

Responsible Giving

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has stated its method of “doing mission” through a policy statement entitled “Presbyterians Do Mission in Partnership,” which was adopted by the 215th General Assembly (2003).

This statement emphasizes that our mission relationships within this country and around the world are most faithful when they proclaim and incarnate these things:

- our shared grace in Christ and thanksgiving to God
- our mutuality and interdependence
- recognition and respect of our identities
- open dialogue and transparency of action
- two-way sharing of resources, human and financial

This 2003 statement is congruent with many ecumenical statements and principles concerning relationships or partnerships between church bodies and institutions. These documents call us all

- to answer God’s call in mission, *not serve our own needs by “doing good”;*
- to be independent (self-propagating, self-supporting, self-governing) church partners with a mission vision, *not dependent churches focused on survival;*
- to meet the holistic needs of churches and people(s), *not serve narrow agendas;*
- to honor the integrity of the church context, structures, and social dynamics, *not to subsidize another’s central church life nor exert undue pressure to change or conform.*

These documents call us to seek

- opportunities for initiatives in mission by any partner, *not one-sided efforts;*
- mutual respect, *not paternalism;*
- interdependent partnerships that are of benefit to all partners, *not one-sided, dependent relationships;*
- mutuality, *not one-way mission;*
- opportunities and recognition for “the least of these,” *not exploitation to the benefit of the more powerful;*

- a growing web of partnerships, *not exclusive or private relationships*;
- open dialogue, prophetic challenge, and mediation of differences, *not coercive or manipulative imposition of solutions*.

Financial Gift-Giving Concerns

While Presbyterians are encouraged to give generously to mission endeavors, financial gifts to partners cause more problems and controversies than any other single issue. Some of the concerns are as follows:

- Respect for the priorities and mission vision of the partner should guide the financial commitments, rather than ministry being “donor-driven.”
- Competition and jealousies are frequently engendered within the partner church because of large financial gifts.
- Power dynamics within the partner church or institution are greatly affected by the infusion of outside funds, even to the point of dividing the church!
- Giving financial gifts can create dependency on, or indebtedness toward, the donor.
- Inappropriate giving can decrease the dignity and self-esteem of the receiver and inflate the self-importance of the giver, both of which make a mutual, equal relationship impossible.
- It takes time and attentive listening and observing even to begin to understand the dynamics of another place and culture. “Transparency” and “accountability” require much dialogue to determine how they are understood on each side and what specific practices will be considered by both to be practical and necessary.
- Sustainability over the long term is a practice to be planned for, whether in outreach ministries or evangelism/church planting.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from over fifteen years of experience in the international presbytery partnership program; they can help to minimize problems in making financial commitments.

1. Refrain from making financial commitments for at least the first two years of a mission partnership.
2. Limit the amount of the financial commitment, set any commitment to the scale of the local economy, and develop clear, agreed-upon guidelines for the use of funds, administration, and reporting.
3. Be aware of—and try to minimize—the divisive impact that gifts to only one part of a partner church or institution can have on the whole. Consult with the national governing body prior to making commitments.
4. If congregational partnerships are developed within a presbytery partnership, there should be agreements on the limits of funds shared between congregations.
5. Plan toward longer-term sustainability of joint projects. This includes refraining from paying the salaries of personnel, whether pastors or other staff.
6. Send funds through the appropriate channels to optimize transparency in the relationship.