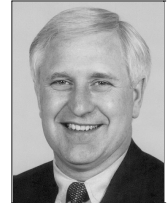


Window on the World

From Randal Dick
Superintendent of Missions



Sister Act



By Barbara Edwards

Sister church? It sounds like a good, positive Christian thing. But what is it? How do you form a sister-church relationship? Does work?

In my job as executive assistant to Randal Dick, the church's international director of missions, we have had congregations ask us how they can get started. I hope this article will stimulate ideas for those who might want to establish a sister-church relationship as well as point out pitfalls and problems that can get in the way.

What is a sister church?

A sister-church relationship is formed when one congregation seeks to partner with another, often of another country or culture, for the purpose of becoming involved in the lives of its members and its ministries. The goal is to achieve shared enrichment. That special relationship between equals is called sister-church.

Before a healthy relationship can be built, it is important to know the rules of the game.

Your congregation is usually insulated from members in other cultures (with which congregations generally form sister-church relationships) who are living out the gospel in different contexts than you are. The nightly news often frames our impression of what life is like, especially in developing countries. Civil war, displaced masses, genocide, drought, starvation and epidemics are reported, and one is overwhelmed by the complexity of the politics. Yet, our members in these places live life day by day as best as they can. Humanly, the emotions either shut down or yearn to help in some concrete way.

Then through the pages of *The Worldwide Church of God News* the plight and needs of various international churches are reported, and it is seized upon as an opportunity to do something.

Sending money may be the most obvious and easiest thing to do. But actually it

is often not the best way to help and could actually be shortchanging a far more useful relationship based on mutual love and respect. (However, this is not to say that we should not give from our abundance. Appropriate giving will be discussed later.)

Inequalities exist

How do you build a healthy relationship in a world where people are characterized as the haves and have-nots? How do you avoid building reliance into the relationship's fabric? It isn't easy! The goal is to build a relationship among spiritual equals.

In an unequal world, we can be thankful that there is equality in Christ Jesus. He died on the cross for all humanity. When a person repents of sin and receives Jesus, he or she receives redemption. Race, language, culture, wealth, prestige and social status do not determine identity or value in Christ. The cross transcends inequalities.

Paul says to the Ephesians that there is one Body (the church), of which Christ is the head. The church is the mother of us all; therefore, figuratively, believers are from the same womb.

Relationship building—where do you start?

All relationships have starting points. They take time and planning. From a strategic perspective, three components are involved in building a sister-church relationship: initiation, notification and participation.

Initiation

God has given each congregation a gift. In the initiation process, be prepared to take what is uniquely yours and to step into the sister relationship with an open heart to learn from the Holy Spirit and from one another. Form some enthusiastic and committed members into a sister-church team. Together, offer up heartfelt prayer for God's will and guidance in every detail of the commitment—asking him for the vision, goals and wisdom in determining all aspects of the relationship, including the duration of the commitment. The entire congregation should be supportive of the effort.

Make contact with the regional director (now known as mission developers) where the overseas congregation is located. (If you don't know who he is, please see the contact information at the end of the article, or send an e-mail or call us at the International Office and we will put you in touch with the right person.)

Communicate your intention to establish and develop a sister-church relationship. If a specific congregation has not been selected and recommendation is needed,

the mission developer can best direct the team based on his knowledge and experience of the region. He will give the name of the pastor or elder of the particular congregation and provide any additional information relevant to the partnership.

Notification

Next, contact the pastor of your proposed sister-church and suggest the possibility of a sister-church relationship. A description or profile of your church could be exchanged, which might include facts about the congregation—how long it has been in existence, number of members, age groups and ministries. Send along your vision and goals for the partnership, which gives the pastor and sister-church the opportunity for mutual consent, as well as to identify their needs and to share their realities.

Participation

Jesus told us that above all, we should love one another. The apostle Peter emphasizes, “Above all things, have fervent love among yourselves...” (1 Peter 4:8). A sister-church relationship provides an opportunity to bridge worlds separated by war and hatred and to walk beside those who live under difficult conditions. The heart of God loves the people made in his image. He wants us not only to help bear their burdens, but also to learn from them new ways of seeing and serving him.

Participation provides great benefits. These are not mere activities or even “good works.” This is edification. It can lead to a deeper faith for those involved and result in a broader vision of what Jesus Christ is doing.

Here are some practical suggestions to enhance the relationship:

- Pray. Pray. Pray. Prayer must undergird the relationship.
- Encourage one another.
- Encourage the pastor to involve the entire congregation by making announcements or giving regular updates and by wholeheartedly endorsing the partnership.
- Learn about the conditions in the sister-church country.
- Occasionally assign speakers to give information about the relationship during church.
- | Exchange pictures.

- Display a bulletin board with a map of the church location with pictures of individuals or groups from the congregation. Letters or e-mail messages can be posted as well.
- Learn to listen to their stories. Share life stories. This builds trust and camaraderie. It also helps prevent a congregation from becoming too insular.
- When necessary, give financially. It is important that the relationship becomes bilateral in nature, not charitable. However, it is important to note that comparatively, a U.S. church has an abundance of economic resources and should not hesitate to share in ways that glorify God.
- Exchange CDs or cassette tapes of sermons, worship music or individual messages.
- Involve the children's ministry. Children can write letters or exchange arts and crafts for special occasions.
- Send a delegate or delegates to the sister church; arrange to bring a delegate or two to the United States.
- Education in some countries such as the Philippines is inexpensive. A U.S. congregation can sponsor one student to a university annually.

A few cautions

- Do not have more than one sister-church relationship at a time.
- Do not get discouraged and discard the relationship while it is still in its infancy.
- Do not treat the partnership as a project. Projects and relationships are different. A relationship is something you build and nurture. A project is something you accomplish, admire and move on to the next. It has statistical rather than spiritual benefits.

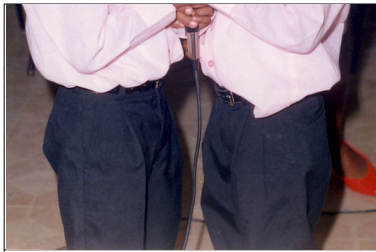
Example of existing sister churches

Pastor David Perry and the New Life Christian Fellowship churches in Indianapolis, Hope, Terre Haute and Lafayette, Indiana, have been in a four-year sister-church relationship with the Worldwide Church of God in Haiti (see photos).



Mr. Perry is in contact with Haiti's pastor, Joseph Franklin. They implement many of the suggestions listed above.

Once a year during the first or second week in November, Mr. Perry dedicates the entire church service to



persecuted churches. During the course of the day, a love offering is taken to help support a school in Haiti, which has 200 students.

In addition to equipping members, the children are Pastor Franklin's primary outreach. Time, energy and resources are diligently poured into them. The children are the future of the church and the future of Haiti. Mr. Perry's congregations help facilitate that goal. One example is that they provide shoeboxes filled with school supplies to assist in the children's education.

Endless possibilities

The possibilities are as limitless as your creativity and ability to express outgoing concern. In my travels, I have met many of our members. Many times they do not possess wealth. But spiritually, they impart much in faith, commitment and love for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God in his wisdom has made our fellowship unquestionably a worldwide church. We have an advantage. The God-ordained relationship already exists for a mutually beneficial sister act.

Mission developers

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Haitian school building is half built, yet it serves 200 children.

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