

A DENOMINATIONAL MISSION AGENCY EMBRACES CROSS-CULTURAL PARTNERSHIP

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I have had the joy and privilege to be a part of the global mission ministries of Christian Reformed World Missions (CRWM) for about 27 years. I served as a missionary in the Philippines for 17 years and I have been privileged to serve in leadership roles with CRWM for the past 10 years. In order to help you understand how CRWM came to embrace cross-cultural partnership, as our preferred strategy for mission, I need to give you a little background on CRWM.

CRWM is a mission agency of the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRCNA). This denomination has only about 1000 churches in the USA and Canada, but it has an influence far beyond its size, especially in the areas of theological education, Christian day school and higher education, international relief and development and global missions. The denomination was birthed in 1857 and was composed largely of Dutch immigrants. Our media person put together a "tongue-in-cheek" video of the history of CRWM, which I would like to share with you.

(PLAY ENTIRE VIDEO – 4:55)

As you saw on the video, CRWM was established in 1888 in an effort to combine the resources of a young denomination in order to reach out together in cross-cultural mission. The churches had a vision to reach beyond their Dutch heritage and to act in obedience to the Great Commission and felt that they could only do so by joining their efforts and forming a mission agency to act on their behalf. They initiated their work with a modest effort to reach the Native American Sioux people in South Dakota (very modest, as you saw in the video).

At that time in history, approximately 90% of the world's Christians lived in the developed world and only 10% in the rest of the world. The mandate of this fledgling mission agency was, therefore, to send missionaries into that void. The language of the mandate was, "to deploy members of the CRCNA in order to preach the gospel to those who had not heard it." In short, to send missionaries. This made good sense, because most of the people living without Christ were not culturally or socially close enough to Christian people to be exposed to the gospel. Over the years, ministry expanded and CRWM experienced some outstanding results, by God's grace, as well as a few notable failures, such as the attempt to minister among the Sioux. The mandate was refined and given greater focus over the years. For example, a later version read, "CRWM will focus its missions on the peoples of the world who live in spiritual darkness. CRWM will deploy members of the CRCNA for effective ministries of evangelism and church development among the unreached peoples of the world, training and equipping them with the knowledge and sensitivity needed to be cross cultural communicators of the gospel." Although the mandate sounded much better missiologically, the core of the mandate remained the same: to send missionaries. My family and I left California for the Philippines in 1984 as a part of that sending mandate.

As I mentioned, CRWM did experience some outstanding results. In Nigeria, for example, CRWM ministries resulted in establishing Reformed denominations that today far outnumber the total membership of the CRC in North America – in fact, they now have two to three times more members. Another example is a Reformed denomination established in the Dominican Republic that now numbers over 200 churches, which continues to grow.

As the Lord continued to bless the efforts of CRWM and many other mission organizations, a shift was taking place that few sending organizations or agencies took note of. In spite of the colonialism, paternalism and other mistakes, all of which we now view as "poor mission practice," God was blessing the work. My father used to observe that God knows how to hit straight with crooked sticks... a fact that is certainly true of many mission efforts. By the time I was born, in 1950, approximately 70% of the world's Christians lived in the West and 30% now lived in the developing world. With hindsight, we can observe the dramatic shift that was taking place, even though we didn't take much note of it or think through its implications at the time.

CRWM continued to expand and continued to send missionaries. Our list of partners was growing, but most of the partners were partners that we birthed and developed, such as the CRC of Cuba, the CRC of Haiti, the CRC of Nicaragua, the CRC of Honduras, the CRC of El Salvadore, the CRC of the Dominican Republic, the CRC of the Philippines, the CRC of Nigeria, etc...

We also began working with other Reformed or Presbyterian denominations, such as the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico and the Reformed Church of Japan; however, we worked with them by sending missionaries to work with them. As one CRWM leader stated a decade ago, we were a "missionaries R us" organization. New fields among unreached peoples were opening up, but we were still working through missionaries, and we were proud of it. Our missionaries have been heroes. I dare not denigrate their work or their memories. It was missionaries such as these, from many agencies and mission organizations that God used to change the landscape of Christendom.

However, we eventually came to the realization that change was overtaking us. Churches in our denomination were doing more and more mission projects on their own or with other organizations, the remaining unreached peoples live in places that are increasingly difficult for North Americans to reach, a non-Western mission force was emerging, and globalization was happening with blinding speed. It was time to rethink our strategy.

In 2003, CRWM's Board and staff leaders decided that it was time for a complete remake of our organization. The CRWM Board struggled for about a year to write new organizational documents defining our vision, mission, values, and key strategies. They finally gave up and in 2004, the task was given to our director, Dr. Gary Bekker. Under Gary's leadership, I was eventually assigned to be the strategy manager and to facilitate the process of organizational change. Gary, I and other leaders had been doing a lot of reading and research that included materials on partnership.

In my reading and research, I had come across the name of COSIM and found out about a conference in Valley Forge in September of 2003. I registered for the conference and went to Valley Forge, eager to learn whatever I could about partnership. Presenters included Chuck Bennet, then President of Partners International and founder of COSIM, Bob Savage, then leader of COSIM and working with Partners International, and Daniel Rickett, past president of Partners International and author of "Building Strategic Relationships: A Practical Guide to Partnering with Non-Western Missions."

I felt a bit out of place at that conference because significant time was spent talking about the tensions between COSIM member organizations and "sending" mission agencies. I spoke about the need for COSIM to open up to denominational mission agencies, such as the one I represented, in order to influence them towards more effective partnership. I was encouraged to hear Bob Savage say, "I don't like the rift between COSIM and sending agencies, even though we have different approaches." Bob went on to say, "Sending agencies have done a great job, which is why COSIM exists. There are now local ministries all over the world to partner with." I liked Bob at that point and I decided that CRWM

needed to be a member organization of COSIM, which COSIM allowed us to do, as the first denominational mission agency.

As Gary and I continued to lay out a one year process for organizational change, I attended another COSIM conference, which was held at the Billy Graham Center in Wheaton. One of the keynote speakers at that conference was Gary Edmonds, President of Breakthrough Partners and a good friend of Partners International. His message at the conference crystallized all the thinking and learning that CRWM leadership had been doing for over a year. After his presentation, I asked Gary if he would be willing to make a trip to Grand Rapids to make a presentation to our Board and a presentation to key leaders. He agreed and his interaction with CRWM leaders was extremely helpful and motivating.

Eventually, after months of engagement and dialogue with all stakeholders in CRWM, we crystallized our thinking into a set of new organizational statements.

Our new **vision statement** is: *We see the CRCNA vigorously participating in Spirit-led mission with churches and other Christian organizations throughout the world so that together we are proclaiming the gospel to more and more people who have not heard it, healthy churches are emerging and the Kingdom of God is advancing.*

In response to all we were learning, we wanted a vision that explicitly saw us in partnership. We no longer see missionaries throughout the world doing whatever CRWM does, but we see CRWM and its missionaries in partnership with other churches and Christian organizations throughout the world. We still have missionaries, and probably always will, however, today most of our missionaries work in the context of partnerships.

Our **mission statement** is: *CRWM exists to glorify God by leading the CRC to obediently respond to our Lord's commission to witness to the good news of God's Kingdom and make disciples of all nations.*

We also realized that, although our agency was formed by churches to carry out their ministry, years of organizational life had led us to the point that we were asking churches to support what we were doing around the world. Our mission statement is a recognition that the Great Commission was not given to a committee or agency, but to the church of Jesus Christ. We have to do all we can do to engage the church in her obedience, rather than act on their behalf. We don't want to engage in obedience by proxy on behalf of the church.

We also took a careful look at our organizational values to see if any new or additional values needed to be included, in light of our new vision and mission statement. To the values that drive us, we added one new **organizational value**: *We value the image of God in all people and the humility that opens us up to respect, learn from and grow with them.*

We already had values such as: we value proclaiming the gospel to people who have not heard it, we value sustainability, we value contextualization, etc., but we needed a value that would drive us towards the beauty of partnership and the blessings of reciprocity.

Once our vision, mission and values were identified, we then spent some time identifying the key strategies that would identify how we would go about carrying out our mission. We identified three **key strategies**:

- 1) *Mobilize CRCNA churches and their members for greater missions involvement through programs that:*
 - a. *proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, particularly to those who have not heard it,*
 - b. *foster prayer for the work of the gospel around the world,*
 - c. *enhance their vision and their connections for mission,*

- d. *inform and encourage them to follow sound mission practices,*
- e. *invigorate them by reciprocal interaction with parts of the body of Christ around the world, and*
- f. *place CRCNA members in cross-cultural mission ministries with CRWM or other mission organizations.*

The intent of this strategy was to keep us focused on the fact that the churches that constituted us as an agency are responsible to witness in their Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. The command to make disciples of all nations was given to the body of Christ and we, as an agency, needed to find ways to increase the churches involvement and to add value to what they were doing in mission. One way we do that is to revise every missionary's job description to include 10-15% of their time and effort be focused on informing, involving and engaging supporters and supporting churches in the ministry.

- 2) *Strengthen the CRCNA and international partners in our mutual capacity for Christian life and missions through programs that:*
 - a. *plant and develop churches,*
 - b. *make disciples,*
 - c. *develop leaders,*
 - d. *partner for impact, and*
 - e. *develop Christian schools.*

The intent of this strategy was to keep us focused on partnership and to commit to strengthening the mutual capacity for effective partnership wherever we work.

- 3) *Participate in global networks and movements to advance the reign of Christ that:*
 - a. *engage with others in an exploration of a Reformed (Biblical) world and life view,*
 - b. *apply the world and life view for transforming individuals and communities, and*
 - c. *work with or develop collaborative networks/movements.*

Organizational change is hard. It took over a year to get agreement on these organizational statements. However, organizational statements are only so many words in a document, until they begin to be implemented. We realized that we could not adequately implement our new organizational statements without a significant structural change. The process of structural change also took significant time and effort. We realized that we had to significantly increase the amount of staff needed to do the work of serving and leading the churches of the CRCNA for greater mission involvement. Part of the structural change was to designate two departments, North America Program Department and International Program Department. Our Director, Dr. Bekker appointed Directors for each of these departments. I give leadership to the International Program Department.

We also identified the need for staff to consult with and resource churches in North America. We appointed two staff for this purpose. These staff eventually became involved with a ministry called *Sixteen:Fifteen*, which is an organization that exists to coach churches to develop effective mission vision and engagement. You will have an opportunity to participate in a workshop this afternoon, led by Matthew Ellison from Sixteen:Fifteen. Eventually, we developed a team called Missions Education and Engagement Team (MEET), which focuses on empowering the churches. I have asked them to address you but they were unable to physically attend. We will be hearing from them via Live Meeting.

(15 minute presentation by MEET)

As I said earlier, organizational change is hard. When an organization has over a century of momentum going in one direction, it cannot make a sharp turn. It is rather like a huge ocean liner which takes miles to complete a turn. Momentum is a powerful force. As strategy manager, I saw my role as a rudder, keeping enough pressure against the present direction to make the organization turn, but not so much that the organization cracked up under the pressure.

In order to keep up the pressure for change, I used a monthly communication tool which I called "In-Gage" for the purpose of informing and engaging everyone in the various aspects of organizational change that we were going through. I also scheduled a series of week long meetings in every region of the world in which CRWM exists. I participated in dialogue and training in Asia, Africa, Latin America and in North America. COSIM has also been a help in keeping the pressure on to turn from being an almost exclusively sending organization to an almost exclusively partnering organization. We have disseminated resources identified by the COSIM alliance and we have sent key leaders to attend COSIM conferences.

So what has all this refocusing accomplished? What are the results of all the change that has taken place?

1) We are doing things with CRCNA churches that we have never done before.

For example, a church in Iowa had a member who had immigrated from Laos many years ago. This person was passionate about the people of Laos and eventually got the church interested in doing leadership development and church planting in Laos. They were in relationship with Laotian leaders who identified the need for training. They had heard about training being done in Cambodia through BILD International. The church asked us if we were serious about helping them increase their mission involvement, without wanting to take it over. We entered an agreement to assist them to translate the BILD curriculum and to get a team of trainers in Laos equipped to carry the training throughout the countryside. CRWM has provided consultation and some funds for printing materials, but we celebrate that the program is owned by the church in Iowa and is accomplished in Laos completely by Laotians.

We are serving a connector and consulting resource to other churches as they carry out their mission engagement around the world. For example, we serve several churches in their engagement with a denomination in Cuba. We serve churches that have church-to-church relationships and schools that have school-to-school relationships. We also serve a group of West Michigan builders who are carrying out their vision of giving back to God by providing technology and some resources to build hurricane-proof church buildings.

2) We are placing many CRC people in other organizations instead of just recruiting them for our own organization. For example, we have a new partnership with Wycliff, which has 76 full time or career missionaries working to make the gospel available in the heart language of people groups who do not have it. That is almost exactly the number of full time or career missionaries that we have with CRWM. We also place missionaries in many other mission organizations and institutions. That is part of what it means to lead the CRC to greater missions involvement.

3) We are becoming increasingly involved in global ministries that do not require residential missionaries. For example, we have a program that delivers non-formal training for the hundreds of thousands of pastors and leaders who will never get a seminary education, but are serving faithfully in churches all over the

world. The program is called Timothy Leadership Training and it includes seven modules. The modules include subjects like "Pastoral Care," "Christian Stewardship," "Biblical Preaching," and others. The learning methodology is very interactive and the main feature of the methodology is the forming of an action plan by every participant in which SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely) are identified for actions they will carry out in their ministry context. When learners return for the next training, they begin by sharing how their action plan went, what worked, what didn't work, what they learned by doing, etc. This program involves training trainers in every location. The goal is to have a core group of master trainers in every place TLT is requested. TLT has the goal of being completely indigenous. The materials have been translated into about 13 languages so far and programs are running in over 30 countries. Although we do have several missionaries that serve occasionally to train master trainers, we only have one missionary on loan to the TLT Institute, giving overall leadership to the program.

Another example of this kind of partnership is the partnership we have developed with the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram, India. CRWM does not have any missionaries in India, but a leader from the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram was doing post-graduate studies in North America and approached us to consider a possible partnership. This denomination has approximately 600,000 members and is in the only region of India that is majority Christian. In spite of a very low per capita income level, this church designates over 40% of her tithes and offerings for missions and they send 1,400 missionaries around the world, although most are in Northern India. We are providing them funding to send teacher/missionaries to Myanmar and nurse missionaries to Nepal.

4) We are developing many partnerships with churches and organizations that we would not have considered in the past. For example, about 20 years ago CRWM started working in Sierra Leone. We worked in two Muslim areas in ministries of evangelism and community development with the goal of church planting. The war in Sierra Leone interrupted our presence there and we had to pull our missionaries out. When the war was over, we sent a missionary back, but the war had taken its toll and the work was not progressing as well as we had hoped and the missionary retired. Leadership capacity in the fledgling churches was very low. At that point, we were talking with the Reformed Church of Zambia (RCZ), a denomination of about one million. The RCZ said they were interested in missions involvement that extended beyond their country borders. Instead of recruiting another North American missionary, we thought this would be a good opportunity to partner with RCZ to provide leadership for the ministry in Sierra Leone. Rev. John Phiri was appointed and has been serving in Sierra Leone for the past four years. Since then, he has been joined by Rev. Ezekiel Sodu, a leadership trainer from a partner church in Nigeria. God has used these men to raise up strong national leaders and the communities in which churches are emerging grew from 30 to 60 in the past four years alone. This is especially remarkable because this rapid growth is happening in Muslim communities.

Another example is the formation of Transformation Networks around the world. After attending a Vision conference on world-view, a continuing program of the Discipling Nations Alliance (DNA), we pioneered what we call a Transformation Network in Managua, Nicaragua. The purpose for the network was to find collaborating partners, which include Christian organizations of all types (churches, medical ministries, Food for the Hungry, development organizations, etc) and provide training in world-view as well as organizational capacity building. The churches we are working with cross the evangelical spectrum, including

Congregational, Baptist, Pentecostal, Reformed, etc.). The goal is to see individual, institutional, community and societal transformation. A team of national leaders from among the partner organizations became the training team and they offer training to all the partners in the network. One example of the kinds of programs the network offers is "Fortalecimiento Eclesial (FE), or "The Healthy Church Project."

(PLAY YOU TUBE VIDEO – STOP AT 3:50)

After the network was established, a national leader was chosen to give overall leadership to the collaborative work of the network. We reproduced another network in El Salvador (Seeds of New Creation) whose network now includes over a hundred partners. Another was started in Abuja, Nigeria and next year we are planning to birth five new networks, including the first one in the United States. Many hundreds of Indigenous organizations are seeing dramatic growth and change as a result of participation in these networks.

A final example is a partnership we developed with the Pentecostal Assemblies of God in Uganda (PAGU). Some of our denominations relief and development workers had been working with the PAGU and the church leaders were impressed with their focus on community transformation. These leaders came to CRWM and asked us to help them to develop that kind of vision and practice in their leaders. They said that they were very good at evangelism and church planting and did not need our help in those areas. They said that they were passionate about seeing people saved and assured of a place in heaven, however, they were not satisfied with their response to the prayer Jesus taught us for God's will to be done and his kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

We formed a partnership with them to develop a Department of Community Transformation in their theological seminary in Mbale. We are developing the curriculum and sending short-term teachers. The project also includes a dairy farm, which serves as part of their theological training. Students take classes on animal husbandry and fodder agriculture along with classes on biblical world-view and other theological subjects. Students also work on the dairy so that they learn transferable skills that they can take to the communities they will serve after graduation. CRWM simply responded to the leaders of PAGU. It was their idea to develop a department of community transformation and it was their idea to start a dairy farm. We do not plan to keep any long term missionaries involved in this project and we are not doing any direct ministries. This is an indigenous ministry which we are supporting in ways that they asked us to. As a Reformed mission agency, we consider it pure joy to be able to partner with a Pentecostal denomination in Uganda.

Conclusion:

Most of the stories I told you about how CRWM is connecting to many partners around the world, I would not have been able to tell you less than ten years ago. We went from sending our missionaries to create our partners to going out and finding healthy partners for synergistic impact. This would not have happened before our organizational change and our new focus on partnership.

I value COSIM so highly that when I was asked a couple of years ago to serve on COSIM's Resource Team, I readily agreed. It is my hope and prayer that other denominational mission agencies will join COSIM, learn from the resources of COSIM, and employ partnership as a major strategy for transforming individuals and communities worldwide, in Jesus' name.