us into the fastest ways "forward"—which often means going alone. We can bring arrogance and ethnocentricity with us by believing our values are best and that we are better than other people. Sometimes we are influenced by ecclesial arrogance in subtly believing our church tradition is best,[4] or chronological arrogance, which is a bias against historic churches, an assumption that new ideas and younger generations are best for reaching the unreached.

I have observed all these biases in our mission context and have needed to personally repent of some. Accordingly, I would invite fellow co-laborers to begin any decision about partnership with a bit of self-examination, a process significantly enhanced by listening intently to local believers.[5]

Personally, I am convinced that foreign missionaries and evangelical churches among unreached people groups need one another. Perhaps even more importantly, such partnerships can potentially reach hard-to-reach people groups with lasting fruit and a reproducing church movement.

Potential Benefits of Partnership

A healthy partnership between expatriate church planters and the local body of Christ brings benefits and multiplying effects which are hard to achieve any other way.

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4   I am referring to unexamined bias in favor of our own church tradition including its practices, styles, and even some doctrines which do not strike at the essentials of our faith and system of doctrine. Admittedly, this is a subjective area. I do not wish to discourage any theological conviction but rather to encourage self-knowledge and reflection so that we make decisions based on conviction and reason and not on unexamined biases.

5   Let us foreign missionaries also remember the forms of churches in which we ourselves have been nurtured prior to moving abroad. Many of us seek to plant churches that take a different form from our "home" churches. If the Lord can call and equip us for this task, can he not do so for local evangelical believers already present among an unreached people group?

One of these benefits is learning from the cultural insight of the church. The local church possesses a greater cultural intelligence about their context—after all they live there! They have centuries of experience in relating to their neighbors. This brings cultural baggage, both positive and negative, to the relationship. At the very least, the church's experience can be an asset to any teachable missionary who listens well.

The local church often communicates more effectively than missionaries. While there may be differences in the use of Christian jargon and vocabulary on spiritual topics, the style of communication (an oral or storying style for example) is usually shared with the surrounding people groups. Abstract language and systematic approaches to explaining the gospel and theology used by many Western missionaries arriving from abroad often fall short in communicating truths in oral preference societies. The local church is well versed in more effective communication styles, and foreign missionaries have an opportunity to learn from them.

In my present ministry, I work daily alongside local evangelical church members who are called to evangelize their Muslim neighbors. The communication effectiveness of the local church is seen in the way that several of the pastors use adapted language and mannerisms when visiting Muslim homes to better communicate with our target people group.

When Pastor Michael and I visit homes, he masterfully weaves the gospel into an affectionate and pastoral conversation with the family.[6] He uses several Islamic greetings and titles of respect for the prophets and explains difficult concepts with concrete metaphors and examples to help the family understand gospel truths. He routinely wins their hearts and makes them feel embraced by the church and the Lord Jesus. My role has been to continue with these families by visiting them weekly for Bible study and discipleship until they place their faith in Christ. Pastor

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6   A pseudonym.

Michael is energized by finding new people and bringing them into the network of the wider church. My gifts complement his as I follow up with new seekers. Together, we identify leaders among those who become believers and they, in turn, work with the new people who Pastor Michael finds.

Partnership may also provide the benefit of legal presence. A local church, if legally registered, can provide residency for missionaries and sponsor ministries that might otherwise be more difficult to sustain in an unfriendly environment.

Even so, every church planting team needs to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of official affiliation. I have observed missionaries with church-sponsored visas and others with non-religious visas participating in the same activities. In one context, the church visas gave a level of leniency from government authorities, and in another context, authorities scrutinized the religious visa-holder's every activity. Personally, I am aware of one church-planting movement that experienced distrust and persecution from government authorities until they arranged to meet in old, mostly unused church buildings in their city. This unique partnership resulted in more time and energy for shepherding and evangelizing.

A shared strategy for reaching a people group establishes the most beneficial partnerships between the local church and foreign missionary. I have seen diverse teams of expatriates and local believers perform highly effective ministry to unreached communities. Such a cross-cultural team brings challenges, but the mutual learning and support, as well as the increase in laborers in the harvest, outweighs the costs of time and relational effort. Such a partnership can function and produce fruit long after a foreign missionary leaves the country.

As an example, I serve on a team of disciple-makers made up of new believers, local church members, and myself (one of the few foreign missionaries involved). Years ago, Muslim refugees from our target people

group began visiting the local church in search of help. Several local church members were trained in basic DMM methodology including discovery Bible studies and principles of rapid reproduction. These members began discipling the new arrivals in small groups. Anyone visiting the church was assigned a small group leader to receive aid and spiritual care. After several years, the church had over one hundred new believers from this target people, and many of them were small group leaders.

A recent national crisis drove hundreds of Muslim families to our church in search of practical help. Each family was introduced to a group leader, and almost all these small group leaders are believers from Muslim backgrounds (BMBs) from the target unreached people group. With 900 families and over 120 BMB small group leaders, the work has turned into a movement. Some of the groups have reproduced up to four generations now. Groups are encouraged to reach their own networks and form new groups while some continue to be formed through the centralized administration of the church as new families arrive seeking assistance.

The role of foreign missionaries in this movement is dependent on their spiritual gifts and language abilities. In my case, I am gifted in shepherding and teaching, which means I guide small group leaders and their families. I invest in them as they invest in their small groups of seekers and new believers. Each week we gather as a group of eight leaders, and I also visit each in their home for family discipleship and encouragement. I am not the only one discipling and equipping this group of leaders: the local pastor visits regularly, some meet weekly with a local seminary professor for theological training, and all receive regular teaching through the larger local church gathering.

Some of these small groups have combined to form new church congregations while most have not yet become churches. Depending upon leadership and geography, the local church encourages some of the small groups to form their own congregations and others to remain under their administration. In this hybrid model, movement DNA is

interwoven with support from an institutional church. In our experience, these two sides mutually support each other. New churches enjoy a place in a network of mature churches and leaders, and the mother church maintains constant expansion and reproduction.

In collectivist societies, the witness of a community is more compelling than that of an individual. When foreign church planters are members of a larger group of Christ worshippers and disciplers, such a community may attract more unreached people. Middle Eastern culture is collectivist in that everyone wants to know what the other is doing. An individual making a major life change *on one's own* is unthinkable. However, if one visits a community of dozens of people who have started following Jesus, whether in a house-church network or large church building, it is easier to take a next step in the same direction of faith.

Finally, the local church can provide a community of support and encouragement for missionaries. Frontier church planting can be lonely and every missionary needs a network of resources to surround and support them. A local church can be an important part of that member care network.

When Not to Partner

While I generally advocate for partnership, there are times when there are good, legitimate reasons not to partner. If the local church has no desire to reach the target people group, foreign missionaries have a choice: (1) engage long-term with the local church to catalyze such a vision, (2) move on to another church, or (3) move on to work independently of the local church.

If the local church does desire to reach the target people group, the next question foreign missionaries should ask is: what can partnership look like? If there is agreement on a shared church planting strategy, then a partnership may be quite close and comprehensive. If not, partnership may not be possible, except in a limited sense, such as through mercy

ministries that bless the target people group and provide access for the missionary to make disciples. It may be that a prayer partnership is the only possibility for a season—a wonderful place to start. However, without at least some level of strategic agreement within the partnership, however limited, such a partnership cannot succeed, regardless of any close relational bonds between the missionary and the local church.

Another good reason not to partner is disagreement on *core* theological issues. It is best for the local church and mission team to agree from the beginning on core doctrinal agreements required for partnership. For mercy ministries, the theological alignment may be more flexible. For a church-planting partnership, a higher level of alignment is necessary. The mission team should decide on non-negotiables and ensure there is agreement before partnership.

Finally, it is best not to establish a partnership that causes a threat to the ministry of either the local church or the missionaries. In some contexts, the simple presence of foreign missionaries threatens the safety of the local church. Foreigners may bring unwanted attention from unfriendly government authorities or hostile nongovernment actors. If a local church has lost its reputation among the target people group, an association with the church could severely limit ministry. Teams must carefully discern and research the ministry context, such as the history of the church, various rivalries, and public perception.

Navigating Partnership for the Sake of the Unreached

Having outlined a case for partnership, benefits of partnership, and potential reasons not to partner, let us now explore the actual journey of partnership with existing churches. In essence, success is achieved when all parties experience progress toward their vision while also maintaining a trusting and reciprocal interdependency with each other. From my

own experience in partnership, I propose six fruitful practices to better ensure successful cross-cultural partnerships with local churches.

Begin as a Learner

Kenyan Bishop Oscar Muriu explains to new missionaries that starting with the question, "How can I help you?" is an arrogant place to start. Instead, he argues, we should begin with the question, "Can you teach me?" Muriu explains: "As I put myself [*sic*] in a posture of learning, then your host will invite you to teach them back in return, and the mutuality and reciprocity that is developed there is that both of you learn" (Muriu 2012).

Learning is the starting point for all missionaries seeking to partner cross-culturally with a local church. In our missionary calling, we must be learners before we are servants. We start not fully knowing how to serve, and listening becomes our first act of love and service. This does not mean the missionary must abandon the vision to which the Lord has called them. It means the missionary must slow down and listen before moving forward in the vision and be willing to have the vision enhanced by what is learned. Listening well before injecting opinions is critical.

In regards to partnership, missionaries must learn the values and goals of the local church, which are not usually posted on a website or written in a summary document, but rather tucked into a dozen long conversations over many glasses of tea! New missionaries must learn the church's past successes and failures, discover what makes the church proud, and learn what brings shame. Most importantly, missionaries must believe the local church has something to teach them.

Share an Imagination

It is vital for foreign missionaries and local church partners to have a shared imagination—a vision of the future which both sides prayerfully labor to achieve. The question to ask is, "If our strategy succeeds, what

will we see in the future?" Follow up questions often include, "How do we define a church?" "Who should be the leaders?" "How do we raise up new leaders?" and "What is the best timetable for all of this to occur?" A shared imagination is an essential building block for partnership.

Agreement to a shared vision *before* ministry begins is an exception in our experience. The most common pathway to an aligned vision is to first befriend one another, listen to each other, and then work toward a shared goal. Ultimately, there must be vision and strategic alignment for any partnership to succeed over the long term. I encourage missionaries to be patient and learn from the church before trying to achieve alignment. Our first church partnership in the Middle East began with a slow journey of conversations and months of simply being present in meetings and worship services, during which we slowly built relationship and trust, which enabled us to align our visions for partnership.

A mission team has a highly focused vision for evangelism and disciple-making among a target unreached people group. However, a local church may believe it is called to a broader vision of multiple people groups in a wider community with various teaching and mercy ministries. The vision of the church and mission team need not be identical; there simply needs to be enough overlap in vision to work together. For example, our current church partner works extensively in global media, plants congregations among four different people groups in the city, and has an impressive teaching, writing, and theological education ministry. We primarily partner with them to reach one of the four people groups. The church is thrilled to have our help in this part of their vision, and we are honored and empowered to implement our vision with them to achieve fruit that would not have happened any other way.

Not every church is ready to align with missionaries' strategy, such as establishing reproducing, indigenously-led house churches among an unreached people. However, I have seen a functional partnership in which a local church endorsed a missionary team to carry out their strategy among a target people group while the church coordinated

relief and development projects alongside the mission team. The relief ministry was a core component of the church's vision, the missionaries could follow up exclusively with neighbors from the target people group, and church members followed up with others.

Be Transparent

I encourage missionaries in partnership with a local church to be open with church leadership concerning agenda, values, goals, and all activities. Even if transparency is not reciprocated, trust is built and deepened when one partner experiences the other's consistent behavior over time. Not only does this help build a stronger partnership, it often gives missionaries a respected voice when collaborating with church leaders.

During the initial six months of ministry alongside our most recent church partner, we endeavored to be completely open concerning our work, including both our successes and our challenges. We established a high level of trust and respect with the church's leaders, and we learned to trust and value them.

Serve from Below

It can sometimes be a practical challenge for foreign missionaries to enter church partnerships from the posture of humble servants. The imperialist legacy of the West dominating the rest means that Western missionaries carry the baggage of that cultural dominance, often being seen as wealthy and powerful patrons. When a Western missionary speaks or proposes an idea, locals listen—even when they shouldn't. How then can missionaries pursue humility in such a partnership?

I believe one helpful way of pursuing humility is to devote time and energy to the local church's priorities. While this may appear to distract from our primary vision as missionaries, it often strengthens the partnership and encourages us missionaries to love our spiritual church

family. It is easy to get caught up in our strategic priorities and forget we are servants and siblings alongside our local partners in ministry. I'm not suggesting a change in vision or commitment to serve in areas that pull them away from one's calling. I am advocating for authentic love, which usually means considering others, and their needs, as more important than one's own. We should view partnership neither as a marriage with complete and exclusive commitment to the other nor as a business arrangement, but rather as functional interdependence as one body (Muriu 2017).

Should we consider the priorities of the local church as more important than ministry to the unreached people group? Should not a church planter's primary calling be to serve those who have never heard the gospel? Yes, but we should not forget to be disciples of Christ who are called to love their neighbors and the family in Christ. I have heard local church members share their struggles with foreign missionaries who were so focused on the unreached that they were unavailable for authentic relationship and unwilling to help with any urgent needs that occasionally arose in the church community. Balancing priorities is a challenge without simple solutions, and I encourage prayer for wisdom, as Christ calls us to serve both the unreached and our partners in the gospel.

Finally, serving humbly in community means giving and receiving forgiveness. In cross-cultural partnership, there is a regular stream of miscommunications and perceived offenses. Missionaries who expect these and learn from them will cope better with the stresses of partnership. In some of our partnerships, I discovered my host culture had unspoken and indirect ways of apologizing. For example, I always knew when a local pastor was upset with me when he stopped responding to my messages. The remedy was always the same: I promptly sat down with him for face-to-face conversation in which we shared candid feedback. Sometimes verbal apologies were exchanged, but more

often, we just verbally reaffirmed each other and our commitment to our shared work.

Build Reciprocity into the Relationship

Both giving and receiving must take place for a partnership to function according to the biblical metaphor of one body. The western cultural value of independence often finds its way into our mission strategies, and yet Scripture calls us to interdependence (1 Corinthians 12). Spiritual gifts, material resources, theological reflection, and methodologies are all part of mutual sharing between missionaries and partner churches. In our current church partnership, we raise funds for mercy ministry, give time for discipling new believers, equip small group leaders, shepherd a few of the church member families, and lend our voice to conversations on strategy and methodology. Our local church provides us a residency visa, regular ministry training, pastoral care, prayer for our family, weekly worship, evangelism opportunities, and a public identity. We are able to participate in a larger mission team which includes church members who share our same vision. Our relationship is reciprocal. We need each other, and together we minister.

Unhealthy attitudes about wealth and the wealth disparity between missionaries and the local church can damage a partnership. This is a complex topic beyond the scope of this article which deserves focused reflection by missionaries, since wealth often influences relationships with local churches. For example, when a western missionary suggests an idea, the local church understands the proposal will inevitably come with funding. As a result, the local church may defer to the missionary's priorities rather than promote a truly mutual exchange of ideas and shared decision making.

One Body in the Global Task

I have made a case for partnership with the local, near-culture church in helping realize fruitful church-planting movements among

the unreached in contexts where such a church exists. It is not always possible in every situation, but when it is, partnering can be one of the most fruitful avenues for frontier church planting.

While we are called to make disciples and plant churches among the least reached peoples of the world, we are also called to be one body, both locally and globally. One part of the body cannot say to the other, "I do not need you." Each part needs the other, and no part should be left out. In describing global partnerships, Oscar Muriu remarks, "it is not marriage as we tend to gravitate to as Africans. It is not business that the western hemisphere tends to gravitate to. It is the body of Christ" (Muriu 2017). It is one body working in concert together to obey all God has commanded.

Questions for Discussion

• How do the context and experiences of Zachary relate to your own context and experience related to partnership? What are the most important contextual factors in determining when and how to partner?

• What's the best way to navigate differences in vision and strategy with existing churches? What do you think of the author's proposal for navigating this?

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