

Case Study 1—Offending Your Hosts

A local congregation of the PC(USA) received an invitation for an intergenerational group to visit and collaborate with a small local Presbyterian congregation in Brazil in a poor neighborhood. Their project was to help in the construction of a simple, two-story church building with three classrooms on the first floor and a fellowship hall on the second floor. The dean of the local Presbyterian seminary and his wife were in the United States studying English, so they generously offered for the group to use their home for sleeping and cooking breakfast and supper. Their son and another young man who worked at the seminary would be the hosts.

A painful incident occurred on the first evening. A few hours after the group of around twelve people arrived, the house was a mess, with sleeping bags and mattresses everywhere. They settled in, took showers (with electric showerheads that heat the water), dried their hair, and had dinner. The excessive use of energy caused a fuse to blow and they were left in the dark. The two Brazilian hosts frantically found a friend who was attempting to solve the problem.

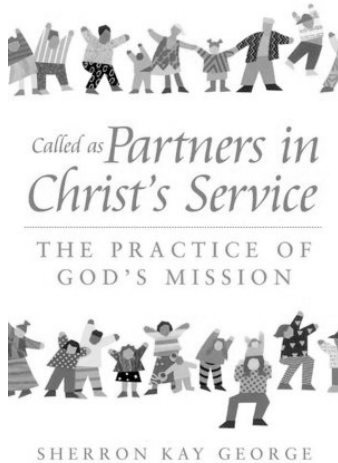
Meanwhile, the group decided that it was time to have their evening devotionals, which they did in English, with flashlights and candles in the dark. The Brazilian hosts were unable to understand and participate, so after a few minutes they abruptly left the room. A bilingual Brazilian who was accompanying the group stopped the devotional and explained that they had offended their Brazilian hosts. Everyone was surprised and perplexed. They always had daily devotionals on mission trips. The PC(USA) mission worker present tried to explain what it means to be a guest in a strange country. The group leader felt guilty and confused. There were some tears. Others were angry at the Brazilian who ended the devotional. No one knew what to do. The young adults in the group asked permission to go after the Brazilians. They knocked on the door and asked for forgiveness. Language barriers came down; body language took over; they exchanged hugs and experienced their joy of reconciliation. Soon the fuse was replaced and the lights returned. The rest of the evening was spent in fun, getting to know the hosts.

After this, the leaders decided that there would be no more “English only” devotionals. Instead, every evening they had informal, bilingual interaction with youth from a local Presbyterian church near the seminary. There was lots of coming and going with games, cards, music, and food. Several evenings the young people in the group went bowling with the Brazilians or to the mall. Everything happened spontaneously.

This was quite a change from their usual mission trips. Some of the adults had doubts about all the unstructured recreation time, the unsupervised youth activities with the Brazilian youth, and no devotionals. There were bilingual prayers before lunch at the construction site and two very meaningful worship services at the church.

Questions for Reflection

1. Why was the bilingual Brazilian so concerned when the hosts left the room?
2. What do you see as the basic issue(s) in the case?
3. The incident resulted in the abandonment of the custom of daily devotionals in English. Do you agree with that? What would you have done?
4. Comment on the presence or absence of the attitudes of respect, compassion, and/or humility.
5. What North American cultural characteristics do you see in this situation? Are there problems? Do any of the dyads of missional practices give us some concrete ways of seeing our own cultural traits and relating in a different way? What practices would you suggest for the group?
6. How do you think that this story engages the core values that we seek to uphold as a denomination in our ministry and witness? Which of these values figure most prominently in this story? What could have been done differently to promote a stronger or more consistent expression of these values?



Case Study 2—“White Noise”

One day during their mission service with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), Tom and Carol Montgomery-Fate set out on a two-day trip to the village of Mamalao to visit the twelve families who lived there. It was part of their ongoing orientation program to help them understand the culture. On the second day Tom realized they had made the mistake of heading out without their rain ponchos during typhoon season. They took a jeep to the end of the road and were one hour into the final half-day hike when the rains started. There was no choice but to slush through the rain and follow their guide, Modesto, a Philippine community organizer who accompanied them and took care of all their provisions and transportation. Needless to say, it was a messy trip.

When they finally reached the village, they found refuge in a bamboo chapel with a metal roof. They rested and shouted to one another over the downpour. Modesto smiled as he pointed to the roof and said, “White man’s noise.” Later Modesto explained that a white missionary who visited the community gave the chapel roof as a gift. He was not being critical. Some people were proud of their different kind of roof. Tom, however, realized that “given the choice...the people of Mamalao might have spent the money differently, perhaps for rice seedlings to plant on the terraces they had just started on the mountain.”

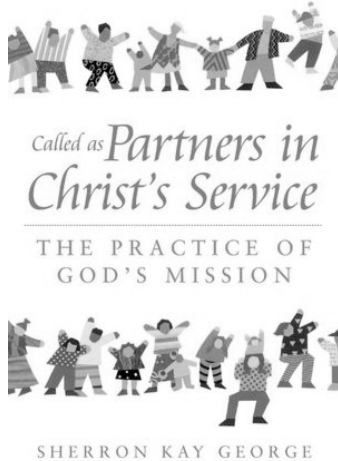
Before falling asleep that night, as Tom reviewed the events of the day, his mind went back to the “white noise” of the roof. In the silence, lying on the floor of the bamboo hut, he imagined a church service going on during one of the frequent Philippine rains and reflected on the disadvantages of a metal roof and the advantages of a thatched bamboo roof. Not only was the latter quieter, but it was also cooler. Though a metal roof would last longer, bamboo was a common and abundant material, and thatched roofs were easy to construct. Suddenly Tom realized that “a good-hearted outsider had unknowingly misread the culture in an attempt to help.” Then he did a bit of self-analysis: “I knew that I did the same thing in Laoag. I seldom knew for sure what to give or how to receive, or what I had *already* given and received.”

Soon after Carol and Tom returned to their base Laoag, they attended a church's elementary school graduation and following the ceremony, a member said, "We really need a new roof." Tom immediately went into a long explanation about the UCCP partnership policy that did not allow mission coworkers to fund projects. Later he realized that he had been hypocritical, and that his method of assuming control and doing all the talking contradicted his message. He concluded,

Both "worlds" need to relearn how to give and receive the gifts of their cultures...One key to struggling with the Two-Thirds World toward partnership, is for us in the One-Third World to learn how to wait and listen. This is perhaps the greatest gift we can give. Waiting and listening are necessary if we are to learn how to receive the gifts of our partner cultures. But if they don't speak, or if we don't hear the voices, it may mean patiently listening to silence...If we wait long enough and listen hard enough, we will gain the capacity to hear new voices emerge from our white noise.

Questions for reflection

1. How could attentive listening help avoid misreading or ignoring other cultures?
2. How do our excessive activities, words, structures, and resources become "white noise"?
3. Are good intentions enough in mission giving? Did the missionary make a mistake? How would you have responded to the member's request if you were Tom?
4. Comment on the presence or absence of the attitudes of respect compassion and/or humility?
5. Who are the principal characters in the case? What are the missional practices of each? What does it mean to wait and listen? How essential are role reversals today in order to practice the dynamic of mutuality in listening and speaking and in giving and receiving? Which practices are harder for you?
6. How do you think that this story engages the core values that we seek to uphold as a denomination in our ministry and witness? Which of these values figure most prominently in this story? What could have been done differently to promote a stronger or more consistent expression of these values?



Case Study 4—Receiving and Giving is Complicated

After several exploratory visits and a time of getting to know one another and praying for one another, a presbytery of the PC(USA) entered into a formal partnership agreement with a presbytery in South America to be evaluated after another five years. A PC(USA) mission couple served as the partnership facilitators. The Latin presbytery presented a project to build a wing of educational classrooms beside one of their congregations to serve as a Sunday School and as a public primary school during the week in partnership with the local government. The project further included a small building for a day clinic in another town where two congregations were located. The U.S. presbytery found the needs compelling. A small delegation visited the sites. In dialogue they agreed to raise the funds. Twenty PC(USA) congregations got involved.

Members of the South American presbytery were invited to visit their partner in the North. One pastor in the delegation was given an opportunity to speak for five minutes in a presbytery mission conference. Those who attended gained a new way of understanding Scripture “from below” and a different perspective on world events. Many of them were moved and challenged. However, some were angry and thought the pastor was “meddling” and had strange hermeneutics. The short presentation generated much discussion and debate. A few people walked out because they had a hard time understanding his English.

The mission enthusiasts in one of the congregations in the PC(USA) presbytery decided to invite a layperson from their partner presbytery to come to the United States and spend six weeks in the Mission to the U.S.A. program. She participated in many of the church’s programs and events and shared her testimony. They were blessed by her courageous Christian values and the beauty of the artwork used in her presentations. The members offered many gifts to her when she left to share with her family and congregation. They wanted to maintain a relationship with her and promised to keep in touch by letters and e-mail. Periodically, they would receive requests for financial help to which they responded generously. Some of them began to notice that the requests were more frequent and for considerable sums.

In a return visit to South America, members of the PC(USA) were overwhelmed with the warm hospitality they received from the people in the congregations. They had few material resources, but were so generous and welcoming. The “wealth gap” between the two presbyteries was blatantly

apparent, sometimes disturbing. Some of the members had feelings of guilt. In conversations with the partners through translators, they received tremendous inspiration. Their priorities and spirituality were challenged when they saw the peace, joy, deep faith, and genuine dependence of the people upon God. Some of the group spent a few days with sisters and brothers who were suffering in unjust land struggles and joined them in a peaceful demonstration. It was scary, but exciting. Others visited the two construction projects and joined in painting the new day clinic. When they asked about equipment and staff to maintain the clinic, there were no clear answers. The PC(USA) mission couple mentioned the possibility of presenting a new project request. They visited one doctor in a very busy hospital in town who was willing to help during her free time. On the last day of the visit, the Latin presbytery presented a project for building a large church sanctuary in another town where they wanted to begin a new evangelistic field (new church development) and a project for equipping two other churches with new pews and pulpits. Furthermore, they requested scholarship aid for three young people who felt God's call to go to seminary. One Latin American pastor in the presbytery made the comment, "We will be happy to receive whatever you want to give."

Questions for Reflection

1. How, through our partnerships, can our folks encourage a greater understanding of the issues involved as they discuss projects with their international partners? How might the partners deal with projects, requests, and fund-raising in a way that avoids the long tradition of paternalistic gift giving that creates financial dependencies and harmful greed?
2. How do partnerships become truly "mutual"? How does the two-way dimension occur? What is the role of the national leadership in each of the partner churches in equipping their own leadership to understand the issues?
3. Comment on the presence or absence of the attitudes of respect, compassion, and/or humility.
4. What does each partner give and receive in this mission partnership? Are there any conflicting messages? How could the partnership mature to become a more authentic mutual gift exchange?
5. How do you think that this story engages the core values that we seek to uphold as a denomination in our ministry and witness? Which of these values figure most prominently in this story? What could have been done differently to promote a stronger or more consistent expression of these values?