

## NEHEMIAH'S PARTNERSHIP SUCCESS

by Ellen Livingood

Is partnership a new phenomenon or something integral to God's plan of action throughout time? While partnership means different things to different people, it has become one of the favorite buzzwords in today's missions circles. Does it really flow from the biblical patterns of how God wants His people to work with Him to accomplish His purposes?

In its essence, partnership is *not* new at all. Churches function as partnerships, and missions teams become partnerships as autonomous entities elect to work together. But as our world shrinks, collaboration is now possible at a greater breadth and complexity. These new dimensions of partnership drive us back to the Scriptures for divine guidelines.

God's design for His people has always revolved around cooperation because He created us to accomplish tasks only possible through joint effort. Many of the stipulations of the Old and New Testaments revolve around how we are to work together. Nehemiah is a great example.

Nehemiah has always rightfully been heralded as a great leader. But a reexamination of his story will also reveal essentials of biblical partnership embedded everywhere. We will highlight five, although there are many more.

### Identify

Nehemiah was no doubt well educated and sophisticated. He was working for the most powerful leader of his day. He was a trusted assistant, and likely a well respected confidant and advisor to the king.

In contrast, the remnant in Judah was a small, ragtag group of rejects—people not even worth carrying off as slaves. They were desperately poor, disenfranchised, unsophisticated, and uneducated. Nehemiah's "them" also included his ancestors. The Jews of earlier generations had made terri-

ble decisions, plunging the nation of Israel into captivity for which Nehemiah's generation was now paying the price.

If any person had the right to distance himself from the "them" and remain the "me," it was Nehemiah. That's why his reaction in chapter 1 is utterly stunning: "I confess the

sins that we Israelites, including me and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses" (Neh. 1:6-7).



There is no clearer mark of identification than sharing the guilt of sin. Nehemiah's humility and brokenness in confession reveal a man


who has moved in the very depths of his being from "me" to "we."

There are huge me/we gaps in missions:

- **MY** church is missional. **THEIR** attractional model isn't biblical.
- As a cross-cultural worker, *I* understand the culture and speak the language. **THEY** (those church teams) wreck havoc when they come over for a week and think they can accomplish something significant.
- **MY** church has in-depth partnerships with nationals. **THEY** are still just sending expensive, ineffective Westerners.
- **MY** agency is developing quality partnerships. **THEY** are still old paradigm.
- *I* am passionate about missions. **THEY** (my pastor and church leaders) aren't missions minded.

Too many partnership discussions are riddled with attitudes of superiority, independence, judgment, and self-centeredness. I see it in myself. I have looked down on those I considered stuck in old models or too eager to jump in without adequate preparation, or... the list can go on.

Are you, am I, ready to move from "me" to "we"? There can be no Nehemiah chapters 2-13 without Nehemiah chapter 1.

  
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Our partnerships are only as effective as the distance we travel from “me” to “we,” and the degree to which we are willing to see ourselves in the failures of our partners. Our confession may need to address our sense of superiority, and our distaste for God’s preference for working in and through **all** of His flawed people.

Are we ready, before a Holy God, to say, “I confess the sins we [missionaries, church missions committee leaders, agency staff, missions pastors, national leaders, etc.] including myself and my father’s house, have committed against You, a Holy God, who has designed for all of us to work together”? Let’s do some soul searching before the Lord and ask for, then rejoice in, His forgiveness. Then let’s dedicate ourselves to live our lives as “we” not “me.”

One missionary partner articulated so well what a “we” posture requires for a cross-cultural worker working in effective partnership with a Western church. He explained, “You need to be able to face two directions at once.” What he meant was, you need to be engaged in the field ministry and focused on it, but you also need to be emotionally and practically invested in the ministry of the church back home. That’s moving from “me” to “we.” The same is true in the reverse for those in the church.

## Communicate

While Nehemiah is sparse on many details, a significant amount of space in this small book is given to dialog: “Here’s what he said..., then I said....” Why? Because partnership hinges on the essential skill of good communication. And Nehemiah exhibits that skill from the initial presentation of the vision, through the recruitment and encouragement of his partners, to the resolution of nasty personal conflicts.

Nehemiah must have been one awesome communicator! First off, he crafted a speech for the king that convinced him to allow (and fund!) the rebuilding of the walls of a historically rebellious foreign capital—the very walls that the king’s predecessors had demolished. Nehemiah was asking to arm the rebels! (And you think you have a tough sell to get people on board with your partnership!) Nehemiah must have built a very convincing case, and he knew exactly what he needed.

The longer you work in partnership, the more you recognize the amount of gas that good communication pours into the

collaborative engine. Churches lose interest, you say? How well did you communicate the passion and the current work? Short-term team made too many cultural mistakes? How well did you help them understand what they needed to know? (No, not just hand them a book or a list...) Your national partners had the wrong expectations? What was the quality of your dialog as you developed your partnership?

One of the saddest wastes of God-given resources in the

arena of missions partnerships occurs in this very area. Sitting in our churches are people with vast expertise in all different types of communication—video/film/photography, marketing, social media, journalism and creative writing, advertising, graphic design, promotion, public relations, labor relations—the list goes on.

Yet tragically, the vast majority of these gifted, highly trained communicators have never once in their lives been challenged to use those skills for global missions. Meanwhile, missionaries, missions pastors, and others in the missions world shoulder communication tasks while often lacking the time, skill, and/or vision to do them well, especially to employ the technology needed to engage younger generations.




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## Involve Everyone

Don’t you love how God tucks amazing statements into the middle of what seem like “maybe I can skim this section” portions of Scripture? There’s one stowed away in Nehemiah 3:8 that you don’t want to miss. Nehemiah notes almost casually that the builders included Uzziel the goldsmith and Hananiah, one of the perfume-makers.

Let’s assume you are Nehemiah organizing this wall-building partnership. Picture it now. There is a huge pile of rubble to deal with—massive, broken stone blocks from the earlier wall that must be moved.

Thousands of pounds of stone must be heaved into place and set just right. Remember, lives will depend on whether this wall will be strong enough to withstand enemy attack.

If it were me, I’d be out recruiting the football linebacker types. The guys with a resume that’s got stone mason in there somewhere. The teenagers who want to show off their muscles for their girlfriends.



Goldsmiths and perfume-makers? Wait. Who? Pleeese. These guys are used to working with ounces or grams, not tons. No bulging muscles. No calluses on their hands. Unqualified. They will just get in the way and slow us down. Leave them at home!

I hear it all the time in partnership. Missionaries say, "We don't want to be bothered working with churches. They don't understand cross-cultural ministry. They will just create problems and slow us down." Churches say, "We don't want to be bothered working with agencies. They are too stuck in their old ways of doing things. We can streamline it, and get the job done faster and cheaper. Leave them out of the equation." Missions pastors say, "I must run this partnership myself because the lay people aren't equipped for it." Agencies say, "We'll ask churches to be our partners, but it would take way too much effort to prepare them to get involved, so they can just give us their funds and we'll get the job done."

But Nehemiah's partnership invited **everyone** and gave them all a very significant part of the task. Notice that the goldsmith and perfume-maker didn't just embellish the decorations on the doors or dab cologne on sweaty workers at the end of the day. No, they "repaired the next section." They had their own piece of the wall.

What makes the difference? I think it comes down to two things: First, urgency. Nehemiah is under no delusions about the enemy. He knows that an attack is imminent. There is not a single day to lose. The more urgency you feel, the more pressure there is to use everything at your disposal.

For us as missions mobilizers, there's no time to lose. How much do we feel the urgency each day?

Second, Nehemiah knew that anyone not involved in the task was a target for recruitment by the opposition. Sanballat and Tobiah were clever. They skillfully employed psychological warfare, and the most vulnerable would have been those uninvolved in the project.

Who have we discounted as active participants in our partnerships? Does our sense of urgency for the task drive us to recognize that everyone, **absolutely everyone**, can and should have a role? Or do we think we have time and reason to be picky about who is given a section of our partnership wall?

Have we given the enemy a foothold by leaving churches out of the missions task? Or some individuals within our

church? To make it a bit more personal, am I convinced that I (or my organization) is really the only one qualified to do this? What would happen if you and I deemed **every believer** suitable to the task?

Before we leave this topic notice Nehemiah 3:8: "Their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors." Pride of position? A sense they had too many other important things to do? An unwillingness to work under those in lesser positions but who knew more about wall building?




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Maybe it was all of these. Anyhow, the nobles flatly refused to work.

Do you have leaders who won't embrace your partnership? Welcome to Nehemiah's club!

What did he do? Apparently, nothing. Nehemiah makes note of it—an eternal monument to the shame of these nobles—but he doesn't get tied in knots over their haughty attitude. He's got an urgent job to do, and he just plows ahead with those willing to work.

Certainly we do need to carefully plan how to engage leaders. But not to worry, partnership walls can be built even if not everyone joins the cause.

## Deal with Difficulties

Few things about a collaborative missions effort can be guaranteed, but here's one: Your partnership is **not** going to go smoothly. And the number of problems is often directly proportional to the importance of your task.

When Nehemiah's project reached the halfway point and the gaps in the wall were being closed, you might say that all hell broke loose. There were external plots to sabotage the task, and there were internal issues of exhaustion, frustration, and fear. His partners were ready to quit. If you've been in a partnership for very long, you have faced these same issues.

Nehemiah responded in two crucial ways. First, he called his team to prayer, and then he addressed the people problems with a conviction that they could be resolved (4:9).

While I often meet partnership participants who understand and engage in spiritual warfare on an individual or a team basis on the field, I seldom find that they have built into their partnerships any serious **plan** to develop the prayer ministry of their partners. Few contemporary Christians are going to be coaxed or cajoled into powerful prayer ministries. They must be led; time must be invested life-on-life to model what it means to wrestle in prayer. Yet I see few partnership leaders who have either an understanding of, nor a passion about, investing deeply in developing powerful pray-ers.

This raises two questions: (1) Are we really convinced our partnership is totally dependent on prayer? If so, it should be evident in the passion of our communication with our prayer team. (2) How much of our time and energy is invested in mentoring a new generation of prayer wrestlers?

Next we see Nehemiah develop and execute a multi-pronged action plan. He addresses the internal issues of his partners. He rearranges responsibilities. He reminds them of spiritual realities. He creates an emergency response plan. He takes on injustice and inequities. And after he deals with the internal issues tearing apart his partnership, he adroitly refuses to be derailed by external distraction schemes.

What do we learn? Never, never, never give up. Clear the rubble. Start laying the blocks. Built your partners into a powerful, praying force. Keep adding more blocks. Adjust the stones into the right places. Address problems. Post the guard. Add more blocks. Mix more mortar. Refuse to be intimidated. Add another row of blocks. Never, never, never give up.

## Celebrate

By the middle of Nehemiah 6, we come to an astounding statement: "So the wall was completed...in fifty-two days." Less than two months! For decades, the remnant had been living in the rubble. Now the wall is rebuilt in 52 days!

And then, wow, did they party! Everybody had part of it.

God has wired human beings to thrive on celebration. It's one of the greatest human motivators. Every sports team in the world knows it. Why give fans towels to wave and a band to stir them up? Because celebrating gets the adrenalin flowing; it helps everyone feel like a part of the team; it pushes players to give their best and beyond. Yet one of the great failures of contemporary partnerships is our lack of celebration.

How much effort does your partnership invest in planning and executing celebration, in helping every member of every church, every national partner, every donor, every field worker to join in the joy of what God has accomplished? Perhaps we don't really believe that the whole team deserves to celebrate. Perhaps we haven't defined our task clearly enough to know when to celebrate. Maybe false humility makes us reticent to celebrate exuberantly. Whatever the reasons, we are robbing God of His rightful worship and our partners of a major source of motivation.

This grand celebration marked not the conclusion of the partnership but just the culmination of its first phase. We know from other historians that there was still a couple of years'

worth of work on the wall, and other projects followed. Wisely, Nehemiah appointed others—men of integrity (7:2)—to lead phase two. While he would come and go, lending his authority to key tasks, the day-to-day work of the partnership would now be handled by those more gifted to keep it going over the long haul.

Often partnerships are healthier if they change leaders at the end of their first phase. Contemporary Nehemiahs need to recognize when it is time to pass the baton.

Two final essentials of partnership need to be highlighted:

**The people "worked with all their heart"** (4:6). Every partnership involves a lot of hard slogging. If we do not engage people to work with all of their hearts, we will see little happen. It takes work and it takes passion.

**They realized that this work had been done "with the help of our God"** (6:16). We can have all the right partnership principles. We can build an "A" team of expert participants. We can devise the best strategy. But at the end of the day, we are totally dependent on our God.

Identify. Communicate. Involve everyone. Deal with difficulties. Celebrate. And work with all your heart, realizing that your success is due to the gracious help of the Lord our God. He is the essential Partner who builds walls in 52 days and makes partnerships successful beyond our wildest dreams!



## Contemporary Nehemiahs need to recognize when it is time to pass the baton.

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