

Navigating the Multiple Stages of Partnership

by *Chris Jones*

When asking for directions, we do not like to hear, "Well if I were you, I wouldn't start from here!"

Partnership in missions sometimes can feel like that. We may begin with what we think is a clear definition of what we want to create but find in time that it is neither an easy or self-evident exercise to develop a meaningful missions partnership. All too often we do not get far into our journey before we realize that the mental map we had envisioned seems strangely inadequate in the complex synthesis of good ideas and local realities.

It would be folly of me to presume to be able to give you an exhaustive road map through the stages of partnerships in such a limited treatment of the subject, but I would encourage you to keep going and to persevere in your various partnerships for mission. The Body of Christ, the fellowship in the gospel, and the family of God are all compelling pictures of partnership that should spur us on. It is worth the effort to engage carefully and wisely in kingdom partnerships. I hope my comments will be a helpful insight to prepare you for what awaits you in that wonderful world.

Question: *To which do you think a partnership is most similar—a marriage, a business, or a team? How does your preferred analogy affect your understanding of, and emphasis on, partnerships in mission?*

The Essential Mindset

Field partners who come with a deep understanding of the body and the community of faith find it easy to collaborate. Workers who are prepared by their agency or their own church philosophy of the body to value each and every believer around them will find it easy to work together. It usually takes a little while to come through the initial shock of it all, but sooner or later they are going to recognize the enormity of the task of "discipling a nation" and will appreciate why God sent a body, not just one finger for this task.

Once your workers have begun to realize who the body around them is, they can begin the task of gathering together so the body can do its work. I can scratch my nose with one finger, but writing is impossible, and let's not even consider lifting a chair! God has provided a body for you on the field. Find it and begin to work together as God intended.

Question: *How much space is there in your field plan for collaboration and for the time it takes to establish the real foundations of effective cross-cultural ministry—relationships? Is your platform, strategic five-year plan, team structure, etc., set in stone, or can it flow with the direction of the host community? Flexibility, margins, and bridge points are all advisable additions to whatever you have planned.*

Two Tracks

Descriptive technical language and agreed terms are essential for teaching and describing to others what we mean by partnership. However, they fail sometimes to express the deeper essence of what partnership on the field, in its various stages, is all about. At the heart of any good partnership lies some form of relationship. Relationships have phases, so partnerships and the relationships at the core of them also go through

phases. To parody Bruce, the shark trying to stay on the fish-free wagon in "Finding Nemo": "Partnerships are people, not projects."

In that sage vein, I would like to say that from my observation, there are two tracks that field partnerships can run on, and they need not be mutually exclusive. The Western, donor-driven track is the one that people write books about. The other track is that of incarnation, assimilation, and familial integration. It is Ruth and Naomi; it is Rahab and her family; it is Christ "tabernacling" amongst us, raised up and drawing all unto Himself, united around a cross.

This second track is where our otherness ceases to be an issue, and we join ourselves together with the host people and with other teams by dying to ourselves, our culture, our strengths, and our ways, and then become one. It is a unity



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without uniformity, a Trinitarian coming together of the three-strand cord. This aspect of partnership is more intrinsic, far-reaching, and pervasive. It is the place where, despite our differences, we come together to join our strength and truly express our whole. This is not just for the purposes of a project with definable and limited goals; it is who we really are.

A Better Way

At the heart of partnership, we come together because this is the church, and this is the family of God. Without this underpinning, partnerships can become marriages of limited temporary convenience. For some, such marriages are a welcome improvement over what has been our sad record in missions, but to me, they remain second best.

The nature of much of our Western track to partnership is donor driven, with a marketplace culture of missions with donors and timelines. We must state the vision and define the stages incumbent on achieving it, and then form a plan to raise whatever it will cost. This makes excellent sense when building a Bible College, translating the Bible, planning your next project, but it becomes less effective at the field end when local cultures, expectations, and sensibilities are involved. Not to mention the humans that created them.



One of the sad effects of this approach has been the creation of many monuments to commemorate our efforts but with no actual cultural transformation. We need to see people changed, not projects completed. If we are not careful, our donor-driven project approach can cause host cultures to feel that they are part of a master plan that has been birthed out of country and without their knowledge (which happens to be true!).

How often have I smiled whilst listening to an advert for an FDA-approved drug, where the narrator quickly finishes his description of the drug with the words, "One known but rare side effect of this drug is death!" Let's be careful as we reach out to locals that we are not exposing them to medicine with unpleasant side effects.

When field partners seek to collaborate with the host community, we need to recognize the assumptions we bring with us. The implicit, not-so-subliminal assumption that "West is best" needs to be considered, otherwise we can end up asking local people to the table to speak a language they do not understand and play a game by rules they don't know. They may respect our maturity in Christ but that can cause us to forget that one size rarely fits all, and national partners do not always feel able to tell us what doesn't fit them.

We need to be aware that there are more things that separate us than language. We are the guests. We are the new-

bies, the beginners, and the learners. If we adopt that position, we may spend enough time with our hosts to respect them and their "different way." Remember, they are experts on the problems that we have not even discovered.

Question: "Partnerships are built with trust but founded on humility." What can you do to intentionally model and build on this kind of thinking when you partner in mission?

Phill Butler's book, *Well Connected*, provides an insightful description of partnership from a real master, and I see no real reason to repeat what he has said so well. I will, however, share my own experiences of the stages of the partnership life cycle in the hope that it will prepare you to know what to expect.

To provide some background: I initially worked as a church-commissioned church planter in a majority Muslim country before being asked to be a facilitator 11 years ago. Since then, I have formed and maintained several partnerships focused on one unreached people group spread through several nations. For the last eight years, I have been based in the USA, overseeing a resource partnership that is transitioning into a non-profit corporation as well as giving oversight to the facilitators of four international partnerships.

Interdev was one of the pioneers of partnering to reach the unreached, and they identified four stages to many partnership life cycles. Their concept of partnership follows very much a Western business mindset of limited, achievable, definable goals accomplished via the effective working together of multiple partners. These stages all contain specific challenges and points of strength. I will paraphrase them:



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1. Exploration

In this first stage, the "catalyst" person

(facilitator, champion, vision bearer) or group of people begins to share the need they see for collaboration and partnering to achieve a "vision goal" considered beyond the capacity of any one group. People who have some stake in seeing the vision achieved or people who may be able to contribute to meeting this vision are approached. When the time is considered right, the catalyst person calls them to meet together to prayerfully consider whether they should form a partnership to meet the identified needs.

2. Formation

In this stage, key players are assembled and the vision is presented, followed by the question, "Is this the right time and the right way to form a partnership?" If the answer is "yes," then some type of agreement and resolution, either formal or informal, is developed to lead the way forward. Goals are clarified, methodology is discussed, human and

material resources are considered, and working groups may be formed to meet specific goals and objectives.

Typically, a facilitator emerges, often the catalyst person from the exploration stage. This person serves full time or part time, seconded from their agency or, as in my case, from their church. They may serve alone or with a facilitation team. Different partnership phases may call for a person with different gifts, so it is not uncommon for there to be many facilitators through the life of a partnership.

3. Operation

Partnership is a dynamic process, and change and refocus may be necessary as efforts move forward. New partners may be added as they see the benefits. The facilitator is now fully operating and may build a team of other leaders around them. Working groups, if necessary, should now address their assigned challenges.

4. Maintenance

This stage is not included in all partnership discussions, but it is an important phase for those operating over a prolonged period of time. Often these partnerships will have had to cycle through different facilitators or reacted to changing approaches by host communities. Such changes necessitate strategies to maintain and reset the course of the partnership.

Question: *In which stage is your partnership currently? Can you define additional stages? How does identifying stages help you understand and manage your expectations?*

The Importance of Adjusting to Change

Many internal factors in a partnership's life and focus can change over time. One partnership had been operating for six years

without local leaders on the facilitation team. This was due to the fact that there were very few local believers at the time of the partnership's formation. Six years later, there were sufficiently mature local believers to include in the workings of the partnership. Their inclusion was of great significance to the life of the partnership and its focus.

In the Central Asian arena where I work, there is a constant threat to partnership continuity from the instability of visa tenure. Good and effective workers are often the most at risk of deportation or visa revocation, and this is a challenge to any partnership's long-term goals.

In other partnership arenas where visa retention is not a factor, there are other obstacles. It is not unusual for local realities to demand change in a partnership, particularly

when the goals require substantial time to achieve. This should come as no surprise and should be expected.

Typically, a well formed partnership starts with a lot of energy and partners clearly understand and appreciate the need for collaboration. As time goes by, the more intractable parts of the challenge begin to bite into the resolve of a partnership to keep going. Fatigue and at times exhaustion can set into a group, and cause their desire and vision to wane.

At that point, a motivated and focused facilitator can help support the partners, define the issues, and if necessary, help reframe or recalibrate the elements needed to provide the necessary focus and commitment.

In one partnership gathering of local pastors, the issue of different theological camps suddenly emerged. Previously, the pastors had felt threatened by external attack, so they found it easy to

lay aside any potentially divisive issues.

When a less challenging atmosphere gave them more time to consider their differences, a rift threatened the unity they had enjoyed under external pressure.

Situations change and partnerships have to be adept at reframing or restating their approach to new realities, and at times must reassess their goal. At other times it may be appropriate to call the partners back to what still remains the core purpose, despite distracting circumstances.

To Finish or to Restructure

Partnerships—whether they are part of a wider network or a small gathering of leaders—need to recognize that some collaborative projects really do have a definable, limited objective. When that is

accomplished, they may no longer need to gather collaboratively. However, sometimes the partners may feel that the relationship itself is reason enough to be together and consider becoming a kind of standing partnership (association, forum, fraternity, council, etc.). They may want to preserve a unity with ongoing functions such as serving as a place where newer workers can come with their questions and concerns.

In the network that I facilitate, one in-country partnership has arrived at a stage where they are recognized as a body that provides a meeting place or rallying point for addressing the types of needs that impact all in-country workers. The partners recognize that there are efforts beyond their own company and mission goals that improve the work of the gospel and church life in this country. The value continues to emerge as they work together.



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Last year they organized an orientation course for all newcomers. More experienced workers lead new arrivals through a spiritual history of the nation and overview the current church and faith situation. They put them in touch with older workers who are happy to be mentors and sounding boards for them. They do this to encourage and form better workers and reduce attrition. They do it to help new workers connect quickly with significant local people they need to know, and they do it to let new workers see that there is a body of Christ that collaborates across team and denominational boundaries.

Over time, increasing worker maturity, growing numbers, and (perhaps surprisingly to some) success create dynamics that challenge partnership. As partners become more engaged with their own growing work, they are commensurately less able to help or encourage others. When we are small and weak, we know we need others. When we become strong, many time demands increase, and we can cease to understand that collaboration is not just a short-term marriage of necessity, but the actual representation and manifestation of the Body of Christ as it should be. When we work together we should never forget that we model a powerful kingdom apologetic.

From Colleagues to Family

After working and sharing together and going through the ups and downs of ministry in challenging contexts, we should find it very easy to value and esteem our other expat coworkers and our dear national brothers and sisters who have graciously hosted us. As partners we can remain colleagues or become family to each other.

Ruth became so much more than someone to work with in the fields when she pledged herself to Naomi. She understood that she was truly family and as much a daughter as if she had been born one.


Jesus did not just visit, get the job done, and leave.

He incarnated. He became that to which He was called.


From my experience on the field, the academic and the technical aspects of partnership are soon forgotten.

What will best be remembered about our field partners is whether they were able to enter into the phase where they become flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone, one with our local brothers and sisters. The disciples were not just friends; they became family. So we are and should be to the family of God in the nations to which God has called us. Let us strive then in our churches and agencies to so model the necessity for incarnation and Body-of-Christ collaboration that our field partners can better accomplish all that God has for them.

Whatever stage you are at in your partnership, or whether you are still considering one, please remember, "Partnerships are people, not projects." Keep that in mind, and you will have every chance of enjoying a successful and efficient partnership experience that recognizes the main thing and keeps it there.



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