

Partnership-Ready Churches—Part 1

by Ellen Livingood

How do you know if a church is ready for a significant global partnership or strategic initiative? (The terms will be used interchangeably in this article with the intention of including a broad range of proactive, hands-on efforts coupling the resources of Western churches, national churches, missionaries, and/or other organizations.)

Wouldn't it be convenient if church leaders could answer 10 easy questions and quickly determine if they were ready for a global partnership and what type would fit their church? Agencies, missionaries, and national churches looking for partners would love to be able to check a church's website and find a partnership-readiness rating.

It's not that easy, but there are indicators. In recent interviews with dozens of church leaders, I have heard stories that highlighted and confirmed some shared characteristics of churches prepared to partner successfully.

In two *Postings* issues, we will explore different angles of readiness. This month we will address:

- **Inadequate reasons for launching a strategic initiative**
- **Characteristics of a partnership-ready church**
- **Three cases of partnership readiness**

Next month we will look at how to move a church toward readiness and interview several leaders.

Inadequate Reasons for Adopting a Partnership

1. Attraction to a “cutting edge” methodology

Not wishing to appear out of date, some churches see partnership as a trend that sounds exciting and offers a short cut to exposing people to missions and increasing financial giving. Other congregations may have essentially good motives but have failed to “count the cost” or really investigate the effort and commitment involved. The failure of many adopt-a-people-group efforts in the late 20th century attests to the dangers of jumping on a new trend without sufficient preparation.

2. The urgency of world needs

Divine direction, not just world need, points the way to partnership. Moved with compassion for those physically desperate or in spiritual darkness, churches are often tempted to respond out of compassion to multiple requests. Yet it is important to remember that no single local church is called to win the world. The most effective partnerships are in-depth and relationship driven. Unfortunately the global church carries scars from many so-called partnerships that were initiated with promises made too quickly by Western churches which had done inadequate research into needs, partners, and the larger on-site realities. Churches which undertake too much in too many places usually fail to accomplish much of anything anywhere. Unless the church is large, it is almost always best to begin with one partnership and to add just one at a time.

3. The urging of a potential partner

Churches have discovered painfully that those who have pressured them to adopt a strategic initiative are often really just looking for a quick financial fix. Sometimes it is a national church or national leader who sees the term “partnership” as a magical door opener for funding. Sometimes it is a denomination, agency, or missionary who may be passionate about their vision but fails to understand that it may not fit the gifting and vision of the church they are so eagerly recruiting.

4. The passion of one missions enthusiast in the church

No church should adopt a partnership driven solely by the eagerness of one individual. Many times God does use one person's vision to move a church forward, but that vision needs to be caught by other leaders and members of the congregation before commitments are made.

5. Sending out new workers

Every sending church should have a high level of involvement with its workers and needs to own the mission to which it is sending them. But to equate the “sending” function with “partnership” dilutes both. When workers first arrive on the field, they are ill equipped for facilitating partnership and forcing them into that role can be damaging to the worker and the work. Not every missionary

is gifted as a partnership facilitator; some missionaries have assignments that don't easily utilize partnership activities. Partnership initiatives are better reserved for experienced workers/nationals whose gifts, vision, and opportunities match the church's.

6. A desire to work in every part of the globe

The goal to have a presence on every continent or within every major people bloc may sound exciting but often means the church is stretched too thin and called on to become experts in too many cultures and settings. Many churches are more effective if they expand their partnerships in the areas where they are already involved. The primary goal is depth of impact not breadth of geography.

7. Being swayed by the “if one partnership is good, more must be even better” philosophy

Most churches that launch an exciting strategic initiative do go on to initiate others, but adding too many too fast engages the law of diminishing returns. Beware of overextending.

8. Launching a partnership as an excuse to cut funding for current missionaries or programs in which leaders have lost confidence

Churches regularly need to reevaluate their stewardship of missions finances and at times there may be call to adjust support designations. However, these decisions should not be driven by the adoption of a strategic initiative. Wise stewardship of missions funds is a serious task and needs time and attention as a separate matter. A partnership is not an project that should be funded at the expense of high quality efforts to which the church has previously made commitments.

Characteristics of a Partnership-Ready Church

The following characteristics are generally needed for a church to be ready to launch a significant, strategic partnership effort, particularly if the congregation up until this time has followed a traditional missions paradigm. Simple, entry-level partnerships may not require all of these qualifiers, while many initiatives will require more.

1. Church leaders have a passion to accomplish far more for the expansion of the Kingdom than they are currently achieving. They sense a “holy dissatisfaction” with their current missions impact.

An intense desire to do more and do it better underlies most change. In the spiritual realm, God plants in the hearts of His people a new vision of His purpose in the world and a longing to be used to greater effectiveness for His Kingdom. That drive is what is necessary to persevere through setbacks, misunderstandings, confusion, and exhaustion. As many have said, “Partnership is not easier, but it is better.” A clear focus on the goal must be driven by a deep desire for greater impact.

This passion does not negate a church's love for, and loyalty to, its current missionaries, but it grows from a conviction that this particular body of Christ could do far more than what it is currently accomplishing for Kingdom expansion. Leaders must long to see their people, particularly younger generations, passionate about God's heart for the world—to see members praying more intensely, giving more sacrificially, and going more eagerly. They must want to be more deeply involved with the exploding global church. They must have a vision to invest more of all types of resources in highly strategic ways.

2. Church leaders have spent significant time in prayer individually and corporately to determine if God is leading them toward a strategic partnership.

Entering a global partnership is not merely following a trend or adopting a quick fix. It must be based on a sense of divine invitation to walk a new road. Church leaders who have led partnership efforts reiterate over and over the prominence of prayer in the process. Partnering is difficult. Unless there is a foundation of prayer, the commitment may buckle when the going gets tough.

3. The pastor(s) and other leaders are enthusiastic or at least approving of the strategic partnership concept and opportunity. They will invest time to help analyze the church's missional DNA and determine the shape of a global partnership that will build on their congregation's God-given passions and gifting. They see their role as helping to integrate the partnership into the church's purpose and life.

One of the frequent questions is, “Can we partner successfully if the pastor isn't passionate about missions?”

The most effective partnerships grow out of, and are integrated into, the essential core of the local church. When they are an organic outgrowth of the thinking and direction of leaders, both pastoral and lay, they are very visible and are constantly provided support to develop and mature. For this kind of intrinsic integration, the ownership of the senior pastor is critical, and the enthusiasm of other pastors and elders is also important. A number of key leaders need to give more than tacit approval; they should understand the new paradigm and own the process and goals.



But must the senior pastor be a missions enthusiast before the church can consider a partnership? No. Many churches pursue effective strategic initiatives without strong missions passion from the pastor. For some, the drive comes from a missions pastor; for others, it comes from one or two elders, or from a gifted missions chairperson supported by a highly committed team of laypeople.

When top-down aggressive enthusiasm is missing, it usually takes longer to generate broad congregational ownership, and the process is definitely more difficult. However, it is possible if there are tenacious men and women who believe God for great things. (In a number of cases, a well constructed partnership has fostered greater pastoral passion by connecting the pastor judiciously to key nationals and/or opportunities.)

4. Leaders are prepared to make hard choices, saying “no” to some other good projects in order to concentrate their efforts on selected priorities.

This may be one of the more difficult prerequisites for a successful strategic engagement. Some churches are attracted to the concept of a partnership but cannot limit their focus enough to make it successful because they feel they must treat each missionary and missions project equally. Their solution is to call every missions endeavor a “partnership.” Others fail to implement a partnership because strong voices in the congregation each advocate for their pet initiatives—leaving the missions program nearly as splintered as before. Church leaders must have the decisiveness to limit their parameters to what they can realistically give in-depth attention.

5. Church members are ready to have their thinking stretched about what missions looks like and how God wants to use them.

A successful strategic initiative requires new ways of thinking about and doing missions that are not measured by the size of the budget, the number of missionaries supported, the variety of church missions events, or even the frequency of short-term missions trips. A partnership involves moving to a new level of commitment and involvement in global missions centered on building relationships and accomplishing shared objectives by investing the full, God-given potential of the church.

6. The church is ready to engage in a missions effort that will probably be messy and to make a commitment with no guarantee of success.

The majority of strategic initiatives set goals for which there is no simple formula for achievement. Relationships are dynamic and crossing cultures is complex. Partners must be flexible and adaptable. The only certainty is that the partnership will change from what was originally envisioned! Is the church prepared to invest energy and funds in a particular effort then, if necessary,

admit that it isn't working, reevaluate, and shift to another approach without becoming frustrated? Much frontlines mission work involves some trial and error experiments—bathed in much prayer.

7. The church is willing to invest the time and energy to develop in-depth relationships across cultural boundaries.

The most critical ingredient of strategic initiatives is in-depth, personal relationships among partners. Most non-Western participants are far more relational than their task-oriented Western partners. Is the church that asks, “What can we accomplish on this trip?” ready to accept that their partners will more likely query, “How can we get to know and appreciate each other better on this visit?” Will the church accept that spending extended time and travel funds getting acquainted must precede accomplishing specific tasks?

8. The church is committed to serving with humility accompanied by a teachable spirit.

Churches usually adopt a strategic initiative based on what they believe they have to give. While generosity is essential, in a true partnership giving and receiving must be reciprocal. Each participant must realize there is a vast amount that other partners can teach and share. Those with the least economic benefits often have the greatest spiritual resources.

9. The church is ready to have their cultural assumptions challenged and their understanding of biblical Christianity enlarged.

Those raised in the West are steeped in the assumption that sophisticated Western culture, economic productivity, democracy, education, efficiency, and material wealth are universally valued and biblically based. A partnership in the Majority World will force partners to rethink what is biblical versus what is cultural. Is the church ready to have its assumptions challenged and viewpoints stretched?

10. Current missions team members are willing to entrust major partnership responsibility to others in their church, especially entrepreneurial members of the congregation who may do things quite differently than they have been done in the past.

A partnership usually thrives best when a leadership team separate from, but accountable to, the missions committee drives the process. The best partnership leader is often the person with an entrepreneurial bent and the ability to create new solutions to circumvent obstacles and accomplish goals. Is the church ready to relinquish responsibility and appropriate authority to newer, usually younger, leaders who likely will want to try approaches that bear little resemblance to traditional missions activities?



Three Cases of Partnership Readiness

Ready? #1

A group of leaders from a church that gives generously to missions recognized that their members see missions as little more than a financial obligation. The concept of adopting a strategic focus to engage their people's talents and expertise for Kingdom benefit sounded very attractive. But were they ready for a serious partnership?

No. Why? Several strong members of the group each had a passionate commitment to a different people group or ministry. They were only interested in a strategic focus if their pet project was the focus! Each of these individuals had influence in the church, and the leader was not strong enough or willing to take the risk of attempting consensus.

Ready? #2

Over many years of a traditional missions program, this church had taken on support for a relatively large number of missionaries. Then there was a major change in missions leadership. The new global outreach team was eager to launch a proactive, hands-on partnership but they also had a lot of questions about the effectiveness, accountability, and skills/ministry match for those they were already supporting. Were they ready at that point to launch a partnership?

No. They agreed they first needed to "get their house in order." They took the time to learn in-depth about their missionary family and current organizational commitments. They established some strategy and policy guidelines, eliminated connections they felt were not a good stewardship of funds, and in the process identified several efforts they thought were potentials for greater involvement and investment. Are they now ready to consider a strategic initiative? Yes!

Ready? #3

This young church plant was eager to make reaching the nations a part of their new congregation's DNA. They chose a people group in a very volatile part of the world. With excitement they sent two short-term survey/

ministry teams and began to lay plans for several ongoing, in-depth involvements that they felt would help the whole congregation catch the vision. Before these could be launched, the political situation disintegrated making travel to their adopted region virtually impossible with little hope for a resolution any time soon. Most long-term workers were evacuated, interrupting even the flow of prayer information. Is this church ready to adopt another focus?

Church leaders feel ambivalent. They want to be loyal to their adopted people/region but they also recognize the need to give their young congregation some tangible involvement. Yes, they are candidates for a new partnership focus. They can invest in a new direction, trusting God that someday they can return to their "first love." By then the church likely will be large enough to engage deeply in both.

Watch for next month's *Postings* with more on partnership readiness.



Ellen Livingood, the head of Catalyst Services, is researching and writing on various aspects of effective partnership for churches and agencies.

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

To ask questions, suggest future topics, change your email address, or unsubscribe to this monthly publication, email info@catalystservices.org.

© 2008 Catalyst Service, Inc.