

GROWING GOD'S KINGDOM

We, God's people, are a people of diversity. Each one of us is an individual, a unique inhabitant of a globe that sustains countless lifestyles, languages, religions and cultures. In the midst of that diversity, we as His people must strive to live as the body of Christ, that it might be His instrument of change in this world.

What exactly does that mean? Consider someone who uproots their life and replants in a foreign culture; the experience is unsettling yet is often born out of a desire to grow God's kingdom. The temptation is to hit the ground running, pioneer new initiatives, hand out social aid and pour financial support into the local church (which, praise God, now exists in most places). Yet in a restricted-access country, these approaches are neither so wise nor sustainable, as you might well imagine!

The limitations of working in a restricted environment come with a silver lining. We are forced to think outside the square as we do not have the freedom to publicly declare God's love. Instead, we must recognise that we are united with the national church as the body of Christ. The question becomes: 'How can we get on board with what God is already doing here? What can we do that will equip and empower local believers to be kingdom builders?'

Although one branch of the local

church here exists above ground, the approval of the government does not exempt that community from struggles. That very stamp of approval curtails freedom and dictates how the church can interact with international workers. Official partnerships are inherently difficult, as often those who invest money and those who co-ordinate a project hold strong and differing opinions, or the church's need for financial input biases the decision-making process. Granted, there is a place for some to invest money and resources into the national church, but this often comes at a cost. In a nation with an ingrained culture of suspicion, to acquire resources without working for them fosters the scepticism and doubt of other locals, and it nurtures an expectation of favouritism and handouts amongst those who believe.

For many local believers, the very act of association with foreigners invites social exclusion and prejudice against their faith community. Take, for example, a woman known as 'Auntie'. She is a faithful believer and runs a hostel near the city where she cares for about fifteen young people, many from backgrounds of drug addiction. Her investment in these young lives is both practical and spiritual. Supporting so many is backbreaking work, yet she will not open her door to foreigners, nor openly accept practical support. To do so would set her apart; it would arouse suspicion, jealousy and judgement from the neighbours. Her witness depends on her integration with

her community. Integration enables her to stand, to acknowledge her faith, and to let the results of her hard work and of God's grace speak into the community. For the desperate parents of drug-addicted kids in a nearby village, sending their children to live at her hostel is considered a last resort because of Aunty's faith, yet is respected as a sure way for them to find freedom.

Where official partnership and public associations fail, one thing prevails: the pure simplicity of enduring friendship. Friendship, discipleship, mentoring – these are personal investments that may develop into rich and fruitful relationships with the passage of time. In reality, Aunty doesn't stand alone – she has international support in the form of a friend: a friend who, with grace, must accept that she can never visit Aunty at the hostel, who can never openly admit their friendship, yet who stands by her in solidarity of purpose, who slips her the extra cash when bowls are empty, who prays with her throughout the joys and tribulations.

For the body of Christ to live with integrity there must be a dynamic and mutual investment in both development (social and economic) and in the growth of God's kingdom. The local church must take initiative, must demonstrate their care for the people of their nation. Over the past 20 years, the church here has learnt key lessons about what it means to live, not just as individuals who believe, but as a

community of faith. They recognise that physical and social ministries are required, that they can't focus only on the spiritual. This journey, albeit a slow one, is sustained and nurtured by the encouragement and advice of international workers who have journeyed alongside church leaders for a decade or more. These international workers have overcome the culture of suspicion through their faithfulness over time; they have not forced the hand of local believers but have patiently waited for the impetus and passion to emerge amongst local leadership, so that Christ's body here might be an agent of change in a country that has abundant needs. Many international workers have established examples: they've pioneered initiatives to train the unskilled, free the addicts, love the neglected, rescue the trafficked and feed the hungry. Yet only when initiatives such as these are taken on by local believers can they be undertaken to the depth that is needed.

The mission of Christ's body in this broken and hurting nation is to stand up and declare through actions that the people of this country are worth loving, and to show people that they are loved. International workers must model that love as they journey alongside local believers as disciplers, mentors and friends. On a practical level, this may seem like a drop in the ocean, yet it allows local believers to learn by experience how to disciple the

future generation: it prepares the church for growth – the growth of God's kingdom. ☞

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