The Theology of Partnership

Cathy Ross

"P"artnership is an idea whose time has not yet fully come." So wrote Max Warren in his little book on partnership in 1954. Max Warren was general secretary of the Church Mission Society from 1942 to 1963. He went on to say that an understanding of partnership may “afford a key to unlock many of the doors which at present divide, and by dividing disrupt our life in society, both national and international.” Now over fifty years later, those indeed seem to be prescient words. In the 1990s, Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama stated that the most pressing and urgent question facing the world was, Can we live together? In 2002 Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Britain and the Commonwealth, posed the same pertinent question in his superb book The Dignity of Difference, where he writes, “Can we live together? Can we make space for one another? Can we overcome long histories of estrangement and bitterness? . . . Can we find, in the human ‘thou’, a fragment of the Divine Thou?” And finally, at the beginning of 2009, the forty-fourth president of the United States, Barack Obama, addressed this same question in his inaugural speech, where he referred to “greater cooperation and understanding between nations.” He rejected “protecting narrow interests and putting off unpleasant decisions” and called for the renewal of “sturdy alliances and enduring convictions” always exhibited with “the tempering qualities of humility and restraint.” So perhaps the time has indeed come not only to explore this idea of partnership but also to work it out in our world. And if we can find a fragment of the divine Thou in the other, then we are a long way down the road to genuine partnership.

The word “partner” derives from the Anglo-French partener, an old legal term that denotes co-heirship. Warren points out that words are strange things—they come to us with all sorts of allusions and resonances, “trailing clouds of glory or of shame, and sometimes both.” And “partner” is just such a word. Co-heirship evokes overtones of ancestry, with suggestions of property rights, ownership, status, and dignity, as well as its underside of power, wealth, jealousy, suspicion, and litigation. These associations—both happy and unhappy, noble and ignoble—can unwittingly influence our approach toward a word and an idea. The simple dictionary definition of a partner is “one who shares, takes part, is associated with another in action.” Although this seems straightforward enough, we can see the potential for a relationship that can lead us to the heights or into the depths. “Heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17) shows us the sublime heights to which partnership can aspire. However, “This is the heir; come, let us kill him” (Mark 12:7) reveals the dark side and the depths to which it can descend.

The Concept of Partnership

Partnership, then, is constituted of three factors. First, there must be the acceptance by each one concerned of genuine involvement, a committal of oneself to the other partner in trust. This element of trust is foundational and inescapable. We trust the other with the “keys,” if you like; we respect their cultural way of being and doing. We learn to give up control and share the responsibility. Second, partnership involves a ready acceptance of responsibility, a readiness to serve the purpose of the common enterprise. And finally, involvement must carry with it a readiness to pay the price of partnership, to accept all the liabilities and limitations that arise. Involvement, responsibility, liability—without these there can be no true partnership. In proportion as they are accepted, the partnership becomes more satisfying and creative. Now, these three factors presuppose the continuity within the partnership of the identity of each partner. Neither partner can become so absorbed or assimilated that his or her own identity is lost. The conscious identity of each partner must survive; the possibility must remain present that either partner can contract out of the partnership, thereby ceasing to be responsible or liable. This is precisely because the essence of partnership is that it is a relationship entered upon in freedom by persons who remain free. It is a dynamic relationship that is continually growing and developing, not one that is static and stale.

This may all sound rather dry and heavy—involvement, responsibility, liability—a little like a school motto. Stiff-upper-lip attitudes and dogged perseverance will see us through! But of course partnership, at its most basic level, is a relationship between persons, and we as people are dynamic, wonderful, unpredictable. So in addition to talking about the three factors that make partner relationships, we need to think about the way good relationships work in general, what we look for in them. What do we seek in relationships? We are looking for love, for mutuality, for understanding, for compassion, and sometimes (often even?) for forgiveness. Paul Tillich has some helpful insights here: “In order to know what is just in a person-to-person encounter, love listens. It is its first task to listen. No helpful insights here: “In order to know what is just in a person-to-person encounter, love listens. It is its first task to listen. No

Cathy Ross, from Aotearoa/NZ, lives in the United Kingdom. She manages the Crowther Centre for Mission Education at the Church Mission Society, is the J. V. Taylor Fellow in Missiology at the University of Oxford, and is the General Secretary of the International Association for Mission Studies. She previously worked in Rwanda, Congo, and Uganda with NZCMS.

—cathy.ross@cms-uk.org
others and with the Word in which we have no more foreign accent.” So here perhaps is a more compassionate, more human, and certainly more challenging way of defining involvement—by listening. In life, to listen is to become involved. Good listening requires humility, vulnerability, availability, receptivity, and patience. To be a good listener means to be willing to share in the lives of others—in other words, the first step toward being an authentic partner.

To listening I would add seeing the other. The gift of sight is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Our eyes have to be opened to recognize Jesus, just as it was for those first disciples—over the dinner table, in the garden, on the lake, on the Damascus road. Once our eyes are opened and we can see Jesus, then the Holy Spirit enables us to see the other person. Sherron Kay George, in her book entitled Called as Partners in Christ’s Service, states that the “first concern in a partnership is to get to know one another and cultivate relationships by observing [seeing], listening, and asking questions.” Listening and seeing are vital to all human relationships and vital to partnership if we really want to know the other as a human being.

Tillich goes on to say that “giving” is inextricably involved in relationships. He writes, “It belongs to the right of everyone whom we encounter to demand something from us.” This is the essence of the “I-Thou” relationship. Gift exchange in a way that both partners practice giving and receiving in a spirit of mutual respect can enrich the relationship. This giving may be as simple as acknowledging that the other whom we encounter is a person. No more than this, but no less.

Sacks maintains that our moral responsibility grows out of face-to-face relationships when we see how what we do affects others. Obama knew this when he announced: “To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history; but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.” He used that wonderfully evocative image of the open hand. This minimum of giving can lead toward a maximum of self-sacrifice if required. In terms of partnership, this means responsibility. To be in a partnership means to be committed to giving within the partnership and through it.

Finally, Tillich speaks of forgiving—a powerful and essential dimension of any human relationship, of any partnership. This means the acceptance of all the liabilities and limitations that may arise from relating with others whose weakness and sin may injure us, just as for them it involves the acceptance of the liabilities and limitations that follow from our weakness and sin. Mutual forgiveness is the only way forward; without it, any partnership is bound to dissolve or at least fragment.

So the concept of partnership means acceptance of genuine involvement, acceptance of responsibility, and acceptance of liability, all of it seasoned with intentional listening and seeing, giving and forgiving. How do we do this in a world that behaves so differently—in a world rife with unequal power dynamics, in a world where the powerful are heard and the powerless are not, where the wealthy can choose to give and the poor are forced to receive, where grudges are nursed and revenge considered a sweet dish, where forgiveness is often an alien concept?

The Theology of Partnership

Let us now consider a theology of partnership, which means that we will consider it as an idea that is ultimately about God and an idea that is consistent with God’s creative and redemptive purposes. I wish to explore three ideas here. First, that partnership is an idea essential to the very nature of God. Second, that partnership speaks of God’s relationship with humanity. Third, that partnership indicates the true relationship between human beings.

First, partnership is an idea essential to the very nature of God. I do not think that it is pushing the idea too far to say that we see partnership in the Godhead. God is a community. God is not a monad but a community of three divine persons. God is also one God. These realities allow not only for relationship but also for unity and diversity. This Trinitarian understanding of God, expressed so beautifully in the icon by Rublev, means that we experience God in relationship with the other, in partnership, within community. The concept of the Trinity allows space for the created individual, but only in relationship to the other. So each person of the Trinity has its own divine nature, expressed in relation to the other persons of the Trinity. There is the space to be each divine person, as each person relates to the other. They cannot each exist without this relationship. I did say before that an aspect of partnership appropriate to humanity is the freedom to withdraw, which of course is inappropriate when considering the Trinity. But each person of the Trinity is a distinct person in a love relationship with the other persons of the Trinity, just as we in a partnership are distinct individuals but existing in relation to and with the other. Feminist theologian Catherine la Cugna comments: “In Rublev’s icon, the temple in the background is the transformation of Abraham’s and Sarah’s house. The oak tree stands for the Tree of Life. And the position of the three figures is suggestive. Although they are arranged in a circle, the circle is not closed. One has the distinct sensation when meditating on the icon that one is not only invited into this communion but, indeed, one already is part of it. A self-contained God, a closed divine society, would hardly be a fitting archetype for hospitality [or for partnership]. We should not miss the significance of the Eucharistic cup in the centre, which is, of course, the sacramental sign of our communion with God and one another.”

Paul Fiddes, in his book Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity, urges us to do more than just imitate the triune God by actually participating in the Trinity. He claims that this participation enables us to truly appreciate the other because of our engagement with the other. Engagement in the life of God means an experience of otherness—the otherness of God from humanity, the otherness of the Creator from the created. He writes, “Nothing in the world can prepare us for this gulf of otherness in a God who abides in the unity of love... Because it is an otherness which arises in participation within God, it can only be known through participation. To engage in the relationships in God means that we are brought up against the challenge of the alien, the radically different, the unlike; but at the same time we have the security of experiencing a fellowship more intimate than anything we can otherwise know.” Our ego is broken.
open by encountering the Thou in the other, and through the Thou of other people we can meet the transcendent Thou, God.

This leads us to the second idea of partnership, which speaks of God’s relationship with humanity. In the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus we see most fully and clearly the self-revealing activities of God. In the incarnation God communicates himself to us and establishes a relationship with us. Referring back to the concept of partnership, we see that God is first involved with us in a supreme act of trust, manifest in the incarnation. Moreover, God is responsible for our redemption. Finally, God’s self-emptying, supremely upon the cross, was the liability accepted by God for our creation and was God’s freely chosen means for our redemption, should we choose to accept it.

It is important to remember that we are free to respond to God or not. Without this freedom there is no true partnership. It is not a forced relationship—we should not be compelled to enter into a partnership. Jesus never compelled people into a relationship with him. Think of his approach to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:9) or his dialogue with Nicodemus (John 3); in Jesus we find a model of love and respect. Love cultivates mutual sharing, mutual serving, mutual forgiveness, and mutual suffering. Love is not feeling sorry for, giving charity to, or taking advantage of. It means coming alongside, somehow trying to feel what others feel, experiencing what others experience, taking a walk in someone else’s shoes. How do we do this in a world of asymmetrical power relationships?

God’s involvement with us is met by our freely chosen involvement with him. To become involved with God, however, means to accept responsibility. We are laborers together with God, as we are told in 1 Corinthians 3:9. As we are caught up in this relationship with God, we are called to share his will and purposes. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 5:19–20, “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself . . . and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” This responsibility by which Christians express their obedience to God, their willing involvement with God, is not an easy thing. In fact this partnership with God, between God and humanity, becomes discipleship. Jesus reminds us that persecution is the least of the difficulties we can expect. Our partnership with God and with others can lead to our suffering and to sharing the sufferings of others. We do this by being present, by feeling their pain, by reacting with compassion, and by joining them in solidarity.

Third, partnership indicates the true relationship between human beings. Warren quotes Bertrand Russell, who recognized the inherent difficulty of true partnership. “Equal co-operation is much more difficult than despotism, and much less in line with instinct. When [people] attempt equal co-operation, it is natural for each to strive for complete mastery, since the submissive instincts are not brought into play. It is almost necessary that the parties concerned should acknowledge a common loyalty to something outside all of them.”

As Christians, we know the solution to this as disciples of the risen Lord. Perhaps the nearest word in the New Testament to partnership is koinonia. Its most basic meaning is “partaking together in” or having a share. The word stands for participation. As Warren writes, “We are then, to seek first for the inward bond which holds the fellowship of the Christians together, which inward fellowship is then externally manifested by the life of fellowship, with its almsgiving, sharing of property and breaking of bread, which we find in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles.” So koinonia can be translated as partnership, fellow-

ship, communion, participation, or sharing. Our fellowship is in Christ. “God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9). The Eucharist is also important, where we participate in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16), as is our daily fellowship in the power of the Holy Spirit. In other passages the word koinonia refers to the life of the Christian community. In Romans 15:26 and 2 Corinthians 8:4 and 9:13, the partnership with other Christians is made explicit in the taking of collections on behalf of the needy.

Are we disciples and partners with crucified minds, giving up our rights, manifesting the courage to be weak?

In Galatians 2:9 and Philippians 1:5 the emphasis is on partnership in proclaiming the Gospel. What is common here is the transcending loyalty to God—“all are equally involved, all have committed themselves to God in trust, all have a share in a common responsibility, all recognise that they belong together, that if one member suffers they all suffer, all have a liability for each.”

Partners share the sufferings of one another. Walter Brueggemann explains suffering thus: “Suffering made audible and visible produces hope, articulated grief is the gate of newness, and the history of Jesus is the history of entering into the pain and giving it voice.” David Bosch writes about “victim-missionaries,” who, “in contrast to exemplar-missionaries, lead people to freedom and community.” Could we say the same of “victim-partners”? Again in 2 Corinthians Paul teaches about the “validity of paradox, about a God who, in spite of being all-powerful became weak and vulnerable in his Son.” We live in relationship with a crucified God. Do we in our involvement with him and as his ambassadors live likewise? Koyama complained that too often Christianity exhibits a “crusing mind” rather than a “crucified mind” and that it suffers from a “teacher complex.” What attitudes do we exhibit when we enter into partnership? Do we adopt a crusading mind and teacher mentality, or are we disciples and partners with crucified minds, giving up our rights, manifesting the courage to be weak—living the paradox of a crucified, almighty God? Victim-missionaries are not powerful and successful, nor are victim-partners. In this asymmetrical and uneven world, victim-partners will not create what has been described as “a relationship of controlling benefactors to irritated recipients of charity,” in which recipients end up experiencing a complex mix of gratitude and resentment at the same time.

The Practices of Partnership

Perhaps we see the practices essential to partnership most clearly in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, where he thanks them for their partnership in the Gospel. Paul and the Philippians were partners in many ways—in giving, receiving, working, praying, rejoicing, struggling, and suffering. They shared in a common project with Paul and were partners with him in the defense and the confirmation of the Gospel. Partnership in the body of Christ is emphasized in the passages that speak of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12 and Rom. 12). Each person is dependent on the gifts given to everyone. Here Andrew Kirk describes partnership
as “participating in the life of one another in such a way that the needs of all are met (Rom 12:6–13).”

An example of sharing material resources is given in 2 Corinthians. Paul expounds the principles of partnership as he exhorts the church in Achaia to match the generosity of the churches further north (2 Cor. 9:1–4). The churches of Macedonia and Achaia are sharing together in a particular ministry on behalf of the church in Judea. The churches in Judea who will receive this token of love have shared the Gospel with them, just as “Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things” (Rom. 15:26–27). Note that they are in partnership not only with one another but also with God. God will provide them with more than they could ever hope to give, as long as they go on sharing (2 Cor. 9:8–11), and God will receive the praise and thanksgiving.

Sharing in suffering is another practice of partnership that Paul writes about in 2 Corinthians. He writes that the Christians in Corinth are sharing in his and Timothy’s sufferings (2 Cor. 1:7). In fact, they are all sharing in the sufferings of Christ, which continue in the sufferings of his body, the church. This is a deep participation in the broken body, and every member feels the suffering of every other member. The suffering may have many causes: persecution, hardships while traveling, hunger, thirst, sleepless nights, insults, exposure to cold, misrepresentation, hard work—these are some of the ways listed in 2 Corinthians 6 and 11. Perhaps suffering is not only the most difficult but also the most profound manifestation of partnership. The San Antonio Report, a WCC statement on “mission in Christ’s way,” acutely observes, “Participation in suffering and struggle is at the heart of God’s mission and God’s will for the world. It is central for our understanding of the incarnation, the most glorious example of participation in suffering and struggle. The church is sent in the way of Christ bearing the marks of the cross in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 20:19–23).”

Partners share in the sufferings of one another, and the incarnation is indeed the supreme model for this.

So some of the practices of partnership are giving, receiving, working, praying, rejoicing, struggling, and suffering. But there is one issue that distorts all the fine ideals and makes the practice of partnership difficult and demanding. This is the issue of power. It is difficult to have a truly mutual relationship when the two parties possess unequal power. But that is the reality of our world today. We know that money, resources, education, land, access to technology, ownership, and much more are unfairly and unequally distributed.

The model of the incarnation can help us. We can let go of our pride and power, our privilege and sense of entitlement, insofar as we empty ourselves following Christ’s way depicted in Philippians 2. We seek to empty ourselves of our pride and ethnocentrism, our feelings of cultural, religious, and technological superiority, which blind and grip us all. We seek to empty ourselves of the need to initiate, control, dominate, impose, manipulate, and run ahead in partner relationships. We seek to empty ourselves of autonomy and independence. Bosch’s insights about vulnerability and “victim-missionaries/partners” are also helpful reminders for us to adopt an attitude of humility and of considering others better than ourselves. A related issue here is what the partners are seeking to share. Money, resources, education, land, technology, ownership, and power may be unfairly distributed and may lead to distorted exchanges. But what else are we seeking to share? Stories, traditions, ancient knowledge and customs, inheritances, joy, kindness, goodness, beauty, sustainability, difference—these too are to be shared and can restore a balance where there may be uneven power dynamics.

Conclusion

So we have seen that partnership is a high ideal and a wonderful idea when practiced well. It can indeed lead us to the heights or take us into the depths. It is not an easy ideal. Joint heirs with Christ or such intense jealousy that it annihilates the partner. Some of the requirements for authentic partnership are counter-intuitive to the human condition—vulnerability and suffering, self-emptying and humbling ourselves, submission, listening and learning. Bertrand Russell reminded us that cooperation is more difficult than despotism. And yet the attitudes of listening, giving, and forgiving go a long way toward enabling partnership to work in fragile human conditions and a broken world.

Tillich reminded us that listening love is the first step toward justice in human encounters. Giving is an essential part of partnership. Partnership is a high ideal whose time has come. God can transform all our partnerships so that something new can be created, something that neither partner could foresee. Listening, giving, and forgiving—these three attitudes can lead us not only into genuine partnership but also into the adventure of living.

Notes

2. Ibid.
5. Warren, Partnership, p. 11.
17. Ibid., p. 11.
18. Ibid., p. 10.
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