

Involving Western Churches in a Security-Sensitive Partnership

by D. & B. Martin

Many agencies and mobilizers are wrestling with the question of how to engage churches in the West to reach areas where it is difficult or impossible for Westerners to go. Since personal contact with the ministry is a high priority for churches and a key way to establish and maintain their vision and involvement, how do we address this dilemma? The MSV, described here by the Martins, models one solution.

A NEW WAY TO REACH THE UNREACHED

Under a ministry called the MSV (the full name withheld for security reasons), (1) national church-planting teams, (2) national mission agencies, (3) Western churches, and (4) Western mission agencies are working together to ignite church-planting movements among 14 yet-to-be-reached, primarily Muslim, people groups in one geographic region of Southeast Asia. Many of these groups are located in places where Western missionaries are not welcome, where it is unsafe or extremely difficult for a Westerner to visit, where doing so could endanger the ministry and lives of national church planters, and where Western blueprints for church planting are no longer effective. Yet MSV provides a practical strategy for Western partners to be highly integrated into the work and to deploy their resources cooperatively.

Today, three years after MSV's launch, 15 North American churches have a personal relationship and partnership with national teams in 13 of these unreached groups. And several German churches as well as additional American congregations are considering coming on board. To date, most of the initiative on the national side has come from sending agencies rather than local churches; we are working to encourage greater participation and ownership on the part of the national churches.

MSV is not a sending agency or an organization. It is a cooperative strategy and a tool for connecting partners with one another. All agreements and cooperative efforts are transacted among the parties themselves, not with the MSV.

Relationships do not require formal or written agreements unless the partners choose to develop one.

FACILITATING THE PARTNERSHIPS

After seven years of field experience as church planters, we became the US-based facilitators for MSV, tasked with recruiting the Western church partners and integrating their involvement with the frontline teams. We present the opportunities; match interested churches with national church planters; coordinate communication, especially in the initial stages; and organize the annual on-field conference and two regional MSV days in the US.

PRESENTING THE OPPORTUNITIES

In our role as MSV facilitators, we travel and speak in churches, presenting the needs of these unreached peoples and introducing the concept of church-planting movements. We challenge churches to "adopt" a people group in order to learn together, focus their prayer, share the excitement of how God is at work among this people, and help to address the needs of church planters in this specific group. MSV resources include videos, DVDs, and literature. Part of our task is helping churches understand the security issues and the communications guidelines.

The education process is not limited to adults. Last summer we participated in a children's day camp program where we led a simulation of how to take the gospel to an unreached Muslim people. Half of the elementary-age children were church planters and the rest were unreached people. They got into their roles so well that the "unreached" children became suspicious of the motives of the outreach team kids and reacted very much like UPG people might. It was a great learning experience!¹

Once a church expresses interest in the possibility of partnering, we develop a proposal specifically for them. We first contact the national mission agencies to discover which national team is closest to being ready for deployment and has the greatest financial needs.

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Then we develop something similar to a business proposal that presents the potential team, the expectations, opportunities, and benefits. We also outline the costs which usually run about \$5,000 per year, roughly half of which covers sending one representative to the on-field conference.

We also encourage the church to leave room in their budget for specific projects for their frontline team. Many commit an additional \$500 to be invested in projects requested by their national partners—things like water purification systems, copying CDs or DVDs for distribution of oral Scripture translation projects, etc.

A KEY TO SUCCESS— THE ANNUAL ON-FIELD CONFERENCE

Each February MSV holds a conference in country but outside the ministry area in a location where there are few if any security concerns. Western partner churches are encouraged to send one or more representatives. Each of the national church-planting teams attends. The national sending agency and the national sending churches are also encouraged to send representatives. In 2006, over 100 assembled for the conference.

The expenses are borne by the Western churches. They pay their own airfare and in-country costs as well as the \$150 per person needed to cover the cost for the national workers.

The primary purpose of the three-day conference is to develop and support relationships, so there is extended time for the Western church partners to meet with their national church-planting team. A guide¹ is provided which helps the groups to get to know each other better and to establish goals for their partnership for the coming year. Many of the national partners speak English, but translators are provided wherever needed.

The conference also provides spiritual nourishment. For the church-planting teams, this is a much-needed opportunity to be outside their people group and in an environment where they are encouraged and refreshed. Each team has an opportunity to share progress and challenges with the entire group and receive encouragement and prayer.

The results of this three-day, relationship-building time are incredible. The church planters are renewed to return to their difficult and spiritually dark locations. The Western church reps are encouraged by the faith and testimony of their frontline partners who are putting their lives on the line every day. They return to their churches with a fresh burden to engage prayer for their team and creatively support them.

A number of churches have sent representatives to the conference before committing to join MSV. The experience has always been an important factor in their decision to participate.

MOBILIZING PRAYER

We encourage the national team members to communicate with their partner churches via email or phone. At first the information tends to flow through us, and we pass it to their respective Western church partners. Over time, we have watched the cross-cultural partners begin to communicate directly with one another without our help. Depending on the location of the teams, this communication may be by e-mail on a secure server, snail mail, phone calls, or through the intermediary of a national mission agency. One advantage in our location is that most of our church planters are fluent in English.

As bi-cultural facilitators², we produce a regular communiqué that is available to all MSV partner churches. This quarterly newsletter provides information for prayer from all 13 of the MSV frontline teams.

SHARING FINANCIAL AND MATERIAL RESOURCES

Financial support is an important contribution of the Western churches, but they are strongly advised not to commit more

than 50% of a church-planting team's support in order to prevent creating dependency. Frontline missionaries are encouraged to establish their own support network of churches in their own country. Just \$100 to \$300 a month from the West goes far in helping to keep a team on the front lines because many of the workers are bi-vocational. Since the financial threshold is so low,

even small churches can adopt and support a team. One church asks each of its small groups to "fast" for a week each month from something (such as soft drinks or lattes), and the money saved is given towards the support of their workers.

Western churches also have contributed resources such as leadership and devotional books, laptop computers, DVD towers, water purification knowledge, and other aspects of development projects that have greatly benefited frontline teams' work and community connections. This year those attending the conference will carry in 120 solar-powered tape players provided by another US ministry.

Ideas for larger projects are also incubated at the conference. One of the American church pastors is in dialog with the national agencies about launching a new training center in the vicinity of the teams, making it possible for them to get additional Bible and ministry preparation on an ongoing basis.

Most Western partner churches make one-year support commitments. During the annual MSV conference, partners assess the goals, progress, and needs of the ministry. As a result, the Western church can make an informed decision about ongoing support. Again, MSV does not govern partnerships but exists to establish and enhance them. Decisions about support are made between the churches, mission agencies, and teams.

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GROWING PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Friendship is a third and invaluable MSV product. Personal, cross-cultural relationships spur on and encourage the frontline teams which serve in dangerous and lonely situations.

A few of the church planters supported by the MSV are Muslim background believers who have never experienced church in the traditional sense and cannot visit churches in their country because exposure could jeopardize their ministry. Partnership in the MSV becomes a lifeline of encouragement and support. One of these workers declared that he considers himself a member of his supporting church in the US because that is the only congregation with which he has regular contact and feels a sense of partnership.

SECURITY ISSUES

Part of our job as MSV facilitators is to make sure that security guidelines are followed. Once they understand the potential dangers, churches are usually very sensitive to security concerns. They don't want to jeopardize the work of the partners they have come to love and admire.

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An MSV Partner Church

NETWORKS OF CHURCHES

Most of our Western church partners support one of the church-planting teams (which vary in size from one to seven units). A group of congregations in Texas and another in Michigan/Indiana have formed MSV networks. These churches work together to support a team in a specific people group. The pastor of one of the MSV network churches serves as a communication hub for that network, regularly bringing the churches together for prayer and ministry updates from the frontline team.

Each December several churches in St. Louis gather for a one-day MSV conference. Designed to raise awareness and involvement of area churches, this program includes a demographic picture of the yet-to-be-reached people groups, a traditional meal of the country where our church planters serve, and reports from St. Louis area churches that are part of MSV. We also held a similar one-day MSV conference in San Angelo, Texas.

CHURCHES' PERSPECTIVES

Pastor **Clint Hamilton** of Hope Church in St. Louis, MO, attended the first in-country MSV conference in 2005. "Meeting the team members was so important," he says. "Talking with them solidified our relationship. Attending the MSV conference provides networking, knitting of hearts, and accountability.

"We see this as a true partnership. We aren't the great American church coming to save the world. When we realize that they [the frontline teams] suffer and sacrifice, it helps us

not to be so arrogant with the resources we have. We learn from them."

Lakan Mariano, a Filipino immigrant and pastor in San Angelo, TX, coordinates a network of four churches involved in MSV. "One of the things we appreciate," he explains, "is that MSV is equipping Muslim background believers and sending them where they understand the language, culture, and how people respond. I tell the people in our church that this is the book of Acts as it is being written today.

"Our frontline team communicates with us once or twice a month, and approximately every six weeks I sent out a brief report to the other churches in our network. The pastors of these churches get together two or three times a year for lunch and an update on our MSV partnership.

"Overcoming the American mindset that you have to go there and physically do something is the most challenging aspect. The common question from potential partners is, 'What will I be doing there?' They tend to feel they are useless if they aren't doing a project.

"We try to explain that they can make a significant contribution by just going and interfacing with the frontline teams. The first thing, the last thing, and frequently in between our national partners ask, 'Please pray for us.' Prayer and a modest amount of financial support mean a lot to them."

Greg Carter is pastor of outreach at Liberty Bible Church in Chesterton, IN, and coordinates another MSV network of five churches. "We wanted to make sure that we did not overshadow the efforts of the national church to take the gospel to others in their own country, so we developed a partnership agreement with the national denomination under which our frontline team serves.

"One aspect of this agreement is a policy that we provide financial support on a matching fund basis because we believe that these workers should be supported by their own churches. Initially we provide half of whatever amount they are lacking and that amount is matched by new support that the agency solicits from churches there. As the amount of support coming from the denomination's churches increases, our support will drop back, allowing us to take on the support of a new team.

"Another reason we work through the denomination is to avoid driving a wedge between the national team and their normal supervision in the denomination. Our presence in the equation automatically adds tensions, and we want to minimize those.

The churches in our network here range in size from about 1,500 to 175. To make it equitable, each of us contributes toward the needed support on a per-capita basis. In addition, each church identifies another way in which they can be supportive of the team. For example, one church is assisting

with the development of a clean, predictable water supply for the team. Our congregation is investigating what could be done in the area of business development to strengthen the overall economy, although we are not yet very far along on that effort.

“The Martins have been a critical ingredient to make this a broader effort. We all would like to see a natural evolution to national leadership with the strongest national players sharing responsibility. Perhaps some day a stateside facilitator will not be necessary, but not yet. You must have someone helping you to interpret the critical cultural clues so you understand why your national partners are responding or not responding in a certain way.

“The most important element on this side is the identification of a champion within the local church—someone who is passionate, knowledgeable, and influential. It can be a lay person or pastor, but without one, you aren’t going to go very far. Successful partnering also needs leadership from among the pastoral staff, especially the senior pastor.

“In this type of partnership, you have to be flexible and to be willing to be disappointed regularly. For Americans, it is easier to do it ourselves, but we can’t, so we need to come to grips with new methods like what MSV facilitates.”

¹ If you would like a sample copy of these materials, contact info@catalystservices.org.

² A description of the role of the bi-vocational facilitator is presented in the *Postings* issue of September 2006 available at www.catalystservices.org/resources/index.shtml.



D. and B. Martin, members of TEAM (The Evangelical Alliance Mission), serve as the US-based advocates for the MSV.

What questions would you like to pose about how this or other partnerships function in security-sensitive areas? If you are a facilitator or a church participant, do you have additional suggestions? The Catalyst website includes an **Interchange Postings Forum** for your reactions at www.catalystservices.org/forum/. We look forward to a stimulating **interchange** of ideas there!

To subscribe to future issues of **Interchange Postings**, go to www.catalystservices.org/resources/index.shtml. Past issues are also available from this webpage.

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