

## GLOBAL PARTNERING GROWING PAINS – III Agencies & Churches Grapple with 2009 Challenges

by *Ellen Livingood*

**The global partnerships movement is maturing** from childhood to adolescence. A multitude of widely varying alliances is reshaping how Kingdom forces are being marshaled around the world. We are all learning as we go and grateful for God's blessing even as we move into uncharted territory. As our experience grows, some of the issues partners must tackle come into clearer focus.

How do we establish thousands of healthy partnerships and maintain them efficiently and productively? In the January-March 2009 issues of *Postings*, we present a series of articles highlighting some of the challenges churches and mission organizations need to address in order to steward the movement to the next level.

### **In this *Postings*:**

10. Increasing Partnership Readiness
11. Funding Partnership Overhead
12. Establishing 1+1=3 Partnerships
13. Structuring Partnership Lifecycles
14. Providing Leadership Continuity

### **In the January 2009 *Postings*:**

1. Defining Models and Terminology
2. Developing "Value Added" from All Partners
3. Expanding Field Capacity to Facilitate Partnerships
4. Engaging the Breadth and Depth of Church Resources

### **In the February 2009 *Postings*:**

5. Building Big-Picture Vision, Knowledge, and Ministry Integration
6. Valuing Short- and Long-Term Contributions
7. Integrating Local and Global Church Vision and Involvement
8. Improving Funding and Accountability
9. Documenting Partnership Stories

## ***10. Increasing Partnership Readiness***

There are lots of scary stories floating around about short-term teams which left total disasters in their wake. Likewise, expat workers are saddened when site churches and individuals too quickly embrace partnership with unrealistic expectations and without the skills needed to bridge culture gaps.

While there are individuals and leaders on both sides who think they are self-sufficient and dismiss efforts to properly prepare them, I believe that the vast majority want to do the best job possible and are very open to getting the training they need. Yet I know of only a few organizations that have dedicated the time to develop training materials and realistic delivery systems to

prepare partners on either/both sides of the equation. Basic orientation may be provided for typical short-term teams (and even that is often very rudimentary), but better training is needed from the facilitator's "bridge" perspective for the linking church as a whole and for their people coming on field assignments, not to mention for leaders and members of site churches involved in partnerships.

**Let's talk**  **about it.**

**Agencies:** Have you inventoried materials field personnel have already developed that address common partnering problems and prepare site and/or linking partners? Have

such materials been shared field to field so that universal elements can be integrated broadly rather than requiring each team or field to reinvent the proverbial wheel? Do you encourage your members to invest sufficient time into partnering churches to educate leaders and participants on essential attitudes and skills?

**Linking churches:** If you have had some experience in partnering, could you help develop materials for those just launching their partnership experience? Could you offer the expertise of educators or trainers from your congregation to help develop training materials that could serve multiple agencies and partners? Would you be willing to invest the time and effort to do some in-church training for other linking partners?

## 11. Funding Partnership Overhead

In recent research interviews with several partnering churches, I asked them about their willingness to fund the overhead costs of partnership. Two answers emerged: (1) Most often the churches reported confidently that they were footing their share of the bill because they were providing a portion of the personal support of their partnership facilitator, or (2) they saw such funding as the role of the partnering agency.

The unadorned truth is that many of the agencies most aggressively pursuing partnerships are struggling to fund them. It is expensive to develop and maintain successful partnerships; they demand significant blocks of time from key personnel. The task often involves extensive travel on the field, and back and forth to the partner churches and meetings in the linking-partners country/countries.

While denominational agencies may have a larger pool of discretionary funds, independent missions largely underwrite their administrative costs from a percentage of the support raised by individual missionaries. Few see it as feasible to finance partnerships from this already overstretched funding source.

**Let's talk**  **about it.**

**Linking churches:** Are you willing to help carry the real cost of well executed partnerships? Do you value excellence enough to pay for the expertise agencies can provide to you? If so, what is the best way for mission organizations to present these costs? How can partners all work together to develop funding plans that are reasonable and equitable? Are there creative ways that you can help to reduce overhead costs in serving partnerships?

**Agencies:** Have you analyzed your current financial expenses related to church partnering (not your general church connection services, but genuine, in-depth partnerships)? What would the costs be to do it with excellence? Have you sat down and discussed honestly with your partners these bottom-line realities? Have you invested time in creative brainstorming about ways to reduce or meet these costs?

## 12. Establishing 1+1=3 Partnerships

As the church expands and matures in millions of locations around the globe, it has become a powerful missions engine in its own right. More and more, Western churches are catching the excitement of joining forces with this new groundswell of globally focused believers.

Another factor drives new types of partnerships: Many Western churches have deep friendships with Majority

World sister churches in places where the pioneer missionary task is largely finished, and site congregations are able to take responsibility for the completion of the task. Rather than either abandoning the relationship or running the risk of suffocating local initiative by staying too long, linking churches are eager to pursue a joint effort in some unreached location.

While filled with potential, these new third-location partnerships (what I call 1+1=3 efforts) also face unique hazards. For starters: A third culture and language are added to the mix, there are more (and more complicated) financial questions, and most sending functions and expertise outside the Western World are embryonic at best.

Let's talk  about it.

**Agencies:** Have you considered what role you could play in 1+1=3 partnerships? Do you have personnel who

understand all three cultures who could serve as facilitators? Could you introduce Majority World partners to sending agencies in their country and/or help facilitate the sending process in various ways? Could you help partners determine the best “third location” for their joint effort?

**Linking churches:** Are you ready to work through some complex questions in order to partner with a Majority World church in a site unfamiliar to both of you? Will you help prepare your partners for cross-cultural ministry while respecting their freedom to follow God's leading and engage globally in ways that are culturally appropriate in their context?

### 13. Structuring Partnership Lifecycles

Should partnerships be time delimited? No—partnerships are based on relationships, and relationships are not designed to begin and end on some artificial timetable. Yes—churches like any other institution reel under the onslaught of constant change, and it is unwise to make commitments too far out into the future.

Which position is right?

Open-ended partnerships generally have not fared well. Hundreds of churches “adopted an unreached people group” 15 or 20 years ago, yet most of these efforts died. While many adoptions were weak in a variety of ways, one reason they failed was that they focused on a huge task with few, if any, short-term goals. Advocates quit or moved away, and the commitment faded.

On the flip side of the coin, some partnerships were built around a defined timeframe, and when the commitment (usually financial) was finished, the linking church partner moved on. Often the site partner felt abandoned.

To avoid repeating both of these types of mistakes, more partnerships today are designed with an eye to combining the strengths of both specific timeframe and

long-term friendships. Partners distinguish between the **partnership** which involves investment of various types of resources and has a defined life span, and the **relationship** which is designed to long outlast the formal agreement. Often the end of one partnership cycle is followed by a new cycle built on fresh goals and commitments. The opportunity to step back and review and “reset” the elements provides a healthy freedom and reengages enthusiasm and often new leadership.

Let's talk  about it.

**Churches and agencies:** As you develop partnerships, are you realistic about the types of commitments and their intended length? How can you reduce unreasonable expectations of how long partners will stay engaged and what they will contribute at various points? Do you have a clear idea of how the partnership will mature? How can you nurture relationships even after the formal partnership ends?

### 14. Providing Leadership Continuity

One of the most difficult aspects of partnership development and maintenance is the problem of leadership transition. Sometimes there is a loss of the partnership facilitator which strains the process, but most often it is a shift in leadership in the linking church.

What happens? The partners work hard to build trust, establish relationships, lay plans, and prepare people for ongoing roles. Then for any of a host of different reasons,

there is a changing of the guard in the linking church: The missions pastor resigns and is replaced by someone who not only is unfamiliar with the partnership but also may have a vision and goals that are quite different. Or a new senior pastor shifts priorities, financial pressures reform funding priorities, elections replace lay coordinators, or extenuating personal circumstances remove a key leader from involvement.

In such situations, it can seem like the work of partnership development has to begin all over again with costly delays, and major time expenditures for renegotiating and retraining. Sadly, many times the energy never returns, and the partnership may hobble forward or die entirely. Yet change is a reality in our world. How can we build resilience into partnerships so that they can withstand leadership transitions?

Let's talk  about it.

**Linking churches:** Have you carefully planned for continuity in face of the almost inevitable major or minor leadership changes? Have you established and faithfully implemented a policy that requires a team, not just an individual, in all key roles? Is your partnership “owned” by your senior pastor, your board, and other key staff so that replacements understand that this partnership is a church-wide commitment? Have all important aspects of the partnership been documented in writing—if not in a formal agreement, at least in informal notes that can quickly bring newcomers up to speed?

**Agencies:** Do your partnership developers work with churches from the outset on the issue of continuity? Have you developed a strong rapport with multiple leaders in partnering churches, not just with the partnership coordinator? Do you have training materials that can constantly be reused to bring new leaders and participants up to speed on crucial aspects of partnering? Have you built margin into partnership plans

to allow for some retrenchment when new leaders are introduced? If your agency is providing the partnership facilitator, do you have contingency plans if he/she is suddenly removed from that role?



*Ellen Livingood launched Catalyst Services three years ago to further church/agency collaboration. She is available to help your church or organization work through these questions, and to train field and administrative staff in how to develop and nurture healthy partnerships.*

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