

Global Friendships:

ADVICE FOR LONG-TERM DIRECT RELATIONSHIP WITH GLOBAL PARTNERS

INTRODUCTION

Your congregation has decided that, in addition to giving to the Mission and Service Fund, you want to be involved directly in relationship with an overseas partner church or organization. You are not alone! Many congregations and United Church communities feel exactly the same way. The United Church of Canada offers many programs that provide the opportunity for direct relationship. The first step is to check out programs on the website at www.united-church.ca, (Get Involved, Connect Globally) to see if one of those programs is the place for your community to start.

United Church history tells us that lived experience is a powerful transformational tool. As a justice seeking church the UCC works to transform individual lives, communities, institutions and the society(ies) in which we live to reflect other ways of living that address the roots of injustice.

Learn more about current thinking on best practices so that your community can build life-giving, mutual relationships with global partners.

WHERE AND HOW TO BEGIN

“Follow your passion!”

Often congregations discover a passion for a particular issue or region of the world. This can result from the visit of a global partner or a connection between a member or members of a congregation with a particular place.

In the 1980s many United Church people became committed to partners in Central America as those peoples struggled to survive civil wars and resettlement of refugees. Those relationships, rooted in communities in the Maritimes, have grown and flourished. The beginning of that story can be found in *“Weaving Relationships: Canada-Guatemala Solidarity”* by Kathryn Anderson, a rich resource for congregations or other groups wanting to establish a deep and meaningful relationship with a global partner.

In the 1990s a refugee from El Salvador walked into Emmanuel United Church in Ottawa because his congregation back home in San Salvador had also been called Emmanuel. He wondered if there was a connection. That ongoing connection has enriched the ministry of Emmanuel United.

What is your congregation’s passion? Follow your heart! What are the issues you are called to reflect and act on here in Canada? Discover which global partners are working on similar issues in their context. A mutual commitment to a specific justice issue is a perfect starting place.

“Have a clear goal for the relationship.”

Spend time exploring why your community is interested in a global relationship. Consider it in the context of the mission and mandate of your congregation or community. There are some helpful ways to begin that conversation in the Twinning manual, available through the General Council Office. . (Contact pip@united-church.ca).

“Perfect the art of empathetic listening”

As you enter into this new relationship listen a lot, speak little, offer no solutions or suggestions. One of the most powerful experiences in direct relationship usually involves hearing the stories partners have to tell. These stories can be intense descriptions of experiences of great injustice, danger and pain. They often illustrate particular justice issues faced by the partner in their context.

By listening deeply and patiently the possibility grows that within the relationship each partner will discover much to learn from the other.

“Wait to be asked”

The gripping stories you will hear may move you to respond immediately. Talk with global partners first to find out what kind of response they are asking for. Their experience and knowledge of the context will lead to a response that allows local communities to make their own decisions about solutions to problems.

“Do your homework”.

Preparation and orientation are important. While you always want to learn about the context your partner lives in from their point of view, it is also important to have some basic understanding at the out-set. Connect with staff at the Justice, Global and Ecumenical Relations Unit at the General Council Offices for advice about where to look for information about the partner and the context of their life and work. Staff may be able to recommend solidarity groups in your area, reading material or special guests who can help with your educational process.

“Think about ways to connect”.

There will be a number of ways to connect with a global partner – as well as a number of challenges! Connections should deepen the ongoing relationship. That happens best when time is spent experiencing and understanding each other’s reality in the midst of work, commitments and struggles

Language may be a critical challenge. Consider learning the language of the partner, or look within local communities to find out if there is expertise you haven’t been aware of! You can make learning a language together a rich part of the life of your congregation or community. It may also provide a connection with local new Canadians living around you. Learning to sing hymns in your partner’s language can also connect the whole congregation to the relationship.

Consider hosting a global partner. An opportunity for partners to live, work and worship within the Canadian context can be an excellent introduction to the relationship. In the process of preparing to receive a global partner you may learn some important lessons about yourselves as hosts and potential partners.

Consider a mission exposure trip. This kind of trip can be a great way to deepen an existing relationship. There are a number of resources available that will help you plan and prepare for the trip so that it conforms to best practices.

“Stay Connected!”

Email is great, but it’s not enough. Letters, phone calls, cards and pictures can all be important ways to maintain a relationship. A joint bible study, joint worship, a common hymn, a virtual “church picnic”, or an exchange of greetings on important occasions may be things you want to consider. Video-conferencing or conference phone calls may be possible. Making a DVD, a posting on You Tube or sharing a Facebook site may be other ways to share your lives (if there is infrastructure on the other end!) Be creative and then share your ideas These are all ways to start conversations and share memories.

Be sensitive and realistic in your expectations of the global partner. Traditions, capacity and infrastructure may be very different in the partner’s context. The ability to connect may be one of the strengths that your congregation brings to the relationship...

Keeping your partner visible in the life of the congregation includes prayer. Upholding that community in prayer reminds your congregation of the bond that is part of the body of Christ in all times and places. Pray for the partner regularly in private and public worship. It benefits your partner and it benefits you.

“Keep coming back.”

If a long-term relationship is what your congregation or community has in mind, then plan to keep bringing partners to you, and to keep returning to them. Working with the partner set a reasonable plan designed to broaden and deepen the relationship.

“Involve Lots of People!”

Strengthening the relationship happens by involving more and more people in it. If only the first group stays connected to the partners then, as those individuals experience changes in life circumstances, interest or energy, the relationship becomes vulnerable. By constantly adding new folks to the relationship you also provide the possibilities for new ideas and new realities to emerge.

“Be inclusive!”

Look around your faith community and ask: Who among us cannot easily become involved in this relationship? And then figure out how to include everyone. Pay attention especially to the economically and socially marginalized in your community. Make sure that if you send a delegation to visit your partners it isn't just for those who can “afford” it economically. In the end, you can't afford to exclude the marginalized in your own context, they may have valuable insights that will also strengthen the relationship.

“Keep asking questions about how the relationship should continue.”

A relationship isn't written in stone but is continually evolving. Part of the success of long-term relationships is that they adjust to the changes over time in both communities. New projects and involvements evolve. Those changes need to be discovered together in conversation with your partner. Build in regular evaluation processes and be alert to changes in your context and in theirs.

“Share yourself rather than your stuff.”

Unless your partner specifically asks for particular items to be sent to their community don't assume used clothes or hymn books will necessarily be useful to them. An assumption that we have what they need is false and an unhelpful place to begin a relationship. Later on, as the relationship deepens, the global partner may feel a request can be made if there really is something needed. In most cases it is possible to buy items locally, avoiding the negative impact on local markets when clothes and supplies are imported.

“Work at various levels: personal, institutional, structural.”

Especially when working with existing United Church partners it is important to reinforce connections with your presbytery, Conference and General Council Office. Such connections will enrich the relationship. You may also find civil society groups or NGOs locally who want to become involved in your partnership.

SOME CAUTIONARY NOTES

“Don't begin and end with Money!”

This is one of the most difficult pieces of advice to follow. When we see need, we want to fix it. But if it is truly a relationship of mutuality it cannot start by one partner exercising the power of money. Sharing financial resources comes best **after** a relationship is underway.

Beginning and ending a relationship with money can and often does simply repeat old and unhealthy patterns global partners from the Global South have previously experienced in relationship with churches from the Global North. It can set up the dynamic of giver-recipient. It makes mutuality more difficult to achieve. And because it is instantly gratifying it becomes too easy to focus an entire relationship on sharing financial resources.

Imagine if your personal relationships were only about sharing money. Chances are you would find them wanting! The same thing is true of a relationship with global partners.

“Don't build anything but relationships.”

Building things makes us feel like we're **doing** something good, contributing to the relationship. The global partner may not feel the same way but may also not feel able to tell you so. Our solutions to a communities' issues may not always be appropriate. When visitors are doing the building it does not encourage ownership of the project which is necessary for sustainability. Nor does it help build local skills and may even demoralize and disempower local people.

The best place to begin building is with the relationship. Any relationship requires that the people involved get to know each other. As you get to know each other you may begin to see the dynamics and the needs of the community in a different way. When your partner begins to share the real stories of life in that community a very different picture almost always develops! At some point your partner and your congregation, in the context of relationship, may identify a real need in one or both of the communities that you can meet for each other. Relationship is about **being** together, working together rather than "for" each other.

"Be open - Don't come with an agenda."

"We want to roof a building, give us a partner who wants a roof!" If you decide ahead of time what needs to be the central focus of your relationship then you are not giving the global partner a chance to have an equal say in the relationship. Agendas, by nature, are something that a group develops together. Each participant has an opportunity to suggest what belongs on the agenda from their point of view. An authentic desire to learn and grow is a great starting place.

"Don't make promises you can't keep."

Many partners hear promises from folks who visit on short-term mission trips or education and exposure visits. Often those promises are not kept. Even a promise as simple as committing to send photos can go unfulfilled. Commit to building the relationship together, and be clear in what you can and can't do.

CHALLENGES

"Patience!"

"But I sent them an email yesterday and I still haven't heard back!" It can be very challenging to understand the situation of partners often means that communication is not as easy as it is for you. Rolling black-outs, the need to access a cyber-café (and have the funds for that purpose!), shared computers and dial-up access are some of the factors that affect partners' ability to respond in what you may consider a prompt manner. Sometimes officials travel and other staff members are not empowered to answer their email. Sometimes language and translation services are required. You cannot assume that your partner's communication protocols are the same or even similar to your own.

Have patience not only with communication lags but with the pace of how the relationship develops. There is no one way for a relationship to unfold. Keep looking for the doors that are opening.

"Integrating Responsibility vs. Paralyzing Guilt"

We are quick to tell ourselves and others not to feel guilty about the freedom, security and prosperity we enjoy in Canada. But a feeling of guilt can also be a signal that something is not right and needs to be attended to. There are reasons that we have more than enough resources in our context and that in partners' contexts there is a lack of resources. Our abundance is, in part, the source of their scarcity. Coming to understand our own place in the system of global economics that is sometimes literally killing our partners is perhaps the most significant learning that we can achieve. Deciding to live in a different manner is the most responsible action that grows out of learning. Taking responsibility is the appropriate response to guilt. Long-term relationships allow us to meet the challenge of what can sometimes seem like a paralyzing situation vis-à-vis our ability to make an impact. Together with our partners we learn how to live in a way that allows all life to thrive on our mother earth.

“Resource Sharing “

Once in a relationship you will undoubtedly wish to share all kinds of resources. The challenge becomes finding ways to share those resources in ways that have integrity, that honour everyone involved, that are based on mutuality and not dependency. This requires a great deal of conversation and deep listening. It requires a willingness to examine how we value financial resources in comparison to other resources such as life experience, wisdom, expertise, etc. Learning to recognize our own needs and valuing the way our partner meets those needs is also a challenge. It is easy to give lip service to our spiritual needs. It is more difficult to embrace our own experiences of poverty.

As a Canadian charity you have some legal obligations you must meet accounting for funds you spend. Any work that you do, particularly anything that involves financial resources, must be part of your registered charitable purpose. That includes relationships with global partners. Be sure to read The Proposed Guidance for Canadian Charities Operating Outside Canada (<http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/tx/chrts/plcy/cnslttns/ccrc-eng.html>) before you consider sending funds outside the country. A summary of obligations may also be found at the following link. (<http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/tx/chrts/ntrntnl-eng.html>)

“How can we be a voice for our partners without pretending to speak for them?”

As we hear stories of our partners and feel called to witness to those stories and share them with a wider audience, we face the challenge of speaking *about* our partners without speaking *for* them. We need to ensure we use their words when possible—that we are not offering our interpretation as if it was theirs. We are called to witness to their reality and speak about our experiences and feelings in the face of that reality. We are not called to decide what partners need or want within that reality based on our experience, but rather to listen to what they say is needed or wanted in terms of advocacy and support. It is a subtle difference and a challenge especially in the early days of the relationship.

“How can we find ways of expressing what we have learned and received from partners?”

It is easy to fall into expressions of general gratitude because it can be overwhelming to articulate the many ways that we receive from partners. Our learning often has a deep emotional impact which can be difficult to verbalize. Practicing the art of being specific about the learnings and gifts received from partners not only helps the congregation recognize those learnings but also helps the partner understand exactly how their contributions to the partnership are experienced by us. It is challenging to us to move behind the feelings and identify the deep desire and need that is being met by the partner in and through the relationship.

OPPORTUNITIES

“Making sense of our own reality”

Participants in long term relationship with global partners speak of having felt a deep need to make a North-South connection in order to make sense of their own experiences. They have described the impact on them “(the relationship) enables us to continue our work in Canada when we are connected to others engaged in the same work in their own contexts. We are part of something bigger than ourselves. We are able to see things more clearly here after having been away.”

“Seeing Scripture and experiencing faith through other eyes. “

Sometimes, unknowingly, we have learned to read scriptures only through the lens of our own experience. Learning from, and worshipping with, people from another culture and totally different life and faith experience can alter forever the way we read scriptures, opening up many new possibilities. Participants in long term relationship describe the experience.

“Scriptures started to jump off the page. Realizing that the majority world lives that way! Seeing the way scripture has been rendered without social justice implications here. It was a very powerful sense of the experiences being literal: the oppression, the militarism, the violence that the scriptures are about. The scriptures, all of them, are a story of liberation...those who have

been oppressed and impoverished. Jesus situated himself with a very specific group – those who were out!”

Witnessing the way our partners speak and express their faith and their hope can also give us confidence to speak about our own faith.

“An Engaged Spirituality”

We can gain new insight into our own spirituality when we witness the spirituality of others. Those engaged in relationship with global partners often observe how the global partner’s spirituality is deeply engaged in responding to the concrete realities of very challenging circumstances. This witness can cause us to begin a process of questioning how our own lives reflect the commitments of faith in very concrete terms. How are we resisting evil, living love and seeking justice? This new insight can lead to deeper engagement in our own context and a heightened awareness of the very practical nature of spirituality.

“Transformation”

How many times have you heard someone declare that an overseas experience “transformed their life!” A few months later the transformed life looks pretty much the way it did before. Transformation of life, values, commitments, and lifestyle is a slow task that takes more work than the first blush of global relationship. It requires honestly facing the privilege and the power that we enjoy. It means patiently pursuing small changes in our own lifestyle and commitments of time, energy and money. It means disciplining ourselves to a way of life that puts the needs of a wider community on a par with our own.

Current scholarship on global relationships tells us that as important as preparation is, integration is even more important. If you truly want your global relationship to transform your lives in Canada then consistent reflection and follow-up action are key. Just as falling in love with a life partner or a newborn child affects our lives forever, falling in love with the people of another reality changes our lives forever. In order to live out those new commitments we need the support of a community that understands and also accepts those new commitments. Transformation happens to individuals, but it is supported and nurtured in community. Make sure to build in on-going reflection and work as a community both in Canada and in the context of your beloved partner.

Opportunity, challenge and a rewarding relationship. What more could you ask for! To learn about programs that help congregations and United Church communities connect with global partners look on the web site (www.united-church.ca) (Get Involved, Connect Globally).