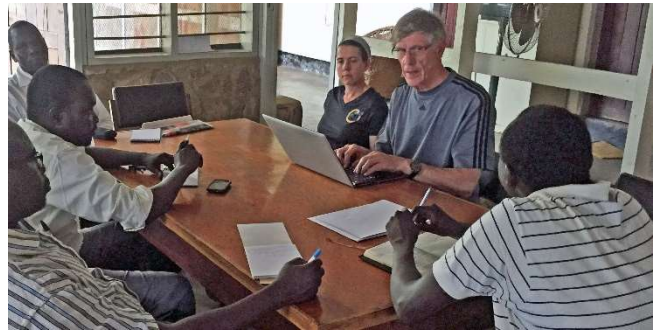


RMNI—Overseas Partnership Principles and Priorities

Is a genuine partnership with American ministries possible?

RMNI has worked with many overseas partners in Africa, Asia and Southeast Asia since 1993. Can a fruitful partnership develop between Americans and other Christians, despite clear differences in what each brings to the table? Yes, if assumptions, expectations and goals of both are clearly understood and agreed upon at the outset and reiterated as necessary, and if the aim is to serve the other. There is no completely equal partnership between individuals or organizations, cross-cultural or otherwise. As in marriage, partnerships are complementary. Each brings strengths and weaknesses. Americans lack cultural intelligence, and knowledge of local languages and needs, but have money, educational resources, operational systems and technical expertise. Africans and Indians, for example, bring cultural and language proficiency, knowledge of local needs, networks, and often exemplary Christian lives, but frequently need what Americans have.



A second challenge is that of spiritual maturity. Do Americans consider themselves owners of resources and benefactors, or instead, stewards of God's resources, for the benefit of the Kingdom of God? Do partners rely upon and constrain Americans to be Providers, instead of trusting God to provide for His work? Field ministries often need at least initial funding.

Money is power. Who controls the checkbook? What American or foreign organization or missionary gives unlimited control of financial assets to ministry partners? This is not evidence of neo-colonialism, a power play, or unrighteousness. Goals must align, and accountability processes established. Assets are needed for other needs besides those of the partner. Americans are stewards--responsible to donors and God for the use of funds.

Funding priorities are normal and necessary. Ours are serving underserved people through teaching, medical assistance, emergency relief, educational development, church planting and Bible distribution, while facilitating racial reconciliation. This looks like mission drift, but seems to be how God has led us. We strategize with ministry partners to support a mutual vision, which for us might be reduced to destroying the work of the Devil (1 John 3:8), and building the Kingdom.

Unusual assets are entrusted to Christians for the Kingdom. Western attitudes can and should be those of Jesus, who did not let equality with the Father of the universe hinder humble service (Phil. 2:6-7). To rephrase the issue, will others allow Americans to be one channel for

the Kingdom, and will Americans allow others to serve them with their assets for the Kingdom? Each needs the service of the other.

Jesus provides the best partnership model. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45, NIV). Jesus had incalculable assets. He could perform astounding miracles and command twelve legions of angels (Matt. 26:53), making him more powerful than any person of his, or any other era. Yet he used his power to serve, healing those who came to him (Matt. 8:16; 12:15; 14:14; 15:30; 21:14), and finally giving his body to be broken for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2). He washed his disciples’ feet, explicitly providing our example (John 13:1-17).

Leadership development--Investing in faithful, able leaders

How are wise, godly, trustworthy, diligent and compatible ministry partners found? It isn’t easy within the USA, and I sometimes fall short. We look for faithful, able and teachable leaders (2 Tim. 2:2). When we find them, we try to help develop their gifting.

Finding them overseas is “far and away” more difficult. References are useful, but finding a passably objective reference may be impossible. We’ve received hundreds of invitations to partner globally with ministries we’ve never heard of. They could not be vetted, even when the invitation was attractive.

We’ve had the privilege of receiving leads to likely partners through the Maclellan Foundation (MFI). They have geographic area strategy directors and field researchers around the globe, who search out the best ministries and people in a

Dr. Aila Tasse became known through MFI and was flown into Juba to cast a vision of reaching the unreached before Juba leaders.



country. We’ve found great partners through friends who have worked on the field. We’ve had limited success meeting impressive leaders while traveling, trusting experience with them to guide us.

We partnered with a dynamic East African leader and had a successful medical-and-teaching team trip, so returned the following year. Preparations had disintegrated, and ministry opportunities more limited, so it was our last visit. Character, accomplishments and accountability are more important than spurts of hard work when present, apparent spirituality, gifting or a charismatic personality.

I worked for several years with an energetic African ministry leader, who received substantial financial support during that time. When we were with him, all went well. When we were not, little

went well. While we agreed on a variety of projects, we had mutually exclusive long-range expectations. He wanted to develop institutions, such as a school or orphanage, that would be supported by us indefinitely. I wanted to provide initial funding, with the goal of locally funded ongoing operations. Over my better judgment, a truck was purchased to generate income. After several engines were ruined within a few months, it was parked. We tried starting a construction business, trained workers and invested in the major piece of equipment. Due to a variety of factors, including civil strife, nothing developed.

I should have made clearer that we would provide initial funding only, and should have ended the partnership when the partner's expectations became unmistakable. Nothing was in writing. In summary, regardless of recommendations, initial impressions and even some experience, extended experience with a ministry leader has been the only criteria that has consistently worked for us.

We provided three years of Bible college pastoral training to four subsistence farmers who we had met and who were recommended by a ministry partner. They ended up not using their training vocationally or bi-vocationally. After graduation, they expected to be called to pastor churches, and to be supported by them. When they were not, they returned to farming. They did not sustain a simple church in their remote, spiritually resistant village.

Later, three South Sudanese men with more obvious gifting were funded by a US ministry partner and completed a Master of Divinity program at what became Africa Reformation Theological Seminary in Uganda. The curriculum included Greek and Hebrew. A BA in Biblical Studies was provided for a fourth man. These men initiated and continue to lead Grace Theological College (GTC) and Agape Mission. All have used their training extensively in ministry, becoming our key leaders in Juba, and project partners with RMNI for over ten years. Donors have supported their work, providing a solid, basic library, and funding some of GTC's intensive Mobile Pastor Training Courses. Donors funded twelve GTC 1-hour call-in radio programs on topics such as grace, suffering, the family, and cults.

While in Mongolia in 2011, after only three weeks, an excellent ministry co-worker became obvious in the person of a wise and humble woman with administrative, teaching and evangelistic gifts. Her leadership responsibilities have grown significantly. She faithfully sends

Three seminary-trained Juba leaders presenting graduation diplomas to a GTC student.



ministry updates to a supporting church that partners with RMNI.

RMNI worked together with a ministry that served church planters in India. The leader seemed to be the humblest man I'd ever met in the USA. I discovered that he was the opposite, on his turf. We partnered with another ministry in India. The leader arranged strings of seminars in various cities for RMNI teams on at least five trips. Teams were tightly scheduled, sometimes traveling overnight by train to teach the next morning. That leader proved an excellent partner. In 2021 we provided through him food gifts to 90 pastors, since their churches couldn't support them due to Covid-19. He again did an excellent job, despite potential exposures for him and his team to Covid.



Fund only nationals?

We do not advocate funding only nationals, instead of cross-cultural missionaries. We have visited a few US missionaries during our thirty-plus overseas trips, but have partnered with nationals or missionaries from other countries on the field. We have brought Americans and some from other nations with us. As a wise African American mission mobilizer put it, God doesn't give the option of doing mission by proxy. All Christian ethnic churches are expected to go, fund or pray for cross-cultural missionaries. There are no exemptions. In our case, RMNI has invested much time, travel and research into mobilizing African American missionaries. After 20 years of research, we could document only 184 African American serving for at least two overseas within a 15-month period, ending in June 2021.

Go to the greatest needs

As of mid-2023, an estimated 28% of the global population (2.25 billion of 8 billion people) is still unevangelized. This despite global communication technologies, global travel and roughly 440,000 global foreign missionaries (World Christian Database [WCD], 2023 www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/resources/status-of-global-christianity/). In 2009, on our eighth trip to Uganda, atop isolated Mt. Elgon, we discovered a large short-term team of African Americans. Tim Schoap, a wiser co-leader, asked me, Why do we go to a country with so many teams? Thereafter RMNI teams went to Sudan/South Sudan, Mongolia, Indonesia, China and India.



I want to reach unreached Muslim people groups, particularly in Africa. Muslims are 25% of the global population (WCD, 2023). RMNI is in S. Sudan, a largely Christian and animist country, because it was part of Muslim-majority Sudan when we first went in 2006. South Sudan became independent in 2011. Only three African nations had a lower Human Development Index as of 2019. A spiritual war for human destiny between Christianity and Islam is the reality in Africa, particularly across northern Africa. As of 2020 there were 557 million Muslims (42% of the population) and 655 million Christians (49% of the population) in Africa. However, in northern Africa, Muslims were 94% in 2020. These are among the 23% still unevangelized in Africa (WCD, 2020-21).

Focus on field-weighted priorities

Projects should usually be selected from priorities of nationals that are shared by donors. We asked ministry partners in Juba for a three-year ministry plan as a project menu. We might ask field leaders how a grant of so many thousands of dollars might be used, then negotiate. A proposal may not be well conceived or feasible either on the donor or national side. Since donors have outsized influence, we shouldn't push partners to go too far beyond their current capacity, or to agree with priorities that aren't theirs. I had a priority of church planting in a very remote area of S. Sudan. Experience revealed that the partner, although willing, didn't have the capacity to select, train, or support church planters. As far as I know, only one of the four villages targeted has a viable church, and that due to recent efforts by an American missionary.

Juba partners, after seeing the response to GTC call-in programs, prioritized starting their own radio station. RMNI had no experience in this area, but met Teaching Missions International's president, Chuck Lokey, who had already started several Caribbean radio stations. He contacted Radio South Sudan's Mike Gwartney, who had installed ten stations in S. Sudan. From these US partnerships, full funding and on-site installation became available. A studio was built, and equipment transported and installed.



Teaching and Helping—Our Main Objectives

We've taught in-person courses or seminars in 8 foreign countries, primarily in Asia and Africa. In 2000 Africa had an estimated 384.3million self-identified Christians. By mid-2023 that number is estimated to be 718 million, an 86.8% increase (WCD)! There are more Christians in Africa than in any other continent.

In Uganda we taught intensive courses at Westminster Theological College and at All Nations Bible Institute. We helped start two Christian elementary schools in Kampala and assisted Westminster to



obtain and develop its 13-acre campus, with funding from Lookout Mtn. Presbyterian Church (LMPC). At the request of the field ministry, we partnered with Third Mill (thirdmill.org) in 2008 to bring their courses and curriculum to northern India. Later we took them to Juba, S. Sudan, which became the foundation of Grace Theological College (GTC).

Another aspect of teaching is scripture distribution in heart languages, where feasible. Thousands of Bibles have been distributed in Uganda, and S. Sudan, particularly through LMPC and Maclellan Foundation funding. Many teaching resources, including papers, handouts and PowerPoints, are being downloaded without charge at www.RMNI.org

Holistic Ministry

Jesus taught and healed, so it's appropriate to try to meet medical and emergency needs. Physicians, nurses, dentists and an ophthalmologist have partnered in Kenya, Uganda and S. Sudan, working in clinics, in tents, under trees and in refugee camps. It's well worth the logistical headaches and cost to see patients receiving sight, meds or dental treatment. We assist with occasional food relief both in S. Sudan and in Chattanooga, where we also assist with rent emergencies.



Gospel Priority

We prioritize evangelism—which can lead, with biblical teaching, to full development of a person, a tribe or nation. We partner with local evangelists to share the Great News, including

with those seeking medical help. We've shown the Jesus film in Uganda, S. Sudan, and inner-city Chattanooga. Teams of 2-3 fan out each week at a housing project in Chattanooga to discern spiritual and physical needs. However, Jesus' priority was meeting eternal needs over temporal ones (Lk 4:40-44). We teach personal evangelism and offer evangelistic resources at <https://rmni.org/files/handouts/>



Self-funding Institutions

We don't fund relatively expensive church buildings. For us that is neither sustainable nor adequate to serve the multitude of new believers. Instead we have funded training in Disciple Making Movements (DMM, rapid discipleship) and simple house church methods inside two refugee camps, although not successfully. That is a paradigm shift not embraced by many among whom a church structure is not a target for attack. A building is rather seen as a sign of legitimacy and permanence.

We work toward self-funding, as project support must eventually end. Ministry partners provided four 3-wheel motorized rickshaws or cargo bikes to generate reliable income for Grace Theological College, and 6 rickshaws or cargo bikes to Agape Mission, our diaconal partner mission in Juba. Drivers are hired from within Juba churches. LMPC provided funds to renovate motel rooms, owned by Equatoria Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church of S. Sudan. These were converted into office space, providing essential rental income to GTC. Neither GTC nor Agape Mission depends upon outside help to exist. Having been provided facilities and equipment, Redeemer FM radio station operations will be funded by Equatoria Presbytery.

Accountability

We trust and verify through financial spreadsheets and multiple eyes on funds received and transferred. We ask for digital copies of receipts for items purchased with donor funds. We



try to periodically visit funded projects. We discontinue what does not work, put a time limit upon what is working and should become self-sustaining, challenge what is not realistic, and fund what is effective and affordable. As Tim Keller put it, we may be taken advantage of, but we make that hard to do. We manage expectations, make few promises, but try to keep them. We negotiate projects in writing, specifying ownership, who controls, and mutual obligations (learned the hard way). We try to provide timely, detailed outcomes to donors. We have recently added that if a promise is not written, it is not a promise. Something said may be understood or interpreted as a promise, which was not meant as such.

Loving relationships

Love is the highest Christian virtue, and needs be the medium of ministry relationships—among RMNI staff and volunteers, donors, and ministry partners in the US and overseas. Our Board meetings, whose members are numerically half black and half white, begin with breakfast, a tradition continued after my wife’s first breakfast in 1999. We have experienced harmony ever since. We try to cover costs incurred by organizations providing RMNI with materials and equipment, even if offered at no charge. We shield overseas ministries from use by organizations that don’t adequately compensate them for expenses. Love should permeate all relationships, even when tough love is needed, and even when we fail to exemplify it.

Jim Sutherland, July 2023

