

GLOBAL PARTNERING GROWING PAINS – II Agencies & Churches Grapple with 2009 Challenges

by *Ellen Livingood*

The global partnerships movement is maturing from childhood to adolescence. A multitude of widely varying alliances is reshaping how Kingdom forces are being marshaled around the world. We are all learning as we go and grateful for God's blessing even as we move into uncharted territory. As our experience grows, some of the issues partners must tackle come into clearer focus.

How do we establish thousands of healthy partnerships and maintain them efficiently and productively? In the January-March 2009 issues of *Postings*, we present a series of articles highlighting some of the challenges churches and mission organizations need to address in order to steward the movement to the next level.

In this *Postings*:

5. Building Big-Picture Vision, Knowledge, and Ministry Integration
6. Valuing Short- and Long-Term Contributions
7. Integrating Local and Global Church Vision and Involvement
8. Improving Funding and Accountability
9. Documenting Partnership Stories

In the January 2009 *Postings*:

1. Defining Models and Terminology
2. Developing "Value Added" from All Partners
3. Expanding Field Capacity to Facilitate Partnerships
4. Engaging the Breadth and Depth of Church Resources

In the March 2009 *Postings*:

10. Increasing Partnership Readiness
11. Funding Partnership Overhead
12. Establishing 1+1=3 Partnerships
13. Structuring Partnership Lifecycles
14. Providing Leadership Continuity

5. Building Big-Picture Vision, Knowledge, & Ministry Integration

Many linking partners, especially large churches with strategy-focused missions pastors, are asking overarching, tactical questions as they seek to identify the initiatives and partners with which they want to get involved.

Their consideration includes things like: Where and how is God moving across this megacity? What is, or could be, the national strategy to meet holistic needs, to start a church-planting movement, and/or to mature and prepare the national church to fulfill its Acts 1:8 mandate? What

various types of partners are needed to accomplish these goals? What approaches are proving successful in tackling specific problems? Who has a vision and ability to bring together the players to achieve what needs to be done? What churches or other entities in the region could be engaged to help reach unreached peoples nearby? Who (churches, individuals, NGOs, businesses, or government entities around the globe) is God calling and intending to use to advance His Kingdom in this place?

These are important questions for investing resources most strategically. Unfortunately, many times on-location workers, churches, and other site entities are too concentrated on their own work to know the answers to these questions or to be really interested in engaging in such dialog.

The colonial missionary approach of carving up a city or country into regions each assigned to a different organization still often represents the mindset of both expat workers and national church entities. Interdev and others have been working to help bring together efforts for broader field cooperation, and in some places it has been successful. Yet linking partners report that they often have to research and discover for themselves the big picture of how God is moving and identify individuals with a God-size vision to transform their city or nation.

Meanwhile, many field workers and site partners are asking other strategic questions to evaluate how partnerships could fit into their field purpose and goals. They are grappling with how much partnership considerations should shape the overall direction of field work. They wonder, “Is God calling us to a vision so big that it is impossible to be successful unless we partner?” “If a church wants to partner with us but has a different field priority, how do we decide which takes precedence?” and “How does our ‘specialty’ focus fit with a big-vision goal—do we need to partner with other agencies on site to engage partners in reaching God-sized purposes? What would that look like?”

Let’s talk  **about it.**

Agencies: Are you dreaming big enough? Are your organization’s micro and macro visions and strategies in perspective on each field? Or are you missing partnership opportunities because your field personnel are so focused on specialized ministry that they don’t see the big picture and can’t communicate it, and their role in it, to potential partners?

For example, if your organization focuses on the unreached, are you also aware of what God is doing in the more reached areas/peoples so as to be able to engage them with the unreached? Have you considered how your specialized ministry could be integrated into larger efforts, and have you identified other site ministries which might be a part of a larger effort coming together in a partnership with one or more linking churches?

Linking churches: Are you encouraging your missionaries to embrace the big picture of God’s purpose in the place where He has called them to work? How can you appreciate and support their specialized task while also asking strategic questions about overarching ministry vision and goals?

6. Valuing Short- and Long-Term Contributions

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis in missiological training that effective missionary work demands in-depth understanding of culture and a high degree of fluency in the first language of the people. Emphasizing the difficulty of the task of getting to the heart of culture and worldview (sometimes referred to as “peeling the onion”), missiologists have warned that the first four years—some say the first decade—is largely given to learning and is a period when the worker has limited impact. Armed with this perspective, it is no wonder that missionaries think it is ludicrous that the volunteer coming to the field for six months or a year has anything significant to contribute, much less the one who arrives for a 10-day visit.

Meanwhile, Christian businesspeople function successfully in the international marketplace, completing complex projects with teams of highly diverse people from around the globe working completely in English with minimal adjustment for local context. At the same time, short-term missions advocates report of villages transformed and churches planted by visiting teams in the course of just one week. From these perspectives, it is easy to disparage the career missionary who marks progress in decades.

Who’s right? Both and neither. Can well-prepared short-termers in carefully planned ministry involvements be effective? Hundreds, indeed thousands, of experiences have

proved they can be. Because Western missionaries have often been consumed with their own tasks, many of these efforts are outside of their field of vision, even those right in the country where they minister.

But do short-term efforts need to be integrated into the overall efforts of the Church, or where the Church does not yet exist, with the work of those called to Kingdom building? Absolutely. Short-term enthusiasts can be naïve and unaware that much of their impact will evaporate unless it is connected to longer-term strategy.

Let’s talk  **about it.**

Agencies and churches: Have you clearly articulated the value of both long- and short-term workers to your strategy? Have you defined some of the factors that make their work most complementary? How could you better assist long-term site workers to see the practical value of short-termers’ contributions? How could you challenge and train short-termers so that what they do most effectively furthers long-term efforts and goals?

7. Integrating Local and Global Church Vision and Involvement

In the minds of many North American church leaders, there is no longer a distinction between cross-cultural ministry in their own neighborhood versus on the other side of the globe. Mission agencies have seen reasons in the past to define their task as exclusively “over there,” but such a stance is increasingly illogical to believers surrounded by ethnic groups from around the world representing the huge religious blocs mission agencies specialize in reaching.

Doing it “here” before or in tandem with doing it “there” is absolutely logical to a growing cadre of church leaders. Why an agency would field workers to reach Muslims in London but not in Dallas just doesn’t make sense to them.

For many agencies, working alongside churches in local, cross-cultural ministry has been outside their mandate. For others it is a peripheral task—an appropriate place to assign personnel unable to return overseas or a sidebar involvement during a worker’s home assignment. Agencies which move church-based, local cross-cultural ministry into the core of their ministry vision and integrate it thoroughly with their global agenda will have a great advantage in partnership and will discover new personnel resources: Linking church members who have become both passionate and experienced in ministry with specific cultural groups,

and believers from those cultural groups naturally gifted to reach their ethnic homeland as part of a partnership effort.

Let’s talk  about it.

Agencies: Could concentrating more effort in working “here at home” with churches in cross-cultural ministry actually be a way to more quickly impact unreached places around the globe? What would such a two-step process look like? What are the benefits of such a partnership?

Linking churches: Are you aware of what ethnic groups live in your city or region? Might God be challenging you to reach these people both locally and globally? What kind of help would you need to impact these people?

Site churches: Are you ready to consider partnering with a linking church to impact both your context and theirs? What resources could you offer a church to help them reach members of your people group or religious bloc living near them?

8. Improving Funding and Accountability

Much has been written about the sad fact that too many churches are repeating rather than learning from the mistakes of pioneer missionaries in lavishing funds on site partners with the right motives but the wrong methods. Writers like Dan Rickett in *Building Strategic Relationships*, David Maranz in *African Friends and Money Matters*, and Glenn Schwartz in *When Charity Destroys Dignity* point out principles that foster healthy interdependence instead of debilitating dependence.

These concepts now need to be disseminated first to the partnership leaders in local churches and then also to all short-term participants. In some instances, avenues for appropriate funding must be established and maintained by agency personnel or with extensive help from them.

Let’s talk  about it.

Agencies: Are your field personnel willing to assist linking partners to fund site partners in appropriate ways, or is there

a latent desire to funnel all funds into their own support and projects? Can you assist facilitators to identify the questions that need to be addressed in order to channel monies in ways that facilitate the goals of site leaders, meet government requirements, satisfy church auditors, are transparent to all partners, and keep accounting to a minimum? How can your field personnel prepare leaders of site churches and other local entities to come to the table with linking church representatives and discuss finances in a way that bridges cultures and avoids potential problems?

Linking churches: Have you taken the time to be sufficiently educated about the dangers inherent in distributing funds to site partners? (See books referenced above.) Have you thoroughly discussed with your partnership facilitator how money can be invested well? Have you and your partners clarified what kind of accountability is needed and realistic in your particular partnership setting? Could you help train site partners in simple accounting procedures to produce the accountability documents you need? If your facilitator is the appropriate channel for funds, have you identified ways that you could help simplify that task for him/her?

9. Documenting Partnership Stories

“What do effective partnerships look like?” is a question I get regularly from both churches and field workers. We in the missions community need to record and present numerous real-life illustrations that highlight fruitful collaborations. Even stories of partnerships that have some ragged edges (and most do) can be very helpful in learning how to work together in different settings.

I search websites, print publications, and video offerings, but find with a small number of notable exceptions that there are few stories of what partnerships look like or what they are accomplishing. Two audiences need these overviews: (1) field workers who sometimes assume that partnership is merely a dressed-up version of short-term teams or a new way to convince churches to invest more finances, and (2) prospective partner churches which are looking for models of how to do it. Concrete examples help both groups understand how healthy partnerships can unleash more resources and benefit all partners.

Let's talk  about it.

Agencies: Have great partnerships been forged by your missionaries or fields of which you aren't even aware? Should you poll workers to discover what productive church collaborations are already in place? Through what avenues can you disseminate the stories of collaboration to help everyone learn?

Agencies and churches: Linking partner churches may be the natural developers of partnership narratives in various media. Why not request that every church partner send a skilled writer, photographer, and/or videographer to chronicle the story of their partnership? Ask them to tell versions of the story for various audiences: (1) other

congregations—church participants are naturally sensitive to how the story should be reported to interest their peers and (2) potential site facilitators and partners—provide a list of questions and ask them to interview their partnership facilitator and various field and church participants to present a version of the story that will answer questions of other potential participants and leaders.



Ellen Livingood launched Catalyst Services three years ago to further church/agency collaboration. She is available to help your church or organization work through these questions, and to train field and administrative staff in how to develop and nurture healthy partnerships.

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