

# The Power of Partnership

Phillip Butler

**I**f we are trying to effectively witness for Christ, which makes more sense—God’s people working *together* to share Christ’s love, or God’s people going their separate ways, each doing their own thing? The Scriptures, international business experience, a growing worldwide trend toward collaboration, and ordinary common sense all point in the same direction: partnership.

Fifteen years ago, there were virtually no registered strategic alliances between North American and Asian businesses. Today, there are over 300 registered alliances and new ones are constantly being born.

Whether in a Western city or in a remote Islamic community where there is no church at all, there are powerful benefits as God’s people work together in partnership to share Christ and serve in His name.

## Partnership—There is no other option

Once-sworn competitors are rapidly becoming collaborators. Cost and risks are too great and the challenge of entering new regions is too complex to go it alone.

In the world of evangelism and missions, two factors powerfully influence how we work. First, with the radical changes in the world’s socio-political structures in the last decade, the open doors of opportunity to share Christ with unreached people are unprecedented. We now have access to nearly a billion people with whom ten years ago we couldn’t even share a cup of coffee. Second, in dozens of countries around the world, the number of missionaries and availability of other kingdom resources are exploding. As we begin the 21st Century, more missionaries and church planters will come from the Third World than from the West.

For nearly 200 years, the church in the West has prayed and invested in missions to see the birth of the church in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Now, that Third World church is taking its place alongside the Western church so that, *together*, they can reach the final segment of the world—the nearly 2 billion who have never heard of Jesus’ love.

Working in partnership has been talked of for a long time, but today we have no other option!



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## An idea whose time has come

Imagine that you decided to build a house. Depending on where you live, you might get your friends to help you build it, or you might hire builders. Either way, think what would happen if each builder didn't know what the others were doing or there was no architectural plan.

What if the person planning the size and shape of the house never talked to the one ordering building materials? What if the one cutting materials didn't coordinate with the one putting the pieces in place? What if each worker didn't know when others were coming to build or how his work fit anyone else's?

In some ways, that's what our mission efforts have been like. A radio ministry broadcasts one message about the Lamb of God and sacrifice. Printed materials from another ministry present Christ from a different perspective, perhaps as the King of Kings. Personal evangelists then share films and preaching from the perspective of a "fallen nature," our sin, and the need for forgiveness. Can you see where this might cause some misunderstanding? In addition, all of these ministries train workers separately and may schedule outreaches with little thought about coordinating with others who work in the area.

The non-Christian approached by disorganized ministries is like someone looking at the house where none of the builders worked together. It looks like a strange and uninviting house. The one listening to these ministries hears disjointed messages from different Christian outreaches.

## Why Partnership is Valuable

Many times, two or more different ministries will broadcast radio programs, print literature, or send missionaries to one people group, while people from another nearby language group never hear anything of Christ. There is a better way. We are learning to work together. Consider the recent story of a man named Ahmed.

Ahmed, seeking for life's answers, began listening to a Christian radio broadcast in his Muslim homeland. He wrote for a Bible correspondence course, which eventually led to a meeting in person with a Christian worker, who led him to the Lord.

Despite responsibilities of running a shop and caring for his aged mother, Ahmed commuted overnight once a month for an all day Bible course in another town, and became part of a growing church fellowship.

Five different ministry agencies deliberately coordinated their efforts over a period of several years, sharing the good news of Christ with Ahmed until he was part of a growing national church.

It wasn't mere coincidence that Ahmed received a correspondence course, or that someone was in place to talk to him when he was ready. The broadcasters gave Ahmed's name to the correspondence people. The correspondence worker referred him to a missionary in the area, who passed Ahmed on to Bible teachers and national church leaders.

These agencies planned ahead of time how to contact, follow up, bring to Christ, and disciple people into a local church. They agreed to "share" their ministry to Ahmed, each contributing what they did best, whether broadcasting, literature distribution, having local personal workers visit him, or networking with local national Christians.

### 1. Partnership is biblical

Scripture calls for believers to work together in unity. While Christians generally agree with this, organizational pride, egos, finances, and independent agendas often keep Christians from working with others outside of their own church or organization. In addition, concepts of unity without a scriptural basis in Christ have made some believers suspicious.

Consider John 17:20-23, where twice in four verses Jesus prays that His followers may be one, in order that the world may believe and know that God the Father sent Jesus. Except for the Great Commission itself, *this is one of the strongest comments Jesus made on missions.* He hinged the credibility of our mission message on our oneness in Him.

John 13:35, John 17:11, 1 Corinthians 12:4-17, Ephesians 4:1-16, and Philippians 1:27 all describe facets of our unity in Christ.

The Bible is more than theological theory about unity. 1 Corinthians 12 says that coordination between believers should be as "down-to-earth" and practical as coordination between the parts of a human body.



Why partner together to reach the unreached? It is biblical.

## ***2. Partnerships model the power of community witness***

In the West, most people live at a high level of individual isolation compared to people from traditional societies, who live their lives as an integral part of an extended family and community. Westerners, especially, often don't comprehend the united power that family and community hold over the individual in traditionally-oriented cultures.

The millions of people in unreached language groups and unreached cities are nearly all from traditional cultures. Family, community, and relationships are critically important to them.

Imagine how our missionary efforts look to people within these traditional communities.

Missionaries are usually outsiders, not connected to the local traditional world. And, what seems amazing to traditional people is that the Christian outsiders are not even connected to one another!

Separate, individualistic ministries rob Christianity of believability.

In the John 17:20-23 passage already mentioned, Jesus seems to have anticipated this obstacle. He indicated that the way to be believable is to have believable unity.

To establish viable national churches within the 10/40 Window, missionaries must offer a Christian community at least as strong and relational as the one from which converts come.

Partnerships model these relationships to more effectively equip indigenous leaders.

## ***3. Partnerships are the most effective way to develop a church***

The ultimate goal of evangelism is always a functioning body of believers. Medical work alone doesn't establish a church. Neither does literature, teaching, or Bible translation. An evangelist or church planter may start a church, but the task of establishing and sustaining a church is vastly easier if there are some contacts and some sowing beforehand with literature and teaching help.

Combining these efforts, so that each specialty contributes its best toward the

goal of a viable national church, is the essence of a Strategic Evangelism/ Church-Planting Partnership.

Such a partnership is integrated, including many specialties and contributors. In an integrated partnership, ministries specializing in relief, professional services, translation, radio, literature, evangelism, discipleship, and a multitude of other services can voluntarily coordinate their efforts in one overall ministry goal of establishing believers in a strong national church.

To use the house analogy again, it takes integrated materials to build a house. Wood alone isn't a house. Neither is glass, cement, or stone. Workers who know how to build with these items contribute their part and work together to produce the goal of a new house.

## ***4. Partnerships are needed because of volatile world conditions***

The world is a radically different place today than even yesterday. It is estimated that we now have access to countries and people groups representing over a billion people that we couldn't reach ten years ago.

Thus, the greatest mission opportunities of recent history beckon...today.

At the same time, risk and hostility threaten many of these new opportunities.

Sudden, unstable changes in politics and borders cry out for sharing risks and opportunities in a partnership—flexible enough to seize these openings and broad enough to adjust to setbacks.

In these circumstances, no one agency can go it alone—particularly in a holistic Evangelism/ Church Planting strategy for a nation, a great city, or a people group. The linked resources of multiple ministries can provide the diversity, flexibility, funding, prayer support, and speed necessary for a timely, appropriate response.

World conditions call for planning strategically, anticipating change, and preparing responses in coordinated ways.

## ***5. Partnerships maximize over-stretched resources***

Our scarce and overworked resources of people, money and equipment cry out for coordination of effort. The Church has the re-

sources to fulfill the Great Commission, but not enough to waste in duplicate efforts and conflicting agendas. Worse than the waste and garbled message that come from duplication, is that some people of the world are left out completely.

Since 1986, Strategic Evangelism/Church-Planting Partnerships have demonstrated that for every pound, dollar, mark, yen, rand, and rouble invested in partnership development, people and financial resources are invested more efficiently many times over in the total evangelism initiative.

The Church has the people, money, prayer resources, and technology to fulfill the Great Commission in our age. But it will not be fulfilled by chance. It can only be fulfilled through godly unity and cooperation.

These partnerships, whether they have a formal, written constitution or merely a general agreement of mutual Kingdom goals, allow the needs of field ministries and indigenous churches to drive the decisions.

### The Shape of Partnership

*What does a strategic evangelism/ church-planting partnership look like... organizationally?*

Partnership is an active step beyond networking. The primary focus of a network is to share information. The focus of a partnership is to take joint action—to do something, and to do it better by working together. Partners need not give up their organizational identity to work together.

In previous case histories, mission agencies worked in partnership. Specifically, they worked together in what Interdev calls a Strategic Evangelism / Church-Planting Partnership.

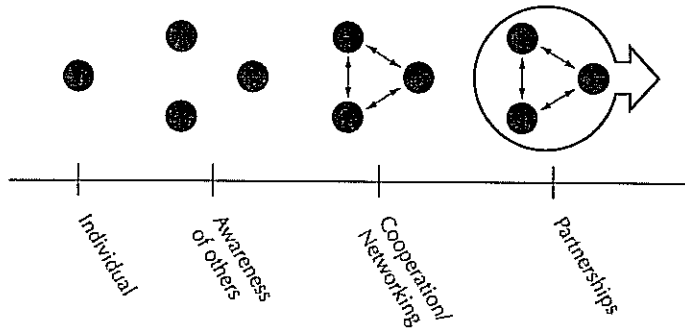
*Strategic* because it is an overall plan to reach a whole people group. It includes all the possible ways to reach a people: linking media, medical projects, evangelism, follow-up, discipleship, etc. together.

*Strategic Evangelism/Church-Planting* because the clear goal is to bring people to ma-

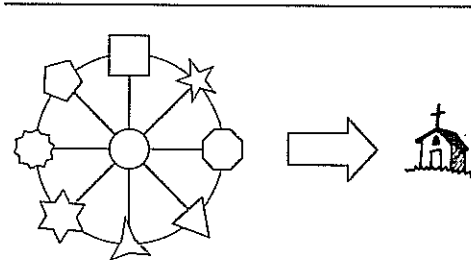
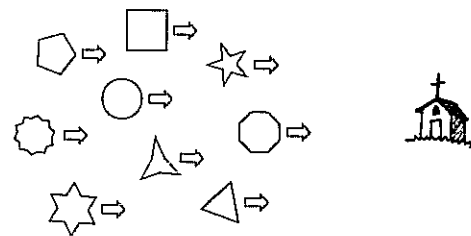
turity in Christ and establish them in their own national churches.

*Strategic Evangelism/Church-Planting Partnership* because the different parts of the body of Christ work together, each church, donor, and agency contributing resources and expertise to the overall whole.

*Strategic Evangelism/Church-Planting Partnerships* bring together radio, literature, relief, scripture translators, national evangelists, church planters, and others into a coordinated strategy.



The progress from left to right on the line above shows increasing integration of ministry agencies. It starts with an individual agency working alone, then becoming aware of others, networking with others, and then working together in a partnership. Most partnerships work together on specific, limited projects, as partner agencies continue to retain their individual identities.



The middle diagram (see previous page) illustrates the old paradigm of ministries working independently. The bottom diagram shows the same agencies retaining their own identities but working together in a Strategic Evangelistic/Church-Planting Partnership.

*What does a strategic evangelism/ church-planting partnership look like... to one being evangelized?*

From the perspective of someone on the receiving end, a partnership approach looks whole. Message and messengers are connected and work together.

For a horseman in Central Asia, the message he hears on his radio ties in with the literature he got from an Asian evangelist passing through his village. That message fits what he saw in the Jesus film and heard from Christians afterward.

When local Christians meet the horseman and take him to their new church meetings, he finds a seamless continuity in the message and messengers. He doesn't have to puzzle through disconnected groups and information. Relationships—something he implicitly looks for in people—are appropriately modeled. The horseman is able to focus on Christ, without distraction from confusing or contradictory variations of the message, and disorganized or discordant messengers.

*What does a strategic evangelism/ church-planting partnership look like... to Christian field workers?*

In an effective partnership, Christian workers know they are not alone. They know they can count on many others with more specialties, and in more locations, than their own agency serves. They know they can trust these friends to handle contacts or converts that they pass on to them.

Workers can use each other's materials, and they can work together to improve them. Because more people use the resource, sharing the cost of a project among partners also lowers the expense for each agency.

New believers with whom agencies work will have a larger circle of Christian fellowship. In cultures resistant to Christianity, believers often feel isolated, so there is a tre-

mendous advantage in the wider circle of friends that can come through partnership.

*What does a strategic evangelism/ church-planting partnership look like... to the emerging church?*

Contacts among believers help build the sense of a national Christian body. In the early stages of evangelism, believers may be few and widely scattered. A partnership between different ministries facilitates contact and fellowship between new Christians.

*What does a strategic evangelism/ church-planting partnership look like... to the non-Western church?*

The missionary growth rate in the West is presently something over 3% per year. However, in non-Western countries that same growth rate figure is over 13%! Estimates are that by the year 2000, the majority of Protestant missionaries will be from non-Western countries. While effective east-west, north-south ministry relationships have always been a challenging priority, this remarkable growth rate of kingdom resources from non-Western countries makes new, effective forms of ministry mandatory.

Strategic Evangelism/Church-Planting Partnerships demonstrate the practical potential for non-Western and Western personnel to work side by side. They can pray, plan, and then cooperatively implement strategies that call on the best resources that each has to offer.

Frequently, the power and intimidation associated with Western mission agencies' larger budgets and administrative structures have made it difficult for non-Western leadership to have a sense of equity in participation and ownership of cooperative efforts.

*What does a strategic evangelism/ church-planting partnership look like... to sending churches and donors?*

To a donor, a partnership translates into more results for our missions giving.

We would all like to see our resources have the greatest impact possible for the Kingdom. No one wants to see his or her donation diluted through inefficiency or duplication.

Partnerships maximize the use of resources.

For example, giving to one of the 40 mission agencies in a Central Asia partnership



assures a donor that the resources of 39 other mission agencies in the region are coordinated for maximum effectiveness with no wasteful duplication.

If a donor gives to a medical worker, he knows that radio broadcasts, literature, evangelists, and national pastors are all working with the medical project. They supply contacts who are interested, help in outreach, and place converts into functioning local churches.

What does a partnership in missions look like? It looks like a body whose parts work together.

#### *What do Partnerships look like...to God?*

Imagine Christ's delight as He works amidst His people laboring together. He makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Consider these examples of His power in partnership:

### **Mongolian Breakthrough**

When the Mongolia Partnership had its first exploration meeting in Hong Kong in early 1991, only two or three ministries were working in the country and you could count all known believers on two hands. Today, over 35 ministries from over 10 nations are active in the country; the New Testament has been published, revised, and sold out three times and the Old Testament is nearing completion; the Jesus film has been completed and shown to tens of thousands; there are daily Christian Mongolian radio programs on the air; a Christian television station has just been launched in the capital; 10-12,000 Mongolians are worshipping in over 30 churches in the country and many believe the baptized believers now exceed 5,000. Remember, it was less than 100 years ago that nearly 50 Christian missionaries were martyred within 60 days as they sought to take the good news to Mongolia!

### **Partnership in Pakistan**

"Along With Life" is the name of the highly listened to daily Urdu/Punjabi radio program that has anchored the Partnership in Pakistan.

The Partnership draws together Western mission agencies, Pakistani churches, literature, Bible production, broadcasting and Bible correspondence course ministries. Since the Partnership began, several thousand Muslims have made inquiries and continue to do so at a rate of 300-400 per month.

### **All-Indian Partnership**

In the central/southern Indian state of Karnataka, Lingyat Hindus have long been viewed as a breakaway, "reformed" stream of Hinduism. Proud, highly intellectual, and dominant in banking and politics, Lingyats became the focus of a Strategic Evangelism Partnership five years ago. Made up of all Indian agencies, the Partnership has jointly produced evangelistic literature specifically tailored to the Lingyat worldview, held training conferences for member partner agencies on practical "how to's" of evangelism among Lingyats, jointly produced the first-ever Lingyat radio broadcast with a coordinated follow-up effort, and have seen many Lingyats coming into the Kingdom.

### **Hope for the Islamic World**

In a long-neglected Islamic area with a population of over 60 million, the Strategic Partnership began nearly ten years ago with only eight ministries. Their common effort focused on one, single project. Today, that Partnership consists of nearly 80 ministries; a series of working groups, made up of the partner agencies, are addressing a wide range of projects related to evangelism, discipleship and leadership development. It is estimated that Kingdom resources now focused in this region are 20-30 times what they were ten years ago! And, in one of the countries where modern missionary witness was launched in the late 1800s by faithful missionaries, a special task force out of the larger Partnership has seen nearly 8,000 Muslims follow Christ in the last five years.

## **Study Questions**

1. What does partnership *exemplify* which also enhances the *message* it was formed to convey?
2. Give an example of how agencies in a partnership can better function to disciple new believers.

