

A theology of partnership in a globalized world

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Abstract

God has initiated and has continued to be in partnership with humans and the rest of creation. Christians have known this partnership in the particular shape of God's mission in Christ. Christian unity in Christ and unity in mission are the foundations of this partnership. The history of Christian mission is full of examples of this partnership, sometimes falling short or missing the mark of God's embodiment of Christ and, at other times, contributing to the work of making the gospel become real in the lives of communities. This article continues the conversation with the hope that it contributes a critical perspective to the discourse. To carry out this task, I will weave together the theological framing and the contextual setting in order to drive home the main points of my theology of partnership in a globalized world—a theology which, I hope, would inform or guide policies and programmatic expressions of partnering churches.

Keywords

empowerment, globalization, interdependence, mission, partnership, solidarity

Writing about theology of partnership is to venture into something that has already received much articulation. Much has been written about partnership in general and partnership from a theological perspective in particular. Churches have been engaged in partnership with each other across the globe for decades. Major Christian groups or bodies have each formulated their principles of partnership, which have guided denominational partnership relations. This article continues the conversation with the hope that it contributes a critical perspective to the discourse. To carry out this task, I will weave together the theological framing and the contextual setting in order to drive home the main points of my theology of partnership in a globalized world—a theology which, I hope, would inform or guide policies and programmatic expressions of partnering churches.

The contextual framing of our partnership: A globalized world

In spite of the many positions and disagreements regarding what globalization is, various interpreters agree on one point: the heightened connections and interweaving of our lives. John Tomlinson

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speaks of globalization as “complex connectivity,” which he describes as “the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependencies that characterize modern social life.”¹ Anthony Giddens speaks of a similar point by articulating globalization as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.”² In line with the heightening reality of our connectivity or interrelatedness is the heightening awareness of our interconnections or the increasing recognition that our lives are intertwined, and that we have shared vulnerabilities and hopes even if we have suffered unevenly. The question, “Who is my neighbor?” is becoming more complex and difficult to answer.

We live in a “global village.” People have come to accept this cliché without much scrutiny. Often, people take it simply to mean that global realities impact the local. It comes with the question: What are the impacts of globalization in the local neighborhood? Although a worthy question, this line of inquiry is one-dimensional and one-directional. In this articulation, the flow between the global and the local follows the linear, one-way traffic approach. We must not only reverse the question but must also ask the question that helps us see the multiple interactions. A term that would help us understand the multidimensional and multidirectional character of our globalized world is “glocal” and its extension, “glocalization.” According to Charles Van Engen, “glocalization” helps us see the “interrelationship between the local and the global in their multifaceted, multidirectional, interactive dynamic influence one upon the other.”³

I have said elsewhere that in a globalized world, the global is lived locally and the local is lived globally.⁴ The global is not simply “out there,” but also “in here,” wherever our location is. The global has no reality *apart from* the local, even as the reality of the global is more than the sum of the locals. The local constitutes the global even as the global is not equivalent to the sum of all the parts. The slogan “think globally and act locally” is not as simple as it sounds. We see the global through the local, not apart from it. In fact, awareness that one is seeing through the local is constitutive of seeing the global. Global thinking is located thinking; it is not nowhere-thinking. After all, nowhere-thinking is somewhere-thinking that has forgotten it is thinking from, in, and through somewhere. To articulate the slogan differently: “thinking globally demands seeing locally.” But we must also underscore the converse. If we want to see the local, we have to see it globally. The reality of the local only comes to fuller light when seen globally. Only in seeing globally is the local taken seriously. Apart from seeing the systemic or structural interconnections of the locals, we have not really taken the local seriously. In short, the global is not a separate reality from the local, but a way of seeing the interconnections of the local.

Although we can celebrate some of its achievements, globalization has also become a juggernaut: homogenizing culture, crushing and marginalizing many, undermining traditional beliefs and community life, destructing the ecosystem, and spreading various forms of diseases. For those marginalized and crushed, globalization is not moving to the desired “global village” but “global pillage.” Instead of the dreamed global village, many have experienced globalization as a nightmare. Global pillage or global fragmentation is the underside to the official version of globalization. This is the view of the victims of globalization.

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1. John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2.
 2. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 64. Also see Harold Netland, “Globalization and Theology Today,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), particularly pages 18–23.
 3. Charles Van Engen, “The Glocal Church: Locality and Catholicity in a Globalizing World,” in *Globalizing Theology*, 159.
 4. Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Burning Center; Porous Borders: The Church in a Globalized World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 108–12.

The new globalization thrust has brought enormous wealth that the world has not experienced before. The main beneficiaries of the global market have made people believe that the rising tide of economic wealth will translate into economic betterment for the majority. Notwithstanding plaudits and accolades from the evangelists of globalization, there is a painful side to the story. Metaphorically speaking, contrary to the belief that “a rising tide raises all boats,” the reality has been that “a rising tide raises all yachts.”⁵ Worse, the world’s poor do not even have boats, and they are drowning in the tsunami of corporate profits. Economic globalization has created and promoted “asymmetries, conflict, and a sense of no alternatives for those not included in the flow of its information, technology, capital, and goods.”⁶

Unsurprisingly, globalization has generated a broad spectrum of counter-globalist movements (from movements of transformation to movements of reaction). Significantly, as the homogenizing globalization spreads, movements of various motivations—ethnic, religious, nationalistic, and cultural—are also rising. The threat of monoculturalism brought by the homogenizing globalization has encountered the assertion of multiculturalism and multi-ethnic identities. It may not be accurate to attribute this phenomenon entirely to globalization, but one major reaction to predatory and homogenizing globalization that has drawn the attention of the world and has shaped geopolitics is the rise of religious fundamentalism and its linkage with international terrorism.

Predatory globalization and mission

Our globalized and highly interconnected world is the context in which we must critique church mission and church partnerships. We must critique the partnerships we have formed or are planning to form in relation to our globalized realities: our connections and shared vulnerabilities and hopes, power differentials and asymmetries, history of colonizing mission and resistance, massive migration and displacement, and innovative and relevant expressions of cooperation.

The interweaving and intermeshing of globalist colonialism and Christian mission is well documented. Volumes of materials point to the alliance of the church and colonization, so I do not feel the need to take a full account of that relationship. Although traditional colonialism has generally ended with decolonization, the issue is more than simply gaining the independence of the nation and the autonomy of the then missionized churches. If that were the case, then we could say that the colonialist traits of Western mission are of a bygone era. Neo-colonialism, however, does not warrant that understanding, not to mention the long process of decolonization that must take place. Even as many of the colonized countries have experienced decolonization, models of mission, mission programs, and missionary presence continue to perpetuate Western dominance in various forms of relationship, which have evolved into more subtle and sophisticated ways.⁷ The sophistication of neoliberal global capitalism has made many of us believe that because direct control is over we are already “outside” of the power of global capital. But that is not the case, because there is no “outside” of global capitalism from which we can build relations. We must always take this into account if we are to disentangle ourselves from the grip of the global market and the dominance of the Western church.

We need to recognize the best efforts of churches to move away from the old and disempowering ways of doing global mission/ministries: efforts such as autonomy and self-reliance, capacity-building programs for missionized churches, inculturation projects, and new ways of doing mission

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5. Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 141.
 6. Robert Schreier, “Contextualization from a World Perspective,” in *ATS Theological Education 1993*, Suppl. 1, vol. xxx (Autumn 1993): 82.
 7. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 312.

understood beyond the notion of outreach to include partnership, critical presence, and mission in reverse. At the same time, we need to be constantly vigilant and critical of practices that continue to perpetuate asymmetrical relations. Efforts at indigenization and inculturation are a step in the right direction, but not sufficient: first, they continue to assume a static-essentialist view of culture and, second, they do not critique power relations. This is similarly true of mission as outreach. Mission understood as outreach, in Joerg Rieger's incisive critique, continues to perpetuate the global North's hegemony. It perpetuates the monological or unilateral approach (even when invited by the partner church), with the outreach mission-sender church shaping the receivers into its neo-colonial image and likeness.⁸ Mission as outreach still continues to operate from the position of power and privilege. From the position of power and privilege, the question is, "What can we do?" In fact, this is the kind of question that people of power and privilege like to ask, or like to be asked. But this is not the question that challenges the power asymmetry. The right question, suggests Rieger, is "How might we be part of the problem?"⁹ We would know that this is the right question by the cold, if not, defensive and dismissive response from mission senders. Mission as outreach may continue to have validity in response to immediate needs, but in many ways it focuses on the goodness and generosity of the mission sender at the expense of concealing the asymmetrical power relations that need to be challenged. The more our attention skews in the direction of celebrating the generosity of the mission sender, the more difficult it is to effect change.

Although mission as relationship seems a more progressive way of understanding and doing mission in our times, it is not radical enough in critiquing and exposing the power dynamics of the partnership. How can there be true relationship when asymmetrical power relation is present? In this model, the power, interest, and concerns of the dominant global North continue to dictate the relationship. Under the asymmetrical power relation, the much-celebrated "mission in reverse" would simply turn the missionized people into servants for the "enrichment" of the powerful and privileged. Not even the spiritual treasures of the underprivileged partner (e.g. native American spirituality) would be safe from mission partners who want to make use of them to boost their own quest for spiritual power.

In the beginning is relation: The starting point for a theology of partnership

Our glocalised world has informed us that we are contextually intertwined. But, even more, at a fundamental and ontological level, we exist only in relation. We are internally intertwined globally and cosmologically. If I have to identify an idea that would serve as a base for a theology of partnership, it would be our intrinsic relatedness within the web of life. Relationship is our fundamental reality. In the beginning is relationship. Relationship is constitutive of who we are and of what we can become. Relationality, not rationality, is decisive for our humanity. Not all individuals have the ability to reason (at least in the way we commonly construe reason), as in the case of total mental disability, but we all relate to the web of life. Descartes's human being, defined primarily in terms of thinking (*Cogito ergo sum*),¹⁰ must be transmuted into *Cognatus ergo sum* (I am related, therefore I am) and *Cognatus ergo summus* (I relate, therefore we are).¹¹

8. Joerg Rieger, "Theology and Mission Between Colonialism and Postcolonialism," *Mission Studies: Journal for the International Association for Mission Studies* 21 (2004): 201–27.

9. *Ibid.*, 214.

10. René Descartes, "Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking for Truth in the Sciences," in *Descartes Selections*, ed. Ralph M. Eaton (Chicago/New York/Boston: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), 29.

11. See Justo González, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 74; also Robert McAfee Brown, *Persuade Us to Rejoice: The Liberating Power of Fiction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 65.

Cognatus ergo summus finds resonance among Bantu cultures of Africa in the phrase “*umuntu ngamuntu ngabantu*” (I am because we are, and because we are I am). Desmond Tutu’s “Ubuntu” theology (plural rendering of the term “Bantu”) is rooted in the proverbial Xhosa expression (Tutu belongs to the Xhosa people) “*ubuntu ungamntu ngabanye abantu*” (roughly translated, “each individual’s humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others”).¹² Something similar is also found among the Sotho people in South Africa: “*Mothoke mmotho ka botbo babang*” (a person is a person only through people).¹³ These sayings from various cultures make the point that we can only be human through relationship with other human communities.

We need to extend relationship to other species and the whole of the ecosystem. The Native American Lakota phrase “*mitakouye oyasin*” (“for all my relations”) articulates in a profound way the intrinsic relationship of all creatures. The relationship is not simply extrinsic but intrinsic: the well-being of the ecosystem is our well-being, not simply because we make use of the ecosystem, but because our very being is intrinsically one with the ecosystem. When we say we are because of our relationship, we should not forget, as George Tinker reminds us, our relationship beyond the two-leggeds, which includes the “four-leggeds, the wingeds, and the living-moving-things.”¹⁴

If being-in-relation is what constitutes who we are, then it is also what makes us truly an image of God. Relationship is the primary lens through which we interpret the notion of the image of God. Conversely, the image of God construed in a relational framework presupposes what God is like: the very essence of God is “to-be-in-relation.” God is the term we use to refer to that source and power of life-giving relation. God is the web of life-giving relation. This recognition that God’s very being is “to-be-in relation” challenges us to rethink seriously not only human beings, but also all of reality.¹⁵

We can find our humanity only in the context of relationship within the web of life, not outside of it. Relationship makes us or breaks us. In this case, relationship as such is not a sufficient category. We must articulate the shape of the relationship that makes us truly human and promotes greater well-being. What is the *Gestalt* of this relationship?

The Christic shape of church mission and partnership

As Christians, we need to discern relationship and the shape of our partnership through the shape of God’s presence in Jesus. If, as I said earlier, God’s being is to-be-in-relation, is there any distinctive shape of God’s way of relating that Christianity offers? And, if in learning and embracing God’s way of relating we image God truly, what image of a God-in-relation can we discern through the Christic lens that can shed light on our relationships and partnerships?

The God-in-relation that we know through the Christ Jesus is the One whose very essence is *costly* and *radical love* that *liberates* and *reconciles* by being in *solidarity* and in *companionship* with the world. Incarnation (Word becoming flesh) is love expressed in the act of solidarity. A radical love that liberates and reconciles can only be what it is through the posture of solidarity. Liberation and reconciliation are possible only in a relationship of solidarity. Incarnation is God’s

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12. Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 39.
 13. Karen Baker-Fletcher and Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 137.
 14. George Tinker, “An American Indian Theological Response to Ecojustice,” in *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspective on Environmental Justice*, ed. Jace Weaver (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 158. Also see Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George Tinker, *Native American Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 48–51.
 15. Mary Catherine Hilker, “Cry Beloved Image: Rethinking the Image of God,” in *In the Image of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O’Hara Graff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 200.

ultimate expression of salvific solidarity. That which is not embraced in the act of solidarity cannot be saved.

John 1:1, 14 and Philippians 2:1–11 give us some idea of the substance and posture that salvific solidarity takes in the act of relationship with the world. In them, substance and shape embrace each other and are in perfect unity; in them substance informs shape and shape embodies substance. Specifically, the substance of the incarnation about which I am speaking is God's love that brings life—a love that does not remain in abstraction, but seeks out relationship in the most concrete ways. In the Word becoming flesh, we have this love seeking embodiment in light of the context and its nagging questions, its deepest needs, and its soaring hopes. Expressed differently, incarnation means that love takes the context seriously, for it is only in doing so that love becomes good news.

Daniel Migliore's account of Trinitarian dynamics helps illumine God's act of salvific solidarity in and through Jesus. He says that the God we know in Jesus is "self-expending, other-affirming, community-building love" or, put differently, "self-sharing, other-regarding, community-forming love."¹⁶ This God who loves the world (John 3:16) "loves in freedom, lives in communion, and wills creatures to live in a new community of mutual love and service."¹⁷ God is not the sovereign will-to-power over others, but the self-giving, other-affirming, other-receiving, and empowering love.

In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:1–11), we have this love through Christ assuming the form of humility, servanthood, and putting one's interests in support of others. In Christ we have an embodied demonstration of the Divine self-emptying, taking the form of a servant and embracing the terror of the crucifixion to be in solidarity with creation, particularly with those who are "dying before their time."

Jesus' posture of humility goes along with this posture of hospitality. God's incarnation through Jesus is God's humble hospitality. It is not only an act of self-giving, but also an act of receiving. In other words, in an integrated fashion, Jesus' act of self-giving is also an act of receiving. In self-giving, he is extremely open to the claims of the world. Incarnation is not about God's exclusivity but God's universal availability. It is an act of hospitality, going down to give and reach out, but also going down to receive. The ocean is a metaphor for this humility—it is capable of receiving because it is lower than others.

We know that solidarity and self-sharing or self-giving, other-regarding or affirming, and empowering love characterize God's relation—love that promotes freedom, communion, and a life of mutuality and service. Moreover, humility and hospitality as well as interdependence and mutuality characterize God's relation.

Sifting some principles for partnership

Starting at the foundational level, I say that churches enter into partnership in light of shared connections, plights, and hopes within the context of inextricable intrinsic relatedness. This is the inescapable context and frame of partnership. Partnership raises often-unacknowledged internal relatedness to the level of intentionality and obligation, and it shapes the way those who are fundamentally interrelated relate to one another. When we engage in partnership, we intend to give a distinctive and definite shape to our relationship. In lifting our fundamental relatedness to the level of partnership, we are making the implicit explicit: we covenant, set guidelines, clarify expectations, demand accountability, and develop practices. In partnership, we put ourselves within the claim of the other and are expected to honor our commitments and be transparent in our dealings.

16. Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 72.

17. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 73.

Building on our fundamental relatedness, we Christians enter into partnership in light of our unity in Christ and in mission. Christian unity in Christ calls all Christians to relate and engage in partnership in Christ-like ways both within and beyond the Christian fold. Christian unity in Christ is the basis of the shared mission of all churches. This shared mission is to proclaim and witness to the world God's liberating and reconciling acts in Christ.

As we journey in partnership, here are some of the principles that I have gleaned to provide compass and ballast that I hope will help us avoid the Scylla and Charybdis in our navigation. I propose six of these guiding principles: (1) solidarity and accompaniment; (2) interdependence and mutuality; (3) trust and respect; (4) humility and hospitality; (5) dialogue and openness; and (6) mutual empowerment.

(1) Solidarity and accompaniment

Any attempt at partnership must be done in the spirit of solidarity. We are in this life together. If the destiny and hopes of one connect with the other, then the fundamental mode and posture of our partnership is solidarity. When a form of support is requested and extended, the support is given/received on the basis of solidarity with the other. Other than this, support can easily turn into power over the receiver.

Solidarity, on the other hand, subverts this temptation. In the act of solidarity, one accompanies the partner in the journey of life and its challenges. Accompaniment is best expressed in the mode of solidarity. The partner does not solve the issues and do the walking for the other, but walks with the other/partner, knowing fully that their pains and joys are intertwined.

(2) Interdependence and mutuality

Interdependence and mutuality go together. If our fundamental reality is intrinsic relationality, and this relationality has become more acute in our globalized world, then our partnership must be seen in the framework and context of interdependence and mutuality. Contrary to common understanding, independence, self-sufficiency, and self-determination can thrive only in the context of interdependence and mutuality. Self-sufficiency (*autarkia*) and self-reliance not only free us from being a perpetual burden to others, but they are also marks of human dignity. But the quest for self-sufficiency and self-reliance must be balanced by *koinonia* (community) and must move in the direction of building a community of interdependence.

Interdependence cannot happen without mutuality. It is only in the mutuality of giving and receiving that interdependence can sprout and thrive. Mutuality must happen at multiple levels and kinds. Differences in need are not a hindrance to mutuality, because mutuality is not predicated on sameness. Each one can mutually offer what it has according to one's resources and expertise. Mutuality happens in mutual trust and respect.

(3) Trust and respect

Does our partnership demonstrate trust and respect? Trust and respect are the foundations of lasting and healthy partnership. To use a building metaphor, they provide the internal support in a well-built house. Without this support, relationships cannot stand; they will crumble. Partnership can sprout, grow, and thrive only in the spirit of trust and respect. The actions of each must build and nourish trust. Trust cannot be demanded; it is earned. One earns the trust of others by being trustworthy. Without this element of trust, which is nurtured by tested and proven commitments, it is very difficult to do much more.

Recognition and respect of the identities and particularities of each partner are crucial for partnership. Partnership must take into account the distinct context, challenges, and priorities that each

is facing. Each partner brings *charisms*, gifts, and skills into the partnership that call for recognition and celebration. Each partner, especially the socio-economically privileged, must be careful and discerning in valuing the contribution of the other.

(4) *Humility and hospitality*

Humility is one of the most forgotten virtues, yet a crucial one for any partnership to grow and thrive. Let us not confuse humility with humiliation. “Humiliation,” as Carol Zaleski puts it, “is an affliction; humility is a gift.”¹⁸ Without humility we cannot receive and, if we cannot receive, we cannot truly give. This is the kind of humility of the ocean. The ocean is able to receive because it has placed itself lower than others. We must always be on guard when we are motivated “to do something good,” for we may be serving our own needs in “doing something good.”

Hospitality, which includes both giving and receiving, can only happen and flourish in the spirit of humility. Although hospitality is often equated with giving, it is only one side of the coin. Hospitality is also about the ability to receive the gift of the other. It means making ourselves receptive to the concerns and ideas of others. Hospitality, understood as giving, without humility, may simply re-enforce asymmetrical relations between the giver and the receiver. In a context in which many are denied access to the table that supports life, hospitality is about dismantling structures that are inhospitable and providing access to the life-giving table.

(5) *Dialogue and openness*

Partnership must be understood as dialogue and must be carried out in the spirit of dialogue. Dialogue is not simply an approach or a method (understood as a tool) or a means to an end, but a life posture. A dialogical attitude to life leads to openness and dialogical engagement and, conversely, dialogical engagement nourishes dialogical attitude. Dialogical posture thrives in a culture of dialogue. We must work to create this culture of dialogue. A culture of dialogue provides the structure and frame in which we relate with other beings. It is foundational for the health and well-being of our world. The foundations of our one world, asserts Diana Eck, are in the “stockpiling of trust through dialogue and the creation of relationships that can sustain both agreements and disagreements.”¹⁹

Does our partnership promote open conversation of differences and failings as well as about prophetic challenging of systems of oppression? Are we transparent in doing mission and do we allow for conversation even in cases of disagreements? Are we holding each other accountable?

(6) *Mutual empowerment*

Partnership must provide an occasion for mutual empowerment, especially in light of power-differentials of the partners and the different positions that they occupy in the socio-economic relations. The historically underprivileged must not experience the partnership as contributing to and/or reinforcing their own disempowerment or to the perception of powerlessness. This danger has remained a thorny issue of partnership.

Although it is true, as the old saying goes, that “absolute power corrupts absolutely,” it is also true that powerlessness corrupts and can be corrupted absolutely. When people feel powerless, they

18. Carol Zaleski, cited in Jane E. Vennard, *Fully Awake and Truly Alive: Spiritual Practices to Nurture Your Soul* (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths, 2013), 154.

19. Diana Eck, *Minutes 20–30*, cited in David Smock, *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2002), 7.

can submit easily to cynicism and to any corrupt power. Michael Lerner makes the point that the problem is not so much the absence of power, but what he calls “surplus powerlessness.”²⁰ When people feel that they are powerless, they become even more powerless than they actually are. A critical way to counter cynicism, powerlessness, and hopelessness is to work for the empowerment of those who have experienced disempowerment. When people realize that they are not powerless and that they have a different form of power, they are empowered to act on their deepest convictions and hope.

Postlude

God has initiated and has continued to be in partnership with humans and the rest of creation. Christians have known this partnership in the particular shape of God’s mission in Christ. Christian unity in Christ and unity in mission are the foundations of this partnership. The history of Christian mission is full of examples of this partnership, sometimes falling short or missing the mark of God’s embodiment of Christ and, at other times, contributing to the work of making the gospel become real in the lives of communities. To be sure, we Christians have committed serious mistakes, but retreat from partnership is not the solution. We must not let our failures intimidate us to explore excellent ways of partnership.

Even as we speak of partnership as something to aim for, it is a process or a journey. Partnership is our way of learning to walk together on a shared journey and of helping each other arrive at our common destination. We need partners to help us see ourselves better and to correct and inspire each other. Partners help us see our blind spots; they help expand our horizons. When we honor our partners’ individuality and agency, they can serve an important role, following Raúl Betancourt, in a way that strangers can: they are able to represent “the exteriority that widens the frontiers of our horizon of understanding.”²¹ In allowing this to happen, “we discover a new world”: we are “born again.”²²

The immensity of the challenges we are facing demands the practice of partnership. We need not do alone what we can do better in partnership or in cooperation with others. Discernment of the world’s deepest needs must, from the very beginning, be done in ecumenical partnership and with preferential attentiveness to the plight of the most vulnerable members of our global society. This discernment requires a spirit of mutuality and respect with our ecumenical partners. A credible discernment of the world’s deepest needs cannot be done in a unilateral fashion. Never! The demand for an ecumenical discernment of the world’s deepest needs and concerted actions over against unilateralistic discernment and actions is all the more pressing in our highly globalized world.

Author biography

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20. Michael Lerner, cited in Clinton Stockwell, “Cathedrals of Power: Engaging the Powers in Urban North America,” in *Confident Witness—Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 85.

21. Raúl Fonet-Betancourt, “Hermeneutics and Politics of Strangers: A Philosophical Contribution on the Challenge of Convivencia in Multicultural Societies,” in *A Promised Land, a Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, ed. Daniel Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 217.

22. *Ibid.*, 218.