

Global Partnership - Background on the Concept Personal Experiences & Reflections by Mary Stamp (1990s)

The shape of mission work around the world has been gradually changing over the years from one of bringing the answers to one of mutual sharing in a non-competitive, ecumenical partnership among denominations.

Instead of viewing different denominations as enemies competing for souls, we now recognize we share in one baptism, one Church, one Lord Jesus Christ. We're members of the same family of God across cultural, language, economic, racial, and faith barriers.

The United Church Board for World Ministries is the oldest foreign mission society in the United States, with roots in the American Board of Foreign Mission. Participants at its 180th annual meeting asked: How in this changing time can we make the oldest mission society in the U.S. be the freshest vehicle for world ministry today?

Today the Church is present around the world. No longer is the Church just in Europe and North America, seeking to plant itself elsewhere. The UCC has partnerships with the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU) in East and West Germany since 1981, with the Presbyterian Church of the Republic of Korea (PROK) in South Korea since 1983, with the Pentecostal Church in Chile since 1985, and with the United Church of Christ of the Philippines (UCCP) since 1987.

Partnerships are between two separate and independent bodies that can choose to work together or separately. It is the Church joining hands in covenant, the mission of one body. We belong to one another in partnership around the world, with each partner having full integrity and dignity.

The Church in partnership enables people to gain an understanding of the contexts in which other people live: being in solidarity with people strug-

gling in their local communities to live faithfully to the Gospel, understanding the world context of structures that create oppression, and engaging in theological reflection on what the Word of God has to say to them. The Church's role is to empower/inspire people, to advocate for people, and to develop leadership skills.

Through the World Council of Churches consultations have been developing Guidelines for "Ecumenical Sharing of Resources," in a dialogue with churches from the southern hemisphere, call for "sharing" in the form of Christians listening to each other so they can know each other and understand one another's struggles before exchanging money or personnel.

Partnership for the UCC includes working together with ecumenical agencies, different churches and conferences, and with the Disciples of Christ to discern the mission, pooling resources and personnel in creative ways—no longer with some churches sending and other churches receiving, but with all one under God.

There are a variety of models for partnership: sending and receiving missionaries both ways, overseas study tours, church-to-church partners, conference-to-church-district partners, local churches setting out on their own to seek sister churches.

Personal Experiences

My son words challenged people of East and West Germany when I repeated there in 1985. He and his sisters were hesitant to send me off for a month to participate in a United Church of Christ delegation of four from our Washington North Idaho Conference and four from Maine to visit the Evangelical Church of the Union in East and West Germany in 1985.

I didn't understand why I was selected to go. It was a bridge building effort, breaking down enemy images. But mine were already broken down. So why was I going? My children feared for my life because of a summer of airport bombings, terrorist hijacking, and airplane crashes. After teary good-byes with my daughters, I took Malcolm for his first day of first grade. I was teary, but he stood calmly on the curb by the school and said, "Mom, it's okay for you to go if you can do something about the bombs." I was shaken and moved that he understood.

When I shared his words in my words of greeting a few days later during a worship in a West German church, there was an audible sound of breath taking, breathing in, inspiration, being fed by the words of a small child who simply said to the people of East and West Germany as I repeated those words to the same response—there are Americans who really care about us, who know what we are experiencing, who share our pain at the wall between East and West. We were no longer strangers but friends, even family.

It's much more than a way to travel. It's pastoral calling, dialogue, challenging one another, praying, and learning. I believe that the UCC/EKU partnership is part of what enabled the ECU in East Germany to host those challenging the Communist system. What is different about the people in the churches whom we met and most other East Germans is that they are still in East Germany, working on reform. Most just saw on TV all the goodies those in the West had, and they wanted them. Most were ready to change the theoretical mammon of atheist ideology for the practical mammon of capitalist material goods. But that was not what was behind the actions and commitment of those who put their lives on the line to gather and challenge the corrupt system and to call for changes. They did not, however, call for a rapid unification. Their vision was to change their system, not have their election taken over by the wealthy political parties of the West.

These were the people we met and exchanged

hope with. These were the people who were amazed that our group of youth in 1988 had gone to such efforts to raise funds to come visit and learn about them, because they could not have afforded to go otherwise. One was inspired to ask: "If you could do that, what can we do."

One woman in Halle, East Germany, as we were saying farewell after a few days of visit and intensive sharing, said, "You are angels. God sent you!" What! What did we do? But coming together, getting acquainted, exchanging experiences and ideas and faith stories, we were mutually fed.

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Bonds of partnership call Christians to mutual responsibility in all facets of their lives together as children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ. I believe the partnership we have had with churches in East and West Germany was part of what enabled the people there to protest—giving them hope, and a trust that they were not forgotten or alone. That basic human contact enables us to live with a global vision at a local level and local vision at a global level in a new era of mission and ministry.

There is a spiritual need for Christian companionship across miles and oceans. Often, even within the context of our own local and regional churches, we can feel we are living out our faith alone. Usually, we think of mission as providing for the physical and spiritual needs of people, especially as bringing someone new into relationship with God. Yet where Christianity has firm roots among the people, we also have a mission of encour-

agement and compassion, of renewing hope and of expressing our unity in Christ. Encountering Christians living out their faith, both as their systems will allow them and as they will allow themselves to live it out, we enable one another to transcend political, social, and economic pressures by having another source of information than the mass media—an interpersonal one. We can mutually enrich each other to start and continue to take small steps that will make a difference in expressing Christ's presence in the world.

There is nothing in the development of Global Partnerships that says it must only be with certain churches and countries. The UCC has a German Church, and a partnership. We can have a partnership with our Samoan churches in our Conference and Region. It would be responsible to do so—as means of fostering closer ties here, learning about language and culture, and learning about the unique avenues for living Christian faith in the Samoan Islands.