

## Swarming A New Way to Engage Passionate People *An Interview with Justin Long*

Senior editor of *The Network for Strategic Missions* [www.strategicmissions.org](http://www.strategicmissions.org), Justin Long has built a well-respected reputation as a missions researcher. Recently his passion has focused on exploring the potential of what has become known as “swarming.” We interviewed Justin to learn more about how he thinks swarming should influence missions mobilization.

### **Postings: What are “swarms,” and why all the attention?**

**Long:** Swarms are networks. They tend to be highly focused, highly adaptable networks that exist for specific purposes. Swarms are not so much movements, although they can give rise to them, and they are different from wide-ranging partnerships, although swarms can spawn them.

I describe swarms with seven characteristics:

1. *Focused on a measurable goal.* They are not long term, and the lines are very clear around the purpose. Unless you accept the goal, you aren't a part of the swarm.
2. *Highly relational.* Although many are virtual, personal connections are key.
3. *Self organized.* They are volunteer and autonomous.
4. *Transformational agents.* They impact their environment.
5. *Highly adaptive.* They are resource poor, so they are innovative and make the most of every situation.
6. *Open.* They build tools everybody can use for free.
7. *Fast multipliers.* They attract others quickly.



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### **Postings: Can you give us some examples?**

**Long:** William Wilberforce's campaign against slavery. The various people involved in making a Hollywood movie. The global campaign to eradicate land mines. A Billy Graham Crusade in a particular city where a network of churches is pulled together to provide follow up to converts.

### **Postings: So swarming actually preceded modern technology? What is the connection then to things like Facebook and Instant Messaging?**

**Long:** Swarming was happening before technology, however, the technologies have certainly made swarming easier. For example, the Russian revolution under Yeltsin was possible because of the Apple Macintosh. They could publish and print their own news. Skype, Facebook, IM, email, etc., make it easier to connect.

Technology is an amplifier, but the decentralized networking concept is not dependent on it and is not just something only the young do. For example, YWAM [Youth with a Mission] is a stunning example of swarming. It's interesting that the Southern Baptist Convention is swarmish, although their International Mission Board is not.

The recent uprising in Iran was a fascinating case. It was fed by a small group of educated English speakers who were tech dependent. Therefore, it didn't spread into the countryside, so most of the people didn't care and didn't rise up. In that case, technology limited the swarm.

### **Postings: Are swarms becoming the way to get things done?**

**Long:** Swarms are not the answer to everything. There is a place for hierarchical organizations and a place

for swarms. A parallel is the difference between the church and the apostolic band, between modality and sodality. For organizations to endure, they are dependent on demographic growth. But those who want to pioneer into new places and new fields tend to be apostolic, swarmish, and flexible.

### **Postings: So how could swarms intersect specifically with the role of a missions mobilizer?**

**Long:** There are two approaches to mobilization. First, there is the hierarchical, organizational approach. Most denomina-

tions function like this. They have resources, events, conferences, recruits—all done very organizationally. The other approach is to do it in a much more swarmish fashion.

I wrote a research paper showing that to finish the missions task, we would need 50,000 teams. No agency in the world is going to recruit and deploy 150,000 workers. The barrier is that we don't have enough recruiters who can find people. But what if we had people in their individual churches whose sole job it was to look for prospects who fit a particular kind of profile? They might look for people with a desire to serve, an openness to a global worldview, etc. When they find those people, they take them out for coffee and share their passion for reaching the world.

Say these recruiters just invest four hours per month and their goal is to recruit maybe three or four people over 10-15 years (that would lower the bar dramatically). We would need 50,000 of those recruiters.

Then we would need mobilizers of recruiters. If each one of them could get 10 recruiters, then we would need 4,000 of those mobilizers. Then in a more full-time position, we would need "trainers of trainers." Fifty people could do this. I feel it is doable, but the trick is to get it started and incubated. If someone were to create a network of 10 or so of these church-based recruiters in a city, they would be on the way to starting a swarm.

The key is you have to have a goal very clearly in view and ask people to sign on to this goal, not to an organization. They would have to be passionate and committed to doing a certain amount of legwork. Mobilizing the kinds of numbers we need demands a relational network of people who encourage each other and provide some resources.

**Postings: Wow. That is pretty immense. Do you have any smaller examples?**

**Long:** If mobilizers are passionate, they need to start visiting and looking around churches for people interested in missions. Form relationships. Meet them for coffee. By common agreement, create a venue of some kind. It doesn't have to be technological or web-based. Get together and share and pray together. Help each other talk about things that come up. Having created that kind of network, you could start doing things together that would be broader. It would be up to the swarm to decide what that would be.

**Postings: What is the profile of a person who is likely to join a swarm?**

**Long:** I have tried to come up with that but when I think I have nailed it down, I find someone who doesn't fit the profile. But I think it is someone focused on a goal who knows who they are and works well collaboratively with others.

They have to be adaptable, willing to take some risks, and give things away rather than hoard everything to themselves. They mentor others.

**Postings: Do swarms have leaders?**

**Long:** Swarms do not have ranks or rights, but they have roles and responsibilities. Leadership is even more important in a swarm because you cannot command. You must persuade. You must be a leader of integrity, committed to the vision, and able to convince others of it.

Normally at the beginning, you have a few people—maybe just one, two, or three—who have a burning passion for the goal. They talk about it and attract other people to them. Swarms have hub people. Some are vocal; some are not. But they are usually well connected to others in the swarm and very well respected. They also tend to have some sense of administration. Swarms typically have no real administrative backbone, but there can be work groups.



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The Ethnê Conference was done very swarmishly. It began with a group who felt that the unreached didn't have the voice they used to have. A small international committee of four or five individuals was really passionate, and they recruited a steering committee of 12-15 people responsible for

the operational details for the conference. The steering committee, in turn, organized the convening group of 75-80 people. If you said, "This needs to be done," then you took charge of seeing that it got done.

Ethnê had no bank account and no structure for receiving funds. It was all relational. We designated ministries that would receive and deliver registration funds. They were hubs where administration got done.

**Postings: Will swarms replace organizations in some situations?**

**Long:** People who participate in a swarm will always have to have something backing them. At the basic level, a funding mechanism. At the next most basic level, member care and endurance around them, and support. The more swarmish you get, the less you have of that. Swarms tend not to be pastoral.

For a swarm, the most important thing is to know what your plausible promise is and to measure your progress toward it. You must face your progress or lack of it and ask why. If people in a swarm lose their passion, they will drop out. That will cause a serious problem because swarms gain their value from their members.

The fax machine is a classic example: One fax machine is an oddity. Every one you add to the network increases the value exponentially because of all of the relationships. Every

unit you add to a network increases its value because of the potential resources that the connection represents. Every person you add to the swarm is a treasure chest of potential possibility that adds value. Swarms can grow exponentially, but they can decline exponentially too.

**Postings:** The readers of *Postings* are passionate about mobilizing the church for global impact. Does that mean they fit well into swarms?

**Long:** Some people hear about swarms and think that they get it, and they really don't. They are just too top-down in their thinking. There are other people who get it and don't like it because they feel that it violates God-ordained principles of leadership, rank, and responsibility.

But many people who have heart and passion just get it and start doing it. Sometimes they think they are doing something wrong and feel guilty because they are working outside of the organizational structure. They just naturally rally people around a vision and share the tools to get the job done.

**Postings:** How can our readers continue to learn about swarming?

**Long:** I am developing a one-day "swarm school" session as well as a 2 1/2 -day "swarm lab." For more details, go to: [www.strategicnetwork.org/swarm-training/](http://www.strategicnetwork.org/swarm-training/) or contact me at [justinlong@gmail.com](mailto:justinlong@gmail.com).

On The Mission Exchange's September videoblog, Learning @ the Speed of Life, [www.themissionexchange.org/](http://www.themissionexchange.org/), I share about swarming for about 10 minutes. This is a highly con-

densed version of what we talk about in a two-hour "Introduction to Swarming" online seminar. Some other articles and blog posts I've written on the topic of swarming:

- *A Five-Minute Guide to Building a Swarm*  
[www.strategicnetwork.org/2009/06/a-five-minute-guide-to-building-a-swarm/](http://www.strategicnetwork.org/2009/06/a-five-minute-guide-to-building-a-swarm/)
- *Some Things Swarms Are Not*  
[www.strategicnetwork.org/2009/07/some-things-swarms-are-not/](http://www.strategicnetwork.org/2009/07/some-things-swarms-are-not/)
- *Should the Church Be a Swarm?*  
[www.strategicnetwork.org/2009/06/should-the-church-be-a-swarm/](http://www.strategicnetwork.org/2009/06/should-the-church-be-a-swarm/)
- *A Promise to Keep: The First Step to Becoming a Swarming Team*  
[www.strategicnetwork.org/2007/09/a-promise-to-keep-the-first-step-to-becoming-a-swarming-team/](http://www.strategicnetwork.org/2007/09/a-promise-to-keep-the-first-step-to-becoming-a-swarming-team/)
- *Swarms and Strategy Coordinator Strategy*  
[www.strategicnetwork.org/2009/06/swarms-and-sc-strategy/](http://www.strategicnetwork.org/2009/06/swarms-and-sc-strategy/)
- *Swarms, Teams, Partnerships*  
[www.strategicnetwork.org/2009/07/swarms-teams-partnerships/](http://www.strategicnetwork.org/2009/07/swarms-teams-partnerships/)



**Ask people to sign on  
to the goal,  
not to an organization**



*Roles with AIMS (Accelerating International Missions Strategies), the World Christian Encyclopedia team, and [www.strategicnetwork.org](http://www.strategicnetwork.org), have immersed Justin Long in missions research, partnerships, and networks for a number of years. Most recently he has completed four years in Malaysia. Currently back in the US on home leave, he is focusing significant time on researching and writing about swarms.*

## Discussion Starters

1. Our church/agency is an organization rather than a swarm, but does it have some swarmish characteristics? What are they?
2. Are there swarms within our agency/church? If so, can we clearly articulate the goal or "plausible promise" around which each has formed?
3. What transformational impact are these swarms achieving? Are they effective in ways that a structured, organizational approach would not be? How? Why?
4. Who in our organization has been effective in mobilizing a swarm? Why? What should we be learning from them?
5. Are we targeting specific goals with institutional programs that might be better addressed through a swarming approach? What would be the criteria for answering this question? How can we honestly evaluate whether we should maintain organizational control of any given effort?
6. What has been our experience with open-sourcing our materials? What additional resources could we give away in order to facilitate the efforts of swarms?
7. Given that swarms are vulnerable and participants need to be part of a "back-up organization," should our church/agency intentionally become a support base for swarms? How will we determine if/when this is feasible? What would the strictures be?
8. Should our agency/church become more swarmish? In what way(s)? What functions should not be swarmish?
9. How will we continue to learn about swarms and their potential?

## Do Some Swarm Brainstorming

1. Name one church mobilization goal you are passionate about achieving but which is currently impossible for your church/agency to accomplish. For example, if you are an agency staff member, perhaps you want to build a network of 100 churches each with a very intentional involvement in outreach to local Muslims and at the same time also partnering with a sister church in the Middle East. Or if you are a local church missions leader, maybe you would love to launch a mentoring program for potential missionaries that would include prospective workers from all across your city, representing a broad range of churches and ethnic groups.
2. Imagine that you have the option of creating a swarm of people also passionate about achieving this result. How would it look different from an agency/church program approach?
3. Given that the leaders of swarms influence by persuasion rather than by organizational authority, name several, highly influential people who share, or might share, your passion for this goal. Given that these people are probably already very busy, what would attract them to participate in a swarm? How could you involve them in swarm building?
4. Let's assume you have two people passionate about this swarm within your church/organization, but you want at least 10 more core members for your swarm. Would you look for the rest inside or outside your organization? How would you describe the types of people you are looking for?
5. What hubs do you think you would need to coordinate key activities that would help reach the goal? (Remember that swarms are self-defining and self-organizing, so these connections may develop in very different ways, but it is helpful to have some ideas as you begin.)
6. How could the swarm most effectively go about building relationships among members?
7. What various means of communication would connect with the people you would like in your swarm?
8. What resources or tools could your agency/church contribute to the swarm's function? Would you be willing to "give it away" in order to facilitate a swarm's work? What would convince decision-makers to relinquish control or brand?
9. What other open-source resources would help the members of your swarm to move toward accomplishing the goal? How might you recruit swarm members to develop/share those resources?
10. What kind of support would you need from your organization (and possibly other organizations) in order to launch a healthy swarm to achieve this goal?
11. How much are you willing to invest in launching and sustaining a swarm, given that leaders serve without authority, and participants can veto decisions and detach from the swarm?
12. What are the first three steps you would need to take to stimulate the launch of a swarm to achieve this goal? Will you do it?



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### Interchange Postings

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