

# Healthy Mission Partnerships

## Building Your Partnership

Partnership Definition: A relationship between two or more interdependent churches or organizations that pray, plan, leverage resources, and intentionally work together to achieve the shared vision God has given them to advance His Kingdom, in ways they could not accomplish alone.

### Partnership vs Network (Butler<sup>1</sup> pp. 33-36)

#### Networks

The study and understanding of human networks have actually become a specialty in the fields of sociology and communications. Networks can be simple or complex, weak or strong. For example:

- Weak or informal networks are less active or intense in their relationships, often only sharing information or interests. They are frequently “on demand,” or fellowship-oriented.
- Strong or more structured networks are often task -, project-, or issue-oriented, have well-defined structure, responsibilities, and objectives, and require substantial time commitments.

For the sake of simplicity, here is a working *definition of networks*: Any group of individuals or organizations sharing a common interest, who regularly communicate with each other to enhance *their individual purposes*.

Note the key phrases:

- common interest
- regularly communicate
- individual purposes

Networks generally are designed to facilitate ongoing communication and information sharing. They help members of the network do their *own individual work* more effectively. The only real points of connection may be a common area of concern and regular communication.

The network may be composed of pastors, building contractors, doctors, mission agencies, or neighbors. It may be structured, with membership, regular meetings, a newsletter, website, etc. Or it may be informal—just an agreement to meet on certain occasions to share information and, maybe, encouragement.

## **Partnerships**

When individuals or organizations move beyond just communication and fellowship and into coordinated action around a common concern, partnerships frequently begin to emerge.

Partnerships can take many forms for many purposes. They can range from simple to complex, informal to highly structured, short-term partnerships to those that last for years.

Here is a *definition of partnerships* (according to Phil Butler): Any group of individuals or organizations, sharing a common interest, who regularly communicate, plan, and work together to achieve a common vision beyond the capacity of any one of the individual partners.

Here the key phrases are:

- common interest
- regularly communicate
- work together
- common vision
- beyond the capacity of any one of the individual partners

Partnerships don't exist only to share information or encourage fellowship. Information and encouragement are part of the partnership

process. But they are means to an end, not the partnership's purpose. While networks may bring people or organizations together through a common interest, partnerships galvanize linkages around a common vision or outcome. By working together on that common vision or outcome, they can achieve ends far beyond the capacity of any of the individual members of the partnership.

The main difference: "Networks are ministries and organizations that come together, share resources so they can do their own individual work better. Partnerships are those collaborative efforts where they come together around a common shared vision where together they are trying to do something that they could not do by themselves." – Phil Butler (Butler<sup>1</sup> p. 261)

## Scriptural Basis for Partnerships

Scripture tells us it's the very nature of God to partner—think of how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all God but three distinct Persons, have partnered in creation, salvation, and sanctification. And the fruit of that partnership is *good*. Scripture also reveals that God intended His people to bear fruit in partnership—in marriage and in ministry:

"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: if one falls down his friend can help him up.... though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." Ecc. 4:9-12, NIV

"Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village. Calling the Twelve to him, he sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits. . . They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them." Mark 6:6-7, 12-13, NIV

"From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." Eph. 4:16, NIV

"I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now." Phil. 1:4, NIV

The church at Philippi partnered with the Apostle Paul and his companions to plant churches around the Mediterranean region. The Philippians offered more than just finances (4:15-18)—they partnered in prayer (1:19) and they gave of their very own Epaphroditus to minister with Paul's team and to care for his needs (2:25; 4:10-19).

Partnerships are often initiated to produce fruit such as salvation, church plants, leadership training, and holistic ministries. One of the important by-products of partnerships is unity of mind, purpose, and vision among two or more partners. This kind of unity is prized by Jesus in His high priestly prayer---a unity that not only brings the Body together but also gives credibility to Christ's message:

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." John 17:20-23, NIV

Jesus also taught the value of unity in Matthew 18, a passage with direct application to church discipline, but containing a much broader principle that also applies to mission partnership:

"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." Matt. 18:18-20

1. We demonstrate the power of the gospel to change lives, producing open, trusting relationships (Philippians 2:1–11).
2. The Holy Spirit's power is released in ways only possible when we dwell in unity and work together (Psalms 133, Galatians 5:16–26).
3. We demonstrate good stewardship. Working together we maximize our use of the resources God has given us as costs are reduced and effectiveness is increased (Matthew 25:14–30).
4. The credibility of our message is strengthened. Jesus says that those watching our lives and work are more likely to believe that he is who he says he is when they observe us working together. This is particularly true in the traditional, community-based cultures of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. (John 5:31–47, 10:38, 17:23)
5. The Body of Christ becomes a powerful, unified community, demonstrating real love, committed to each other, to growing in Christ, and to witnessing to the world around us (Ephesians 4:1–16)
6. We encourage use of the full range of gifts and abilities distributed by the Holy Spirit among God's people (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12).
7. Encouragement, refreshment, and hope replace loneliness and despair when God's people work together rather than working independently (Psalms 133). (List of 7 from Butler<sup>1</sup> pp. 29-30)

### Practical Reasons

Besides the scriptural reasons and precedent for partnership, there are also practical reasons why partnerships are valuable in the expansion of God's Kingdom.

The sheer magnitude of world evangelism makes partnership an essential ingredient for getting the task done.

National churches in most countries of the world are now sufficiently large and mature to function as highly capable partners.

When agencies, churches, consortia, and individuals work together in concerted effort, unnecessary duplication is avoided, and the quality of outreach is enhanced because partners leverage each other's gifts and resources to further advance God's Kingdom

## Key Principles for Healthy Mission Partnerships

- 1. Shared Vision and Values. Healthy partnerships are formed and driven by shared vision more than by committees or structures.**
- 2. Prayerful Dependence. Healthy partnerships are born and bathed in prayer.**
- 3. Healthy Ministry. Healthy partnerships have healthy partners from the start.** Though partners may differ on minor points of theology or strategy, they should have similar core values, missional focus, and a commitment to build healthy churches.
- 4. Interdependence. In healthy partnerships, there is an interdependence that preserves the autonomy of each partner and promotes mutual ownership from beginning to end.**
- 5. Trust-Filled Relationships. Healthy partnerships are built with healthy peer relationships among key people from each partner, fostering high levels of mutual understanding, respect, trust, love, and unity.**
- 6. Quality Communication. Healthy partnerships require clear quality communication between all partners, including cultural sensitivity and pathways for decision-making and conflict resolution.**

**7. Mutual Contribution.** In healthy partnerships, the costs and benefits are complementary. Partners enable each other's growth through the exchange of ideas, strategies, and prayer – partnerships are reciprocal and not unilateral.

**8. Defined Roles.** Healthy partnerships have clearly defined roles and responsibilities for champions, mediators, short-term teams (if applicable), and long-term workers.

**9. Multiplication.** In healthy partnerships, partners and individual workers find ways to multiply themselves in others. Partners labor together to equip and empower others in spreading the gospel to all people.

**10. Leveraged Resources.** Healthy partnerships strategically leverage resources (prayer, ideas, personnel, training, finances, businesses, etc.) for Kingdom results. Partners advance the Kingdom of God more than their own "kingdoms."

**11. Sustainable Models.** Healthy partnerships are preserved from dependency by a judicious transfer of money (if any). The goal is the planting of healthy, reproducing, indigenous, interdependent, and self-supporting churches.

**12. Shared Expectation.** Healthy partnerships have mutually agreed upon expectations with accountability, review and revision.

**13. Long-term Thinking.** Healthy partnership is a long-term process. Though it's good to make the initial objectives few and small to ensure early success, it's important to continually build relationships, pray, and stay focused on God's vision to sustain partnerships through the years.

## **Breakout Group Time (Thursday morning)**

- a. In the partnerships that you are doing: How do the principles correspond to your experience?

- b. How would you go about choosing a partner?

**Healthy partnerships have healthy partners from the start (Key Principle #3).**

**What does a healthy, compatible partner look like?**

- a. Displays a commitment to help build healthy churches.
- b. Agrees with you on principles and practices for healthy partnership.
- c. Has compatible theology — majors on majors — may differ on smaller points and can agree to this.
- d. Shares your ethos — e.g. the core values, mission statement and guiding principles of your organization or church.
- e. Is missionally, or intentionally focused, keeping its eye on God's vision and doing whatever it takes to obtain it.
- f. Compatible theology and core values
- g. Compatible Size

How would any of the above items help you to choose a partner?

# Launching your Partnership

## Shared Vision (Key Principle #1):

Take some time to develop this by spending time together.

*Shared vision is to partnership what the North Pole is to the compass. It exerts a certain gravity that tends to align everyone's actions with the partnership's avowed purpose and values.*  
(Rickett<sup>2</sup> p.29)

Independently received – then shared

Through reading Scripture and prayer (**Key Principle #2**)

Through serving and breaking bread

A partnership vision trip

A vision could change over time.

## Goals / Objectives:

1. They bring real value to the ministry of the gospel. What difference will this alliance make in the ministry of the gospel?
2. They state the strategic interests of the partners. What does each partner gain?
3. They take full advantage of the skills, resources and talents of each partner. What skills, resources, and talents does each partner bring to the alliance? (Rickett<sup>2</sup> p.33)

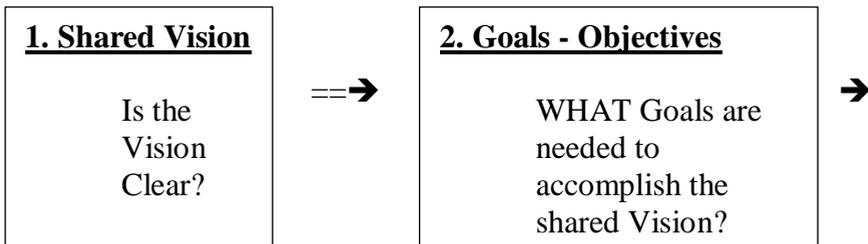
Goals also need to be limited and achievable, especially early on in a partnership.

## Vision, Goals & Structures – What Order?

Once the vision is clear and goals/objectives are established, then it is time to begin to build structures and forms that will really answer “HOW” are we going to accomplish the goals and ultimately the vision of the partnership. The easiest way to kill a partnership is to focus on structure before it is really needed.

There is a healthy order for building structure into a ministry partnership. The healthy order looks like this:

1. As God leads you and others to partner together, clarity of vision will be present. Shared vision may develop some over time, but its essence is what the partnership is built around. Shared vision is the number ONE driving force of all healthy ministry partnerships.
2. Goals/objectives should flow from the shared vision to accomplish that vision. Partnership leaders should ask, “WHAT goals are needed to accomplish our shared vision?”
3. The goals should then determine the types of structures needed. Partnership leaders should be asking, “HOW are we going to accomplish these goals of our partnership?”



### **3. Structures = Forms**

HOW are we going to accomplish the Goals?

- Partners' roles
- Partnership leadership
- Prayer initiatives
- Decision-making processes
- Resource mobilization
- Strategy development
- Project planning
- Written documentation
- Communication and information sharing plans
- Meetings
- Accountability plans
- Financial processes and policies
- Conflict resolution procedures
- Disengagement process

### **Building Trust (Key Principle #5)**

Healthy partnerships are built with healthy peer relationships among key people from each partner, including boards, staff, and those who pray, give, and participate, fostering high levels of:

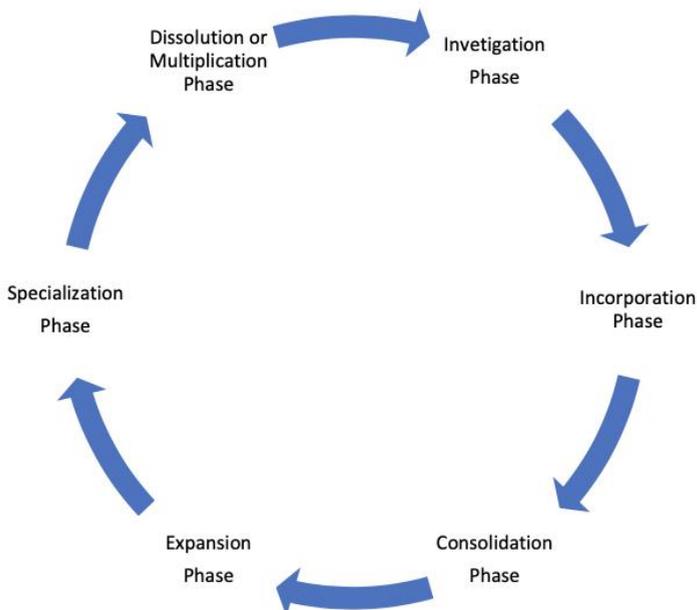
- a. Mutual understanding and respect
- b. Mutual submission and love
- c. Mutual trust
- d. Christian unity

This will take time from all parties involved. Given enough time, there will be mutual understanding, leading to mutual respect and unity in the body as Jesus prayed for recorded in Matthew 18 and John 17. Paul also exhorts this in Ephesians 4:2-7, 11-13.

## Life Cycle of a Partnership

Healthy partnership is a long-term process and not an event, though it may have a defined time frame of commitment.

- a. It takes multiple touches by the partnership champions as potential partners explore partnership.
- b. The initial objectives should be few and small, and their early achievement will help sustain the partnership later on.
- c. While some partnerships may last only a few years, many others will expand far beyond the initial objectives, lasting many years with continued nourishment from the partners.
- d. Partnerships take time, so be patient, keeping in mind that it's harder to maintain a partnership than to start one, so keep focused on God's vision, and persevere in prayer!



## Partner Roles and Responsibilities (Key Principle #8)

### Roles:

**Partnership champion**, or team of champions

1. Casts and recruits to a vision
2. Commits to making this position his or her primary ministry
3. Mediate conflict, if any, toward resolution
4. Each partner needs this role filled.

**Partnership facilitator**, or team of facilitators

1. Relentlessly committed to the purpose of the vision
2. Equally committed to the process of working together.

**Bi-cultural mediator**, or team of mediators

1. Help manage expectations
2. Understand the cultural differences of both sides

**Short-term teams**, if applicable

**Long-term workers** (expatriate and national)

### Responsibilities:

**Resource Leveraging. (Key principle #7)** is in healthy partnerships there are costs and benefits for each partner– partnerships are reciprocal and not unilateral.

- a. Each pays a price by contributing complementary capital (not the same).

- b. Each receives benefits (not the same).
- c. Partners learn from each other and enable each other's growth through the exchange of ideas, strategies, and prayer.

**Key principle #10** is healthy partnerships leverage kingdom resources for Kingdom results.

- a. Partners are more interested in advancing the kingdom of God than the “kingdom” of their church or their mission organization.
- b. Results are maximized through a strategic use of kingdom resources: prayer, ideas, personnel, training, finances, business, etc.

### **Healthy and Unhealthy Dependencies.**

Interdependence and mutual ownership are highlighted in **Key Principle #4** as in healthy partnerships, there is interdependence between partners, each retaining its own identity.

- a. Partnership is not a merger or an acquisition.
- b. Differences in history and culture deserve respect.
- c. Each partner has “ownership” through the stages of planning, operation, and celebration.

**Key Principle #11** is healthy partnerships are preserved from dependency by a judicious transfer of money (if any).

- a. Support may be considered of missionaries for a limited time, but not national pastors. Our goal is the planting of healthy, reproducing, indigenous, interdependent and self-supporting churches.
- b. People (rather than money) are the most significant resources a partner can bring to the table.

## Dependency Definitions and Distinctions

Keep in mind, some “dependencies” are in fact quite healthy, particularly interdependencies. Truth be told, we’re all dependent upon others to make us complete. Interdependence is not the same as its negative counterpart, co-dependency, where givers cooperate with receivers to perpetuate unhealthy dependencies. For now, some definitions:

Healthy Dependency: relying on another person/organization for a genuine need you’re unable to provide

Unhealthy Dependency: relying on another person/organization for something you’re able to provide

Interdependence: a mutual sharing of wisely used resources to accomplish what 2 or more people/organizations could not do by themselves

In their widely-read book, *When Helping Hurts*, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert outline what they consider are the 3 stages of poverty alleviation: relief, rehabilitation, and development. *Relief* occurs during and immediately after a natural or man-caused crisis and is meant to reduce human suffering. *Rehabilitation* is aimed at restoring people or communities to their prior conditions, whereas *development* is the transformation that occurs in the “helpers” as well as the “helped” to bring them into right relationship with God and His creation. The authors emphasize, “One of the biggest mistakes North American churches make—by far—is in applying relief in situations in which rehabilitation or development is the appropriate intervention.”<sup>3</sup>



### **Breakout Group Time (Friday morning)**

- a. Healthy partnerships – In your experience, what has helped the most in communicating how to be effective in your culture with potential partners?

- b. Can you give examples of unhealthy dependencies? What led to those and what did you do about them?

# **Sustaining Your Partnership**

## Quality Communication

**Healthy partnerships require clear quality communication between all partners (key principle #6). This includes:**

- a. Being sensitive to cultural differences in communication styles
- b. Having a mutually acceptable system for decision-making
- c. Expecting problems and finding ways to solve them
- d. Having a bicultural mediator or team of mediators

Living out 1 Peter 4:8 *“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.” (NIV)*

## **Continuity in Communication**

Ellen Livingood says, “The necessity of keeping information flowing to the church is often under-emphasized during the partnership launch, but it may be the single greatest reason for long-term failure.” Livingood also says to keep the big picture in front of everyone and to frequently tell the church/organization lots of stories of what God is doing.<sup>4</sup>

## **Active Listening**

*My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.... James 1:19, NIV*

## **Face-to-Face communication**

This won't always be possible, but when face-to-face communication takes place, it is more likely to have better results than virtual meetings. Emails and virtual meetings may be what can occur in between live face-to-face meetings.

## Clarifying Expectations (Key Principle #13)

### **Mutually Agreed Upon Expectations**

During meeting times many conversations will surface around vision and values that indicate mutual desires and high potential for an interdependent partnership. Whether or not a formal agreement is needed, there is good reason to write at least some things down. This might be in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or a Partnership Agreement. Here are some items that might or might not be included:

- The shared vision and goals you and your partners have received from God
- The general roles each partner will play
- Specific resources partners will provide, and who in particular is responsible
- Plans for communication, meetings, and decision-making
- Conflict resolution procedures
- Conditions for financial aid (if any)
- Assessment and review
- Approximate duration of partnership, exit strategy, and ongoing relationships

Be sure to clarify what is expected from each individual partner, and what is expected of the partners together.

### Pathways for Conflict Resolution

Establish a pathway for conflict resolution. Missions partnerships almost inevitably experience some degree of conflict. But don't let that discourage you from engaging in partnership. In conflict prevention, partners do well when they build into their scheduled meetings some time to ask clarifying questions of each other. If not, any feelings of uncertainty about what other partners are thinking or doing can eventually rip open the seam that sews them together. It helps to clarify exactly what they mean by their words or actions, because if our minds

are filled with vague or cloudy impressions, we run the risk of disagreements becoming “personal”. It’s healthy to disagree over strategies but when we continually question a partner’s loyalty or intentions or simply don’t understand what they are trying to say or do, we’ve entered the unhealthy zone. Because of the cross-cultural nature of mission partnerships, the 3rd party may need to be that bi-cultural mediator we mentioned, someone who has lived in both cultures, is bi-lingual, has experience working with mission entities, and is trusted by the parties involved.

## Accountability, Review and Revision toward Multiplication

### **Healthy partnerships have mutually agreed upon expectations with accountability, review and revision (Key Principle #12).**

- a. Written or verbal agreement—where practically and culturally appropriate—with partnership purpose, roles, expectations
- b. Exit plan for partners, if applicable
- c. Good internal accountability for each partner
- d. Mutual accountability if partners share capital
- e. Periodic evaluations of the partnership

An example of an assessment tool is provided by Daniel Rickett below:

*Partnership Self-Assessment is a personal approach to partnership evaluation. The idea is to have both individual and group scores so that partners can celebrate the high scores and discuss how to improve the low scores. First, distribute copies of the Self-Assessment to each of the alliance team members from both organizations. Have them complete the Self-Assessment individually so that everyone has his or her own score. Second, combine the scores of all team members in each partner organization so that you have two completed Self-Assessments, one for each partner organization. Finally, discuss the results and what steps might be taken to further develop the partnership.*

*For each statement, choose “rarely,” “sometimes,” or “often” to describe how consistently you and your partners have the described experience.*

1. *I have a clear sense of what the partnership is intended to accomplish.*
2. *I can explain clearly the gap we fill in one another’s ministry.*
3. *My ministry is definitely getting the benefits it needs from this relationship.*
4. *We have clear mutual expectations about how to work together.*
5. *I know what is expected of me in this relationship.*
6. *Our partnership problems get resolved quickly.*
7. *It is easy to work together.*
8. *Partners respond quickly to my concerns and issues.*
9. *We follow the ground rules fairly closely.*
10. *We make compromises to reach our shared goals.*
11. *I work to develop our relationship separate from ministry activities.*
12. *I have a clear awareness of our partner’s interests and abilities.*
13. *We consult one another before making key decisions that affect the partnership.*
14. *We explore new opportunities together.*
15. *We are achieving the results we intended.*
16. *We are measuring real impact and not merely activities.*
17. *I understand where we are going with the partnership in the future.*
18. *I know what to do better to meet our goals.*
19. *I have a sense of joy in the journey.*
20. *We pray and worship together. (Rickett <sup>2</sup> p.139-141)*

**Healthy partnerships foster multiplication more than addition (Key Principle #9).**

- a. Partners look for ways to multiply themselves in others. For example, in a church-planting context, rather than plant another church, a veteran would coach several new church planters.
- b. Vision for reaching a target group must include that group's outreach to a third one, and so on.

*“And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” 2 Timothy 2:2, NIV*

*“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,” Hebrews 10:24, NIV*

## **Breakout Group Time (Saturday Morning)**

- a. What did you learn?
- b. What motivates you toward the next practical step either in an existing partnership or a new one?
- c. How would you pass this information along to someone else to join them in adopting some of these new principles? Can you think of someone to drink coffee with and tell them what you experienced?

## References

1 Butler, Phil, *Well Connected: Releasing Power, Restoring Hope through Kingdom Partnerships* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2005). Download a free PDF copy of the book in any of these languages: French, Russian, Spanish, and English

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4 Ellen Livingood, [The Essential Facilitator Bridge](#) in Catalyst Services, “Interchange Postings” April ’08 Vol. 3, Issue 4.

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