

TOGETHER WITH GOD

working with the church



Interserve is an interdenominational and truly international community of Christians, bringing God's love to the peoples of Asia and the Arab world through word and action. Wherever we work, we do so in partnership, serving the global church and encouraging newer mission movements. We serve in some of the hardest places in the world in obedience to Jesus' commission to "go and make disciples of all nations".

The purpose of the Vision & Practice series is to promote and build a greater understanding of Interserve's ethos and direction.

Vision & Practice Series:
Together with God: Working with the Church
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PUBLISHED BY
Interserve International
www.interserve.org

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INTRODUCTION

God has always been at work to display his glory, wisdom and power, making all things new. Central to that work, our risen, reigning and returning Lord is building his church.


And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.¹

The mission of the Father and Son are continued in the power of the Spirit through the church. He uses the faith and lives of his people, empowered by the Holy Spirit,² to proclaim the gospel and demonstrate his love. All those who become followers of Jesus, from every tribe, tongue and nation,

join a new community of faith, centred on a common relationship with God as revealed in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The fulfilment of God's mission requires that the whole church work together.

Interserve cooperates with existing worshipping communities and other Christian agencies in our areas of service, wherever they share similar goals and a biblical foundation. We believe that working together in partnership with the church is a biblical principle and that it bears fruit in effective ministry, good stewardship and a commitment to express the unity of the Body. Hence, Interserve intentionally seeks partnership with the church. ☩

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“ THE EVER-CHANGING NEEDS OF PEOPLE AND THE WORLD’S DIVERSE CULTURES REQUIRE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS ALWAYS TO BE OPEN TO WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING TO US IN THE SCRIPTURES. ”

THE CHURCH

We believe that partnership begins with a biblical understanding of the church. Inadequate views lead to misunderstanding, tension and crisis, and these adversely affect relationships within the church, between churches, and with other organisations like mission agencies.

The ever-changing needs of people and the world’s diverse cultures require followers of Jesus always to be open to what the Spirit is saying to us in the Scriptures.

We do not create a dichotomy between church and mission organisations like Interserve. Both are part of the Body of Christ, appropriate contextual and functional expressions of the one Body. Indeed, in a number of contexts where the national church has no freedom to exist openly, mission workers provide the only visible sign of the church. At the same time, individual members not only belong to the universal body of Christ but also are called to express that belonging through participation in the community of believers we call the local church.

We believe that, in his sovereign grace, our Lord adds to the church all those who experience salvation. When we are truly related to Christ, we enjoy union with the Head and communion with the members of his body. Whoever is born of the Spirit can never be an only child, but belongs to the family of faith, whose Father is God.

The church possesses a unity which transcends all human distinctions, arising out of the common confession, “Jesus is Lord”.

The church is the people of God today who live in continuity with the people of God in the Old Testament, fulfilling the promise made to Abraham and his descendants to be a blessing to all nations, to be a light and to proclaim God’s glory to all.³ The church belongs to God and continues in his people, seeking to keep the faith of the Apostles, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit. The church is universal, transcending culture, time and geography, but finds earthly expression in local communities gathered in Christ’s name. Whatever form these worshipping communities may take (and Christians experience a rich diversity in this matter!), their

calling is to make God’s wisdom known not only in this world but also in the heavenlies.⁴

The church’s objective is to bring acceptable worship to God, to declare his glory, to nurture the people of God with fellowship and teaching, and to minister through wholistic service, applying all the gifts of Christ’s body to a vast range of human needs. Because the church is God’s, the mission of the church is God’s mission. Every believer is called to use his or her unique spiritual gifts to fulfil the mission of the church. Every faith community’s vision must, in turn, be lives and communities transformed by a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Transformation is needed on every level – spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual – and in every sphere of



life, community, human structures and the created order. Wholistic mission includes growing life-long disciples. It also includes calling disciples into fellowship with other believers. That can involve facilitating their movement into an existing community, or where there are no worshipping communities it may mean the formation of entirely new

worshipping communities, brought into being by the Spirit and the Word.

Successful churches pursue that vision with humble service in Jesus' name, without seeking status or power. When individuals and churches serve in this way, Christ is glorified and his kingdom grows. ✿



THE CHURCH AND INTERSERVE

Interserve has always had an expressed commitment to work with and within the church.

This is clearly stated in our purpose: “To make Jesus Christ known through wholistic ministry, in partnership with the global church, amongst the neediest peoples of Asia and the Arab world.”

We believe that God, in his providence, raises up specialist agencies and structures, such as Interserve, to partner with churches and to stimulate and assist them to be catalysts for mission. We rejoice in the reality of the global church and recognise the global nature of the mission movement that has sprung from it.

Wherever we work, we seek to do so in partnership with local and national churches, where they exist. A commitment to the development of local churches and to the facilitation of those churches into mission is at the heart of Interserve’s mission call.

Interserve listens to the church as it articulates its needs, its vision and the interpretation of the gospel within its culture. In this way we learn and more effectively serve and partner together.

Interserve Partners are Christian professionals called to live and serve among the people of Asia and the Arab world. Interserve trains, supports and cares for these individuals and families as they pursue mission in the world’s difficult places. In the larger context, though, Interserve seeks to partner with the worshipping communities

which send these servants into the world. Partners sent from a church with Interserve are accountable to both the church and Interserve.

Consider Paul and Barnabas, sent on their first missionary venture by the Spirit working through the church in Antioch.⁵ Interserve seeks worshipping communities which, like the church in Antioch, will make Jesus’ last command⁶ their first priority, and which will look forward eagerly to hearing the reports of what God has done.⁷

We value every opportunity to be partners in the gospel and to work with faith communities – whether well-established, or consisting of only a handful of believers – in our area of service in proclaiming the gospel, discipling those whom the Spirit brings to faith in Christ, and encouraging all members of the body to play their part in God’s mission. For some, that means involvement in cross-cultural service, as was the case for Paul and Barnabas and the Antioch church. For all, it means learning more and caring more effectively, in order to pray and support the church’s mission, wherever God has called us to be.

Partnership with the church can be individual or organised, formal or informal. Socio-political conditions, security concerns, and local issues influence the shape of the church, and therefore Interserve’s partnership with it, in any particular place. Interserve seeks to provide a link between needs and available resources, linking the

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‘sending’ church with the needs of people in the countries where our Partners work, linking churches with the needs of those who live around them; and linking Partners with the resources needed to fulfil their call to service.

Interserve’s commitment is to be a church-oriented mission agency, to add value to a church’s mission, whether it is well established, just emerging, or anywhere in between. This has its challenges, as visions and values vary greatly. Churches change. There are issues of theology and practice. These difficulties are magnified by cultural

differences and language barriers.

As if that were not enough, churches in different stages of development require different kinds of partnerships. Partnership is a complex subject in itself, requiring careful thought, but we believe it includes respecting what God is doing in churches at every stage in their development, and wherever a church may be in the maturation process. Whatever a church’s characteristics and capacities, we want to see that church freed for mission, with a vision and plan that puts it in the centre of God’s purpose in the world. ✠

SENDING AND RECEIVING CHURCHES

Interserve has been interdenominational throughout its history. We recognise that the body of Christ is diverse, and that no one denomination or manifestation of spirituality can fully capture the brilliance of the gospel.

We do not seek to mirror the form, pattern and culture of the churches we come from, but we seek to demonstrate in our teams a rich diversity of biblical spirituality. Our desire is to nurture and learn from the local church as it brings biblical truth to bear on local culture, reflecting the beauty of the gospel expressed through the church.

Our statement of faith lays out what we believe to be the essential elements of the Christian faith, and forms the basis of partnership with the church. Interserve seeks to be a fully international community, and participation is open to all people who are committed to Christ, irrespective of their culture or nationality. We appreciate the opportunities our work provides to put that commitment into practice and to enjoy its rich fruit. Indeed, the growth of the global church now means that mission is from everywhere to everywhere. The interchange of ministries through spiritually gifted persons from all over the world makes for mutual enrichment and deepens fellowship in the gospel. The church in all its diversity helps us learn about the nature of God and mission, through differing narratives of the birth and development of the gospel and church in each culture. In that sense, the traditional distinction between 'sending' and 'receiving' countries does not make sense anymore. Even so, there is a difference between a country with a new church, or a place in which there really is no church, and nations where the church is established and has significant resources. In such instances, the distinction between 'receiving' and 'sending' still helps us to identify a particular set of challenges and best practices in helping churches to achieve their mission goals. ☼

INTERSERVE AND THE RECEIVING CHURCH

Where there is an existing national or local church, Interserve seeks to work with it according to the following guidelines.

BUILDING UP THE CHURCH

In every country where we serve, we seek to do so without perpetuating our organisation or projects. We recognise that, in most receiving contexts, the local church exists and is growing. Local churches are God's primary agent for discipleship and for the transformation of their nations. Therefore, we are committed to building up the church so that it can fulfil its role. Interserve partners need to intentionally come alongside the church in the country of service, to work in and through it, and to challenge and equip it in a spirit of humility and mutuality. This will involve listening to the church and entering into dialogue with people.

We expect our Partners to have demonstrated a love for the church and to have exercised their spiritual gifts in a local congregation or similar fellowship in their home country, before assuming cross-cultural ministries. We then assist Partners in using their gifts for building the local church, recognising their different church backgrounds and cultures, and providing appropriate instruction and orientation in their areas of service. This includes learning about the church in that country and the local language.

Learning the local language is only one step of many to understanding contextualisation. In church planting or building an existing church, Interserve is committed to the complex and diverse processes of contextualisation. In instructing a new believer from another faith, we seek to be aware of the many struggles in this ongoing process. It is a journey in which each new disciple needs to be given time and space, as he or she grows in new-found faith.

FACILITATION, NOT CONTROL

Interserve workers seek to facilitate the church's ministry, not control it. We are sensitive to cultural differences, and in general do not seek roles of leadership in established national churches. We plan ministries and projects in consultation with the local church, and with the church's best interests in mind. When there is a possibility to work in

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a new country Interserve makes that decision along with the church in that country, where it exists.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Occasionally financial assistance may be provided in a way that honours God and encourages Christians to depend upon God, not upon human resources. In channelling funds to churches or other Christian organisations, we consult with church leaders on the wisdom of such transfers and their use. We oppose the view that the provision of money buys the right to dictate policy.

WISDOM, SUBMISSION AND INVOLVEMENT

We recognise that in some locations, especially where the church is very small or persecuted, the church or national believers might be harmed by internationals associating openly with the church. But, where possible, Partners should be active in a local congregation, seeking to identify with it and submitting to the guidance of its leaders. Interserve seeks to be accountable to the church in meaningful ways, listening carefully to national leadership on issues of cultural relevance and contextualisation, and allowing the church to evaluate our work in their country.

An international church may often be an important part of an Interserve Partner's spiritual and social life. Indeed, Interserve has a specific commitment to recruit and place Partners as pastors and workers in international churches. We see a key role in these churches for discipling and mobilising the Christian

Diaspora, as well as being a witness to the local population. But participation or involvement in an international fellowship should never preclude involvement in a local worshipping community, except, of course, in those places where there is no church as yet or where it causes harm to national churches or believers.

PATIENTLY PROPHETIC

Interserve Partners have the freedom to explore new ways of proclaiming Christ to the 'neediest people'. At the same time, we have a responsibility to stimulate churches, even very new ones, to become involved in mission, establishing new worshipping communities which, in turn, develop their own cross-cultural mission.

Interserve has a history and experience of working with churches in areas of social justice, politics, the role of women, family relationships and a host of other important matters. We share and teach from our experience on these things with gentleness and humility. We recognise our place as guests in a country, we acknowledge the beams of wood in our own eyes, and we follow the preeminent work of the Holy Spirit in leading people into all truth.

CHALLENGING OTHERS

Interserve challenges institutions, and para-church agencies with which we are associated, to plan their activities in consultation with and for the benefit of the church, and to join us in working with the church in a manner consistent with the principles we have described.

Where there is no existing church, Interserve works within the following parameters to help establish new churches.

BUILDING THE CHURCH

Interserve uses church-planting and church development activities appropriate to the particular culture and situation. Establishing new worshipping communities is a complex process, involving Spirit-given resources. These resources may be gifts of evangelism, spiritual warfare, disciple-making, teaching, administration and faith. All Partners are expected to be involved in disciple-making and to support the establishment of new churches in contextually appropriate ways. We realise that bearing witness to the love and sacrifice of Jesus on the cross can sometimes be very costly, even to our

very lives. Activities will vary greatly from person to person, and from place to place. Since no one person possesses all of the resources, church planting is a corporate, team activity. Our primary concern is to stimulate the national church to establish new worshipping communities. Interserve Partners, however, retain the freedom to initiate evangelism and discipling where the local church is unable or unwilling to undertake this important task.

TRUTH AND LOVE

Interserve Partners seek to proclaim the truth and demonstrate love for the glory of God. We combine service and witness in wholistic ministry. This includes giving to God for his glory our work and professional skills, our friendships, family relationships, recreational interests and every other part of life.






CULTURE SPECIFIC CHURCHES

We believe in the oneness of all believers in Christ, and we affirm the importance of culture-specific churches and the value of integrating disciples into worshipping communities. We understand that this is a journey, and that some may take longer on the journey. At the same time, we recognise that it may sometimes be necessary to help to form fellowship groups of new disciples sharing a common

background, in which they will find mutual acceptance and be able to worship in culturally appropriate ways. Hence we seek churches that are rooted in Christ and under the authority of the Bible, but also clearly related to local culture. Training and empowering indigenous church leadership is a necessary activity and one in which we participate as learners also.





LEAVING THE OUTCOME TO GOD

We desire the church to grow, but we first of all seek to be faithful and persevering, not 'successful' in human terms. We are willing to work the hard, stony ground as well as the more fertile soils. We rejoice at every person who becomes a disciple of Jesus and experiences spiritual breakthrough, but we do not judge the worth of our ministry by numbers. We look for long-term, lasting results, and not for immediate gratification. We know that

there are many times when good results are not easily measured or seen, and that working in resistant cultures requires courage, hard work, patience, and above all, faith. What we want is a long obedience in the same godly direction for ourselves and for those whom we serve. We appreciate churches and believers in the sending places who also understand this important ministry principle. ❀



INTERSERVE AND THE SENDING CHURCH

Where Interserve works with established churches which send out cross cultural workers, we abide by the following guidelines.

ENVISION AND EQUIP

We aim to envision and equip the church for mission in Asia and the Arab world. We believe that we have a key role in advocating for the peoples of these regions, in helping the church to gain vision, understanding and commitment to participate in the mission of God in these challenging places. Interserve is active in taking the initiative to promote cross-cultural ministry, whilst seeking to be responsive to the requests of the local church. As always, relationship and respect is the basis of partnership.

AFFIRMING THE CHURCH

We affirm the church as the primary sending agency for cross-cultural workers. We recognise that there is a growing interest and commitment by churches to be directly involved in mission and are grateful for this. At the same time, we take the initiative to offer our services and build relationships, especially if we share or could share a cross-cultural worker with a particular congregation. We believe that our experience gives us insights which can be helpful to the church. In particular, Interserve strives to share its vision for wholistic ministry, its learning about best practice on the field, and the complex process of calling, screening,



approving, training, commissioning, supporting, and receiving back those whom God calls to share the good news of Jesus Christ across cultures. We want to share the decision-making in these important areas with the church. Interserve also recognises that support through prayer, finances and other means is an integral part of mission, in which all Christians can and should share. In this way, then, the family of Interserve provides additional support for the sending churches.

ASSISTING THE CHURCH

We assist the church with member care. The church is ultimately responsible for the care of each person it sends. We recognise that there may be situations where the church in newer sending countries is not able to assume this responsibility fully. In these situations Interserve will seek to develop the church's capacity to do so. Effective member care is a key aspect of long-term success in the field, and is very difficult to provide from a distance. Interserve's international structures and personnel enable us to provide that service to those who partner with us. Interserve's role is to facilitate member care, involving the sending church in the process. This also includes help finding appropriate placement, holding workers accountable, providing assistance to children, debriefing workers when they return from the field, and helping them connect with their home support base – all important aspects of member care.

COMMUNICATION LINKS

We provide communication links between the sending church, the

receiving church (where it exists), other related organisations, and workers in the field. Interserve Partners often work with NGOs (non-government organisations). Some are sent by a denominational mission board, while others are connected to a business or project in their country of service. Interserve's flexibility and its servant attitude enable us to work within a great many situations and layers of relationship and to make this work effectively by ensuring proper and helpful communication between all parties involved. Thus, decisions affecting personnel and their ministries can be shared. This is especially important for the primary sending organisation (church, business, etc.) which is, typically, a great distance from the worker in the field.

ROOM FOR GROWTH

We allow options and room for growth. Partnerships with sending churches are not a 'one size fits all' operation. Every sending church (and its culture) is unique in its goals, needs and expectations. Some want to be directly involved in nearly every aspect of a Partner's ministry, while others want to assign many more responsibilities to Interserve. Financial support, language learning needs, and cultural adaptation issues will vary greatly between the various sending churches. Our goal is to create vital partnerships from the beginning to the end of our involvement with workers, but we don't expect every church partnership to be exactly the same or equally successful. What we do expect is improved wisdom and best practice, both for the church and for Interserve as we work together. ☸

CONCLUSION

Some people choose not to get involved in partnerships. They may simply enjoy their freedom, or be afraid of the complications involved, have had a bad experience or hold negative opinions about the church or mission agencies.

We understand these barriers, but since its founding in 1852, Interserve has always chosen partnership for the discipling of the nations. Our love for God's church dictates this path and so partnership with the church is our way of working while we seek to overcome our respective faults and failings. From the beginning Interserve has emphasised corporate, team effort more than the work of individual 'heroes,' and has made service our goal, striving for the expansion of Christ's kingdom and not seeking individual recognition.

“What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the

one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building” (I Corinthians 3:5-9).

If we substitute 'mission agency' and 'church' for 'Apollos' and 'Paul' here, the same point applies. We are all servants, all co-workers in God's service. It has always been our understanding that we are part of the global church. We are thus God's fellow workers alongside the worshipping communities in our home countries and in the Arab world and Asia. Mission is not competition among Christians but is what we are called to do as one great family of faith.

Most of all, worshipping communities, mission agencies and individual believers on every continent have one purpose: to render service in the unity of the Spirit. We believe that, essentially, Interserve's way of working with the church is to work together, with God. ☸

NOTES

- ¹ Matthew 16:18 "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."
- ² Ephesians 1:18-21 "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, - and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength - he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come."
- ³ In Galatians 3: 6-14 the Scriptures foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham. Christ redeemed us, so that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.
Genesis 22:17-18 "I will surely bless you, and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore ... and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed."
In Isaiah 49:6 the servant of God will become "a light for the Gentiles" that his salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.
- ⁴ Ephesians 3:10 "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms."
Ephesians 6:10-12 "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."
- ⁵ Acts 13:2-4 "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus."
- ⁶ Matthew 28:19-20 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
- ⁷ Acts 14:26-28 "From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples."

Interserve has always been committed to working with, and within, the church. This booklet contains an overview of how Interserve relates to the global church as, together with God, we strive for the expansion of Christ's kingdom.

*Lives and communities
transformed through encounter
with Jesus Christ.*