

Evangelical Reformed Baptist Churches In Italy

Co-Workers in God's Field

On The Relationship Between Churches and Missionaries/Missionary Agencies

1. "*Co-Workers in God's Field*" (1 Corinthians 3:9) is the way in which the apostle Paul describes the network of different subjects, however all belonging to the universal church, who are active in the work of God. The underlying conviction is that God has entrusted his people, both singly and collectively at the same time, giving the mandate to live responsibly in the world (Genesis 1:27-28), announcing the good news of Jesus Christ and making disciples of the nations until his second coming (Matthew 28:18-20). The church is therefore the custodian of this high mission which defines its identity and which must be carried out by cultivating a collaborative spirit within it.¹

In fulfilling this mandate, the church implements various expressions by which its life manifests itself. Recalling the Preamble of the constitution of the (CERBI) churches (2006),² local churches are the fulcrum of this project, living it out in a network of communion with other churches both near and far from each other. Biblically, in fact, relationships between churches exist in view of missionary projects (Acts 11:22), diaconal services (Acts 11:29; 2 Corinthians 9; 1 Timothy 5:9), common assemblies (Acts 15). In our ecclesiological understanding, this perspective is called "congregationalism of communion".³

2. In line with Biblical teaching, churches sometimes commission specific ambassadors for services to support the evangelization and the building of the church itself. Within the network of churches, these people are sent to support the work of the church (Philippians 2:25), to plant new churches (Acts 13:2-3), and to provide various services (Acts 11:30; 12:25; 15:30). Within these movements there is sufficient flexibility, not harnessed in rigid institutional paths, but also an accentuated sense of belonging to the one church, and the need for reporting, that is, sharing paths of service. Over the course of history, these light structures connecting sending churches and receiving churches have been called "missions" or "Missionary Agencies". Missions are therefore para-ecclesial agencies that connect churches and groups of churches within the universal church and facilitate the carrying out of the Lord's mandate.

¹ Our churches have elaborated the meaning of this mandate in the "Programmatic Declaration" (2015) which reads: The Evangelical Reformed Baptist Churches in Italy are

- Rooted in Scripture, Word of God, in accord with the classical reformed faith;
- Allied in an ecclesial network for mutual support and growth;
- Committed to assimilate, proclaim, and apply the gospel of Jesus Christ in every area of life;
- Projected towards the extension of the Kingdom of God through the conversion of sinners, Christian discipleship, and spiritual, social and cultural renewal until the Lord comes.

² <http://www.cerbi.it/chi.html>

³ "The ecclesiology of communion is a lived experience of inter-ecclesial relations which recognizes that, biblically speaking, the life of the local church must establish relations of communion with other local churches based on the common confession of the evangelical faith and aimed at supporting the work of the gospel, in the various territories in which they are located" (CdA 1/14). See *London Confession of Faith* (1689), art. 26.7; 26,14-15, Italian Edition: *Confessione di fede battista del 1689*, art. 26,7; 26,14-15, in *La fede riformata battista*, a cura delle chiese CERBI, Caltanissetta, Alfa & Omega 2012, pp. 79-82.

In the modern history of the church, these agencies have become the protagonists of the mission, showing a considerable ability to operate that tends to be independent of, or unrelated to, the life of the churches. Comparing the aforementioned with the reality of local churches or denominations, the latter have gradually become more introspective, localized and not always able to cultivate a missionary vision worthy of the name. The role of local or denominational churches have diminished, that of the missions agencies have grown, often reversing the burden of responsibility and the roles of each.

3. In the reality of the contemporary evangelical church, too often the relationships between churches and "missions" have been reversed, with the latter becoming the central focus of initiatives and churches becoming, and (in some cases) already were, subjects that are basically passive. This has created evident ecclesiological imbalances with heavy and negative consequences on the overall structure of the church. What took place was not collaboration but replacement; not synergy, but autonomy; not partnership, but competition, or mutual indifference. To remedy this, the *Lausanne Covenant* (1974) has opportunely invited everyone to rethink the relationship between churches and missionary agencies in the spirit of collaboration in the Gospel:

“We urge the development of regional and functional cooperation for the furtherance of the Church’s mission, for strategic planning, for mutual encouragement, and for the sharing of resources and experience”. (n. 7).⁴

It is evident that the "mission" as a para-ecclesial agency is called to assist the church/local churches in a spirit of circular sharing of gifts and collaboration in the promotion of God's work. On the other hand, the church/churches must reappropriate their role in God's plan, without delegating the mission to others without themselves being directly committed to it, or taking submissive attitudes. The relationship, therefore, must be rebalanced so as to reconstruct a primary responsibility upon churches in carrying out the divine mandate and the subsidiary function of the para-ecclesial agencies in supporting that work.

4. Each of our churches has had or has ongoing sporadic and/or ongoing collaborations in the field with missionary agencies and/or missionaries. Others will be able to open up in the future. We imagine that there are experiences that vary, from stories of co-existence marked by mutual indifference or mistrust, to fruitful intersections characterized by organic integration. In Italy, in general, biblically healthy models of relationship have not always been established. On one hand, because of a prevailing ecclesiology marked by unstable and local identities, and by conditions of great precariousness of the churches; and on the other hand, by a general spirit of independence and disinterest in the local context on the part of foreign missions/missionaries.

This motive is not in itself sufficient to nurture feelings of skepticism in the face of possible future developments. On the contrary, it is our task to work to re-establish the relationship in healthy terms as far as the biblical framework is concerned, while also being responsible as far as the missiological responsibility is concerned. This requires the commitment to biblically review the structures inherited from the past, both by churches needing to mature their missionary vi-

⁴ <https://www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant> . On the contribution of the Lausanne Movement to this discussion, see also the Lausanne Occasional Paper, n. 24 "Cooperating in world evangelization: a handbook on church/para-church relationship" (1983): <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-24>

sion, and by missionary agencies and/or missionaries whose task it is to enrich the life and witness of the church and not to work in a self-referential way. The presence of missionary agencies and missionaries is a precious resource for the life of the church, and the evangelization and planting of new churches. Our desire is to be an active part in the process of mutual fertilization aimed at the expansion of the Kingdom of God in Italy.

5. To make their contribution, our churches must be up to the task entrusted by the Scriptures, and focused on the challenges of an evangelical witness in our country, becoming more and more credible interlocutors and responsible subjects in carrying out the Lord's mandate. To be receptive and collaborative, they must strengthen their ecclesial identity, their plans for their region, their being structured and functioning ecclesial realities, living spiritually and in network with the wider evangelical context. Furthermore, our churches must become more proficient with the use of foreign languages and therefore develop the capacity for dialogue with different linguistic and cultural worlds. If these conditions are lacking, it will be difficult to foster a harmonious integration of missionaries. To have a healthy relationship then, fragile churches at the identity level, and dysfunctional at the operational level will not be active collaborators of the mission. On the contrary, robust churches at the identity level and actively engaged will be humble and credible interlocutors.

6. Churches who have missionary projects that are solid and flexible, intentional and open to collaboration, are a necessary condition for activating, cultivating, preserving, and developing the work of the Gospel. Collaborations with missionaries/missionary agencies are possible on the basis of a range of elements, first of all the level of doctrinal compatibility. As stated in the aforementioned Preamble, "it is necessary to honor God's plan and to serve, without compromise and in full, the cause of evangelical unity on the basis of the Gospel and, in proportion to the degree of existing doctrinal agreement, cooperate also with others. In the awareness that God alone must be glorified ". This means that our churches must be able to discern and practice to the degree of collaboration possible with missionary agencies on the basis of the existing doctrinal agreement.

It is evident that, while for diaconal, evangelistic, prayer, and institutional representations of the evangelical people, or support for religious freedom, the sufficient level of doctrinal agreement is that indicated in the Statement of faith of the Evangelical Alliance.⁵ The planting of churches and the ministry of the church, in the church, requires a stringent doctrinal agreement based on the London Confession of Faith of 1689. It is unthinkable to plant new churches or to share the responsibilities of conducting those churches unless we have embraced a confessional ecclesiology that distinguishes our confessional churches.

7. In establishing relationships with missionaries in view of collaboration, our churches will weigh the degree of doctrinal agreement, but also the compatibility of their philosophy of ministry with the ecclesial project of our churches. This requires a serene and in-depth look into the foundational documents that guide the action of said missions in Italy⁶, verifying the extent of

⁵ <https://www.eauk.org/about-us/basis-of-faith>.

⁶ An example is the document "The Italy / Malta Foundations For Ministry" (2017) of the International Mission Board (IMB). In general, missions agencies have an orientation document that contains the guidelines of the mission agency.

the convergences and the existence of any critical points. Constructive relationships with churches of origin, and with the missionary agencies to which they belong; will be sought and developed, as our churches need to also be willing to be visited by groups from those churches and involved in some synergistic initiatives. The fact that the missionaries live in "two worlds" commits our churches to foster ecclesial and cultural integration, in the awareness that it will be necessary and even healthy for them to keep alive and continuous relationships with their world of origin.

In addition, the spiritual maturity of the missionaries will have to be evaluated, bearing in mind that, in most cases, they are solid and integral persons in terms of personal faith, but at the ministerial formational level may be in need of further growth. We have no expectation of being able to immediately and automatically charge them with direct responsibilities, but their involvement will follow a step-by-step itinerary underpinned by regular opportunities for evaluation and sharing. Moreover, their previous ecclesial experience is often marked by experiences in ecclesial worlds very different from ours and therefore integration is a process that requires attention, patience, and positive intentionality. Admission as church members, and gradual involvement in activities, are necessary paths to establish solid relationships fueled by trust and respect. Access to the IFED educational program (Theological Culture Course, Theological Days, Preaching Laboratory, the journal *Studi di teologia*, etc.) is an important way to promote the assimilation of the churches vision and the overall setting within the Italian Evangelical panorama.

As Paul was well aware, in the field of God there was a need for multiple collaborators, so he was certain of this: "He who plants and he who waters is nothing: God makes it grow" (1 Corinthians 3:7). May the Lord receive all praise and honor from what our churches, enriched by the help of missionaries and missionary agencies, will be able to give for the advancement of the Kingdom of God in Italy.

The Company of Elders of the Reformed Evangelical Baptist Churches in Italy has unanimously approved this document.

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