

VIBRANT PEOPLE-GROUP NETWORKS

by Ellen Livingood

THE VALUE OF A NETWORK

If your church commits to in-depth ministry to a people or specific place, you likely will be introduced to others who share some or all of the same goals. This may include multiple churches (sometimes from locations scattered around the world), on-site expat workers from a variety of sending countries, national workers, national churches, mission agencies, NGOs, Kingdom businesses, and/or other organizations from multiple countries. With so many players, things can get complicated. Good communication among everyone engaged there becomes crucial, and collaborative projects often will compound individual efforts and avoid duplication.

Many of the earliest network partnerships connected primarily field workers from various agencies. Almost all of these on-field partnerships now include nationals. Some are informal but others are highly structured. Some have grown to include churches in sending countries, but most primarily tie together the efforts of those working on site.

More recently, “resourcing networks” have sprung up, linking churches committed to a people group, geographic region, or particular task. Often these networks of churches also include field workers, and some incorporate businesses, NGOs, nationals, and other groups.

Networks foster education about the people and ministry opportunities, and they support church mobilization and cooperative field efforts. Varying in the number of participating churches, the scope of their efforts, and the degree of formal organization, all are designed to increase the flow of resources in order to further shared goals. Joining such a network could dramatically increase your church’s impact.

HOW TO FIND A NETWORK

Some networks are public, and you can find them via a Google search on the web. Others prefer a much lower profile and require a personal introduction. To find a network, ask your field workers, other churches involved in your area

of interest, mission agencies working there, or missions mobilizers who have global connections.

ESTABLISHING A NEW NETWORK

What if no network exists for your people/place?

Perhaps you have been engaged in an outreach there for some time and see needs that are beyond the resources of your congregation. You wonder, “How could we recruit other churches to join us in reaching these goals?”

Or maybe you are just getting ready to launch a major initiative and feel overwhelmed by the task ahead. Your church leadership agrees, “If a group of churches tackled this effort together, we could accomplish so much more!”



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WHAT MAKES A VIBRANT NETWORK?

Hold frequent meetings. Most networks schedule

meetings at least annually. Some hold sessions on the ministry site one year and in the home country of the partner churches the next year. Hosting the network meetings provides another method of serving the larger effort. Even small congregations can do it. One church of less than 50 people did an excellent job of hosting one of their network’s annual sessions.

Provide face-to-face interaction with key field workers. Network meetings need to involve on-the-ground personnel, if at all possible. Hearing from those on the front lines will give renewed passion to the churches working behind the scenes. This may involve the investment of funds to fly missionaries and/or nationals from the field to attend meetings or perhaps pay transportation costs for those who are on home assignment but not in the immediate area of the network meeting. The added advantage is that these

workers can also be used as speakers in the host church or nearby congregations.

Recruit a strong core of network leaders who represent the cross-section of partner churches and organizations. While one congregation often takes the lead in a network, it is important that others have a voice in the direction and coordination. It is also critical that there is a plan for succession of leaders. Networks by nature are fragile. While one strong leader often provides focus and dynamic enthusiasm, it is crucial to have a team around him/her which can continue forward momentum should the leader leave.

Establish and maintain clear, practical security guidelines. Networks focused on a region where safety is a concern need to develop security requirements for everyone participating in the network and communicating with field workers. Network leaders must take responsibility for consistently introducing newcomers to these guidelines and regularly reminding everyone of the importance of abiding by them.



Earn trust. Networks function well only if they prove to expat and national workers that they are serious about being a source of quality assistance rather than an interruption or interference with their ministry. Suggest various ways you could serve them but always be responsive to the preferences they express, and respectful of their limited time and resources.

Share mobilization tools. If one network church makes a video on a field visit, this resource can be shared with others. Also share: missions education resources for children, youth, or adults, especially those related to the people or region; pre-field training materials; articles highlighting aspects of culture, religion, or ministry; ideas for engaging short termers, etc.

Publish a regular prayer bulletin. A tremendous service to the work as well as to your partner churches is the writing

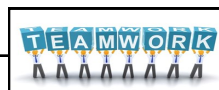
and email distribution of a regular prayer communiqué. Many networks have one person who collects updates and requests from all of the field workers, then compiles a composite email of crucial requests. Some of these prayer bulletins are circulated weekly; others are published monthly. The best include not only prayer requests but also answers to prayer, testimonies, new developments, and more generalized information about the ministry and needs. (The [PTAP weekly update](#)—Praying Through the Arabian Peninsula—is an excellent example.)

Establish a website, Twitter feed, Facebook page, etc. While security issues make creating a public website challenging for some networks, having an Internet location where people who are searching for contacts can discover your network and find up-to-date information, resources, etc., is a real service. Some sites have limited public information and password protected pages for members. ([Pray for Tunisia](#) is an example of a well developed site.)

Serve as a memory bank. To avoid the necessity of having every church or worker reinvent the proverbial wheel, networks can collect, store, and distribute information on all sorts of practical topics related to serving their people.

Staff a help desk. While written materials can be a great help, there will inevitably be more questions. If a network member can answer or help churches get answers to their questions, they will save field personnel precious time.

Develop advocates. Network meetings can provide practical training for local church advocates so that they return to



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their churches with new ideas for developing vision and mobilizing involvement on behalf of their people or project. Share ideas about what has worked in your church to build a partnership task force; to engage children, youth, and adults; to prepare teams; to debrief workers when they return; to stimulate prayer; etc.

Create an entrée point for interested churches. Make it easy to begin. Many churches feel overwhelmed by the concept of adopting a people group, focusing on a city, etc. Assure them of assistance as they get started.

Establish an atmosphere of celebration. Your field workers may be battling discouragement, and some of your church advocates may be disheartened by lack of interest in their congregations. Your network meetings should be times of rejoicing over what God is doing. Be a Barnabas! Affirm both workers and advocates. A network also can provide needed encouragement for appointees.

Take time at each conference to refocus on the power of God and the promise of victory so that everyone goes home encouraged and refreshed to get back in the battle.



What is far too large a project for a single church may be feasible if many work together.

Learn from other networks. Send members of your network to attend the meetings of other networks to glean ideas.

HOW CAN YOUR NETWORK FURTHER FIELD MINISTRY?

Serve as a clearinghouse for meeting field needs. Circulate requests for personnel, equipment, etc., received from the field to see if one of your network churches alone or as a group could provide the resources requests. For example: Can someone in a network church find a critical part to fix a piece of hospital equipment? Who could go and lead a children's program at the next field conference? Is there a member of one of the network churches who could give advice on launching a restaurant as a business-as-missions effort?

Identify and promote financial projects. What is far too large a project for a single church may be feasible if many work together. Examples: purchasing an airplane, completing a Bible translation, establishing a training center, launching a micro-enterprise bank.

Create an orientation guide for those making short-term trips.

Work with field personnel to incorporate the most important content.

Serve as a communications

hub. Because communications networks today are virtual, the physical location of the coordinator is irrelevant. This is one ministry that often is better done from outside of the ministry area.

Produce a video about your focus people that multiple churches and workers can use.

Place a short-term team coordinator on the ground. Fielding such a person can save hundreds of hours of time on the part of the long-term personnel and serve visiting teams from all network churches.

WAYS TO RECRUIT MORE CHURCHES

Use all of your church's connections. Communicate to other churches in your denomination, regional fellowship, or city-wide networks. Ask to hold an information meeting at your next church conference or convention.

Visit Perspectives classes. The "Perspectives on the World Christian Movement" course highlights the importance of reaching the least reached and usually includes missions-passionate church members. Request permission to come and present your passion for your focus people and the opportunity (and benefits) of joining your network. Perspectives alumni groups are also fertile ground for recruiting churches.

Place announcements in Internet newsletters focused on global missions. [Missions Catalyst](#), and [Brigada](#) are two that provide a place to get the word out.

Publish your story. Use the journalism talents of someone in your congregation by asking him/her to write an exciting story of your church's involvement with your network. Submit it for publication to your denomination's magazine, or to a magazine like *Christianity Today*. Post it on your church's website, your network's website, and in other online and print vehicles.



Recruit through your agency. Ask agencies that work with your people/location to promote your network in their print publications and on their website. If possible, visit the agency's headquarters and talk to the church-mobilization director and others who interface with congregations. Explain that you are willing to help churches get started; outline ways you can help.

Recruit the churches near communities of immigrants from your people group/region. Are there communities of immigrants from your focus people living in your country? If so, churches in the area of these immigrants would make natural partners. Recruit them for your network.

INTERFACING WITH OTHER NETWORKS

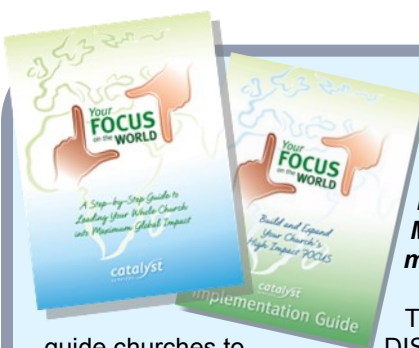
It is possible that you will discover there are multiple networks committed to your people/region. Some larger denominations launch their own networks, and you may find there are networks similar to yours located in other parts of the world. Open lines of communication to provide mutual encouragement and avoid duplication. It may be useful to occasionally schedule a meeting where all networks come together for sharing, assistance, and elimination of redundancies.

BE A CATALYTIC CHURCH

Are you passionate about helping other congregations to catch the vision for how God wants to use them to make a significant difference around the globe? Here are some other ways you can impact churches around you:

Encourage your church staff to be mobilizers. Have members of your pastoral staff caught the vision for your people? Encourage them to share their vision and experiences with their professional peers when they participate in conferences, denominational meetings, ministerial gatherings, seminary alumni events, etc.

Challenge churches near your people group to share the vision. Find out if there are churches located near your focus people—in the same or a neighboring country. It is quite likely that you will find that God has already laid your focus people on the heart of such a congregation. Explore the possibility of partnering.



The FOCUS materials guide churches to DISCOVER their God-given fit for a global initiative, SELECT the right partners, and IMPLEMENT a successful cross-cultural focus.

Learn more at: www.FocusHelp.org

The topic of effective networking is further explored in the **Your FOCUS on the World Manual** and **Implementation Guide**.

The FOCUS materials



Help churches your missionaries are planting to mobilize for their role in global missions.

Help mobilize churches your missionaries are planting. Does your church support missionaries in other parts of the world who are establishing or discipling new churches? Invite these new congregations to join you in reaching an unreached people or area. You may be surprised how even a small group of new believers will have some gifts your larger congregation may lack for the missionary effort.

Invite other churches to send people with you on ministry trips. Providing the opportunity for them to see and experience the work for themselves is a great way to encourage others to become partners.

The bottom line: There are few global missions tasks one church can do alone. Become a committed network participant and an enthusiastic recruiter of other churches. Your biggest contribution “over there” may be recruiting more church partners right “here at home.”

AGENCIES: “[Let's Partner with Networks](#)” is a previous *Postings* that addresses the ways missions organizations can benefit, and benefit from, these types of networks.

Interchange Postings

Catalyst's *Postings* e-newsletter is a free, monthly publication of practical articles highlighting what churches and agencies are doing to mobilize untapped potential for global impact.

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