

# Cooperation in the Body of Christ: Towards a New Equilibrium

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Editor's Note: This Cape Town 2010 Advance Paper has been written by David D. Ruiz M. as an overview of the topic to be discussed at the Morning Plenary session on 'Partnering in the Body of Christ toward a New Global Equilibrium.' Responses to this paper through the Lausanne Global Conversation will be fed back to the authors and others to help shape their final presentations at the Congress.

'Equilibrium' is a difficult term to use and declare in these times. The inequalities of our world have graphically depicted the profound differences in all levels of society. These have transformed us, organizing us as rich or poor nations, developed or undeveloped, as modern or backward communities, as the first world and the third world. Even the effectiveness of the Gospel has divided us. While some churches waste huge sums on Pharaonic buildings (whether in the Global North or South), others are unable even to pay a salary worthy of a pastor or support their missionaries with dignity.

We actually have to ask ourselves whether this term, 'equilibrium' represents what we have in mind when we speak of global cooperation in God's mission. But we have been given the term, and I must work it.

Is it possible to correct the global lack of equilibrium?

When we examine the Biblical text, we become aware that inequality is a recurring theme, a fateful legacy of the fall of man that, lamentably, will follow us until the end of time. Jesus Christ himself said 'For the poor you always have with you' (John 12:8). When our Lord returns in glory he will ask questions to the nations about this issue (Matthew 25:34-40). In the parable of the wheat and tares he demonstrates how we must coexist (even in the church) with the children of evil, and that will multiply our inequalities (Matthew 13). It will only be in the moment when we see descending God's heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, the equitable city, that this situation will truly change. As we read in Revelation 21, this city's dimensions are equal (21:16), as are the ways to enter it, with three doors for each one of the four cardinal points (21:13). In her we will not find both light and shade, only light (21:23); all have the same relationship with God. He is God of this city, and all there are his children in conditions of equality (21:7).

Causes for pain and opportunity. The absence of equilibrium in the world should be for the church a constant cause of pain, but at the same time, a constant opportunity. The poor give us an opportunity for the church to abound in good works and be blessed by so doing (2 Corinthians 9:8-10). Underdevelopment and its problems help us to demonstrate compassion and to exercise the power that God gives us to heal all illness, and to obey his mandate to establish his kingdom with compassion and love (Matthew 10:7-8, 25:45). Above all, this is a great opportunity to proclaim the Gospel.

A model of equilibrium. The church of Jesus Christ is the closest to equilibrium that the world will ever experience. Her origins show it in the book of Acts (2:41-47, 4:32-35). In times like the ones we live in, Scripture demonstrates that the church has the potential to become the bridge that both connects and reduces the gap between those who suffer as a result of this unbalanced condition, this world of inequity. In this way, the church provides for people a fountain of hope as it shares methods for subsistence, but also, the supernatural means that provide both physical and spiritual health (5:12-16).

However, the prime contribution the church can provide is the future hope that the Gospel of Jesus offers them. In these passages of Acts we see how poor and rich, academics and beggars, as well

as people from different backgrounds and ethnicities were able to challenge inequality. This establishes that in the Gospel of Jesus Christ there is always hope for all, and that their economic or social status, or their ethnic or cultural background does not matter. It is possible for the church to challenge global inequality, and to cooperate in so doing.

Unfortunately, it does not take long for the book of Acts to register the divisions in the church of Christ. In 6:1 we find the church in tension related to how they would distribute food, especially to widows from different ethnicities. The apostles deal with the issue rapidly and with conciliation, and come up with an agreement favorable to the entire church. They, in turn, would dedicate themselves to the preaching of the word while the church found a group of men with the necessary characteristics to fulfill the service responsibility. From that moment on, the apostles discerned that it would require constant effort and dedication on their part to maintain the unity of the churches. In that manner the church would continue being the example closest to equilibrium-equality for the world, and it would be effective to offer answers and assistance for the diverse consequences of the terrible global injustice of the first century.

### The division in the church

The churches of Christ confront and have confronted the challenges of maintaining unity. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians testifies to this reality; it is a letter for a divided church. From the start we can see that this letter was written due to the reports of struggles between believers (1:11) and to respond to questions regarding the realities that provoked those divisions.

The church of Corinth presents a catalogue of the different kinds of divisions that appear in the church of Christ. For example: 'divisions' (schisma = tears, cracks)(1) in 1:10, 12:25; 'to divide, tear or shred' (2) indicates that one is separated from the others in thought and mind. We also see 'quarreling' (erides = unbecoming fights) (3) in 1:11 where each one belongs to a different clique. We continue the list with 'jealousy' (zelos = to boil) (4) in 3:3, as the bitterness coming from unjust treatment (compared to others). Finally, we find 'lawsuits' (krimata = fightings) in 6:7, which are the legal battles between Christian brothers.

We might like to say that divisions in churches and Christian organizations come because of the unbelievers who take part within these bodies, but we must recognize that divisions in the church prove our own lack of maturity. Differences and divisions prove that we are of the flesh (3:3; 11:19). Divisions are proof of a self-centered attitude; instead of serving others, we prefer to serve ourselves (10:24). To sustain the attitude that others are more important than we are is not natural, and we have to battle and work hard to keep the unity of the Spirit (Eph 4:3).

Even when we understand that the global imbalance cannot be completely corrected, is it not possible for the Church to challenge it? Is it possible for us to present models that reduce extreme contrasts? What role has mission cooperation played in this process?

### The appearance of COMIBAM

The Ibero-American mission (5) movement known as COMIBAM (Cooperación Misionera Iberoamericana; Cooperation of Missions in Ibero-America) represents an example of possible cooperation, that churches can work together. And when this is achieved, their contribution has unlimited consequences. Only that way can we explain the existence of this regional network that convenes 25 nations, more than 400 missionary agencies and missionary training centres and a countless number of local churches throughout this region.

In 1984 plans were launched for the Ibero-American Mission Congress (COMIBAM) that was held in Brazil in 1987 with the presence of more than 3,100 delegates representing all the countries of Latin America. While the first congress was sponsored by CONELA (the then-regional body related to World Evangelical Alliance), the mission movement captured its own identity, ending with a broader representation than even CONELA had at the time.(6) From that moment, COMIBAM worked

tirelessly to promote the emergence of an active mission movement within the region.

A second congress was convened in Mexico in 1997 to carry out an evaluation and projection of the Ibero-American mission movement, an approach based on the missionary process itself. The Mexico congress transformed the movement, a process of 'Ibero-Americanization' was instituted, and plans were established to regionalize Ibero-America, thus allowing the development of the potential of national mission movements. A new administrative model was created. A healthy leadership transition was established to strengthen COMIBAM with its national base movements.

The third congress was convened in Granada, Spain, in 2006. That congress demonstrated that the Ibero-American mission movement was greater than we imagined, and its impact much more meaningful than what might have even been dreamed of. The active and decisive presence of more than 280 Latin field missionaries serving in more than 60 nations allowed us to come to a much clearer understanding of the reality of our missionaries. Above all, we recognized with humility that the spirit of sacrifice was the best motor to empower our Latin mission force, even in the midst of deficient finances, mission structures and member care by the sending churches.

COMIBAM's contribution through its years

Missiological reflection: From 1984 COMIBAM has generated a dynamic that favoured Ibero-American missiological reflection. It has stimulated the development of a growing generation of missionaries, missiologists and students of missiology in ever-increasing numbers. The written contributions are now a legacy to help us understand the new Latin and global mission world.

The centrality of the local church: Another significant contribution comes from the number of local churches involved in the missionary process. They number in the thousands and represent the majority of the Latin American Evangelical theological streams. The churches contribute, according to the Spain congress, with more than US4 million per month to sustain the Latin mission force.

A mission force: Another notable result has been the sustained growth, over 15% per year, of the number of Latin American missionaries, now over 12,000. They serve in church planting within the most needy and least evangelized people groups in more than 60 nations. (7) COMIBAM is now an historical landmark in relation to the process of connecting missiological reflection to the reality of the Ibero-American church.

A paradigmatic change: Perhaps one of the most significant roles that COMIBAM has played has been to shorten the gap between the older, traditional sending nations and the newer sending ones. It has done this in a variety of ways. First, it has connected Ibero-American missiology with that activity being done globally, thus winning the right to sit in equal conditions in the best known dialogue tables of the Evangelical world. Secondly, it has sustained a serious and intentional attempt to recognize the mission force from the local church, allowing this voice to be respected and listened to with attention.

Third, it has worked hard to maintain a two-way road that facilitates the contribution and learning of mission themes with mission movements of other areas of the world. What's more, COMIBAM has participated actively in the missiological dialogue with other emerging mission forces of the Global South. Together they have created a meeting space for reflection on the themes of church, mission movements and missiological growth in the majority world. Lastly, COMIBAM has played a protagonist's role in the development of mission cooperation, as well as the development of strategic alliances between emerging mission forces that has catapulted missionary exchange and missiological reflection between them.

We feel certain that COMIBAM's role in the last 15 years has been a significant element to bridge the gap between the Western mission forces with the rest of the world. It has helped to correct the imbalance between emerging mission forces of the Global South and North. Above all, it has created a conscience of the mission community within the global church that affirms the fact that the Church

in the world is one, and that God can use her with power, regardless of where she may come from.

### Difficult lessons regarding unity

As a result of this short but fruitful experience, we can say that cooperation offers an alternative for a better life, but it is costly. There is a high price to pay for cooperation. Those who have participated in the COMIBAM process can confirm this reality. And as we return to I Corinthians, Paul continues teaching us. But now, they are the difficult lessons regarding unity that must be presented to the church that battles to stay united.

The cost of unity. On the one hand, unity is evidence of an ascending road towards spiritual maturity. As such, each step is costly, and each movement forward is painful and reminds us constantly of the question, "Are you willing to pay the price for unity?" In I Corinthians 4:6-13 we encounter the three correct attitudes to reach and maintain unity.

Humility (I Corinthians 4:7) is the first of them. Paul gives us three key questions that help us maintain humility in any relationships. What makes you stand out? What do you have that you have not received? And if you received it, why do you glory in yourself as you were one who had not received it? In Paul's supreme example of cooperation between the Father and the Son as presented in Philippians 2:5-11, humility is the most important characteristic.

The second is to "be ready for humiliation" (4:9-10). Paul uses two words, "exhibited" and "spectacle." These two terms were used for those who marched as slaves condemned to death in the procession towards the arena where they would die. They describe those who are seeking to work for and find unity, for they must be willing to be humiliated in the process. To those who caused the divisions, Paul challenges, "Would it not be better to endure injustice? Would it not be better to allow ourselves to be defrauded?" (6:7). Paul then shares three examples of humiliation taken from his own experience. To be cast aside after having given good service, after having acquired what was expected of him (4:8). To be the last when you should be the first (4:9). This is a sad scenario for one who has been their spiritual father (4:15) and who is considered as one facing the death sentence. To be ignored, even when you have an opinion or position about what's happening to you (4:10). Those who learned from him, to whom he opened the doors to find the road to triumph, now considered him ignorant, weak and scorned.

The third cost of unity is to "be willing to be treated without any respect" (4:11-13). In the goal of maintaining unity, we must be willing to be treated, in Paul's words, as worthless ashes, like "the scum of the world, the refuse of all things." (8) Again he gives us three examples. Not receiving from them the recognition he deserved in the eyes of God (4:11). Not receiving respectful treatment, in spite of his hard work that gave such good results (4:12). Not receiving the status that he merited and had acquired (4:13). Saint Chrysostom said in reference to this passage: "He had passed through 1000 exploitations." (9)

The stimulus for unity: Paul reserves the most difficult lesson regarding unity for the end of his letter, that is, "a united group starts with me". We must work for unity as if it were a personal commitment to God, instead of wasting time trying to identify the guilty one who broke that unity; and many times we are just that one. The epilogue of this letter reminds us of three phrases (15:58). Stand firm, and let nothing move you (maturity and maintenance of unity). Always give yourselves completely to the Lord's work (commitment to the Lord in spite of people). Remember that your labor for the Lord is not in vain (trust in God's justice, which at the end of the day will give to each as we merit).

Let us work hard to maintain our unity, and above all, let us be willing to pay the cost. Only that way are we able to place on display a church that challenges inequality and reduces the gaps that it causes. Equilibrium is a mental attitude where we know that we are doing what pleases God in the search for cooperation, even when we are in a disadvantageous position.

I conclude by sharing the dreams that caused me to come to Lausanne III and to write this Advance

Paper: I dream that we will understand that more than a state of equilibrium, we need that attitude where we can all consider ourselves, finally, members of the same body, with equality of possibilities and opportunities to contribute together to world evangelization. Thus we would leave to one side suspicion, competition and pride; we would adopt an attitude of apprentices in order to take advantages of the lessons that we might learn from those whom God is using, even when they are not from our continent, nor of our theology, nor of our organization, nor of our circle of exclusive friends. I dream that instead of seeking the utopia of those who have the economic resources and willingness to pay the bills of those who have the missionaries, that we would instead hear anew the question that God posed to Moses, "What do you have in your hand?" Let us participate together in world evangelization, leaving the issue of finances as the last topic, trusting that the God who sent us will provide. I dream that as a result of this congress we will learn that the world does not need more consultations nor congresses, where after spending so much money we end only with new definitions of the terms "cooperation," "accountability," "resources," "trust" or some other new plan where we give a new name to the lost but we don't do anything concrete in order for their names to be written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Let us put an end to that colonization of ideas that attempts to impose names, slogans, programs, systems and methods, and let us be friends finally, true partners in evangelization. Let us make the Gospel available to those who do not have it, to the ends of the earth, regardless of the ultimate costs that we must pay. I dream that this congress will change our minds permanently; that we will become aware that the world that we once knew no longer exists, that these are new times; that new winds of the Lord are moving new churches for world evangelization. This congress has proven that the churches that enjoyed the Golden Era of missions are now the minority. The growing mission forces have no mission history. The effective missionaries are those who go with contextualized training, inflamed with passion, accompanied by their churches, and incarnating the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Triune God. Let us learn to respect God's clock and those to whom the Spirit has called to guide now the movement of mission.

With this I dream, and I finish.

Translated from Spanish to English by William D. Taylor, at the request of David D. Ruiz M.

© The Lausanne Movement 2010 Mare, Harold in Gaebelin, Frank E, ed, Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 10, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976) p. 193 Robertson, A. T. Imágenes verbales en el Nuevo Testamento, (Barcelona: Clie, 1989) p. 114 Ibid, p. 114 Ibid, 138 Note: Ibero-America is the geographic region that includes Latin America, the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, Brazil, the Hispanics of North America and the countries of the Iberian peninsula. For more information see Uslar Pietri, Arturo, Cuarenta Ensayos. (Caracas, Monte Avila, 1990) Nuñez C., Emilio and Taylor, William D., Crisis and Hope in Latin America, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1989) p. 168 For more information see: [http://www.comibam.org/catalogo2006/index\\_i.htm](http://www.comibam.org/catalogo2006/index_i.htm) Robertson, A. T. Imágenes verbales en el Nuevo Testamento, (Barcelona: Clie, 1989) p. 157 Edwards, Mark J., ed. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Vol. VIII, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999) p. 227