

Multiple partners is not unfaithfulness

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Did that title get your attention? Forgive my casual language: In my day job, I'm an AIDS researcher. Clearly, in the realm of disease transmission having more than one partner is not only being unfaithful, it is dangerous. But even though the word "partner" is used in the context of AIDS and church relationships, the similarities end there. A church partnership is not a marriage. It is more similar to a friendship. While having more than one spouse is fraught with trouble – be it legal or relational – having more than one friend is desirable.

Here is how having more than one church partnership is helpful.

One of the challenges in a cross-cultural relationship is knowing whether differences you encounter are based in context, and thus reflecting resources and opportunities; culture, reflecting a people; or in personality, reflecting a person. In the case of my church, The Chapel Hill Bible Church, we have had a relationship with Nairobi Chapel and its offspring for about 20 years. It started when Oscar Muriu, the senior pastor, first began pastoring Nairobi Chapel. The Chapel has since grown into a church larger than ours (we have about 800 people attending on a Sunday) with a vision to plant hundreds of churches throughout Africa and the rest of the world. To what degrees do their growth and vision reflect their context, the Kenyan culture, and the personality of Oscar? (The Bible Church currently relates most closely to Mavuno Downtown, one of the Chapel's off-shoots, but I'll continue talking here about the Chapel.)

The context of Nairobi Chapel is a country with a strong business climate and culture. I have come to see this through the work of my organization, Africa Rising (www.africarising.org) which works with African organizations in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. Kenya is strikingly different from either of its East African neighbors. The business culture of Kenya is giving rise to a fast-growing middle class, which is the demographic target of the Chapel. One huge asset of a church of middle-to-upper class people is their resources for bricks, mortar and staff. They are also responsive to a mission of enlarging the market.

The culture of Kenya is one that values status and hierarchy more than Western culture does. The technical way of putting it is that Kenya has a higher "power distance" than does, say, America. Generally, a Kenyan pastor receives more deference from his congregation than does an American pastor. For this reason, a Kenyan pastor is likely to be more directive and his church less democratic than many American churches. In a healthy church, such as Nairobi Chapel, direction from the top can lead to laser-like focus and great efficiencies.

Oscar Muriu's personality fits hand-in-glove with his context and culture. He is well educated, market-savvy, decisive, affable, and energetic. And let's not forget deeply spiritual. He has found and mentored others who share his outlook and many of his skills. As an exceptionally effective mentor, he has realized much of his church-planting vision by placing like minded people in the new churches.

Is this the picture of the African church? Should the Bible Church see the characteristics of Nairobi Chapel as characteristics of Africa or Kenya? Or are they lessons that won't translate well to a country with a shrinking middle class and a low power distance culture?

I don't have complete answers to those questions, but I have partial insights through another church relationship. For about eight years, the Bible Church has also been in relationship with Powerhouse Church of Mamelodi, South Africa. Mamelodi was a township of Pretoria during the days of apartheid. Townships were where the black South Africans were confined. After the end of apartheid, the residents didn't suddenly get rich and move out, so the townships remain very poor communities. Generally, southern Africa has rates of AIDS about twice as high as those in East

Africa. In poor communities, such as Mamelodi, the rates are even higher. Vincent Nyathi, the senior pastor of Powerhouse, does much of his preaching at funerals.

On a day I spent with Vincent, we drove around Mamelodi, visiting his congregation (He says half of his congregation comes to church on Sunday; the other half just lives in this community). We visited people he had prayed for a few days ago to see how they are now doing. People stopped him in his car to ask for prayer. And he delivered blankets to the poorest families because the weather had turned unusually cold. Vincent's dreams for growth are for a larger vocational training program to provide jobs in a community where more than half are unemployed.

The context: poverty and AIDS. The culture: also a high power distance. The personality: a heart for the poor and suffering.

These are both strong churches run by exceptional men. In knowing both of them, I am able to see each of them more clearly. And I am able to see what would translate to my church and what might not. The Bible church's context is a highly educated university town. Some of Nairobi Chapel's market-like ambition and efficiency could work here. However, our culture is academic, and thus ? at least here - a rock bottom power distance. One had better not lead in a directive way. Yet we also have a heart for the poor and could learn much from Vincent's Christ-like service.

By having more than one partnership, we learn more from each of them. There is a limit, though, to the number of partnerships that can be given the attention each deserves. We have one more, with an inner city church nearby. That feels like a good number for us. Lessons from the three offer us plenty to work on and plenty to enjoy.