

Let's Partner with Networks

by Ellen Livingood

Early missions networks brought together field workers from various organizations working in a country or region. While some of these field-based networks have come and gone, a number continue to flourish. Most now include nationals; a few are entirely or almost entirely directed by nationals. Some have grown to include churches in sending countries, but most primarily connect those residing on site.

SENDING-SIDE NETWORKS

More recently "resourcing networks" have begun to spring up, primarily linking churches which have made a commitment to a people group or particular task. Most invite agencies, NGOs, other organizations, and interested individuals to participate, too.

With few if any exceptions, resourcing networks are emphatic that they facilitate field-driven ministry, and do not attempt to set strategy or determine how work is carried out.

Their purpose is to help local congregations mobilize their members, expertise, and finances by fostering vision for the people/area, disseminating information, and fueling excitement about ministry opportunities.

These networks usually organize regular conferences for participating churches, coordinate the distribution of prayer information, and serve as a link between churches and field ministry in a host of ways. Some provide specialized services such as shipping materials to the field or providing secure email dissemination.

Networks vary in the number of member churches, the scope of their efforts, and amount of formal organization. Some are entirely lay led, but the most active have a facilitator, often a former field worker or missions pastor who dedicates a significant amount of time to the task.

While at least some field personnel are in touch with resourcing networks, there generally is little proactive engagement of agencies' sending-base staff in these network efforts. Some comments from network leaders:

"We invite them [agencies], but they don't participate very often," one longtime network coordinator lamented.

"There is no question that we are in separate silos," another commented. "And even when they do come, agency personnel often just meet with the churches involved in their projects rather than participating in the overall network interaction."

"Agencies don't seem to see any value in tying their churches into our network," yet another said, reflecting his disappointment. "We could provide so much orientation for churches which want to get more involved with their missionaries working among our people group. But agencies pretty much ignore us here on the home front."

"Agencies are too busy and too tied into their own corporate structures," a fourth said frankly. "I've tried to talk to them, but they don't seem to know how to connect with me."

Sometimes it is due to a proprietary attitude—"If we aren't running it, it isn't worth it." I say, "Get peripheral vision. Networks provide that."

To be fair, the situation is complicated by the fact that most networks rotate meeting sites, encouraging various member churches to take turns hosting the sessions. Travel is expensive, and for those agencies which assign church mobilizers to geographic regions, continuity of contact therefore is difficult.

One mobilizer noted that because networks included multiple agencies, it was hard for him to know how to relate. "It's not my program, so I'm not sure what kind of role I should have," he explained.

But agencies' mobilization teams may be missing a golden opportunity by either ignoring networks or staying on the sidelines. Have you been overlooking great potential?

NETWORKS' VALUE

What contributions do resourcing networks make to the overall mobilization process?

- **They encourage churches to commit to reaching the least reached.** While statistics continue to indicate that a large portion of missions involvement targets technically "reached" populations, most networks are focused on

those among whom little is being done and/or where response to the gospel has so far been minimal. Since work among these groups is often slow, sharing the commitment with other congregations is a vital way to maintain interest despite the lack of quick results. Most mission agencies certainly want to encourage the concentration of prayer, personnel, and other resources on these needy areas.

- **They inform about the broad spectrum of field efforts.** If churches catch a vision for reaching a people group, they usually become interested in the full scope of ministry among their adopted people and may broaden their involvement. For example, while their initial commitment may be supporting a translation project, participation in a network can expand a church's vision to include radio programming, church planting, and community health programs.
- **They introduce multiple field workers, both expats and nationals.** As a result, encouragement and support of various kinds can flow both directions.
- **They are a place where churches' people group champions and teams improve their advocacy skills.** The sharing of new ideas about how to engage the congregation in the task of reaching their people stimulates broader and deeper involvement.
- **They connect churches to field opportunities and facilitate collaboration on projects too large for a single church.** While no one congregation may have the resources to fund a translation, buy an airplane, or build a guest house, combined efforts can accomplish the task.

BLESSING NETWORKS

Okay, so networks can be very valuable, but what does an agency's mobilization staff have to offer them?

Encouragement is key.

It can be an arduous task to develop a congregation's vision for an unreached people and maintain it over a period of years. Being an advocate can be a lonely job. Who serves as cheerleader for advocates? Reinforcing their vision and value to the missions enterprise may be crucial to maintain an entire congregation's focus on an unreached people.

One partnering network recently lost all but one of its partner churches when foreign workers were forced to leave the country where most of the target ethnic group lived. Sadly, at the point where ongoing engagement of the Western church perhaps was most needed by the emerging national church, congregations disengaged.

Could agency mobilizers have helped these churches maintain their vision and retool their involvement? In a rapidly changing global environment, agencies must give

serious consideration to how they can assist churches to stay the course across major transitions.

It's a two-way street. While agencies can encourage churches to stay committed and involved via their network connection, networks can help churches stay connected with the agency's work there, even if a supported missionary leaves the work.

Introduce new churches to the network.

Putting churches into contact with networks is also a great way to serve them and foster their ongoing involvement with a people group. Mike Pollard of Arab World Ministries carries a list of people-group networks, key contacts, websites, etc., for each country where his agency works. When he talks to church leaders interested in a particular place or people, he can share this information and encourage them to network with other congregations with the same passion.

Resource the resourcers.

One of the primary reasons advocates and other church representatives attend network meetings is to expand their understanding of their adopted people, current ministries, ministry opportunities, and ways they might

better mobilize the people in their pews. Most ministry information comes from field personnel who attend the sessions, but an agency mobilizer may be familiar with aspects of the ministry he/she could share to broaden understanding of what God is doing there.

A few agencies publish materials designed primarily but not exclusively for network use. People International (PI) produces *Scans* of many of the people with whom they work as well as online profiles. These are a welcome resource distributed by the corresponding networks both to those inside their member churches as well as to other congregations considering involvement.

Whenever possible, PI budgets funds to send personnel to network meetings. "We contribute speakers and workshop leaders. We build relationships. We help those who want to get more involved," says USA Executive Director Tom Houser.

Sharing mobilization strategies and tools is a great way to bless networks and resource advocates. By attending the gatherings of several networks, mobilizers can pick up ideas to pass along, and they become highly appreciated cross-pollinators among networks.

Cathy Hendrickson serves both on the staff of Anglican Frontier Missions and a people group network. "I am learning stuff day in and day out at AFM that I can bring to the partnership. When I discover a new resource that could help our network churches, I email it to the administrator for use in an upcoming edition of our people group newsletter."

Examples of helpful tools: A succinct, practical security covenant; creative ways to encourage prayer; a network facilitator's job description; or a short-term team orientation

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guide written for a nearby people group that could easily be adapted by another network.

Introduce new workers.

If your agency has appointed new workers for this people group or region, introducing them to the corresponding network is a benefit to all parties. Networking churches are thrilled to meet workers who are an answer to their prayers. And what greater encouragement for appointees than to meet a group of people representing churches which share their passion to see God's name honored among this people? Sometimes introductions lead to support for these new workers, too.

John Kennedy, personnel director of InterServe, identifies another benefit, "I recommend appointees attend network meetings where possible. They provide entrance into a community of workers. It is fast-track learning and a good briefing before they go to the field."

Provide stability as networks go through change.

By their nature, networks have the advantage of being flexible and fluid, but their lack of organizational stability also means they are fragile. Some networks form around one strong church or leader, and if that core is removed, they flounder. Others may lose their focus if there are major changes in the ministry area or its accessibility from the resourcing country. Agencies could offer a steadying influence and safety net at such times. To change the analogy, agencies could serve as a docking station for networks—not controlling them but providing a place where they can refuel and regroup as needed.

Help start networks globally.

Is your agency involved with an unreached people, city, or region for which there is no resourcing network? Why not help launch such a supportive community? What you have learned from other networks will be a great help to those launching a new group.

Challenge and resource your field workers to help start networks among churches around the world. Some may be blessed by connecting to their counterparts in the West. Others may function better by concentrating only on their ministry target rather than extended peer relationships. Regardless, your agency can provide practical help and encouragement for networks on every continent.

AGENCY BENEFIT

Is there benefit for the agency from investing mobilization time and energy in networks?

Get a bigger perspective on what God is doing.

You represent a wonderful agency carrying out strategic work, but God is bigger than any one organization. Your mobilization skills and service will be enriched as you take time to be introduced to how God is using multiple avenues

of outreach to people groups. While nothing beats personal visits to the ministry area, attending network meetings can be the next best way to grasp the big picture of both the needs and the progress of God's work there. It's just about impossible to attend a network meeting and not come away encouraged both by the spread of the gospel and the passion of a core of God's people who "man the ropes" with great dedication.

Hendrickson reflects on the benefits for her agency, "I am able to bring to AFM a reality-based understanding of partnership, and I am able to coach missionaries about the benefits a network can offer them on the field."

Demonstrate your commitment to partnership.

One of the most frequent complaints from churches is that agencies talk about their commitment to partnership but at the end of the day, it's all about their own agenda. Involvement in networks is a way to prove your dedication to the principle of true partnership.

Learn to contribute in a setting that is not focused on or run by your ministry. Start by sitting down with the network coordinator just to listen to his/her passion and challenges. Ask what the network needs and how you could assist. Your attitude will speak volumes about your seriousness concerning partnership.

Discover a fruitful recruiting field.

Whether they are recent college graduates, mid-career people, or energetic retirees, those who represent their church at network meetings are often potential missionaries in disguise. As one network coordinator said, "You aren't starting with people who are stone dead cold. They are already missions involved. At every network meeting, there are people asking, 'With whom could we serve?'"

"It's a great recruiting ground for us," says Houser. "Who are the committed? Those in the people group networks."

Build relationships.

Network meetings are a very efficient place to interface with the key congregations that have an in-depth commitment to a people or place. These sessions offer the luxury of time for extended conversation with key church missions leaders. It's a wonderful setting in which to develop friendships based on your shared passion to see their church mobilized. Doors will open to new churches as a result.

You will discover that some of these people offer a wealth of knowledge and skills you may be able to utilize elsewhere in your mobilization ministry. Here are volunteers just waiting to be utilized.

Represent your missionaries.

Your field workers may not be able to invest the time and funds to attend every network session. You can be the link between them and these passionate churches. On their behalf, you may be able to present long- and short-term staffing needs and financial projects, as well as reports on what has been accomplished. In turn, you can also reflect network interest and progress to your field personnel.

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Utilize quality orientation for short-term teams.

Do more churches need help in preparing teams than you can logistically provide? Why not enlist network churches with experience to help other congregations needing pre-field preparation for teams going to that target area? You will have benefited the team, the missionary, and the church as well as created yet another way that a network church can serve its people group.

TAKING INITIAL STEPS

What are some steps toward a more proactive involvement with networks?

1. Establish a databank of information on networks focused on UPGs/regions where you work or are interested in working. Identify the purposes, key leader(s), website, upcoming meetings, etc. Make this information available not only to mobilizers but to missionaries, retirees, and short-term ministry alumni.
2. Identify a primary contact person for various networks and inform the network leader of this liaison person.
3. Meet with network leaders to listen to their passion and needs. List ways in which your organization could assist networks in a spirit of true Christian servanthood.
4. If you are creating your own affiliations of churches focused on a region or people, introduce them to the corresponding trans-denominational or multi-agency networks. Encourage them to work together.
5. Prioritize participation in networks for mobilizers, appointees, and field personnel.

6. List resources, both tangible and intangible, that you could offer to networks.
7. Tell churches about networks focused on areas of the world where they are involved or considering involvement.
8. Highlight the work and benefits of networks in your newsletter, magazine, and website.
9. Take advantage of advocate and network development training and introduce church leaders to these opportunities. Impact Indonesia sponsors a UPG Advocacy Network Coaching Clinic led by Mark Snelling (imin@linkmail.org) and visionSynergy is organizing a forum of North American Unreached People Group Networks Nov. 27-29, 2007 (www.visionSynergy.org).



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