



A Survey of Kingdom Collaboration

FEATURE ARTICLE

“There is no other way society will achieve large-scale progress against urgent and complex problems, unless a collective approach becomes the accepted way of doing business.”

-Stanford Institute of Social Innovation Journal, Spring 2012

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What's the Challenge?

All cultures have both idealized and realized values. These values represent the way things ought to be and the way they really are. Near the top of the list of Christian idealized values is the vision Jesus gives His followers in John 17:21-23—"That they may all be one as you and I are one, so that the world may know that you have sent me."¹ The distance between what we hope for in Kingdom collaboration and the way things really are often create tension, disappointment, and even disillusionment. But there is real cause for hope!

Historical Context and Previous Models

Over the decades a number of ingredients at the field level have opened hearts and minds to cooperation as an alternative to Western paradigms of individualism: Distance from home constituencies (read: difficulty for sponsors to look over your shoulder); an awareness of limited resources in the face of overwhelming need; a sense of a lack of effectiveness, if not failure; intense isolation; and an acute awareness of Satanic opposition.

In North America, mission agencies originally came together in the IFMA (Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association, and the EFMA (Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies), finally merging into Missio Nexus—now with 261 mission agencies, over 70 churches, and 200+ individuals as members.

The World Evangelical Alliance Missions Commission (WEAMC, <https://mc.worldea.org/>) with an international leadership team spread across nine regions has nearly dozens of associated national mission alliances. Reflecting the vitality and scale of non-Western initiative, the India Missions Association has over 254 members!

Change In The Wind

Following its launch at the historic 1974 meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland, the Lausanne Movement has linked individuals rather than organizations. In face of a World Council of Churches in decline, Lausanne's power was the core call of evangelical theology and evangelism expressed in a twin commitment to holism (the Lausanne Covenant) and the awareness of unreached peoples (Ralph Winter's singular contribution to the 1974 Lausanne Congress). The Lausanne Movement

provided a safe haven for many individuals who shared these commitments but found little, if any, resonance in their own denominational or organizational structures. Today, the Lausanne Movement (www.lausanne.org) is home to a range of evangelism-related consultations, links global leaders across twelve regions, and is home to 36 "Issue Networks" involving hundreds of leaders across dozens of countries.

Revolutionary forces—the ease and lowering of costs of communications, the advent of the internet and, more recently, social media—combined with the growing ease and lowering costs of transportation—accelerated a powerful trend identified in the 1970s and 80s: the shift of power of social structures from the center to the edges.

In the evangelical missions community this was expressed in a range of non-traditional initiatives, outside of formal church-related structures including:

- Interservice's "Urbana" missions events with thousands of college students connecting, typically, with up to 150 cooperating mission agencies, finding their way into significant international service.
- The revolutionary Inter Cristo initiative that collaboratively brought over 2,000 mission and Christian service agencies together across the U.S., the UK, France, and Germany to more effectively connect individuals who wanted to serve with specific global opportunities. Initially criticized for its groundbreaking use of computers, Inter Cristo linked tens of thousands of individuals to naturally-related field work over its 40-year life.
- And the 1986 birth of the intentional, multi-agency, partnership approach to unreached people pioneered by Interdev. From an initial meeting of a dozen ministries in Malaga, Spain over the following 16 years the movement spawned strategic evangelism partnerships in over 90 languages where previously that had not been a single nationally-led church.
- Possibly more important, the 1980s partnership movement provided a model for replicable collaborative work by evangelicals across challenging, diverse theological, linguistic, and cultural lines. Rooted in the replicability of the vision, partnership



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development training, from the early 90s through 2003, helped hundreds gain the understanding and skills to facilitate durable collaboration.

While all of this was happening, the ‘modern missionary movement’ dating back 100+ years was producing extraordinary fruit. The church of Asia, Africa, and Latin America was looking at the world and their responsibility in new ways. In time, hundreds of non-western missionaries began arriving in the field so that Western and Non-Western missionaries were meeting around a common vision. To realize the vision, partnership or other forms of collaboration were the natural way forward.

Also, regionally, like-minded non-Western church and mission leaders were forming new collaborative structures to advance the cause of missions – sharing information, best practices, and encouragement.

MANI (Movement For African National Initiatives) links those across both Anglophone and Francophone Africa. COMIBAM links the Spanish and Portuguese language missions community in the Americas and Europe. And these were barely the tip of the iceberg.

Variations On The Theme - The Collaborative Vision Grows

As the number of language-specific or people group-specific partnerships grew, annual regional consultations sprang up to link partnership leaders. As the next level of collaboration, these regional consultations provided opportunity for people from within the region to meet, share experiences and resources. They were also a natural forum for those from outside the region who had interests inside the region. More than a dozen of these annual consultations emerged, from French-speaking West Africa across to Southeast Asia.

In the greater Middle East and Central Asia alone, four of these annual regional evangelism consultations currently attract over 1,000 participants annually!

But the explosion of collaborative initiatives in recent years is probably best seen in the remarkable recent compilation of mission networks and partnerships consistently updated at the web site, www.linkingglobalvoices.com. Assembled and maintained by Eldon Porter, consultant with the WEA's Missions Commission, the site has over 500 missions-focused networks, partnerships and other specific collaborative entities.

From 180+ member networks focused on Muslim ministry to global networks dealing with church planting and digital media-based evangelism strategies, without exception, even the most specialized of these Kingdom-focused networks represent the strategic meeting point for what is now the global church mission force.

Collaboration Increasingly Defined By Specific Focus

The trends of collaboration today have naturally coalesced around major challenges: linguistic (specific language groups), geographic (countries or regions), and functional (specialized issues that cut across linguistic and geographical boundaries such as media/communications, orality, individuals at risk, Scripture translation and distribution, relief and development, refugees, etc.).

But the revolution in communications technology has facilitated a further innovation in collaboration: In the West, a growing number of local churches connect around their common interests in language groups or countries and then link directly with partnerships or networks in the field. Face to face relationships of understanding and trust are still vital for effective, durable collaboration. Yet, for many elements of collaboration distance is now almost meaningless.


What Of The Future?

- The hundreds of 'ad hoc' digital and other media-based evangelism initiatives must find ways to more effectively listen to and collaborate with national and international workers on the ground – at the

grass roots where the real action must always occur.

- Over 600,000 college students study in a foreign country. While a range of initiatives seek to reach these future influentials before they return to their home country, total impact could be greatly increased by more intentional collaboration among international student ministries.
- Faced with both voluntary and forced migration on an unprecedented scale the church must find ways to more effectively collaborate to serve and reach these groups. In 2015 over a million refugees arrived in Europe. In 2016 over 135,000 more arrived – almost all from highly-contested, high-priority areas like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It's estimated 50+ million Chinese live outside of China; more Mongolians live outside the country than inside.
- The global Church's relief and development agencies' impact would be greatly strengthened by functional networks that facilitate comprehensive coordination by the global church in times of national or international disaster. Tragic events of the last three decades demonstrate the potential such coordination could have in increasing effectiveness and credibility for the gospel by being in place before disaster strikes.

Is Collaboration the “New Normal?”

Across international development, agriculture, higher education, pharmaceutical research, and business, collaboration is considered the 'new normal'.² The global missions community is no different. It is now radically more connected than it was 50 years ago. Sociological trends, globalization, the rapidly growing global Church, prayer, and the sovereign work of the Lord of the Harvest have all played a part. While enormous challenge and opportunity is yet ahead, no matter what your role in the frontier mission movement, these remarkable trends can only be good news. 

¹ Extensive articles on the theological/Biblical basis for collaboration can be found on the resource web site www.synergycommons.net

² See as an example “Collaboration As The New Normal” <http://thepartneringinitiative.org/publications/collaboration-is-the-new-normal/>