

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



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Adopting a Collaboration Mindset

How can we grow together in God's mission?

We all say that we value collaboration, but if we're honest, we find it difficult to practice it in ways that shape our mission engagement and the culture of our churches. In this article, Jen Haddox explores the gifts and challenges of collaborative mission and proposes a starting point for how we can grow together in God's mission through a more collaborative spirit of engagement.

MY JOURNEY TOWARD COLLABORATION

For two decades I have been serving as a mission mobilizer in various capacities—short-term mission leader, “Perspectives” class coordinator, mission-conference planner, and now denominational mission leader. In all of those roles, I have sought to help churches get engaged in what God is doing in the world, especially among unreached peoples. When I first got started in this ministry, I hoped to see individuals catch a vision and get engaged in God’s mission. By God’s grace, I’ve seen this happen!

As I gained experience, I recognized that mobilizing one or two people in a church was not as fruitful as mobilizing a whole church. More recently, I have come to see that even though individually mobilized churches are good fruit, there is a greater synergy for the gospel when individuals, churches, and organizations collaborate.

The gift of collaboration in mission occurs when multiple people, churches, or agencies come together to share ideas, resources, and expertise that lead to Great Commission breakthroughs.

Genuine collaboration is an expression of unity in Christ that helps every participant grow individually and corporately into God’s purpose. When we collaborate with others beyond our natural boundaries for the sake of the gospel, not only do we experience unity in Christ and synergy in our Kingdom efforts, we also see ourselves and others growing as Jesus’ disciples in the process, and the gospel advances in ways beyond our individual contribution.

Collaboration is the expression of *koinonia* (partnership and fellowship) that Paul describes in the opening of his letter to the Philippians. He writes, “...because of your *koinonia* in the gospel

from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” The words “thanksgiving” and “joy” also flood this mission partnership letter. The book of

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Philippians is a witness that gospel partnerships like the one Paul’s missionary team had with the church in Philippi result in growth for disciples (Phil. 2-3), gratitude, and generosity (Phil. 4).

PAINFUL REALITIES

Growth, gratitude, and generosity are gifts I would like to experience in my mobilization efforts, but instead I continue to run up against scenarios like these:

- A. For a number of years, my church has been taking annual mission trips to a Global South community, and we started to invite neighboring churches to join us in our mission partnership. But only one or two people have ever done that, and it doesn’t seem to lead to anything ongoing.
- B. My church decided to host the “Perspectives” class in our region for the very first time, and

we sent out invitations, made phone calls, and visited *every* church in town, but only one other church sent a few people to the class. One pastor even replied, “I’m not sending *my* people to *that* church for something.”

- C. My church has been in a long partnership relationship with a church in the Global South. We keep asking them, “How can we serve and support you best?” Sometimes I wonder if they are just giving us the answers they think we want to hear. We are coming to better understand their ministry challenges, but it still seems like we can’t get beneath the surface in our interactions.

WHAT MAKES IT SO CHALLENGING

Even when we *try* to grow in partnership and collaboration, it often doesn’t go the way we hope or expect. We know the value of working together in God’s Kingdom, but it just doesn’t come easily or naturally. Why is that? In my recent research on the topic, I discovered the challenge of bringing people together in effective ways. I became convinced that the struggle to genuinely collaborate and partner in mission has to do with our deep-level cultural worldview.

Most North American church leaders have recognized that we no longer live in a time when the local church has cultural authority and influence like perhaps we had a few generations ago. (Scholars called this former era of Christian cultural authority, *Christendom*.) I would argue, however, that many of our churches continue to have some Christendom culture in our DNA and structures.

We continue to think of ourselves as leaders in the worldwide Christian movement. We want to grow and extend the reach of our churches and have a market-driven approach to get people into our

programs and by which we measure success.

Collaboration is significantly hampered and even impossible when it is assumed that one party is in control or taking the lead. In his book *Beyond Christendom*, Jehu Hanciles persuasively suggests that collaboration only becomes possible when we recognize our marginality—that we do not have cultural authority over other people. Giving up status and privilege and our assumption of leadership roles in mission takes some intentionality.

ADVANCING THE GOSPEL IN WAYS ONLY POSSIBLE TOGETHER

The challenge of shaking off the cultural influence of Christendom in Western churches may also find its remedy in collaborative global mission engagement. As churches in the West become disoriented because we no longer exert cultural influence, we can learn and grow through partnership with Christians who have always lived without cultural Christian influence. But it requires a paradigm shift in mission engagement toward humility and mutuality in cross-cultural partnerships. A great read on this is Paul Borthwick’s *Western Christians in Global Mission: What’s the Role of the North American Church?*

I’ve seen the gift of collaboration at work in one particular security-sensitive context. Although the workers belong to a variety of agencies, come from diverse cultural and theological backgrounds, and employ varying field strategies, they regularly come together for broader Kingdom purposes. They have formed a collaborative network to learn from and support one another, building trust and cooperation instead of suspicion and competition. All of this with the goal of advancing the gospel in ways not possible without each other.

When I attended this network's annual conference (pre-COVID), we began with a corporate fast. The fast called our attention to our vulnerability, to our need for a Savior, and our need for one another in His Body. I was so convicted by the Spirit that churches in the States need more leaders calling us to this expression of unity in Christ.

I came home from that trip and began dreaming about how this could happen for churches in my

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denominational network. Rather than each church relating individually to a global mission partner or initiative, we could band together to learn from one another, share ideas and expertise, and see more fruit for the gospel.

In conversation with many church leaders, experts in mission partnership, and global partners, I have developed a strategy called Communities of Global Engagement. It's nothing complex; rather it is a simple commitment that our churches will serve and grow together in our global partnerships.

A significant hallmark of these communities is the commitment to develop a small leadership team of four to five people, each from a different church and including at least one leading representative from the global partner. Our goal is to give the non-Western partner an equal voice to initiate, guide, and participate in the partnership community. These leadership teams gather monthly via Zoom

for prayer and to coordinate mission partnership connection opportunities which have so far included virtual prayer gatherings and learning opportunities, and we hope soon, in person gatherings.

FIRST STEPS

Anyone can begin shifting into a collaboration paradigm. Here are a few ideas for practical steps toward embracing partnership and collaboration.

1. Rather than inviting others to your mission project, ask if you can join others in what they are doing in God's mission. Learn how to connect with others by exploring the amazing ways that God is drawing the Church into collaborative partnerships. Visit [Linking Global Voices](#) to browse the amazing number of gospel networks. Then, dig into learning with resources from visionSynergy at their [synergy commons site](#).
2. When you do have a really cool mission opportunity to offer to other churches (like a "Perspectives" class or short-term mission trip), think about inviting partners, not just participants. What's the difference? A partner has an investment of leadership and resources and can clearly see how they have a significant part in the outcomes.
Partnerships are formed when participants see their participation as fulfilling their own mission too. Ask your neighboring churches, "What is your mission, and what would it mean for us to partner in fulfilling our distinct callings?"
3. Instead of asking your global partner, "What can we do to support you?" ask, "What can we learn and receive from you?" Mutual mission partnership is a step beyond offering support

and receiving it as well. One of the church leaders in my network was introduced to discipleship materials a global partner was using to encourage Christians in their context to share the gospel with Muslim neighbors. This American leader is now adapting those resources as a tool to encourage their churchgoers to do the same.

Another of the Communities of Global Engagement I am working with is currently planning a virtual learning series where the global partner will teach about the ministry of trauma healing among persecuted house church leaders. Instead of our pastors teaching these majority world leaders, they are teaching us. I can't wait to see how blessed we will be by their expertise and what it could mean for better serving vulnerable people in our local communities.

CALLED TO COLLABORATION

In the complex and diverse context of global Christianity, as local congregations or denominations or mission organizations, we “have come to the historical moment when, if we are to be for the gospel of Christ, we must also be for each other.” (Daniel Rickett, *Making Your Partnership Work*, Kindle loc 293). Collaboration involves relationships, and relationships are dynamic and complex.

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Collaboration doesn't mean that we always agree and get along; it means we commit to working together despite the work it requires. In *Understanding Christian Mission*, Scott Sunquist calls this “dynamic unity” because it is always moving and adjusting as we follow God's mission in the world. Remaining centered in unity with Christ, we can navigate the relationships and challenges together in ways that give God greater glory.

May God draw us in the direction of dynamic unity in mission for the sake of His glory being revealed among all peoples.



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