

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



February 2024 | Vol. 19 | Issue 2 | by Ellen Livingood

Are We Ready to Partner?

**First of a three-part series
to help you establish a
healthy partnership**

The world is growing smaller. Travel and technology have made it possible for churches almost anywhere in the world to connect and collaborate in ways unimaginable just a few years ago. This has enabled partnership to be a realistic goal for almost any size church.

While for many reasons, partnerships have sometimes failed to live up to their potential, a growing number of churches are determined to partner better. They want to approach partnering humbly with a determination to listen, learn, and serve in an empowering support role. This first in a series of *Postings*

articles on partnership is designed to help you measure your church's readiness.

A BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

The New Testament does not speak directly about church-to-church partnerships, yet we have a record of the impact of one powerful New Testament church partnership between a church and missionary. In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul lists the multiple ways they strengthened his ministry: by the depth of their relationship (1:5), their powerful intercession (1:19), their personal care (sending Epaphroditus, 2:25-29), and their generosity (multiple financial gifts, 4:15-16). These key elements are also relevant in today's church-to-church partnerships and other partnering commitments.

DEFINING GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR CHURCHES

To keep it simple, for our purposes we will use the term "partnership" to describe a **RELATIONSHIP** of trust that connects local churches across cultures in **MUTUAL GIVING** and **RECEIVING** to achieve shared Kingdom-building **GOALS**.

Partnership: A relationship of trust that connects local churches across cultures in mutual giving and receiving to achieve shared Kingdom- building goals.

This type of partnership can happen right in a church's own community as they engage with a diaspora congregation, but many such relationships connect churches on opposite sides of the globe. This series will primarily focus on those that connect "*global churches*" (those in the Global South including Africa, Asia, and South America) with "*Western churches*" (those in the Global North including North America, Europe, Australia and other highly developed nations). Our primary focus will be on *church-to-church partnerships* although partnerships between/ among multiple churches and individual indigenous workers or organizations can be included.

We will more specifically address these other cross-cultural partnerships at various points as we move forward.

A REAL-LIFE STORY

"Before we take your resources..."

It was 2014, and the senior pastor and missions pastor of College Wesleyan Church (CWC) in Marion, IN, were visiting Senda de Vida Church (SDV) in Mexico City. There were just 40 people worshipping in a building that had been without a roof for 18 years. Every time they met, church members had to laboriously pull up a heavy tarp to protect the congregation as they worshipped. The American visitors recognized the need for a roof as something they could quickly resolve by writing a check.

But SDV's pastor, Alex Silicia, said categorically, "Before we take your resources, we want to develop a relationship." His reaction to their proposed generosity set CWC on a course to pursue a very different church-to-church partnership than what they had expected.

Alex had grown up near Tijuana, Mexico, watching one American church after another drive across the border with huge bundles of clothes and other gifts for

churches in his country. He was painfully aware that the giving was all one sided and did nothing to encourage Mexican believers to trust God's provision or see themselves as having the capacity to contribute.

"We never do for our partner church what they can do for themselves, but we do serve alongside them."

Now as a pastor, Alex was determined not to repeat that pattern of dependency. He insisted that a relationship had to precede any monetary gift because his small Mexican congregation needed to know they too had something to give. Americans were not the only ones God had resourced in order to be generous.

So began a reciprocal relationship that still continues today. What did Senda de Vida give to College Wesleyan Church? Beau Hamner, the current missions pastor at CWC,

explains, "As our relationship developed, we discovered that instead of focusing on the problem of their missing roof, SDV was committed to discipling their people. We quickly recognized that we could learn from their program. In fact, their model has entirely shifted the way we do discipleship here.

"Another blessing to us," Beau adds, "is Alex's deep friendship and his ministry to us whenever he visits. Alex has become one of my best friends. We can be transparent with each other. He knows all of my challenges and vice versa.

"Teams from CWC regularly go to Mexico to spend time building relationships with Senda de Vida people who have become beloved friends," he continues. "One cardinal rule is that we never do for SDV what they can do for themselves. But we do serve alongside them at dental clinics, in homeless ministries, and other outreach opportunities. SDV teams have come to Marion to serve alongside us, too."

And what about the missing roof?

Beau continues. "Alex challenged us, 'Don't do the roof project *for* us but *with* us.' So that's what happened. Our Mexican brothers and sisters gave what they could, and we made up the rest. When the roof was finally finished, we

sent representatives to Mexico City to celebrate together.

"Mutuality and reciprocity are foundational to our partnership," Beau concludes. "In fact, we feel so connected to Senda de Vida Church that we don't make decisions here at CWC without considering how our choice will impact them. And they ask themselves the same question."

Currently, the two partners are dreaming and praying about sending teams together to serve in a third location, possibly working alongside one of CWC's other global partners.

SIX REASONS TO PURSUE A CHURCH PARTNERSHIP

Before going further, it's important to stop and analyze why church-to-church partnerships can be particularly fruitful. Here are just a few of the benefits.

1. **The global church has exploded in recent decades, but it is often fragile.** The **2024 Status of Global Christianity** confirms that there are now more than twice as many people who identify as Christian in the Global South than in the Global North. At the same time, many Christian leaders in the Global South are deeply concerned that

without deeper roots, too many young congregations will not survive into the next generation. Nurturing, sister-church relationships could make a big difference in their survival and encourage continued multiplication and outreach. Given these factors, why wouldn't Global North congregations desire global fellowship and collaboration?

2. **Western churches need partners to help them learn to cross cultural divides.** Partnerships between Global North churches and diaspora congregations in their geographic area not only benefit both bodies but can also prepare Western churches to better relate to a church on the other side of the world. In reverse, skills gained in global partnerships can also improve local, cross-cultural relationships.
3. **Western churches need to learn from their global brothers and sisters.** While once church-to-church partnerships were assumed to be almost totally a Western church's giving to their global partner, the best of these relationships are now reciprocal. Western churches that demonstrate humility in learning from global brothers and sisters become better

disciples.

4. **Western churches are responsible to steward their financial resources well.** At their best, church-to-church relationships can help identify and support indigenous-led efforts in ways that avoid dependence. They nurture the vision of local leaders who are gifted and already leading well in their own context.
5. **An amazing generation of global church leaders is poised to speak powerfully into the weaknesses of Western churches.** God is raising up godly men and women around the world who have both benefitted from Western churches' missions efforts and suffered from the mistakes they have made. Their prophetic voices can speak powerfully to Global North congregations, and their messages especially resonate with younger generations.
6. **Reaching the unreached together promises to be far more effective than going it alone.** In the hardest-to-reach places, Western churches face political barriers, language/cultural hurdles, and lifestyle discrepancies. At the same time, global churches may be hobbled in their missions efforts by lack of training and

resources. Both can be more effective if they work in collaboration.

FIRST STEPS TOWARD PARTNERSHIP

A good way to begin moving toward a partnership is by conducting the fairly simple readiness audit on the following pages. Evaluate how well the nine key partnership-readiness indicators in the left column describe your congregation. The readiness-calibration questions in the right column flesh out at a practical level what each requires. Please note, **no church is ever fully ready**, but if your church is serious about growing into these goals and eager to take steps toward readiness, God can shape you into a great partner!

We recommend that you bring together a group including pastor(s), elders (or other church leaders as defined by your church), and missions team members to work through this list. A partnership coach, denominational leader, or agency partnership facilitator can be a valuable guide for your discussion. As a result of your honest assessment, identify a couple of key areas where you need to improve your partnering skills. Don't try to work on everything at once.

ASSESS YOUR CHURCH'S PARTNERSHIP READINESS

For a true partnership to flourish, certain core qualifications must be present in your church. The following measures are not simple yes/no answers but represent goals that must be constantly reaffirmed and character traits to continue developing. Download this tool as a **customizable Word document**.

PARTNERSHIP CRITERIA	READINESS CALIBRATIONS
1. Commitment to relationship building. We are willing to invest the time and energy to develop in-depth relationships across cultural and language boundaries.	A. Since Global South people are almost always more relationship-oriented than those from the Global North, will we gladly make multiple visits to “be together” (get to know our prospective partners and build in-depth trust) before “doing together” (adopting projects, running programs, and contributing funds)? B. Does our congregation understand this prioritization of the relationship? Will they support trips that build understanding and trust, but don’t necessarily complete a tangible project? C. Is our prospective partner part of an honor/shame culture? Are we willing to learn to communicate in a way that is appropriate for them?
2. Willingness to assume the role of follower rather than leader. We recognize that the global partner is best positioned to know what should be done and able to lead the way in achieving goals.	A. Will we consciously reject the idea that our way of doing things is best for our partner? This will mean listening well and being patient as our partner develops their own vision and plans. B. Will we acknowledge that bigger and faster is not necessarily better, and encourage our partner to set the speed of our collaboration?
3. Conviction that God is challenging us to deeper global commitment and involvement. We have a passion to accomplish far more for the expansion of the Kingdom and feel a “holy dissatisfaction” with our current missions impact.	A. Have we spent time in corporate prayer to seek God’s plan for the expansion of our global stewardship of all He has invested in us? B. Are we willing to have God stretch our faith to trust Him for something that is clearly impossible by our own efforts? C. In response to Jesus’ Acts 1:8 mandate, are we willing, if God asks us, to invest people, time, and funds in our partnership that we might feel are sorely needed in our own church?
4. Humility to receive as well as give. We will come to partnership expecting to learn and receive because true partnership requires reciprocal giving and receiving.	A. Will we approach partnering believing that no matter their context or needs, every potential church partner has God-given gifts to share? B. Are we ready to humbly learn from our partners who may have less education and leadership expertise than we consider ourselves to have?
5. Tolerance for ambiguity and change. We are ready to engage in a partnership that will probably be messy and to make a commitment with no guarantee of success. We expect that our plans may often need to change.	A. Are we willing to commit to ongoing prayer in order to discern the Holy Spirit’s guidance as situations change, necessitating the reshaping of our priorities and involvements? B. Since relationships are dynamic and the context in many global locations is unstable, will we consciously work at being flexible and adaptable?

PARTNERSHIP CRITERIA	READINESS CALIBRATIONS
6. Commitment of our leaders. Our pastor(s) and other key leaders believe that God is calling us into a cross-cultural partnership. They will personally and corporately “own” this relationship, leading our congregation to sacrificially pursue partnership as a way to fulfill God’s missions mandate for our church.	A. Are our spiritual leaders ready to commit to the development of a partnership, not allowing other “good” programs to displace this as our missional priority? B. Are our pastors and key leaders eager to invest time to develop reciprocal relationships with our partner church’s leaders despite different cultures and languages?
7. Partnering capacity. Whether exploring our first partnership or taking on an additional one, we do so because we believe God has invested in our congregation gifts and resources that will likely be wasted unless we embrace our calling to collaborate with brothers and sisters in another place.	A. Do we see underutilized gifts in believers across our congregation that could be engaged for global impact? B. Have we already researched our untapped expertise, experience, and other resources that might point toward the type of partnership God would have us initiate?
8. Length of partnership commitment. We are willing to make a 3-5 year commitment to this partnership, realizing that at the end of that time we may mutually agree to conclude. Or at that point we may extend our commitment not because our partner is dependent on us but in order to see more accomplished.	A. Are we ready by faith to make a commitment to a partnership for a definite period of time, recognizing that while our formal collaborations may then end, our fellowship and friendships will endure.
9. Financial investment. We will make a significant financial commitment to this partnership while doing all we can to avoid allowing finances to be the driving force of our partnership. Respecting the time and expertise of our partnership facilitator, we will also remunerate them as needed for their service.	A. What does “significant” mean for us? B. Will we talk through tough questions about financial accountability with our partner, understanding that their convictions about the biblical responsibility to steward funds well may differ from ours and we will need to find common ground in how we approach questions of financial transparency and accountability? C. Will we recognize the immense value added by our partnership facilitator and contribute to their support and/or related ministry expenses?

Next month’s *Postings* will introduce different types of church-to-church partnerships and begin to guide your church toward partner selection.

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