



**North American Association of Christians in Social Work**  
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## **THE SISTER PARISH PHENOMENON**

**By: John Cosgrove, Ph.D., Doug Fogg, and Ellen Moore**

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## OVERVIEW

The last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the beginnings of what has become a movement which has seen the formation of ever increasing numbers of relationships involving faith communities from the “developed” nations of the Global North and similar entities and local communities in “developing” Global South. What the partners in these relationships (variously referred to as “parishes”, “congregations” and “churches” as well as “faith communities”) do together can differ significantly. Unfortunately, no nomenclature exists that distinguishes among types of relationships. Even if two relationships both use identical terms, e.g. “twinning”, “sister”, “partnerships”, to refer to themselves, that does not assure that they look or function alike. The term “International Inter Congregational Relationships” (IICR) has been employed to apply to all such relationships (Cosgrove, 2008). Nonetheless, while there is little empirical research on these relationships, what exists and a substantial body of anecdotal evidence allows some generalizations to be made about these relationships:

- IICRs are overwhelmingly between parties from Christian traditions;
- while the Southern partners come from all over the “developing” world, a considerable proportion of them are found in Latin America and the Caribbean, a region to which much of the origins of the movement can be traced,
- the large majority of the Northern partners, in relationships in this hemisphere and elsewhere, are from the United States;
- IICRs have become agents for positive social change in matters that impact both particular locations in the Global South and across the developing world; and,
- IICRs are both highly compatible with the core values social work – service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence - and especially appropriate for the participation of people of faith who are members of the profession.

This paper will give a brief review of the historical context from which the movement emerged. There will be a description of a range of activities associated with levels of involvement that take place within IICRs and of factors which influence those levels of involvement. There will be a description of the special strengths that IICRs bring to endeavors

to relieve human suffering in nations with few or undeveloped resources. Then suggestions will be made about how social workers can employ their knowledge and skills and be a part of these exciting and rewarding ventures. This will be followed by a detailed presentation of the work of Sister Parish, an organization which promotes and helps maintain relationships between congregations in the US and congregations and communities in Central America. These relationships represent a high level of involvement as described below but they also have additional distinct characteristics, not the least of which is their ecumenical approach.

### **The Genesis of International Inter-Congregational Relationships (IICRs)**

The last fifty years have seen our world become interconnected and interdependent in ways that few could have imagined. Advances have been achieved in communications, transportation and other technologies which make it possible to keep up with what is happening, as it is happening, in the far corners of the earth. The amount, quality and frequency of information have improved exponentially over the years as has the ease with which it can be accessed.

We have watched the last gasps of old colonial empires, followed by their morphing into forms that were, too often, no less exploitative. We have all become virtual eyewitnesses to destructive forces of nature and man to which local authorities and the international community have been unable or unwilling to respond effectively. It would eventually become almost impossible to ignore the disturbing images and cries of people without the means to end their poverty and to have a say in matters that affect their lives.

As the world was “shrinking”, here at home we had been working through our own domestic struggles which further sensitized us to injustice. Major steps had been taken in the US toward ensuring the civil rights of minorities in the 1950s and 1960s. Then, the War on Poverty helped us to see beyond individual failings to societal factors which created or exacerbated social problems. Since churches were among the few trusted and viable institutions in impoverished communities, they became focal points for service and reform. Religious leaders and faithful, across denominations, began to work together to support these efforts in a manner that would have been inconceivable only a few decades before.

What was happening here echoed international trends in terms of empowerment of peoples and faith-based participation. Complimentary threads in secular and religious thought

which were being woven together. In the late 1960's and throughout the next several decades theologians, particularly in the Americas were seeing spiritual and material well being as interdependent (as in the theologies of liberation, see Healey, 1990). Along with social theorists and activists of the time (see for example, Freire, 2000), they were also emphasizing the value of the perspectives of those who had been "objects" of top-down evangelization and social development, especially the victims of outright oppression in the Latin America and the Caribbean.

As technology facilitated greater contact between churches in the North and South, a sense of kinship developed between these distant brethren. An expression of this was the faith-inspired groups that traveled south to witness and take part in work for social justice of churches and community organizations. By their presence, these delegations gave visibility and thus a measure of protection to that work. People of faith have as well been the forefront of in assisting migrants fleeing political and economic conditions which denied them their fundamental human rights and the means to sustain life. This growing awareness and contact would lead to closer and enduring relationships, one of the most visible being the IICRs.

### **Levels of IICR Involvement**

IICRs participate in a level and range of activities along a continuum that also represent potential stages in the maturing of the relationship. The continuum extends from an involvement that social workers would recognize as being one of charity, i.e. one which primarily concerns itself with helping to meet the basic needs of the southern community. Deeper levels of involvement are more developmental, i.e. they seek to identify the reasons those needs exist and enable and empower the community to do something about them. A yet more intense involvement engages both partners in a mutually supportive relationship to ameliorate or eliminate systemic and structural problems, not only in the southern community, but in areas where similar problems exist elsewhere.

So, in some IICRs the southern partner may be the recipient of aid for food, clothing, medicine, shelter from their northern counterpart. Those relationships may stay at his level or may go on, for example, to improving local human capital for the long term by aiding educational and health care efforts. More direct and immediate efforts include the promoting of the development of social capital by providing experience working in and leading groups leading

to the growth of organizations of civil society. That is, groups which offer mutual support and cooperation in spheres of community development, work, special needs and advocacy.

Enhancing local “capital”, in the more literal sense of that term, is very popular in IICRs. That takes the form of facilitating the start-up and expansion of small businesses or micro-enterprises, often using the accumulation of assets of community members through microcredit programs.

The experiences of IICRs have informed actions that find inspiration in and address local needs while moving beyond them. Northern congregations have expressed their concerns to corporations, governments and other powerful interests about harmful conditions that their members and their southern partners have witnessed. They have lobbied against unfair labor, trade and immigration policies and practices whose impact are also felt in other societies and they have recruited allies in their religious and local communities to join in these actions.

IICRs may begin anywhere along this continuum. They may take part, sequentially or simultaneously, in activities like the ones described, all of which have value. There are as many factors that affect levels of involvement as there are IICRs, each of which has a distinct identity. However, it is possible to discern reasons for the differential involvement in IICRs.

### **Factors Influencing Levels of Involvement in IICRs**

#### **Time**

Any relationships that endure cannot be forged easily or quickly. With IICRs the process begins even before any contact is made. That may be either when the congregation decides to seek out a partner or considers responding to an opportunity to partner when one presents itself. The project, while apt to have been initiated by a few members, requires the “buy in” and continued backing of the leaders and other members of the congregation.

Once established an on-going investment in nurturing and maintaining the relationship with the partner is crucial. All of these tasks demands time and energy. To the extent that these tasks are compromised, it will be difficult for the IICR to continue or find its full expression.

#### **Interaction between Partners**

The progress and success of an IICR will be largely proportionate to the chances for representatives of the partners to meet with sufficient frequency to establish organizational and personal relationships. This can and should be supplemented by other types of communication, such as those made possible by technology, that is increasingly available even in remote areas.

Having an people “in-country” to facilitate the work of the IICR is ideal. However, it is of critical importance for the partners themselves to have sufficient face-to-face time to negotiate inevitable differences experience between the partners- who they are, where they come from, what they believe and how they see the world.

### **Respect for Difference in Religious Expression and Culture**

In a relationship in which a shared religious tradition is an essential component, it is vital for each partner to understand as much as possible about the particular spirituality of the other and their beliefs and practices. This necessitates an appreciation that the spirituality of the other finds validity and lasting meaning in the unique culture in which it has developed.

There is much wisdom in the following, oft quoted statement:

“Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on people’s dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival. (Anonymous).

Openness to other traditions, religious and cultural, is accompanied by a degree of risk. That is the possibility that one’s beliefs may be challenged. However, with the risk comes the chance for enrichment.

### **Mutuality**

IICRs flourish in an atmosphere in which both parties are perceived of, and believe, that they have as much to offer as the other. This can be difficult given that the respective prior experiences of the Northern and Southern partners in comparable situations were likely those of benefactor and supplicant and because of the often very substantial difference in material resources between the partners. Time, interaction and increased mutual understanding are needed to modify role expectations, correct inaccurate stereotypes and enter into full fellowship.

### **The Special Strengths of IICRs**

IICRs are a faith based response to the effects of the gross inequities in the distribution of power and the goods of the world. This situation conflicts with the fundamental convictions of the partners of the interrelatedness and interdependence of human kind and the responsibilities inherent in those convictions.

Secular responses are motivated, at least in part, by competing political, economic and other interests that can lead to inconsistent and ineffective outcomes despite considerably greater material investments. In addition they lack the kind of organizational and personal commitment possible in an IICR.

IICRs are anchored in communities of faith which draw strength not only from common beliefs but from the lasting bonds among members that are formed over time. These bonds are fostered by celebrations of liturgy and ritual including those that mark the passage of key life stages, birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death as well as by the leaders and fellow members being sources of support and comfort during material, emotional and spiritual crises.

### **Social Work and IICRs**

Those who participate directly in IICRs bring to them a variety of occupational backgrounds and abilities that create a rich pool of talent on which the relationship can draw. As for social work, the compatibility of the values of the profession and those that animate IICRs was mentioned previously. Additionally, the primacy of the “strengths perspective” in social work is very germane to developing countries where deficits may make it difficult to recognize underlying assets. Besides its ethical framework and practice principles, social work offers specific knowledge and skills that can be of use in IICRs.

For some time, education for the profession has been infused with content that encourages and enables its practitioners to view social issues thru a global lens. From the macro point of view they, for example, have familiarity with: international covenants and policies regarding human rights; efforts of governmental, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations to deal with the growing internationalization of social problems; and, with the related effects of globalization.

Because of another emphasis in contemporary social work, cross-cultural competence, practitioners are very aware of the influence of culture on perception and behavior, an understanding that is invaluable to working in IICRs.

In their professional formation and to varying degrees in practice, social workers learn program planning, fund raising, management, accountability and other organizational tasks. They are employed primarily in not-for-profit environments in which collaboration, often across



disciplines and agencies, is essential. This background is quite pertinent to working in and through congregations.

Knowledge of individual and group dynamics is always valuable. However, the usually brief and relatively infrequent visits to an IICR partner (annually is the norm), along with cultural and language barriers and a necessary focus on broader community concerns make it problematic for clinicians to engage in micro practice in the partner community. However, of potential value are insights into the personal and relational aspects of issues that may disproportionately affect impoverished communities, e.g. HIV/AIDS, abuse of alcohol and other substances. That potential can be realized when a sensitive exploration of local manifestations of such issues and of cultural appropriate solutions is undertaken in conjunction with representatives from the community.

Direct practice skills may also be of use in the preparation for visits to the partner. This can entail assisting in meetings in which those who are going to visit are encouraged to surface and explore their expectations of the experience. The same applies to meetings of returning visitors to help in the processing and integration of the experience.

The suggestions given above are examples rather than an exhaustive list. The actual contributions social workers can make to IICRs are determined by the relevance of their experience, their creativity in adapting it to the context of the IICR and how it compliments what their co-congregants and partners bring to the endeavor.

## **SISTER PARISH INC.**

### **History**

Sister Parish, was first founded in 1988 by Richard P. Fenske of former Lutheran Pastor from Maryland, and Vicki Schmidt, who had been active in a number of solidarity and refugee advocacy organizations. Building on their dream of establishing an organization which would link faith communities in the United States with communities in Central America, not to extend charity or promote mission, but to build solidarity and understanding between two very different groups of people as a means of establishing peace. Over the past 22 years, the Sister Parish has linked over 70 communities and thousands of people in 6 countries, despite shortages of funding, unstable governments, and various other challenges including travel restrictions and cultural differences, all of which have made for a variety of interesting learning experiences! Through it

all, Sister Parish has remained committed to solidarity rather than charity, partnership rather than aid, continuing relationships rather than a short-term mission experience. Today, Sister Parish, Inc. maintains 14 active linkages between various rural and urban communities in El Salvador and Guatemala, involving 6 different Christian denominations, with relationships from 2 to 17 years old.

### **The Sister Parish Mission**

Sister Parish exists to foster mutual understanding and commitment to peace and justice among people in the United States and Central America. This objective is pursued through intentional linking between churches and Christian communities in the United States and in Central America. Delegations travel to the North and South with home stays as an essential aspect in enhancing awareness and understanding, and in nurturing closer relationships.

The Sister Parish Vision:

- **Consciousness-Raising.** We will seek to transform the world by sharing each other's experiences so that we can better understand and overcome the sources of injustice and oppression.
- **Solidarity.** By putting ourselves in the reality of others and by building an interdependent community of brothers and sisters within and among countries, we promote mutual respect and dignity for all people, advocate for human rights, and work for social and economic justice for all.
- **Reconciliation.** We will live in peace with one another by finding the courage to recognize our own failings and to forgive each other despite the history of violence.
- **Ecumenism.** We will accept each other and respect each person's beliefs and practices, as we unite to work together so that all may share equally in the fullness of God's creation.

### **Structure**

Sister Parish Inc is a non-profit corporation governed by a U.S. Board of Directors. Our congregations in U.S. are linked through a Northern Assembly of Churches that meet once a year to support each other, share information, successes and challenges.

In Guatemala, communities are represented by a Directive Council that meets three times a year to revise and approve community to community projects, plan representatives meetings and provide input and information to the U.S. Board of Directors regarding the organization's activities in Guatemala.

In El Salvador, Sister Parish coordinates our work with the Association of Communities for the Development of Chalatenango, or the CCR. The CCR includes a network of over 100 communities that coordinate sistering work and other organizing in the region.

Sister Parish currently has two full time staff in Guatemala, one full time staff in El Salvador and one part time staff in the U.S.

### **Membership**

Sister Parish currently facilitates 13 relationship in Guatemala and Salvador.

9 linkages in Guatemala

4 linkages in El Salvador

The majority of our member congregations and communities in Guatemala and El Salvador are Catholic. In Guatemala we have one Episcopalian congregation, although many communities in the countryside infuse their worship and spirituality with traditional Mayan values and beliefs. In both countries, communities rely heavily on the teachings of Liberation Theology.

Sister Parish relationships may differ from other linkage models, as we often link congregations in the U.S. with entire communities in Guatemala and El Salvador. It is through these relationships that we see the ecumenism piece specific to the SP model shine through. In one rural community in Guatemala, the Sister Parish committee is made up families of various faiths including Catholic, Pentecostal and Mayan traditions.

In the U.S. our member churches are of the Catholic, Episcopalian, Methodist and Lutheran faith traditions. Member churches in the U.S. are located in Minnesota, North Dakota, Illinois, Washington, Maryland, North Carolina, Indiana and Virginia. All of our member communities in El Salvador are located in the Chalatenango region. In Guatemala, we have communities in the urban area of Guatemala City and in a number of regions in the north and northeastern regions of the country.

Churches in the north that decide to join Sister Parish are required to pay a yearly membership fee of \$750. This fee helps to cover costs related to facilitating the relationship, including staff salary, travel and office operations. Churches and/or individuals are also responsible for paying for delegation travel, which includes an overhead fee to Sister Parish Inc as well as in country costs. The total cost of a 10-day delegation, including the SP overhead fee is \$1,025.00 per person. This amount also includes all lodging, food and transportation in country.

In Guatemala and El Salvador, communities and congregations often learn about Sister Parish from friends and family, and generally approach staff about joining the organization and becoming linked with a congregation in the U.S. When this happens, staff meets with the community to discuss in detail what Sister Parish is about, mainly that it is a relationship-based organization that focuses on solidarity building rather than material projects. This is often a difficult concept for communities to accept, as so many organizations, especially faith-based organizations, in Latin America are charity based.

### **Operation**

Sister Parish staff is spread out between three countries. This structure creates challenges, but it is important to our mission to be physically close to the relationships that we are facilitating. Staff on the ground in Guatemala and El Salvador, are the link between the north and the south, translating communications, traveling to communities, sharing pictures and interpreting cultural differences. We also plan and facilitate delegations that travel north to south, as well as south to north. Because the Sister Parish experience is intense and often challenging for delegates, staff in the U.S. and Latin America facilitates orientation and guidance regarding what to expect while traveling.

As mentioned, Sister Parish is unique in that we travel not only from the U.S. to Latin America, but with delegations from Latin America to the U.S. This is an important piece in dignifying communities and recognizing that neither reality, in the U.S. or Latin America, is without its share of problems and challenges. Traveling in both directions reinforces the belief that personally experiencing another's reality is the key to truly understanding it.

For the past few years, the Sister Parish Director has been based out of Guatemala. For this reason, our main office is also located in Guatemala City. Our U.S. staff person plays the

important role of “holding down the fort” in the north, taking the lead in donor development, publications and office administration.

### **Examples of Current Sister Parish Relationships**

#### **Guatemala**

**Las Margaritas II** - One of Sister Parish's oldest relationships or *hermanamiento* has been of the Catholic Community of St. Francis of Assisi in Raleigh, North Carolina and the village of Las Margaritas II in the Ixcán region of Guatemala. Settled by refugees from the 30 year long Guatemalan Civil War, Las Margaritas was first linked with St. Francis in 1993. Since that time, there have been nearly 25 delegations, both north to south and south to north with over 150 delegates participating in this solidarity-building experience. The differences between the two communities are astounding. LMII is a very rural, farming community of 60 families which, until a gravel road was built 9 years ago, could only be reached by boat. The community has only had electricity for the past 3 years. Contrast this with St Francis, a vibrant Catholic community of 5000 families in a thriving southeastern city of 750,000 residents. Nonetheless, strong personal relationships have been built between the residents of Las Margaritas II and the parishioners of St. Francis over the past 17 years.

St. Francis generally sends 2 delegations to LMII per year, and brings a delegation to Raleigh from LMII every 3 years. Though regular communication during intervals between delegations was always difficult, improved technology and infrastructure in Guatemala has made it possible for the two communities to communicate using cell phones and skype programming on a monthly basis for the past couple of years.

The examples of personal growth in both communities are evident. Delegates from St. Francis have become active in advocating for their LMII brothers and sisters by contacting the Guatemalan embassy, writing to and visiting their representatives in Congress, and educating themselves about such issues as Mining, Hydroelectric Power, NAFTA, and CAFTA, and their affects on rural communities in Central America. Residents of LMII have been empowered to purchase the land on which their village is situated, build typewriting school for their children (a requirement in Guatemala to move on to secondary education), as well as advocating for themselves for improved medical care and secondary education for their children. This partnership between the two communities has been important to Sister Parish, Inc. as a whole, as

LMII has been very active in the Guatemalan Directive, and St. Francis has maintained a consistent presence on the Sister Parish Board of Directors and the Northern Assembly of Churches. This is just one of many examples of the strong and mutually-beneficial relationships that have been formed through a Sister Parish *hermanamiento*.

**El Salvador** - In El Salvador all of the SP communities are located in Chaletenango. Chalate is a region with a majority population made up of ex-combatants of the FLMN (now a political party). As a result it is an area of impressive community organization with strong ties to international solidarity organizations. It is also a region under attack from transnational corporations that want to carry out large mining, hydroelectric dam and mega-highway projects. Due to the high level of organization in Chalate around these and other issues, the SP relationships in El Salvador are “advanced” in their understanding of the impact and influence that international solidarity can have. Likewise, rich spiritual exchanges take place between church and community, as Salvadoran folks share the link between their struggle and the liberating Gospel. Many linkages are also able to carry out successful scholarship projects, often supporting students through college.

### **Opportunities for involvement for faith communities in North America**

The best way to get involved with Sister Parish is to come on a delegation. There is no question that the experience of traveling to communities, meeting people face-to-face and learning about their spirituality, culture and society is the only way to fully understand what this concept is all about.

Sister Parish now offers open delegations twice a year for people that are not affiliated with a member church. These delegations visit SP communities in ES or Guatemala and often have a theme, for example, we organized a delegation to ES to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Archbishop Romero’s assassination.

Join us for our Winter 2011 Delegation “Resistance & Renewal in the face of Powers and Principalities” (*Ephesians 6:1*). Travel with us to El Salvador where you’ll meet people who are organizing to protect their land and loved ones. Go on a fact finding mission to investigate the effects of mining, hydroelectric dams and highway projects on rural communities and return

home ready to educate your own community on the effects of globalization and environmental destruction.

If you are interested in Sister Parish for your church but are unable to travel that is okay too. Staff can help walk you through the process of deciding if Sister Parish is right for your congregation. In either case contact [usoffice@sisterparish.org](mailto:usoffice@sisterparish.org)

You can get on our e-list and our mailing list or visit Sister Parish on Facebook <http://www.facebook.com/Sister.Parish> or go to our blog [www.sisterparish.typepad.com](http://www.sisterparish.typepad.com) to stay informed about the issues that are affecting communities in Guatemala and El Salvador and about what Sister Parish is up to. Also, to see pictures and read about community projects, delegations and southern gatherings go to our website <http://sisterparish.org/>

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### Useful Resources

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