

# My mistakes

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Date: 29.07.2010

Category: Partnership

Transparency is one of the ways in which cultures differ. In some cultures, especially those that aim to preserve 'face' or honor, mistakes are concealed. But I come from a 'confessional' culture in which people readily share their shortcomings. One of the values of confession is that we often learn more from others' mistakes than we do from their successes. In that spirit, I am going to share with you stories of two church relationships my church pursued that didn't succeed. I refer to them as 'my' mistakes because they occurred when forming partnerships was my area of responsibility in the church. Others contributed to these mistakes or failures, but I take the ultimate responsibility.

## Church #1

We wanted to develop a relationship with an African American church in our own community. My church draws people from two neighboring cities: Chapel Hill and Durham. Compared to Chapel Hill, Durham is larger and has a larger proportion of African Americans and poverty. We had identified a section of Durham - the most troubled one - to which we would dedicate ourselves. We then began looking for a church to partner with in being a blessing to that neighborhood.

We found a vibrant church of about 150 people that was receptive to developing a relationship with us. Our key contact was their youth minister. A few of us began attending their church periodically, and we invited the minister and the youth on a number of our youth retreats. We enjoyed our times together. After a couple of years, however, we realized that staying in touch was a struggle. Our calls and emails to them were seldom returned. This had always been the case with this church, but we figured it would change as we got to know each other better. We also noticed that they never initiated contact with us. We were always the pursuer, never the pursued.

After a few years with the relationship never reaching a higher level of mutuality, I decided to test the relationship by going quiet for a while - by not pursuing them. A month went by and there was no contact from the other church. Two months went by, then four months; still nothing. In fact, now several years later, they have never contacted us. We felt that a mature relationship was possible only if both churches were actively engaged. We found ourselves in a one-way relationship that had become more draining than energizing. As I mentioned in another blog, church partnerships are not like a marriage. Allowing a relationship to end is not a divorce. In this case we felt instead that the relationship had never really taken hold and did not show promise of becoming something more. We let it go.

Within another year, we had developed a relationship with another church in the same neighborhood. Our experience with that church has been strikingly different. They do pursue us, and we have partnered them in joint ministries to be a blessing to the neighborhood.

## Church #2

The second story takes place in Brazil. Our church had found a natural connection with a seminary in Brazil that was in relationship with Duke Divinity School in Durham. Although we found the relationship with the Brazilian seminary to be rewarding, a church-to-institution relationship is different from one between two churches. We wanted to find a church to be in relationship with that was in the same community as the Brazilian seminary.

I asked a Brazilian elder of our church to be the chief liaison for our Brazilian partnership. He was excited about the role and the possibilities. However, Brazil is a huge country and he was from a region very far from the one in which we were developing relationships. He visited the seminary and a few neighboring churches with me in southern Brazil, but felt that our chances of developing a

church relationship were best with his former church in the north. I was not enthusiastic about this idea because, being so far away from our other activities, a relationship with his church represented a whole new partnership effort. Visiting there would require additional plane trips within Brazil or separate trips altogether from the US.

Another concern I had was that the relationship would be overly dependent on one person ? him. We did not have a multi-person connection with that church as we did with the seminary. I built into all of my ministry efforts ? including, or especially, our partnerships ? a plan of succession. I did not want a ministry or partnership to falter because of one person moving away.

Another of my ministry principles, however, is to truly trust those in whom I have entrusted leadership. That means giving them the benefit of the doubt when they have strong and persistent notions about their area of ministry. I gave the approval for an exploratory visit to the church in northern Brazil. I did not go myself because I wanted to broaden the relationship to include another of our pastors and another lay leader. Those two and the Brazilian lay leader returned with enthusiasm for the possibilities. But there was an important detail in their report that gave me pause. A number of the Brazilian senior staff liked the idea of the relationship we were describing, but they couldn't envision it happening. Their only experiences had been with an American mega-church pushing a brand of church on them, and with serving as a host for American church ?mission trips.? In both cases, they felt used and their own contributions or perspectives under-appreciated. In contrast, we were describing a relationship in which we would exchange leaders for months at a time and seek to learn from each other.

We did have visits in both directions, but the longer term staff exchanges we had hoped for never materialized. Perhaps because their staff could not imagine the mutual learning relationship we were seeking; perhaps because the Brazilian church was itself a mega-church with a momentum that wasn't in the direction of partnerships; our relationship never developed beyond polite and enjoyable visits.

Then, what I feared would happen, actually came to pass. For a variety of reasons and over several years of time, all three of the people who initially visited the Brazilian church eventually left our church. Moreover, the people at the Brazilian church who most understood the nature of the relationship we were seeking left that church. We had lost our most promising connections on both ends. There is no vital relationship between us now and, perhaps most telling, no discernible sense of loss.

## Lessons

From these two experiences of relationships that did not take root, we have discerned a few lessons. (1) A mutual learning relationship cannot be imposed by one partner: it must be a shared desire. (2) Some churches or church leaders cannot envision a mutual learning relationship. They may have been burned by one-sided relationships, or they may not be able to envision learning from another church. Both of these are failures of imagination that preempt a true partnership. (3) To survive changes in leadership, a relationship needs to involve several people on each side. And there needs to be a constant effort to bring more people into the relationship. One role of the liaisons is to create more liaisons. (4) Friendship between two leaders of two churches is not the same as a church partnership. The latter is more institutional and involves more people in more relationships.

There is more to these stories, and this is not all that we learned. Still, from your experience with cross-cultural church partnerships, you may have insights into these stories that I haven't mentioned here. Or you may have questions about the situations I've described. I welcome your insights and questions. And if you care to be transparent or ?confessional,? I would also welcome hearing about your mistakes.