

April 2021 — Four friends

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I teach a mission course at our seminary and have an on-again-off-again relationship with the field of “missiology,” which can include everything from church growth and personal evangelism



Rev. Dr. Jonathan Seitz speaks during a conference on mission at Hsinchu Bible College in Taiwan. (Photo by Rev. Chooa Lam Sin)

to the study of world Christianity or contextual theology. I like teaching the mission course and am always amazed by the different types of mission described by my Taiwanese students. There’s a denominational tradition of “local mission” that often involves after-school care, work with isolated adults or community life. Presbyterians here also have a long history of work with human rights and Indigenous ministry. Students also describe their youth work, rural ministry, new church developments and a host of other ways they direct their work. Some reports are inspiring — senior women who do church outreach via a dance group that meets at the park, a church redevelopment plan or a Japanese-inspired multigenerational Christian education program.

In the U.S., mission is also incredibly diverse. One of the churches that influenced me the most as a young adult was Westminster Presbyterian Church in Trenton, New Jersey. The pastor, the Rev. Karen Hernández-Granzen, once shared a sheet for their 120th anniversary listing more than 120 partnerships they had. And she really knew each of those groups and the people behind them; she had friends in each organization, project or mission and celebrated their joys and sorrows with them.

For U.S. churches, it can be feast or famine when it comes to mission. I know churches that are stuck and a bit isolated, and congregations that often juggle many commitments. The global church for the past 75 or so years has been using the language of “partnership” to talk about these mission relationships. The language of partnership can be biblically deep and soulful (think of biblical passages that describe membership together in Christ or service together as disciples) or very shallow (limited liability partnerships written onto church life).

One of the new ways of discussing these mission relationships that I appreciate comes from Boston University’s Dana L. Robert in her new book, “Faithful Friendships: Embracing Diversity in Christian Community.” I encourage our students to think of mission in ways that expand

beyond “What will we fund?” to “Whom can we befriend?” I use the metaphor of four different kinds of friendship to talk about this, what I call (1) the old friend; (2) the new friend; (3) the friend next door, i.e., our neighbor; and (4) the friend in need. This focus on friendship allows that sometimes one friend needs us urgently, or we may go years without talking to each another, but we value all of these people. For many churches, their mission is indeed shaped by these friendships. They might have a decades-old relationship with Congo or Taiwan or Guatemala, participate in a new hunger program, have a stake in a food project down the road or respond to a call for disaster relief.

Churches sometimes must prioritize or focus their work, caring for a friend in need, but it’s always possible to make a new friend, and our friendships often lead us into new communities, new callings and new directions. I am a middle-aged man of midwestern extraction, and recent research says that my demographic is struggling with friendship. Many of us have few friends and more of our life is given to work, the internet and sometimes family. One thing I have been really grateful for about life in Taiwan is having a different lens by which to see friendship. I really admire our seminarians, because they value community and friendship so deeply and give their lives to them. In Taiwan, friendship is serious business. I sometimes see friends attending primary school reunions, and I also often have friends who go out of their way to introduce me to someone new. The thoughtfulness in gift-giving, checking in and simple acts of kindness still surprises me.

Mission, like friendship, is not a zero-sum game. Although we’re habituated to think of mission in terms of tasks, budget lines or priorities, the truth is that the relationships matter most. Who are your friends? Who would enjoy reconnecting? Who could use your help? Who is your neighbor?



[The Rev. Dr. Jonathan and Emily Seitz](#) have served as Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission co-workers at the invitation of the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan since 2009. Jonathan teaches classes related to mission, religion and world Christianity at Taiwan Theological Seminary in Taipei, the capital of Taiwan. Emily works with a university chaplain, faculty and students at Aletheia University, a Presbyterian university in the city of Tamsui. [Subscribe to their letters.](#) [Consider supporting their ministry.](#)