Global Friendship as Incarnational Missional Practice

Dana L. Robert

Friendship is a foundational practice in Christian mission. As Donald McGavran expressed succinctly many years ago, human relationships are the “bridges of God” across which the Gospel travels. This statement is at once both obvious and complicated. Because friendship is universally accepted as a positive virtue, it is taken for granted and not typically a subject of theorizing; the longing for deep and consistent relationships remains a core part of being human. At the same time, cross-cultural friendships are notoriously difficult to achieve, especially across unequal power dynamics, gender, and class differences. Friendship carries long-term obligations and hidden assumptions peculiar to the cultures of those who practice it. Committed missionaries know that even after they return from the “field,” their obligations, responsibilities, and privileges toward their mission friends and partners remain with them for life.

Reflection on friendship as missional practice is especially fitting in a tribute for Jonathan Bonk and for Jean Bonk, his lifelong partner in ministry. Jon Bonk’s capacity for friendship with the homeless and care for the foreigner and the stranger is legendary. Under Bonk’s leadership from 1997 to 2013 (he was associate director, 1997–2000; executive director, 2000–2013), the staff of the Overseas Ministries Study Center (OMSC) arranged medical care, schooling for children, recreational and educational opportunities, English classes, holiday celebrations, and warm fellowship for its residents. Around the world, the friends and former residents of OMSC compose an extended family. The Bonks’ commitment to lifelong friendships provides a powerful example for mission practice today.

A chief attraction to mission in the twenty-first century is that it holds out the opportunity to forge relationships across geographic, ethnic, and economic boundaries. To share the Gospel—to follow Jesus and to make him known in places where he is not—remains a perennial motivation for mission. To help others and to save God’s creation are also prominent motives for mission outreach. But for the millennial generation, what I would call “global friendship” is possibly a more compelling motivation for mission than either evangelism or service. Shaped by interconnected technologies, the spirituality of millennials is relational. A self-consciousness that includes connecting quickly with people all over the world shapes contemporary expectations of mission practices. Americans, especially, expect to be able to make friends easily with people, regardless of geographic distance, and regardless of cultural, class, and gender differences.

Given that relationships are foundational for mission and outreach, especially among young people, then what is the meaning of friendship as missional practice? In this article I explore the connection between global friendship and mission in several dimensions. First, global friendship provides opportunities for spiritual formation—for deepening one’s Christian faith through a shifting web of diverse and geographically expansive personal relationships. Second is the idea of global friendship as a vehicle for transformation. Ideally relationships lead to personal and social change—everything from personal fulfillment to local service to saving the planet. A third aspect of global friendship and mission worth exploring is that of incarnational missional practice. In this dimension, friendship is a discipline of “imitating Christ,” a way of being with others in mission as Jesus was. These aspects of friendship as missional practice are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. All three can be seen in the missional commitments of Jon and Jean Bonk.

Global Friendships as Spiritual Formation

Cross-cultural friendship as missional and spiritual formation has a long history. During the 1920s, North American Protestants participated in what they called “world friendship.” In the wake of World War I, linking with people across national divides was part of promoting world peace. To connect with other peoples unlike oneself both promoted spiritual growth among North Americans and expressed their deep longing for global unity. Travel seminars to other countries, such as Sherwood Eddy’s influential American Seminar, originated in the 1920s. Missionary societies renamed themselves “world friendship” societies and began providing hospitality to international students and bringing foreign mission speakers to the United States. In 1926 Japan missionary Sidney Gulick founded the Committee on World Friendship among Children. Its first project resulted in Americans sending nearly 13,000 friendship dolls to Japan. Japanese children responded by sending to the United States fifty-eight specially prepared Japanese dolls, which toured the country as signs of friendship between nations.

Women of the largest Protestant denomination in the country, the Methodists, adopted world friendship as their mission focus for the 1920s. Wrote one mission leader, “World Friendship is a new name for what has been in the hearts of missionary women from the beginning.”

In this context of nurturing global relationships as a valued mission practice, Baptists Marguerite and Ida Doane in 1922 founded the “Houses of Fellowship” in Ventnor, New Jersey. The Doane sisters were stalwart supporters of the Woman’s American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and its emphasis on relational mission. A center for missionaries on furlough, the Houses of Fellowship provided a family-like community setting just steps from the ocean. For many missionaries and their

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families who returned regularly, the Houses of Fellowship was the only home they knew in the United States. In 1926 Dr. Anna Kugler attributed her physical and psychological recovery from serious illness to the “fellowship” she experienced there. In its first twenty-five years, the Houses of Fellowship hosted over 7,400 people from 106 mission agencies and 97 fields. In 1967 the Houses of Fellowship became the Overseas Ministries Study Center. Despite the name change and its eventual relocation to New Haven, Connecticut, OMSC remains famous for its warm hospitality and the lifelong friendships that are formed there. With the globalization of the worldwide mission force, today international missionary visitors, many from Korea and Burma, make OMSC their home away from home.

For North Americans, what has changed about the idea of mission and friendship from the era of world friendship in the 1920s is that, in the twenty-first century, ordinary Christians expect personally to make global friends. Churches continue to support professional missionaries as their paid transcultural agents. But in addition, local congregations, annual conferences and judicatories, and educational institutions have embraced the concept of the “mission trip” as a personally uplifting educational and/or spiritual experience. Worldwide, a billion tourist visas are issued every year; said another way, annually, one person out of every six travels to another country. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow calculated that by 2005, over 1.6 million U.S. adults were going on mission trips every year, in addition to an unknown number of teenagers. This kind of short-term travel opportunity is something new since the 1980s, because the Internet and cheap airfares have produced the “nomadic” generation.

A chief purpose of modern mission trips is to make global friendships. A posting from the chaplain’s office at Northwestern University has what might be a typical statement: “Alice Millar Chapel and University Christian Ministry co-sponsor spring break service trips abroad each year. These ‘friendship missions’ are undertaken to increase global awareness, to provide an opportunity for immersion in a different culture, and to build relationships with brothers and sisters in other countries. In previous years, groups have travelled to Russia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, and Cuba.”

For young people, relationship building through mission trips is seen as a positive good because it increases global awareness. Mission trips to places where people are poor also help middle-class North Americans see the world in a different way. Evidence is ample that a chief result of mission trips is to feed the spiritual lives of those who go on them. While widely available air travel has made the mission trip the spiritual formation of choice for youth ministry nationwide over the past twenty years, the spiritual impulse to go on pilgrimage as a way to encounter God is an ancient practice that cuts across multiple religions. The relationship and bonding among pilgrims from diverse backgrounds—whether Muslim hajis or medieval European travelers or contemporary followers of the Virgin of Guadalupe—is a key feature of spiritual travel. What is different about the modern mission trip, in distinction from other forms of pilgrimage, is the expectation that participants will form relationships with and will help those whom they visit. While almsgiving has always been a feature of religious pilgrimage, traditionally it has been understood that the purpose of the trip is to help the pilgrim himself or herself to become closer to God.

The desire to connect with others in the name of Jesus Christ and to make friends with them can lead to profound spiritual insights. Through experience of the “other,” friendship recognizes that rich and poor, black and white, Asian and European are fellow children of God, equal in Jesus Christ. But unless the initial desire to make friends is carried through into a long-term self-sacrificial mutual relationship, the chief beneficiary of the friendship mission trip is probably the person who goes on the trip. As with traditional pilgrimages, the anticipation of global friendship through short-term mission travel deepens one’s own spiritual life.

Global Friendships as Pathway to Transformation

A second way that friendship functions as a missional practice is by providing a pathway to transformation—either personal transformation through following Jesus Christ or social transformation. For example, Global Women was founded in 2001 to establish ongoing relationships between young women in the United States and young women in Moldova, Burma, and other places that have a history of Baptist missionary involvement. At first this approach was misunderstood because overseas groups expected to receive project grants as in the past. Instead they got visits from American women and support for indigenous friendship partners on the ground.

The mission of Global Women is stated as follows:

Motivated by the love and mercy of Jesus Christ, Global Women is a nonprofit organization connecting and empowering women to transform our worlds through global friendships as we:

- Investigate the needs of women,
- Involve ourselves and our communities in meeting these needs, and
- Influence leaders to cultivate cultures that value women.

Even though friendship is the motivating spirituality of Global Women, its overall purpose is to use that friendship to meet the needs of women, and to help with social transformation toward values that empower them. Dealing with human trafficking, encouraging microenterprise, and cultivating women’s leadership are specific missional priorities.

Another mission group that emphasizes friendship for transformation is the South African group Petra Institute for Children’s Ministry. Founded in 1989, this mission empowers children for ministry. It “shares God’s desire that the lost and broken children are found and restored to healing Christian families and communities, to join Him in transforming society.” It works with partner organizations and has conducted training sessions in children’s ministry in over sixty-seven countries. Petra Institute staff build capacity for children to make decisions for Christ by teaching the Bible through stories and play, by showing how to establish community and family-like relationships among teachers and children, and by designing contextually and biblically based curricula for children’s spiritual formation.
ministry. Its mission of transformation through relationships assumes long-term commitments to children, including working with children who have experienced trauma. "Petra Institute strongly believes in a relational rather than an educational approach. We strive to bring children in relationships with their teachers, their friends and ultimately, God." The philosophy of Petra Institute does not erase the distance between child and adult, so that, strictly speaking, equal “friendship” is not its primary goal. But it uses the power of relationships to lead children into deeper relationships with Christian communities and with God.

Friendship as pathway to transformation has limitations when it involves a one-sided expectation that Westerners can change other persons or social systems without being changed themselves. Yet mutuality through friendship assumes that as people enter into relationships with each other, both sides will be changed by the encounter. Ministries like Global Women and Petra Institute reflect a postcolonial, global networking approach to mission, in which mutual transformation through relationships is not a by-product of mission, but part of its raison d’être.

Some might question social transformation as a goal of friendship. Yet if friendship does not expect transformation, it runs the danger of being selfish—of gaining personal spiritual satisfaction on the backs of the poor. In the early 1960s the great missionary Trevor Huddleston addressed the All African Conference of Churches. Huddleston was well known as having supported the community of Sophiatown, as it was forcibly relocated under racist apartheid laws. He wrote Naught for Your Comfort, which described the trauma of the community being removed against its will, and his role as a missionary in friendship and solidarity with the people. In his speech to the African churches, Huddleston said that when oppressed people were down in a ditch, his role as missionary was to stand with them. African church leaders objected, saying that when they were down in the ditch, they wanted help climbing out. Cross-cultural relationship, in other words, needs to seek mutual personal and social transformation. As David Livermore notes, “We need to realize that in most of the world, a relationship without any obligation is no relationship at all.”

Global Friendships as Incarnational Mission Practice

A third framework for global friendship in relation to mission is that of incarnational mission practice. Followers of Jesus Christ seek to be in mission in the way of Jesus Christ. Through the incarnation, God became human in the person of Jesus. And Jesus’ ministry was one based on friendship, whose purpose was to build a fellowship that witnessed to the kingdom of God. Friendship, fellowship, and following Christ are inseparable. The Gospel of John reports that, as he faced death, Jesus commanded his followers to love each other. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you” (15:13–14). The unity of fellowship among Jesus and his friends and followers witnessed to God’s love. And so Jesus prayed in John 17:21–23, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. . . . I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

Jesus’ final prayers before his death outlined the clear connection between friendship and mission. The self-sacrificial and mutual love of fellowship is what draws people to God. Jesus called this the “new commandment”—that his disciples love each other, just as he loved them (John 13:34). In following Christ, the friends of Jesus conform themselves to his discipline and to his example of love for the sake of the other.

When Jesus talked about friendship, he focused on fellowship and community. For him, friendship was not an isolated incident of individual self-fulfillment, but the foundation of loving fellowship. The implications of biblical friendship give special resonance to many church-based missional practices. For example, missions directed toward children focus on creating a loving community for them that cares for them in ways their dysfunctional families cannot. Friendship missions reach out to the homeless and integrate them into loving communities. In Panama, a Latin American evangelical mission called Jesús Amigo (i.e., Jesus friend) works with gang leaders. These kinds of friendship missions try to heal broken lives, one at a time. As they construct authentic loving fellowships, they confront false ones of lies, violence, and abuse. Radical discipleship starts with friendship with real persons. This relational mission in the way of Jesus, as shown in the Gospel of John, is a necessary witness to the kingdom of God in a world of violence and division. Friendship is not “random acts of kindness”; rather, it involves systematic kingdom-based practices that require respect, compassion, humility, sharing, giving, and receiving.

In a world torn by ethnic conflict, friendship in the way of Jesus is a powerful witness to church and kingdom. In a world church torn by theological and organizational divisions, friendship functions as a bridge to ecumenism. As long-term mission partners well know, incarnational global friendships take a long time to develop, and they carry risks and responsibilities. Given the growing hostility toward Christians in some parts of the Islamic world, it is the only kind of friendship that can be practiced among Muslims, for example. Patient, loving friendship is often the only way to show the love of Jesus in situations of hostility. Roland Miller, who worked for a quarter century in India and founded a mission to Muslims called the Malabar Mission Society, expressed this idea beautifully when he wrote,
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Conclusion

As a contemporary missional practice, global friendships cut across geographies and cultures. Globally conscious and interconnected through electronic media, the millennials are particularly drawn to friendship as a way of being in mission. Global friendships promote a spirituality of world unity that forms their participants. These relationships can lead to personal and social transformation. But at its best, global friendship cannot be reduced to a technique or a strategy or a resource for self-fulfillment. At its deepest, global friendship is an incarnational mission practice. Friendship in the way of Jesus creates communities that point toward the kingdom of God. The reason to engage in mission through friendship is to follow the way of Jesus Christ, who loved his friends so much that he laid down his life for them.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented as part of the Augsburger Lectures at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, May 19–20, 2013. For preliminary historical reflections on this subject, see Dana L. Robert, “Cross-Cultural Friendship in the Creation of Twentieth-Century World Christianity,” International Bulletin of Missionary Research 35, no. 2 (2011): 100–107.
9. Ibid., 10.
10. Recent popular mission literature reflects a growing emphasis on relationships. See, for example, Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Poh, Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2010); Paul Borthwick, Western Christians in Global Mission: What’s the Role of the North American Church? (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2012).
11. Livermore, Cultural Intelligence, 25.
13. The term “nomadic generation” comes from David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, and refers to the spiritual rootlessness of millennials. “One of the characteristics of Millennial life has become the image of the traveller. They want to wander the world, both in real life and in digital ways. They want to feel untethered. There is a trend among young adults of delaying the pressures of adult life as long as possible; they want to embrace a lifestyle of risk, exploration and unscripted moments. At the same time, they want to be loyal to their peers.” See www.barna.org/barna-update/teens-nextgen/61226-three-spiritual-journeys-of-millennials#.VN-wX8bDiCM.
16. See www.globalwomengo.org/who-we-are.
22. Livermore, Cultural Intelligence, 75.
23. Churches, congregations, conferences, and dioceses have adopted friendship as a positive missional value. See, for example, Diocese of Erie, www.erieercd.org/missions4.asp.