

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



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Thinking Collaboratively

Churches discover the value of doing missions together

Imagine that your congregation decides to erect a new church building. You have a clear vision for the completed structure, and lots of workers show up at the construction site. But then you notice that three small clusters of workmen are each building a separate front entrance while no one is putting on the roof. Plumbers are running water pipes, but they don't extend to the location where carpenters are busy constructing the kitchen. You desperately need better collaboration!

This simple illustration points out that complex tasks require a comprehensive plan that includes good communication and real cooperation. Today we have tools for collaboration that were unimagined just a generation ago.

We live in what is being described as the “network society.” Thanks largely to the internet and ease of travel, people can overcome barriers of distance, language, education, and financial resources to connect around the globe. Networking is creating the potential for collaborations that are revolutionizing how our world operates.

Missions is also reaping huge benefits from networking. Hundreds of networks around the world are connecting people in order to collaborate on projects as diverse as refugee services, church planting, pastoral training, trauma care, disaster relief, missionary mobilization, and so much more. The [Linking Global Voices](#) website is a place to discover networks by name, issue focus, or geographic location. For example, ICETE (the [International Council for Evangelical Theological Education](#)) fosters global dialogue and cooperation to increase the quality of pastoral training. Their online platform offers high-quality teaching resources contributed by schools across the globe for the benefit of thousands of educators, even those working in the most remote contexts.

Yes, it is easy to demonstrate how collaboration serves missions. But why does your church need to think collaboratively? Here are a rationale, real-life examples, and questions to consider as you expand your church’s collaborative thinking.

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WHY MISSIONS COLLABORATION IS IMPORTANT TO YOUR CHURCH

Historically, most church missions efforts have involved supporting individual entities, whether missionary units or ministry organizations. Here are some reasons why churches are now beginning to think about how to engage more broadly.

- ***Duplication of efforts is far more common than most churches know.*** Anyone seeking funding faces the temptation to portray themselves as the only person/organization working in a

Churches Collaborating Globally

Parker Ford Church in Pottstown, PA, is not large but you might say they punch above their weight class because they are involved in a strategic, collaborative effort called CCPA (Cross-Cultural Partnerships for Asia). This Asian-led network recruits and supports Asian church planters working among unreached peoples by matching each with an American congregation.

Western partner churches like Parker Ford make a small but vital monthly support contribution, but more importantly, they pray, communicate with, and care for their frontline worker. Annually, partner churches are encouraged to send representatives to a renewal conference in the Philippines where they collaborate with Asian senders as well as other North American partner congregations to minister face to face to “their” worker and many others.

Central Church in Sioux Falls, SD, began their new focus in Ethiopia eight years ago with just one partner. However, their commitment to invest not just their treasure (funds) but also their time and talent,

particular place or addressing a particular need. This is seldom the case. Multiple organizations are often working in the same area or are focused on addressing the same issue. And other workers, especially non-Western and bivocational believers, may be doing very effective work “under the radar.” Sadly, in too many instances, failure to work together results in duplication of efforts, poor use of resources, and competition instead of cooperation.

Churches need to proactively seek out those who can educate them about networking in a particular region or type of ministry to which they feel called. Our past *Postings*, “**Increase Your Impact,**” provides guidelines for researching complementary ministries and expanding your church’s involvement collaboratively.

It is important to note that your missionary may be so immersed in their own work that they are unaware of other ministries or of partnering efforts around them. Together discover collaboration opportunities that facilitate wiser stewardship of everyone’s resources!

- ***Collaboration demands serious commitment.*** Partnering requires that participants share a common, big-picture vision, come with large amounts of humility to serve others, and involve a facilitator who has the skills to guide the process over the inevitable roadblocks. Be prepared—while collaboration is usually better than working alone, it is not easier!
- ***Collaboration is a wonderful way to invest in younger and indigenous leaders.*** Collaboration usually produces better results than working alone, but it also requires perseverance. Partnering requires that participants share a common, big-picture vision, exhibit humility and servants’ hearts, and involve a facilitator with the skills to navigate roadblocks. Be prepared—collaboration may be better than working alone, but it is usually harder too!
- ***Churches can significantly contribute to collaboration by shifting their focus from primarily sending Western “doers” to instead sending facilitators.*** Tomorrow’s missionaries will need to be sent out already having the ability to bring together people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives to work harmoniously for greater Kingdom goals. Today’s local church leaders need to both identify and develop the facilitation skills of the next generation of sent workers.

led them to expand their collaborations.

Today they partner in various ways with Ethiopian ministries providing pastoral preparation, vocational training, ministries for the disabled, church-multiplication efforts, care for vulnerable children, microloans, and more. They recently sent a longer-term worker from their congregation to serve there. Part of her assignment is coordinating all of Central’s on-the-ground collaboration efforts.

Churches Helping Missionaries Collaborate

First Methodist Church in Tulsa, OK, supports a worker who trains North African leaders in business skills to help African leaders become self-supporting evangelists and church planters. First Methodist networked him with one of the ministries they support in Central America. His coaching resulted in the Latin organization becoming largely self-sustaining.

New Hope (MN) Church has had a long-term commitment to collaborative work among Azerbaijanis. One of the multiple ways they have put feet to this commitment is by provid-

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IMPORTANT CAUTIONS

- ***Not all partners are open to collaboration.*** Missionaries and national workers may be reticent to collaborate with others for a wide variety of reasons. Some resist because they want full control of their own projects or because they want to be able to exclusively claim the results as a justification for their presence. At other times, resistance to collaboration grows out of tensions between workers, both expat and indigenous, that are rooted in distrust arising from past or present disagreements.
- ***Missionaries or indigenous workers may not want their church partners to collaborate with others because they fear that it will reduce the amount of funds and attention that they and their ministry receive.*** Such zero-sum thinking is counterproductive. Churches need to challenge this mindset by demonstrating that they are willing to invest more, not less, in workers who are committed to collaborative efforts and who help their church to collaborate well.
- ***Not all networks welcome churches into their ranks.*** Some networks are eager to “partner” as long as that means the church will just provide financial support. Other networks don’t want to include churches because in their view, either it takes too much time and energy to educate churches about the context, they consider churches as unteachable or controlling, and/or they believe churches’ interest will quickly move elsewhere when some new opportunity diverts their attention. Unfortunately, these negative reputations have sometimes been well earned.

ing office space and support for the missionary who coordinates several Azeri-focused networks. Having this facilitator onsite not only serves the networks but also ensures that ministry in Central Asia is highly visible to the congregation.

A Church Collaborating with Other North American Congregations

Emmanuel Faith Community Church in Escondido, CA, works collaboratively with many global partners, but they have also been involved in developing and sustaining a consortium of US churches located in Southern California that work together to support ministry efforts in the Middle East/North Africa.

Five core churches provide ongoing stability to this effort while welcoming other congregations and individuals to participate as they can. Working together means that the churches can tackle projects too large for any one member to address while also combining efforts on ministry trips and sharing information that makes ministry better and more efficient for all of them.

The good news is that a growing number of networks welcome churches that want to learn and truly serve the network and its efforts. The leaders of these networks are willing to invest some time and effort to nurture healthy relationships that benefit the church as well as their own purposes.

- ***Collaboration is not always the best way to work.*** Without negating any of the major benefits of working together, it is important to acknowledge that there are situations in which it is most efficient and effective for one individual or entity to work alone. However, churches should ask insightful questions before reaching the conclusion that a particular solo worker/work is optimum.

QUESTIONS TO IMPROVE YOUR COLLABORATION

As your church considers its global role in today's network environment, you will need to wrestle with these questions as you seek to become intentionally collaborative.

1. **Value partnering.** Does our church have a commitment to collaborative efforts that avoid redundancy and work to maximize the investment of people, finances, and other God-given Kingdom resources? How is that expressed and practiced? Do our church leaders and our missionaries know we value collaboration? Can we cooperate broadly or do we have specific doctrinal or other restrictions on our willingness or ability to partner?
2. **Help missionaries collaborate.** Do we know if/how our missionaries are collaborating with both other expats and indigenous ministries where they serve? If they are, are there ways that we can encourage those collaborative efforts? If they aren't, do we know why? Is collaboration one of the things we measure in our accountability system?
3. **Nurture the collaborative spirit of indigenous leaders.** How can we measure the amount of collaboration being practiced by current and potential indigenous partners? Do we understand both the opportunities and challenges they face in working in cooperation with others?
4. **Fund collaborative skills and efforts.** Should we consider sending some of our missionaries and indigenous partners to get further training in how to facilitate collaborative efforts? Should we set aside funds annually for them (as well as for members of our church's missions leadership team) to attend network meetings or other sessions focused on collaboration? Do we earmark funds so workers can invest time and travel in order to work more collaboratively?

As we consider underwriting projects, are we taking into consideration whether the effort is being approached in collaboration with others? Have we considered designating funding for a regional or issue-focused network that serves as an incubation site and working hub for projects we want to see advance?

- 5. Identify facilitators and recruit future ones.** Are our missionaries and indigenous partners eager to help our church engage in broader relationships/networks in their area of ministry in order to expand what God is doing where they live and serve? Can they help prepare us to partner well?

Are we seeking to send future workers who have a collaborative mindset as well as the skills to facilitate various kinds of partnerships? How can we help them develop expertise in facilitating collaboration?

- 6. Investigate sending agencies' collaborative efforts.** Do we know what the agencies with which we partner (directly or by sending workers under their leadership) practice and teach regarding collaboration? Should this influence our choice of organizations with whom we send workers or with whom we support projects?

- 7. Collaborate locally too.** As we engage locally, do we consider whether our partners are actively pursuing efforts to collaborate? How could we foster more collaboration in order to better use Kingdom resources?

Is your church serious about seeing the greatest possible impact from your missions efforts both locally and globally? Expand your thinking to envision ways in which collaboration could result in broader impact, reduced duplication, and wiser stewardship of resources. As one African proverb reminds us, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

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