

Reflections on Partnering

David Joel Hamilton; May, 2021

Recently I was invited to participate in the creation of an “OBT Affiliate Table” with ETEN (Every Tribe Every Nation), in order to accelerate Bible translation among the remaining 2,000 Bibless language communities in today’s world. This invitation was an unexpected open door which presented both wonderful opportunities to collaborate and potential dangers to drift.

When I spoke with the leadership of ETEN via Zoom, I felt it was essential to lay out my concerns prior to accepting the invitation to help shape this OBT Affiliate Table. The two issues I wanted to address are those that are reflected in Proverbs 30:7-9, which reads:

“O God, I beg two favors from you; let me have them before I die.

***First**, help me never to tell a lie.*

***Second**, give me neither poverty nor riches! Give me just enough to satisfy my needs. For if I grow rich, I may deny you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ And if I am too poor, I may steal and thus insult God’s holy name” (NLT, emphasis added).*

In light of this portion of Scripture, these are the two points I shared with the ETEN leadership:

1. **My first concern** had to do with protecting ETEN. I noted that whereas all the other entities in ETEN are organizations, YWAM is a movement. As a movement we are held together by our common vision and values, our shared covenants and legacy words, and our relational networks. While we are not led by our structure, our movement does contain within it more than 2,000 legal organizational structures. So unlike most of our partners, our leadership does not make executive decisions which directly affect the whole of the mission. Our leadership decisions affect only those parts of our mission over which we hold immediate responsibility. Beyond that we lead not through authoritative decisions and pronouncements, but through influential teaching and modeling, inspiring others to fruitful kingdom action.

As one leader within the movement, I do not and cannot represent the totality of YWAM to them, nor am I capable of implementing any accords made with them beyond my immediate circle of influence. If I were to project an authority beyond what I in fact have as a YWAM leader, it would be a living lie, violating the first request in Proverbs 30:8. It is important for our potential partners to understand this, otherwise we could easily defraud them by creating expectations that we can not begin to fulfill. If we do not make this clear to our partners, it will lead to frustration and disappointment. This leads to undermining relational trust, which is the essential currency of any collaborative kingdom initiative. The ETEN leaders were unaware of YWAM’s fractal, movement-like framework and expressed appreciation for my forthright presentation, noting that it would help them adjust expectations accordingly.

2. **The second concern** had to do with protecting YWAM. I was aware that in their most recent Illumination event, they had raised a significant amount of money to help end Bible poverty. This is a great blessing but also a potential pitfall. I expressed my concern to the ETEN leaders that through our collaborative efforts with them we might be given too much money. If this happened it could be destructive to what has been built over six decades of ministry. Here the second request in Proverbs 30:8-9 needs to be embraced: a prayer for a Goldilocks-like “just right” amount of financial support – not too much nor too little.

I shared with them that YWAM has been able to grow as it has because of our adherence to our Value 16 ([click here](#)), which facilitates local stewardship and sustainable economic patterns in many diverse contexts all around the world. Over the past several years we have worked closely with Wycliffe Global Partners on a variety of projects. We have stipulated that we would appreciate their financial assistance when we are engaged in building capacity to serve. Capacity-building is understood as helping with the costs of training people with new skills (how to be an oral Bible translation facilitator, how to master Hebrew for translation from the original language into the receptor language, etc.) or needed tools (computers or tablets for those involved in Render training, translation software, appropriate recording equipment for Jesus Film productions, etc.). Training and tools are the essence of capacity-building. We welcome help in these areas, but even in these areas we don't want to receive 100% of the cost. We want to – we need to! – have “skin in the game.” The need to own the financial responsibility creates kingdom sustainability.

But even as we have welcomed assistance in these capacity-building categories, I have urged our partners to give nothing which would replace our day-to-day financial dependency upon God through their natural relational networks. Stipends or salaries seem like a blessing, and they are for – the short term! But if a grant is given for the one or two years that it takes to fulfill a project, then those engaged in the project are left without a financial support network when the project is over. Dependency on finances from foundations and project-oriented grants can undermine our sustainable longevity as those called into Levitical missionary endeavors with a Value 16 commitment. It unwisely shifts financial responsibility from us and our relational networks to dependency on a distant board of directors. We dare not do this.

The ETEN leaders were delightedly surprised when I shared this with them. One shared that he had never heard anyone tell him that they were worried about getting too much money. This framework and clear communication fosters great trust as we collaborate for kingdom purposes.

As I shared with them about how we want to guard our YWAM values, I made sure that they understood that we do not believe that this is the only Biblical model for financial support, nor is it even necessarily the best. But it is the model that God has called us to embrace in our tribe and as we have done so, we have been blessed by God. The fruit has been a great host of amazing men and women of God serving in over 190 nations, not without sacrifice, but with the Lord's good hand upon them. This is like the story of the Recabites in Jeremiah 32. It is our particular act of obedience to be true to the call of God as YWAMers.

For those who feel led otherwise, we rejoice if they want to serve in other Bible translation organizations or other mission agencies who have a different financial philosophy. It is our great privilege to have seeded many other expressions of the Body of Christ with those trained in our DTSs and those who have served on our staff for a season. But if we as YWAM are to serve alongside others as peers in a collaborative manner, we need to do so as YWAMers. We should not be forced into our partners' mold, nor try to force our partners into our mold. This mutual respect is both the joy and the challenge of truly partnering together. So, with these precautions in mind let's enthusiastically embrace the opportunities that God gives us to serve together with others in order to see the end of Bible poverty and bring God's kingdom truth and love to the least, the last and the lost.