

# “Short Time, or Long:” Best Practices to Turn Short-Term Missions into Long-Term

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Vol 1:1 2021

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Partnership is not a new concept in missiology (Barnes 2013; Tizon 2008, 37–94, 209–30; O’Connor 2007, 47–65). In fact, many trace its roots back to the beginning of the Christian missionary endeavor (Nissen 2004, 103, 113), and some suggest that the notion partnership in mission hails from a time before time began (George 2004, 3–5; Anastasios 2010). Partnership in mission is an idea whose time has come in a unique way with the advent of the 21st century. One potent application of this ancient missional concept is to use partnership to condition the local church’s practice of short-term mission (STM). Years of reflection on STM has produced no shortage of critiques. Nor has there been a dearth of suggestions for possible corrective measures to lead to more adequate practice of STM (Priest 2008; Haynes 2018). But one suggestion that has gained momentum in recent years (Ehle 2016; Kisling 2016; Schmor 2016) is for churches to practice STM within the context of long-term relationships (either with other churches or with parachurch organizations). In grossly oversimplified terms, this approach suggests that instead of picking random locations to practice STM, church leaders can focus their investment of time, resources, and energy in a single location, producing a lasting connection to a place and a people. The argument is that this approach mitigates some of the more self-centric, touristy aspects of STM and provides a healthier platform for global engagement by local churches. This thesis is masterfully defended in the works just cited.

This paper, then will not concern itself with describing or justifying the use of partnership to condition STM. Rather, it will address the question that immediately arises once we are convinced that STMs are best practiced within the context of a long-term relationship: “how exactly should we do that?” Using original survey research supplied by churches from the US and around the world (which forms the basis of my forthcoming dissertation), I will address patterns of belief, thinking, and behavior concerning partnership that have allowed short-term trips to become more impactful and healthy by placing them within the context of long-term relationships. I will begin

with some preliminary tasks; first outlining the research methodology employed, then sparing a few remarks on how widespread these international congregational partnerships (ICPs) have become. I will then address the perennial issue of determining what constitutes a healthy expression of partnership after which I will describe how healthy existing ICPs actually are. After laying this groundwork, I will turn to the patterns of belief, thinking, and behavior that the healthiest partnerships have in common. Finally, I will close with some thoughts on how churches can set up their partnerships to give short-term engagements long-term impact.

## Methodology

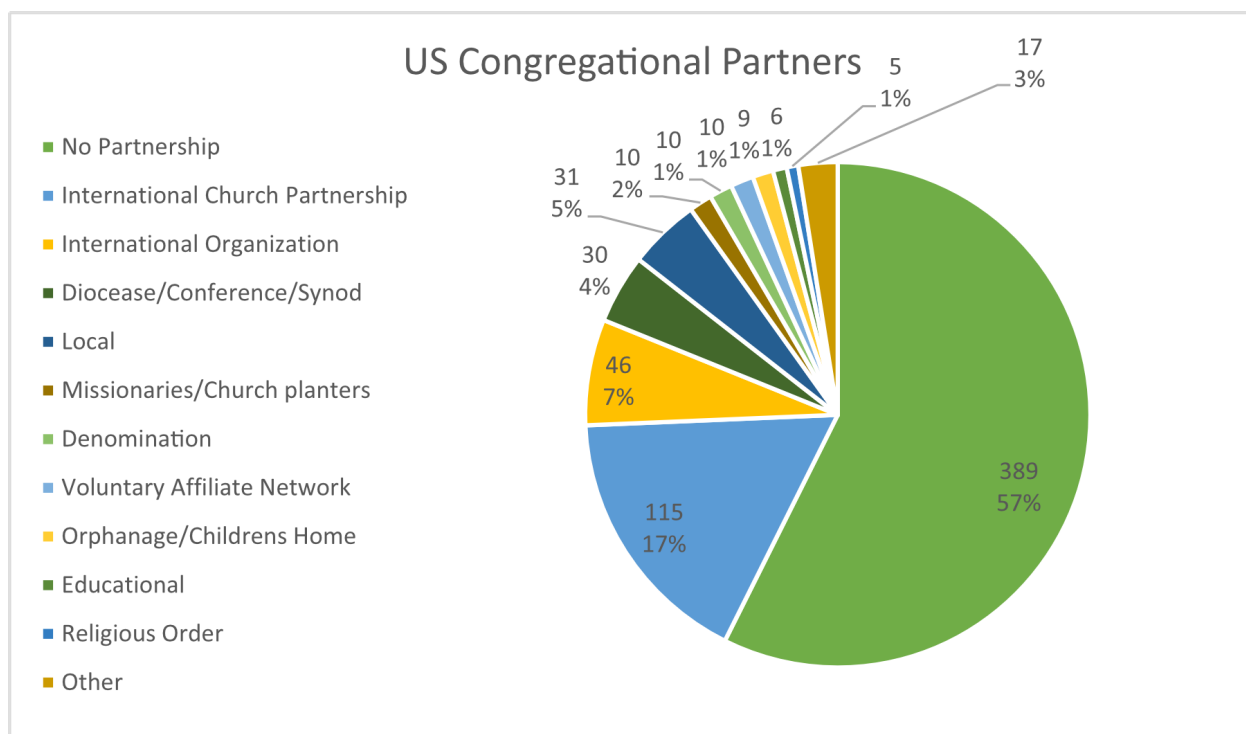
The research for this project was conceived based on the immense body of literature that has grown up around international mission partnership in the last century (the space necessary to give an adequate treatment to this literature is not conducive to a journal article, but I must say that I am deeply indebted to the following exemplars: Addicott 2005; Bakker 2013; Brown 2007; Butler 2006; Cheung 2013; Eitzen 2003; Kraakevik 1992; Kruis 2009; Lederleitner 2010; Manuel 2001; Reeves 2004; Rickett 2014; Shoemaker and Shoemaker 2011; Van Engen 2001; Wuthnow and Offutt, Stephen 2008). I noted 25 themes (some theological, some defining ideas about partnership, some structures or practices that operationalized these concepts) that were consistently mentioned in this literature as key factors in the success of an international mission partnership. I then developed a survey that measured how consistently each of these themes were practiced by a given congregation. I also developed an evaluation to include in the survey that allowed me to group the congregations based on how healthy their practice of partnership was. This allowed me to compare the average prevalence of any given theme between healthier and less healthy groups to see if the literature is right about that theme leading to better partnerships. This process involved running ANOVA and Tukey post-hoc tests to establish correlation within at least an 80% confidence interval (the vast majority of variables had a much higher confidence interval). The tests were run twice, to reduce the possibility of data entry error, using PSPP (an open-source data processing platform that can be found here: <https://www.gnu.org/software/pspp/>).

This survey, dubbed the Global Congregational Survey (GCS), was deployed in two phases (more information can be found at: <https://globalchurchpartnerships.org>). Phase 1 entailed developing a truly random sample of US congregations and their international partners. This was accomplished by randomly selecting eight states (one

from each of the socio-economic regions defined by the Bureau of Statistics of the US Department of Commerce). From these states, I randomly selected two counties, one urban and one rural, and secured a list of all the congregations in each of these 16 representative counties. From August 2019 to February 2020 these congregations were contacted by email and telephone to determine (1) what sort of mission partnerships they had (if any); (2) how many people regularly attended the church; and (3) if they would like to participate in the survey and invite their partners to do so as well. Phase 2 consisted of sending out online surveys to all willing participants; 169 emails were sent out with links to the surveys on [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com). Of these, 30 were returned completed; 24 from US congregations, 6 from their international partners. Ecuador, Mexico, India, and Kenya were all represented. The next section will present information gathered during Phase 1, while the succeeding sections will summarize the findings from Phase 2.

## Tracking Partnership among US Churches

Assertions about the recent increased focus on partnerships among American churches have become axiomatic of late. (Bakker 2013, 44; Lederleitner 2010, 21; Guthrie and Bonk 2002, 118–19) Of particular interest is a footnote in which Lederleitner quotes Scott Moreau's claim that churches and mission agencies claiming some kind of mission partnership have increased by 6900%. What is somewhat less clear from the existing literature is just how widespread the phenomenon has become. The first phase of the GCS provided some much-needed insight in this regard. It turns out that mission partnerships of one kind or another have become quite pervasive among American congregations. In fact, 43% of American Churches would say they have some kind of mission partner (All percentages given in this section reflect a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of +/-2.76%). Of these, the majority partner directly with another congregation (ICPs), while most others work with a parachurch agency of some sort. Other major partners for American congregations include local (non-international) churches and organizations or diocesan partnerships handled at a level above the local church in the denominational structure. This article will deal specifically with the most prevalent form of partnership: ICPs. While there are certainly nuanced differences among all these types of partnership, there are also plenty of insights to be gleaned from a study of ICPs that will be applicable to the other types.



While a complete profile of congregations who frame their missional participation using long-term partnership is beyond the scope of this article, I will spare a few words concerning the current trends. The vast majority of churches practicing mission partnerships are denominationally unaffiliated (37% of ICPs and 21% of all other types of partnership are pursued by non-denominational congregations), followed by Baptists (12% of ICPs and 13% of all other types of partnership), Lutherans (10% of ICPs and 16% of all other types of partnership), Roman Catholics (7% of ICPs and 14% of all other types of partnership), and Methodists (3% of ICPs and 9% of all other types of partnership). Surprisingly, the majority of churches pursuing partnership are also smaller churches (weekly attendance under 500). However, when you compare the distribution of all US congregations according to size to the distribution of partnering congregations according to size, an interesting phenomenon appears. ICPs are more likely to be pursued by larger churches than other forms of partnership, while the distribution of non-ICP partnerships very closely matches the distribution of all congregations. In other words, size does not affect how likely it is that a church will create a mission partnership; but it does impact the kind of partnership they will develop.

## Defining Healthy Partnership

The first thing a church has to do, if it wants to situate its STMs within a long-term partnership, is define what success will look like. A definition of “success” for ICPs can be very elusive. Indeed, each author tends to define it in slightly different ways, and I will not break with this tradition. I refrain from using “successful” when speaking of partnership because it is so problematic. The language of “success” or “achievement” has connotations that emphasize the performative dimensions of a partnership; but is less attuned to a holistic view of what makes a partnership “good.” The language of “flourishing” or “health” is certainly inclusive of performance, without being unnecessarily exclusive of other dimensions of goodness in partnerships. That is why I choose to employ it throughout this article. In this project, the definition of a flourishing partnership coheres around three points. Healthy partnerships: (1) succeed in what they attempt to accomplish, (2) create positive feelings between partners, and (3) shape the local church’s understanding of itself and its place in the world. Each of these measures is a crucial dimension of a healthy, flourishing partnership. Similar to a marriage, congregational partnerships are at their best when the people in them feel that the relationship is not stale or stagnant, but instead trust that the relationship is able to do what they need it to. They flourish when they are happy being in a relationship with each other; when being partnered creates more positive feelings than negative ones. And partnerships reach their true *telos* when the relationship has a transformative impact on the identity and purpose of those involved. A healthy partnership does not exist for its own sake, but to cause the partners to become something they could not be on their own. These three dimensions of a flourishing partnership (performative, affective, and transformative, respectively) form the basis for the evaluation in this study.

In order to facilitate analysis, I’ve placed congregations into three groups based on how they scored in the evaluation. Group 1 consists of congregations that scored in the 80th percentile or higher (4.616 or higher). Group 2 consists of congregations that ranked between the 70th and 50th percentile in the evaluation (between 4.616 and 4.33). Since this paper focuses on distinctions between the most and least healthy congregational partnerships, Group 2 will not be dealt with very much. Group 3 is made up of congregations that scored in the 30th percentile or lower (4.17 or less) with respect to overall partnership health. If there is an aspect of belief, thought, or behavior concerning partnership that is consistently practiced by Group 1 but not by Group 3, it can be assumed that this aspect is strongly correlated to partnership health.

The evaluative section of the GCS presented some interesting results. First, 75% of the respondents to the GCS scored a 4 or better (out of 5) in the evaluative section, indicating that they have moderately to extremely healthy partnerships. In fact, only one partnership strays down toward what might be characterized as an unhealthy partnership. I am tempted to suggest, as this dataset certainly does, that the majority of churches are abnormally successful in international partnerships. However, I suspect there is something else going on here. After all, only 19 of the 29 individual respondents who replied to the GCS also filled out the evaluative section. This means that roughly a third of the congregations sampled declined to comment on the state of their partnership. It may be that those respondents would score in a similar distribution to those that filled out the evaluation; but I would find that highly unlikely.

In the conversations I had with some participants, I noticed that most were terribly self-conscious about their partnerships. Many did not want to fill out a section if they felt they were not going to give the “right” answers. And they were quite loath to paint their partnership, and especially their partners, in an unfavorable light. Despite constant reassurance to the contrary, many people felt their partnership had to “measure up” to some unspoken expectation in order to participate. I have had many discussions with colleagues in the partnership field who have had similar experiences. One colleague, who works in a denominational partnership office, said she finds many congregations unwilling to even disclose that they have international sister churches, because they do not want to face scrutiny from the denominational office if they feel they are not performing adequately. While it seems that American churches are increasingly interested in pursuing international partnerships, they are also very unsure whether they are doing it right. And they are not really willing to talk about their partnerships unless they are sure. So, the finding that 75% of congregations are experiencing healthy partnerships is likely a reflection of greater willingness to discuss a partnership with outsiders on the part of people who are confident about their partnerships. Maybe most partnerships are just abnormally successful. But given the factors just mentioned, it is likely that many of them simply decline to report negative outcomes rather than say something that might reflect poorly on their partner or on themselves.

In the coming sections, I will unpack how theological, conceptual, and practical considerations explain the difference in health between Groups 1 and 3. Of course, there are other possible explanations for the difference in outcomes. National origin or denominational affiliation did not have a significant impact on how healthy a partnership became. The two demographic factors that seemed to have the greatest

impact were (1) the population density where the American partner was located and (2) the size of the congregation. Both of these factors cohere around the issue of access to resources: human, financial, and material.

While access to resources generally seems to have a significant impact on the overall health of a partnership, it would be disingenuous (not to mention profoundly unhelpful) to simply say that the best thing a church can do to ensure a healthy partnership is to be large and/or urban. Congregations do not usually have much of a say in those matters. It may be more helpful to suggest that congregations who lack access to material and human resources would find their partnerships enriched by finding creative access to resources. This might entail partnering with better resourced mediating institutions (such as denominational or extra-ecclesial missionary agencies rather than with international congregations directly). Under-resourced congregations engaged in international partnerships might also benefit from sharing resources with each other: creating multi-lateral partnerships, forming co-ops, etc. in order to broaden their resource base. One definite advantage that better resourced congregations have is that they are often working with a larger and more globally connected staff. It is far easier to nurture a healthy international partnership when there are missions pastors on staff and a large and highly organized pool of volunteer labor. When the health of the partnership is incumbent upon a one or two person staff, it is harder to allocate the attention needed to create better outcomes. In this case, working with a consultant or sharing a missions staff among multiple congregations might help under-resourced churches improve the overall health of their partnerships.

## Beliefs About Healthy Partnerships

So, access to resources is clearly connected to partnership health. The next question a church conditioning its STM's by long-term commitments will need to answer is what they actually believe about partnership and its relation to God, the Church, and Christian life. In this section I will look at certain ways churches theologize concerning their partnerships that also contribute to overall partnership health. The GCS clearly indicates that, while a given theological approach may not guarantee a healthy partnership, it does set a ceiling for how healthy a partnership is likely to become. A robust, biblically grounded theology does not mean your partnership will always succeed, but a lack of one is a clear indication that it will be troubled. An examination of how much and what kind of theologizing about partnership is most effective has yielded three main findings.

First, theology should be done robustly, or not at all. A fully fleshed out theology of partnership has much more impact than one that touches on only two or three ideas. Likewise, the more (and more varied) biblical passages that frame the practice of partnership, the healthier the partnership may become. Second, theology that specifically addresses collaborative ministry and relationships among Christians is demonstrably more effective than a theology that only addresses general missiological principles. Mission theology is certainly important for churches engaging in international partnership. It provides a kind of baseline understanding that is unquestionably significant; but it is also insufficient on its own. Accordingly, churches who are able to move past simply motivating mission and draw on rich theological understandings of the unity of the body of Christ, the pattern of the self-giving love of the Triune God, and the shared calling of all Christians to work together with God in his mission find themselves operating in more meaningful and healthy relationships with their sister churches. Third, grounding theological precepts in biblical examples has a profound effect on the health of a partnership. Scripture is a powerful motivator and it is very effective in allowing congregations to imbue their collaborative ministries with ultimate significance. Relating to the biblical story is how congregations see their theology impact their partnerships. These theological factors may not guarantee a healthy partnership. But they do provide a foundation that suggests how healthy a partnering ministry is likely to become.

I recently planted a tulip tree in my back yard. There are lots of practical factors that will determine how that tree will grow in the coming decades: rain patterns, fertilization, ice storms, pests. But if I had not planted it in healthy, slightly acidic soil; it would not have a chance to flourish, even in the best of circumstances. Theology functions in a similar fashion for partnerships. It is the soil in which these precious relationships are planted. There are a myriad of practices, structures, and ideas that will inform how healthy a partnership becomes. Those will all be examined in the coming sections. But the theological richness and depth in which those partnerships are located sets the upper limits for how well the best executed of collaborative ministries may develop.

## Concepts of Healthy Partnerships

Congregations seeking to situate their practice of STM in long-term relationships also need a clear idea of what constitutes an adequate understanding “partnership.” The GCS provided tremendous insights into how congregations in healthy partnerships

conceptualize the nature of partnership. The following concepts were significant factors in the kind of partnership that developed:

- (1) Relational Priority – Partnership means putting the relationship ahead of things like programs.
- (2) Shared Calling – Partners are called together to something they could not be/do on their own.
- (3) Mutual Valuation – Resources (material and spiritual) are clearly defined and mutually valued.
- (4) Space for “Others” – A combination of radical Hospitality and cultural competence.
- (5) Non-Dependence – Focus on Sustainability/Capacity Building
- (6) Interdependence – Bi-directional flows of resources, people, and ideas.

These six ideas are all practiced more consistently among healthier partnerships than among less healthy ones (some more so than others). But these concepts are far more powerful when they are combined with each other than when measured on their own. Shared Calling, Mutual Valuation, and Space for Others constitute the driving forces in the healthiest conceptual frameworks; while Relational Priority catalyzes each of the other concepts, deepening their overall impact. Additionally, partnerships are healthier when their conceptual framework moves beyond seeking to mitigate dependency and seeks to foster genuine reliance on one another.

This has some important implications for congregational partnerships, and for the field of mission partnerships in general, going forward. First, we need to move beyond a siloed approach to definitional concepts. Ideas like radical hospitality and a sense of being called by God to something greater are not as significant on their own as they are when placed into a wider constellation of ideas about what “true partnership” means. The definition of partnership is one of the major stumbling blocks to its study and implementation in the field of missiology. And one of the reasons for this is that partnership’s definition is irreducibly complex. Perhaps one of the reasons that a definition of a “true partnership” remains elusive is that we keep trying to define it in discrete terms when it really is a combination of essential ideas. Attempts to define partnership in terms of a single *sine qua non* will only perpetuate the current state of affairs. Going forward, we must resist the urge to essentialize partnership into one or two concepts because, as the GCS has made abundantly clear, partnership exists as a complex web of definitional notions.

The GCS also draws attention to the fact that interdependent international relationships between congregations are incredibly hard to find. While there is a laudable focus among respondents to the GCS on building the capacities of international partners, there remains a clear sense that the Non-American congregation needs the contributions of their American sister far more than the American partner needs what their international sister provides (Adler and Offutt, Stephen 2017). The prominence of Mutual Valuation in this chapter makes it very clear that American congregations value the resources brought to them by their sister churches. But they also think they can get those resources without their partners. When it comes to the contributions American congregations make to their global partners, there is a sense that those are far more essential. The question, then becomes: what it would take for American congregations to rely on their partners as much as their partners rely on them? Exactly what that would look like, remains an open question. As is the question of whether American congregations are actually willing to attempt something in their own neighborhood that requires resources from outside their own congregation. Looking forward, I can see no more pressing issue for global congregational partnerships than the question of how to convince American congregations of the necessity of relying on the rest of the global Body of Christ.

## Practices of Healthy Partnerships

Finally, a church looking to practice STM within long-term partnerships needs to understand the kinds of actions and structures that can set them up for success. Reflection on the results of the GCS provides a clear understanding of the operation of healthy ICPs. A model of operational structures would include three pillars: expectation, communication, and revision. Commitment to a high degree of clarity concerning what partners can expect from each other, who is responsible for which duties, and how communication and documentation should flow between partners is paramount. A comparison between Groups 1 and 3 makes it abundantly clear that any deviation from being as clear as possible on these points leads to inconsistent or negative outcomes. Churches in ICPs also should structure their partnerships to include a mechanism for reviewing and revising their processes and expectations. Consistent feedback, even when it is negative, is essential for a healthy organism. Just imagine the state of a person whose brain never received any information about how the body was performing and consequently never changed course. Such a person would probably not last more than a few minutes. Should we expect any different from a partnership that is unable to evaluate its own state or how well it is functioning?

A model of operational practices would have to place leadership buy-in and exercises that build trust in a league of their own. Without enthusiastic support from church leadership, partnerships tend to have severely limited impact. Additionally, healthy partnerships tend to be the ones that began building trust early in the development of the relationship. Trust is something that builds slowly over time, as partners demonstrate goodwill and the capacity to deliver on their promises. So, creating many opportunities to do this, even on a very small scale, early on in the development of a partnership can have an enormous effect on partnership health down the line. These two factors (buy-in and trust-building) are clearly the most impactful practices that partners can employ when they want to improve the quality of their partnerships. Without these, there can be little hope of enjoying a healthy relationship.

Next, regular exchange of hospitality, commitment to work through problems, and culturally appropriate accountability form a nucleus of highly recommended practices. There is some evidence that a congregation can have a healthy partnership without them; but when they are consistently employed these practices definitely lead to healthier results. Exchange of hospitality builds social capital, (Brown 2007) creating a sense of belonging to one another and a narrative of belonging with which both host and guest can strongly identify. It is one thing to say, “we are all one body of Christ” it is another to say, “Geoff and Emilio are part of my family.” Additionally, hospitality often creates a situation in which the guest is vulnerable and needs the host to provide for needs the guest is accustomed to providing for themselves. This can itself be a powerful trust-building exercise. Commitment to work through problems is about making the decision to remain in the relationship, come what may, before trouble actually arises. It comes from a conviction that the relationship itself is valuable and not to be jettisoned lightly. This suggests that partners should be honest with themselves and each other about the likelihood of the relationship being troubled from time to time and affirm to one another that this will not mean the end of the relationship. Failure to discuss this or signaling that you may not be in it for the long haul, does a huge disservice to the partnership. Finally, emphasizing culturally appropriate accountability demonstrates a measure of cultural intelligence. Cultural Intelligence refers to an understanding of one’s own culture and a concurrent understanding of the validity of other culturally defined beliefs and practices (Livermore and Clark 2009). This willingness to suspend judgement helps reduce friction in one of the most sensitive areas for ICPs: money.

Organizational penetration also seems highly advisable. Not all congregations pursue partnership in a way that integrates their partnership into other ministries of the church. Some prefer to silo it off as a kind of self-contained ministry program. But some churches integrate aspects of their partnerships into multiple ministries of the church such as weekly worship, children's or youth programming, and small groups. Some rely on their sister church to help them become better at outreach to certain segments of their own neighborhood (refugee populations, for example). Granted, this is not as prevalent as other factors. But when it is present to **any** degree, those partnerships are always in Group 1. It is still possible to have a healthy partnership without organizational penetration. But when the partnership interfaces with multiple facets of congregational life, the relationship is always the healthier for it.

## Conclusions – Short Time Becoming Long

Partnership has become a major factor in the way American congregations interface with the global church. As STMs continue to be the most pervasive mode of engagement, many churches seek to condition their practice of mission by situating their trips within a long-term relationship. This allows them to build expertise and investment in a specific area, and also (ideally) gives non-US congregations a greater say in the process by serving as partners in mission rather than objects of mission. Of course, the attainment of this ideal is still more elusive than many of us would like. By surveying churches who are pursuing this type of international missional engagement, and gauging how healthy their relationships really are, this article has provided insight into what kinds of ideas and practices can make that ideal a bit less elusive.

Having, or creatively sourcing, access to human, financial, and material resources is clearly a factor in making partnerships as healthy as possible. But it is also important to anchor the pursuit of partnership in theologically substantive themes; ones that go beyond general missiological interest and locate partnership at the center of faith. Themes like the mutual life of the Trinity and our calling to a life of self-giving love give a theological framework to partnership that infuse it with ultimate significance. And expressing that framework using biblical passages and metaphors grants congregants a more tangible and more easily imitated example of the meaning of partnership than when we leave these concepts at the level of abstraction. It is one thing to talk about covenantal faithfulness, but it seems much more weighty to talk about David and Johnathan putting their kingdoms on the line for one another, or about Jesus hanging on a cross even when his people had abandoned him.

Healthy partnerships also have clarity about what they mean when they talk about “partnership.” They rely on definitional concepts like a shared sense of calling, placing equal value on each partner’s contribution, and an openness to who their partners are and how they do things. They place more emphasis on building a relationship than attaining a goal. And, at their very best, they not only seek to build capacity and sustainability; they emphasize that both partners should give and receive people, ideas, and resources.

Finally, churches who frame their STMs within long-term partnerships follow a consistent pattern in their organizational structures and operational practices. They are transparent about their expectations of what the partnership will achieve and who will be responsible for making that happen. They provide clear lines of communication and documentation so that communication can flow freely between partners. And they have regular opportunities for meaningful feedback so they can evaluate and adjust how they do things as changes and problems arise. They also take every opportunity to build trust between partners and they have leadership that is strongly committed to the partnership. They open their homes and churches to one another often, and they resist the urge to insist that their culturally-defined method of accountability must hold sway. They are realistic about the likelihood of difficulty and commit themselves beforehand to work through problems in the relationship. And they integrate their international relationships with as much of the daily life of the church as possible.

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