

## Synergy in Josiah Venture

*Dave Patty, March 21, 1995*

The needs in the area of youth ministry are compelling as we look at the countries of Poland and Czech. In both regions the evangelical church is small and struggling and the need for evangelism and leadership training pressing. Youth ministry is a prime context for addressing both of these vacuums.

The Josiah Venture staff also has many resources to bring to bear on this need. The years of experience represented by those on the team, the Sonlife training material, connections with people and programs in the United States, and our willingness to live and work here "on site" are all great assets.

Yet the presence of a need and the possession of corresponding resources does not automatically guarantee effectiveness. In the first place, there must be Godly character and the blessing and presence of the Lord if spiritual goals are to be accomplished. In the second place a number of cultural barriers must be navigated if our labor is to achieve lasting results.

Our arrival here puts us face to face with several problems:

We possess a very different perspective than the nationals we came to serve. We see the world differently, gravitate more readily toward certain solutions and away from others, feel life from different comfort zones, possess a different well of experiences, approach relationships from a distinct angle and, not the least, speak a different language. Even our language burns into our minds unique patterns of thought and ways of reasoning.

In some ways that perspective is better, in some ways worse. Some of our ideas and solutions could unlock worlds of possibilities for the Christians here. Others would be a total disaster and terribly inappropriate.

We don't know which is which.

Because of that we may do things that are destructive. Our presence may close certain doors and create unnecessary barriers. Our efforts may unravel productive systems and solutions, and replace them with chaos.

We may do things that are a waste of time. We may, in our ignorance, strike where the iron is cold instead of hot, and invest a tremendous amount of energy in something that has very little return. We may build something that is more temporary than permanent, something that will quietly disappear the moment we take our hands from it. We may generate nice smiles and polite pats on the back for our work, but little serious consideration from those who are shaping the future.

On the other hand, we may develop things that work, but are not reproducible. They are effective primarily because of unique resources we possess such as English ability, American appeal, money, opportunity to work at ministry full time, or specialized training. Our national friends may look longingly, but conclude that the same results are not possible in their context, because our resources are so different than theirs. They may not see past the outward trappings to the inner core that could be adapted to their setting, and thus conclude the example we have set is not possible for them to follow.

How do we minimize the impact of these problems? How navigate our way through them without timidly apologizing for our deficiencies, or worse yet, proudly steamrolling our perspective?

It seems there are three common approaches, each of which sets up different control parameters in response to this cross cultural dilemma.

### **You control the agenda, I serve the tea.**

Because my reference points are not to be trusted, I concentrate on supplementing and resourcing existing directions and priorities. I do not question the perspective of nationals, and assume, if we disagree, that they are always right. I do not initiate new efforts, but wait for and respond to the efforts initiated by nationals.

On the surface, this may seem like an ideal approach. It does indeed have a great deal of merit. However, it can place the missionary in the position of a national worker, performing tasks that could be done by locals, and, in fact, would probably be done better and more efficiently by them. It can also miss the creative energy released by new paradigms, since the resources of the missionary will be channeled according to existing structures and strategies. In addition, it may generate friction as hidden agendas clash below the surface of cooperation.

### **I control the agenda, you serve the tea.**

Because you do not understand my perspective, I work hard to bring others up to speed on all its facets, and keep my hand firmly on the helm until they have enough experience to sail the ship just as I would. I assume if I disagree with a national, that they mean well, but just don't have enough data or wisdom to make an accurate assessment. I argue my point carefully in order to win them to the truth. I use nationals in execution, but keep them from the key leadership roles, at least until they are fully "trained". I develop the core strategies and solutions in private or with other Americans, and then work on communicating them to the locals in a way that will motivate them.

This approach will rarely be championed in a mission effort. Though unappealing in theory, it remains very attractive in practice, and exerts an almost magnetic pull on cross cultural workers. It is usually the most comfortable of the possible solutions, and has the added advantage of allowing the missionary to have an immediate sense of impact and significance. It also clears up much of the fog surrounding strategy and direction, and gives the missionary a clear course to chart. This clarity is deceptive, however, because it is only a matter of time before local believers become disillusioned and unmotivated, and unseen road blocks hamper forward motion.

### **We draw straws to see who serves the tea.**

Since each of the solutions above carries baggage, I aim for compromise somewhere in between. In some settings I control the agenda, in others merely provide the resources. In this way I strive to bring my perspective to the issues at hand, as well as respond to yours.

This appears to solve the problems of both of our first two proposals. In actuality, however, it is not a new kind of approach, but merely a mixture of the two previous ones. "Somewhere in between" means only that I cross the middle on my way to the other side, fluctuating between capitulation and domination. This middle ground unfortunately retains the down side of each of the former approaches, depending on which one I use, and has the added liability of keeping others confused and unsure exactly what to expect.

While these approaches are quite common, there seems to be a fourth possibility as well, one that is in between the two extremes of control and submission, and yet is of a different nature than both of them. Those who study the working interactions of people label this approach **synergy**.

Synergy is difficult to explain on paper, but unmistakable when it occurs in experience. It produces a

dynamic release of energy and creativity, and uncovers solutions which were to this point hidden from both sides. It generates a combination of the resources that each side brings, a mixing of what each person has to offer, in a way that results in something new altogether. The end result is a situation in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and no one even remembers what part was brought by whom. In his book "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People", Steven Covey describes synergy as "Not my way, or your way, but a third way, a higher way."

Perhaps we all can recall the experience of being in an extremely productive and stimulating dialogue. It may have been a planning meeting, or perhaps just a bull session around the dinner table. Whatever the setting, something occurs which allows each person present to place all of their resources on the table, to transparently and non-defensively offer their perspectives, ideas and concerns. Once on the table, these items become community property, and began to be moved around in an attempt to find something which fits together, and most effectively solves the problem at hand. Some ideas are discarded, others are examined closely for the data behind them (which, in many cases, is more valuable than the ideas themselves). This process has a dynamic to it, a creative tension as opposing viewpoints are pitted against each other and new formulations are made in an attempt to answer the critiques.

Central to it all, however, is a spirit of openness and teamwork, in which no particular perspective needs to be protected as personal property, and no piece is too humble to be left unconsidered. There is an attempt at "win/win" solutions, where each party is happy with the conclusion. Each member recognizes that their perspective is incomplete, and listens carefully to understand the viewpoint of others. At the same time, there is a healthy honesty in which each member has the freedom to challenge others, argue passionately, and even change positions several times along the way.

With synergy, to continue the metaphor began above, the mission begins to control us, it becomes both bigger than us and our agenda, meaning it belongs to all of us. *The mission controls us, and we both forget the tea.*

Why might synergy be a valuable commodity in missions? In the first place, it has the potential of protecting the missionary from the poles of domination and capitulation, or the confusion of the alternating middle ground. But it also offers hope for a truly revolutionary contribution to the national setting. In the context of synergy a dynamic is created which can, over time, result in a paradigm shift, a change in the basic way of looking at or approaching problems.

Thomas Kuhn coined the phrase "paradigm shift" in his 1962 book "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions." From an intensive study of the history of science, he concluded that the most significant breakthroughs came with shifts in the basic perspective or ontology of particular area of scientific inquiry. For instance, the work of Copernicus was revolutionary because it resulted in a change in viewpoint from the earth as the center of the universe to the sun. Einstein rewrote the basic laws of physics when he proved that matter and energy were interchangeable. Each of these paradigm shifts altered the basic way of viewing reality, and unleashed a ripple of connected discoveries and new solutions. Whole vistas of knowledge were opened by a seeming simple, but very significant, change in perspective.

Kuhn argues, however, that paradigm shifts only occur when significant sources of data are not explained by existing theories. There is a conflict, a tension, an apparent contradiction. "Though almost non-existent during periods of normal science, deep debates occur regularly just before and during periods of scientific revolution, the periods when paradigms are first under attack and then subject to change," Kuhn says. "When scientists disagree about whether the fundamental problems of their field have been solved, the search for rules gains a function that it does not ordinarily possess."

This is exactly the kind of thing that can happen when people from two different cultures begin to work together. They each bring different perspectives to the problem or project at hand, different experiences, and most importantly, different paradigms. These basic sets of rules are often tacit, meaning that those who possess them are unaware of their existence. They seem at first to be basic and obvious to all, items of truth that are self-evident and need no debate. They seem to be universally true, but may actually be terribly inadequate, and the source of much blockage and wasted energy in the Lord's service. What is the nature of Christian growth, effective outreach, true worship, or fulfilling the great commission? Most believers begin Christian service with an answer to these basic questions already in place, and simply add information or resources to their current schema as they move forward.

Cross-cultural work possesses a level of complication not found in normal relationships. A national and a foreigner working together will have many more opportunities to come to contrasting conclusions, on everything from the nature of the current situation to the kind of future steps that would be reasonable and productive. This produces a tension, a certain kind of chaos, as the contrasting paradigms collide.

So who has the right paradigm? Whose perspective should win the other one over? There is a good chance that neither possesses the right one. But the process of working together can produce the kind of debate that reaches down to the "search for rules" and results in a *new formulation, one that is more robust, accurate, and productive than either side had to begin with. The combined resources can produce a ministry "revolution."*

It costs a great deal to put a missionary on the field. A national can often work the same ministry hours for much less money. Added to that, missionaries are marginal at many tasks that nationals do with ease, since they are always working in a tongue and culture that is foreign to them. If nationals can work better and cheaper, why are we here? Precisely because our presence can provoke a kind of synergy that rewrites the basic paradigms of ministry and unleashes a powerful ripple of energy and productivity in the local setting.

Obviously this does not always happen naturally. There seems to be a certain kind of environment that has to be in place for the fire to ignite, just as a real fire requires fuel, spark and oxygen to fan into flame. If any one of these elements are removed, the fire will be unable to start, despite an abundance of the other elements. In the same way, there seems to be four key dynamics that must be in place for synergy to begin. A synergistic environment needs to be ***hott, with the elements of Honesty, Ownership, Tension and Trust firmly in place.***

**Honesty** means that accurate information is flowing both directions. Often in a working relationship one side will withhold their information and perspective. Sometimes this is because of intimidation, other times because of a fear that the information will be misused.

This demands a keen eye and an inquisitive heart on the part of the missionary. In some cultures the prevailing pressure will be to automatically acquiesce to everything the "outside expert" says. In others there will be a pressure to keep everything purely "local", and discard the missionary's perspective outright because it is "foreign". Still others may nod on the outside, and then quietly do their own thing.

In every case the end result is the same. If either party is marginalized by silence, the synergistic process grinds to a halt. Each party needs to be engaged, honest and open about the pieces they are bringing to the table.

**Ownership** is a difficult item to quantify, but unmistakable when it is present. It occurs when the participant has something real at stake in the question being discussed. If this discussion solves a problem they are encountering or touches a passion that already exists in their soul, there will be a much higher commitment to involvement. Likewise, if they have responsibility to execute part of the plan, or if their "name" is on it and their reputation at stake they will be more motivated to work toward an optimal solution.

In any case, ownership causes people to say "we" instead of "you" or "I" and generates a high level of sacrifice and involvement. Each participant feels that they have a stake in the whole, therefore they can't back out when the going gets rough, or settle for a mediocre plan.

Direct responsibility builds ownership, and involvement in the decision making process does as well. As the adage states, "people tend to support what they themselves create." The more people get their hands involved in the creative process, the more they will feel a sense of commitment to "see the thing through." Another ownership builder is the weaving of already existing elements into a new plan. When a youth worker brings his youth group to an training event, or the elders are asked to lead a youth meeting, existing structures are integrated in to new forms, and existing ownership is woven in as well.

**Tension** is a key catalyst that stirs synergy. Too little tension and programs proceed as they always have, with predisposed paradigms unchallenged and firmly in place. Too much tension, and forward motion grinds to a halt and emotions cloud reality.

The optimal mix is something a missionary needs to continually evaluate. Just as flour must be slowly stirred into a recipe if it is to be absorbed, so too the missionary must often chose carefully the areas of input so as to keep the system from overloading. Some resources must be held back, and others introduced gradually, so as to not overwhelm the local setting and dominate the outcome. By the same token, the missionary must not be afraid of a manageable mess, since one will undoubtedly be created by their presence. They must take courage from the example of Jesus, in that he was not afraid to shake up people's worlds and pose questions that for a time remain unanswered.

**Trust** is the glue that holds the entire process together. When trust disappears, the synergistic environment is sabotaged. In the highly interactive and exposed process that synergy creates, the ability of each member to wound the other is also increased. If the other person is not perceived as "safe", key parts of the process will be protected from cooperate view or loaded with hidden agendas. At this point the focus will turn to protecting ones territory, proving ones point, maneuvering for position, or manipulating for personal gain. All of these spell death to true cooperate vision and problem solving.