Effective Collaboration in Global Christian Ministry

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This whitepaper is a distillation of decades of real-world experience in forming collaborative partnerships for Christian ministry around the world. In the first section - "***Personal Perspective***" - I provide an overview of my own journey towards understanding the tremendous need for global collaboration in Christian ministry, and the extraordinary power that is released when God's people work in partnership. In the second section - "***Key Principles***" - I outline what experience and observation have shown to be the most important aspects of successful collaboration and the benefits that employing them can produce. In the third section - "***Partnership Process***" - I highlight the three phases of development among all durable partnerships and detail the objectives, activities, and outcomes in each phase. In the fourth section - "***Lessons Learned***" - I list a number of important insights that I and my colleagues have discovered in our collaboration consulting work with numerous networks, agencies, and other organizations over the years.

> *You are blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of how to compete and fight. That is when you will discover who you really are and your place in God's family.*
>
> *- Matthew 5:9 (The Message)*

> *I pray that they may all be one. Father! May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me. I gave them the same glory you gave me, so that they may be one, just as you and I are one: I in them and you in me, so that they may be completely one, in order that the world may know that you sent me and that you love them as you love me.*
>
> *- John 17:21-23 (TEV)*

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

There is cause for tremendous hope!

Despite centuries of division, disappointment, and even despair, hundreds of individuals around the world are now proving every day that *God's people can work together.* And, working together, they are accomplishing miraculous things—things that would never happen if they were working independently. In short, in many places, the dream is turning into reality. Jesus' prayer of John 17:21 is coming true. "I pray that they may all be one. Father! May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they be one, *so that the world will believe that you sent me*" (*italics* added) (TEV).

When Dr. Christian Barnard of South Africa did the world's first heart transplant, it produced a wide range of reactions—wonder, outrage, and, in some cases, professional jealousy. Open heart surgery in those days was a "black box," in which predicting outcomes was difficult and success inconsistent. Today, around the world, thousands of open heart surgeries take place every day. Selection of patients, critical success factors, advanced technology and training, plus years of practical experience have dramatically increased the chances of success.

Based on the experiences of the last twenty years, I'm convinced that, despite all appearances and centuries of conflict and division, followers of Jesus from extremely varied backgrounds really *can* work together. In doing so, they can make an extraordinary, enduring impact. In the early days they had little experience to go on. But my colleagues and I have now seen it happen well over a hundred times. It's not a fluke or one-time, exceptional experience. *All the key components necessary for effective Kingdom collaboration are known.* The primary issues that need to be addressed, the vision needed to make the difference, and the skills required to launch and sustain effective, durable partnerships and networks in the Church are known, tested, and replicable!

I want you, your friends, and your colleagues to have that hope. You and your friends *can do this! You can help God's people come together to accomplish things never possible when individuals work only on their own*. You can make a *huge* difference. Following the God design, you can turn ministry dreams into reality.

But let me start with the dark side.

Early Days—Journalism and Communications

It's been a long road. I grew up in a Western society that is the ultimate model of individualism. "If you can dream it, you can do it," the saying goes. My professional background was journalism and the communications industry.

I remember the heady stuff of writing to fifty-minute deadlines and delivering the hourly newscasts on radio. The countless interviews with the famous and the newsmakers. The trips, long before I was really qualified, to cover NATO and key European stories such as the Berlin airlift. Working in a newsroom where colleagues had lined the walls with every award the industry could bestow. The adrenaline rush to frantically complete the research, write the story, find a phone in some obscure overseas city, and then call the story in to New York to meet the 4:00 a.m. East Coast deadline before the newscasts started pouring out across the U.S.

As I made the transition from reporting to the business side of the industry, I was plunged into the world of marketing, advertising, audience ratings and demographics, intense media competition, and the agony or

ecstasy of the successful or failed sales presentation. It was proud, high-velocity, and frequently highly individualistic work.

Along the way I did consulting and training with increasing frequency for Christian communications agencies. That experience, much of it once again international, exposed me to many good people doing good Kingdom things but, generally, not actively coordinating their efforts.

Communications Industry to Christian Organization

After many years, I stepped out of my career in broadcasting. It was one of those steps of faith so many others have taken. One where God's voice seemed to overwhelm reason. Sell the sports car. Don't be too concerned about what you don't have in the bank account. Just trust him. So, in 1970, with encouragement from my wife and many friends, I launched a ministry called Intercristo. Intercristo was an effort to connect my communications background and management experience to the world of Christian service I had begun to encounter.

The problem was clear. Internationally, thousands of critical missionary positions were unfilled because information about them wasn't available. Meanwhile, in the resource countries, thousands of well-intentioned Christians wanted information about where their vision, experience, and devotion could be used in God's service. Opportunity and resources weren't connecting very well.

But solving the problem was not easy! Intercristo was designed to be a clearinghouse for Christian service opportunities around the world. We needed media to tell Western Christians about the opportunities; a small team of people to correspond with hundreds of Christian organizations who needed staff; and computers to handle the huge volume of information needed to link interested people with opportunities worldwide.

People like Paul Little of InterVarsity, Sarah Jepson of Seattle's Bank & Office Interiors, and Jack Frizen of the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association all played key roles in making an impossible dream come true. Intercristo became, I believe, the largest ongoing, cooperative effort in the history of the Church. While many other Christian "job centers" now exist, thousands of Christian ministries, large and small, domestic and international, continue, to this day, to file their personnel needs through Intercristo. Tens of thousands of believers, in response to radio messages, posters on college campuses and in churches, or a Web site visit, inquire about where God might use them in some kind of service. All possible because God's people worked together.

Growing Questions: The Connection of Scripture to Life

Exposed to a growing range of Christian ministry, I saw increasing conflict between my day-to-day experience and what scripture seemed to teach about God's people working together. Simply put, my own study and conversations with friends seemed to reveal a huge gap between the *ideal* and the *real* of the Christian world.

In his John 17:21 prayer, Jesus stated his desire—the ideal for the Church worldwide: that they should be one as he and the Father were one. But what about reality? As I looked around and talked with others:

- Division and mistrust was everywhere. Churches and Christian organizations weren't talking, much less consistently working together.

- I found that many before me had debated, worked, and tried to bring God's people together, with little lasting success.

- From the Old Testament to Paul's epistles, scripture, based in a traditional, community-based culture, consistently appeared to address itself to *both individuals and the wider community they*

belong to. However, it seemed that, in the West, the gospel message was relevant primarily to individuals. (See Robert Banks' book, *Paul's Idea of Community*, for more insight into this perspective.)

- As a by-product, inside the Church there was typically no working, functional community. Small groups, accountability groups—maybe. But real community?

- In contrast, from my international experience, I knew that the major unreached people to which the Church had been sending missionaries for the last 200–300 years were *all community-based, relationally intensive cultures*. How could our Western, individualist brand of Christianity have any credibility or power in the community-based Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and animist cultures?

- The Church's essential lack of credibility and seeming irrelevance at home was obvious. When input is wanted on public issues, media representatives almost always call on a wide variety of special interest groups before contacting the Church.

- With occasional exceptions, talks with church leaders reflected frustration with trying to "connect" their ministries and their people to the evident, crying needs in their communities.

Outside the Church, on the other hand, symphony orchestras, sports teams, contractors working on major buildings, and complex businesses dealing with the "value chain" all understood that very different people and skills have to work together to produce outstanding results.

From Genesis to Revelation, God's design seemed clear: Made in his image and based on Christ's transforming work in us, we're to live our lives in restored, open, trusting relationships that allow us to live and work *together.* So what was wrong? What *is* wrong?

Communications Consulting to Kingdom Collaboration

The year 1985 was a watershed in my life. I had stepped down as head of Intercristo six years before. I now led a small team of Christians who had similar interests in effective communication. We had formed a small agency called The International Development Organization, Interdev for short. Our Interdev team provided consulting, training, and research for Kingdom communications projects in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. We did virtually nothing in the West—Europe or North America.

In 1985, with our Board, my Interdev colleagues and I were doing long-range planning. We had no buildings, no endowment, no large patrons or on-going funding constituency. Our only "assets" were our network of relationships, our experience, a specialized but positive professional reputation, and the Lord! We asked ourselves, "Based on our experience and the resources we do have, what priorities over the next five to ten years will enable us to be the most responsible stewards—and have the greatest Kingdom impact?" After much prayer and reflection, the answer came down to one thing: around the world, duplication of effort, division, and lack of coordination seemed to be the greatest single roadblock to Kingdom advancement. Shouldn't we *at least try* to help God's people do something about this critically important, seemingly pervasive problem?

Small Beginnings, Huge Implications

With modest funding from three trusted sources, many questions about how to proceed, plenty of naysayers, and no good "models" to copy, we stepped out. We rewrote Interdev's charter to focus on this new vision and began talking with agencies we had already worked with—from Hong Kong in the East to North Africa in the West.

In June of 1986, the first meeting of fourteen individuals from eight ministries gathered for three nights and four days in an old hotel to answer one question: "If we want to see real spiritual breakthroughs in our region, is there *anything* of importance we *can only do together* rather than continuing to work individually?" The group came up with a list of twenty critical items that they could only accomplish together! But, of course, when you haven't done one thing together, you can't start with twenty. Through much prayer and discussion, they narrowed the list to one priority for cooperative action for the next twelve months. The first strategic partnership in my experience was born.

Little did I realize it at the time, but as the world around us changed radically, God was about to surprise us—overtaking us from behind with what would become a global partnership movement.

Today, hundreds of ministries are engaged in dozens of strategic partnerships around the world. In many countries, language groups, and cities, training programs are helping concerned individuals replicate and sustain the partnership vision in their own areas of ministry.

The Church's Greatest Challenge

So, based on all this experience, what is my sense of the Church's greatest challenge today? Lack of money, prayer, or people? What?

Looking back over forty years around Christian ministry in the West and internationally, I'm convinced of one thing: The brokenness in the Church, the divisions that abound, and our consistent resistance to the God design of restored relationships and practical unity is our (the Church's) truly great sin. It is the world's roadblock of all roadblocks to belief. On the *outside,* it is the greatest single roadblock to power and credibility in our engagement of the world. Inside the Church, it is the greatest impediment to the joy, refreshment, and fulfillment God intends for us. And it is the greatest impediment to the great, undying hope that the person and power of Jesus can bring to every believer—and to his Church.

The "unreached" are unreached for very real reasons. They're often at a great distance from sources of the gospel message—physically, culturally, or in their worldview. Whether in the lonely streets of great cities, the squalor of squatter villages, or the remote vastness of a jungle or desert, anyone trying to reach and serve people in such places takes risks. Personal encouragement and support is often rare. Satan is especially active through his dark, powerful agents attacking those who venture to share Jesus' life-changing, eternity-changing love. When we go it alone, we're extremely vulnerable. When we go together, we go in strength.

For centuries, Christians have dreamed that the world might really be changed ... if only believers could work together rather than doing their own thing. Now, in hundreds of places in dozens of countries, people from all kinds of ministries are seeing that this Kingdom dream can come true!

The rest of this paper will outline the core principles, processes, and insights that will help you form a strategic, successful, and sustainable partnership.

KEY PRINCIPLES

Decades of field experience have revealed certain key principles that power virtually all effective partnerships. Build your ministry partnership with these principles, and the likelihood of success is very high. Ignore them, and the likelihood of failure is equally high!

Here's a quick look at the key success factors and the benefits that employing them can produce:

1. **Effective collaborative partnerships are driven by an energizing, challenging vision.** This vision must be beyond the capacity of any single person or agency to achieve alone. Only the vision will keep you going. Partnership for partnership's sake is a sure recipe for failure. Warm fellowship isn't enough. Successful partnerships develop in order to accomplish specific outcomes. This means lasting partnerships focus primarily on *what* (objectives) rather than *how* (structure). Form always follows function - not the other way around. Consensus is usually better than constitution! Focus on the purpose. Structure should be only the minimum required to get the job done.

2. **Trust, openness, and mutual concern are vital ingredients.** Partnerships are more than coordination, planning, strategies, and tactics. The heart of the gospel is restored relationships. God longs for Jesus' finished work to be demonstrated in our relationships. Investing time in knowing, understanding, and genuinely appreciating each other is not just an option.

3. **Durable partnerships need a committed facilitator -** someone who, by consensus, has been given the role of bringing the partnership to life and keeping the fires burning. This "honest broker," usually loaned or seconded from a church or ministry committed to the task, must be a person of vision who will keep on despite all discouragement. Prophet, servant, and resource person - this individual has to be trained and nurtured. One person serving everyone in a partnership is a lonely task. The facilitator must demonstrate patience, tenacity, vision, and the spirit of a servant.

4. **Partnerships are a process, not an event.** Every lasting partnership has exploration, formation, and operation stages. Forming them usually takes much more time than you expect. The quickest way to kill a partnership is to call a meeting. Ultimately, personal trust and demonstrated trustworthiness is required. Take the time to build personal relationships. Get to know the potential partners, the priority issues, and the perceived roadblocks. Facilitators who spend this time privately in one-on-one meetings will find that later, in the group, it will pay rich dividends.

5. **Successful partnerships have limited, achievable objectives—in the beginning**. Don't attempt too much too soon. Though limited, early objectives need to have: (A) Kingdom significance that captures the vision and motivation of the group, (B) relevance to each partner's vision and objective, and (C) achievable, tangible outcomes that are vital for fulfillment and encouragement. As the group becomes more mature and experiences success, it will gain confidence and broaden its objectives.

6. **Effective partnerships require substantial, ongoing prayer.** Good ideas, strategy, and breaking through the traditional paradigm of isolation and independent action aren't enough. Satan wants to fragment the Church, destroy relationships, and neutralize God's power in the world. Working together requires actively enlisting a prayer support network. It's essential.

7. **High participation and ownership is vital.** Effective partnerships are never top-down or hierarchical in character. Facilitators need to give special attention to the widest possible participation in objective-setting, planning and the process of meetings, and on-going communications - increasing the likelihood of the widest possible ownership and commitment to the common vision. Let people in on the process, not just the dream.

8. **Start by identifying priority felt needs among the people being served.** Don't start by trying to write a common theological statement or a constitution. Start with the felt needs of the people you want to reach or serve. Kingdom priorities, barriers to spiritual breakthroughs, resources needed, and realistic priorities for action must be distilled and agreed on in light of those. Remember, lasting partnerships focus first and foremost on *what* (objectives) rather than *how* (structure).

9. **Healthy partnerships have a partnership "champion" inside every church, ministry, or organization in the partnership.** These people see how their group can benefit from such practical cooperation. The champions sell the vision to their colleagues, provide ongoing, two-way communication, and help keep the partnership focused on the expected outcomes.

10. **Growing partnerships serve at least four constituencies:** (1) the people they're trying to reach or serve; (2) the partner agencies/ministries with their own staffs and visions; (3) the funding and praying constituencies behind each of these ministries; and, eventually, (4) the partnership itself with its growing expectations. There are many more players around the table than we often acknowledge. Each constituency needs information, a sense of participation, and a feeling of fulfillment or success.

11. **Strong partnerships are made up of partners with their own clear identities.** Individuals, churches, and other ministries involved need to have - and live by - their own clear sense of mission or calling. Otherwise, they will never understand how they fit in, contribute to the overall picture, or recognize how they benefit from the joint effort.

12. **Strong partnerships also acknowledge, even celebrate, the differences** in their partner ministries' histories, visions, and services. This is important and valuable, but ultimately, these partnerships concentrate on what they have in common - where their vision, values, and ministry objectives intersect.

13. **Effective partnerships don't come free.** Just participating in the exploration, planning, launch, and ongoing coordination takes time and money. Deeper commitment may require still greater investment. But the return on Kingdom investment through partnerships proves to more than offset the contributions a church or other ministry may make.

14. **Substantial partnerships are even more challenging to maintain than to start.** Keeping the vision alive, the focus clear, communication active, and outcomes fulfilling takes awareness, concentration, and long-term commitment by the facilitator or facilitation team.

15. **Healthy partnerships expect problems and pro-actively deal with them**. Make sure the partnership has a means for dealing with changes, exceptions, disappointments, unfulfilled commitments, and simply the unexpected. Small problems must be addressed immediately. A wise man knows one thing—the only predictable thing is the unpredictable.

Forming collaborative partnerships with these core principles in view can accrue a wide range of substantial benefits. Regardless of geographic locations or types of ministries involved, here is a selection of the kinds of benefits that can be realized:

1. **Potential and options for action expand.** Working alone, no matter how sophisticated or substantial your resources, limits what one person or ministry can accomplish. Working with others who complement your strengths expands your potential and your horizons of ministry and impact.

2. **Achievement of goals accelerates, costs decrease, and waste is eliminated**. An effective partnership produces efficiency and reduces the gaps and overlap that result when we all do our own thing. Return on Kingdom investment increases.

3. **Individuals and ministries are able to capitalize on their strengths.** Effective partnerships allow people or organizations to do what they do best, to maximize their contribution rather than spreading themselves too thin by doing many different things—often poorly. When we join hands with others, we discover different, often complementary, strengths.

4. **The bigger picture comes into focus.** Effective partnerships let you see what's needed to accomplish the bigger vision, identify the missing pieces, and connect with resources to accomplish the vision. Getting all the pieces together, focused on a common objective, is a sure recipe for better outcomes.

5. **Flexibility increases.** Partnerships encourage individuals or ministries to play their unique roles. When they don't have to do everything, they have more options in timing, more available resources, and the ability to concentrate on what they do best.

6. **Risk diminishes.** The larger or more complex the vision or project, naturally, the greater the resources needed. Working in effective partnerships, we can share the load and reduce risk while increasing the speed of progress or the quality of the outcomes.

7. **God's power is released in a special way.** Working alone on challenging projects, particularly in our own strength without God's presence and power, can be scary! God promised that his power will be present and released in a special way when we join with his people in partnership. *(Psalm 133)*

8. **We receive refreshment and new hope.** In challenging circumstances, hope keeps us alive. Whatever our vision, in our community or elsewhere in the world, the knowledge that others share our vision refreshes our spirits and sustains our hope. *(Matthew 5:9, Psalm 133)*

And perhaps most importantly:

9. **Our work gains significant credibility.** God's people working together demonstrate the core scriptural truth: the work of Jesus restores relationships, both with God and with each other. Working in collaborative partnership infuses ministry with authenticity - both in word and in deed - and moves us closer to the fulfillment of the Great Command (*Matthew 22:36*), the Great Commission (*Matthew 28:18-20*), and the great, unfulfilled prayer of Jesus in John 17 (*John 17:20-23*).

PARTNERSHIP PROCESS

Having seen many partnerships among ministries emerge as long-term, effective strategies (along with a few significant failures along the way!), it is clear that durable partnerships usually go through several phases. Whether you have a vision for your community, city, special interest group (immigrants, homeless, athletes, kids, etc.), or overseas language group with no effective witness for Christ, the phases are essentially the same.

> *Exploration:* The investment of time and energy you make in identifying the potential partners and exploring their vision, interest, and readiness to at least prayerfully talk about collaboration.

> *Formation:* The critical, "go/no-go" phase in partnership development. It's when potential partner ministries say, "We agree, the only way we can accomplish this vision is by working together." Or they say, "At least for now, we don't think so."

> *Operation:* The phase in partnership development at which talk turns to action. Goals are set, roles defined, timelines and the basis for monitoring and evaluation agreed upon. Once there is consensus on the vision and the core plan, the emerging partnership moves forward.

Remember: partnerships are a process, not an event. If you give each phase the time and energy it deserves, you are on the path to a rewarding experience. If you expect this to happen overnight, you are headed for big disappointments! Here is more detail on each phase of the process, along with specific objectives, actions, and outcomes to be expected.

Exploration

An effective, durable strategic partnership requires identifying potential partners, establishing trusting relationships, coming to consensus on the vision, identifying key action elements and responsibilities, seeing initial objectives achieved, and then moving on to realize the more complete vision. A facilitator or facilitation team needs to be identified, trained, and coached. Developing effective partnerships takes time. See effective partnership development as a process, not an event, and you've taken a big step toward seeing your dream come true.

In the vital Exploration phase of partnership development a lot of time is spent holding one-on-one meetings. In those meetings you will be asking questions and listening, expanding your personal base of information, multiplying relationships, and broadening your understanding about the realities of the project and the perceptions of others. Keep in mind that an individual's perceptions are usually his or her reality even though these perceptions may be quite different from yours!

During this phase you'll also need to identify who will serve as the partnership's facilitator or facilitation team. You may be that person. Or you may be instrumental in finding them. It's extremely helpful for the longer-term facilitator to be involved in these early stages: meeting the people, getting a good sense of the issues, and helping design the process.

In any case, the facilitator(s) must be patient, tenacious, and committed to the vision. They need to demonstrate the spirit of a servant as they bring the partnership to life and keeping the fires burning. This "honest broker" must be a person of integrity who will keep on despite all discouragement. The facilitator is prophet, servant, and resource person who must be trained, nurtured, and encouraged.

There are a number of key action points at this stage that will move you in the right direction. Here are some of the essentials:

- Make sure your prayer support team is in place, informed, and focused on what you all feel God wants to do by helping His people work together. Remember, Satan does not want unity among believers. He is not too concerned about those who just talk about it. But, the stakes really go up when you begin to take action that might actually result in more effective, credible, joint efforts!

- Identify everyone you can who is currently involved or actively thinking about involvement in the issue you're thinking about. You want to identify all the relevant ministries, leaders, and resources.

- Identify the potential partnership facilitator or form the facilitation team. It's vital the facilitator (or team) is involved in these early stages and gets the needed training for this core role.

- Identify who are considered to be the most significant players in this field—significant because of their knowledge or experience, their influence, their history, or their capacity.

- Enlarge your own network of relationships with these people.

- Listen with respect, interest, and care to the people you meet and interview, expanding your knowledge, understanding, and awareness of the various perceptions related to the challenge you're considering.

- Identify what others think about the current situation, what they think about the relevance of current activity, what they see as the priority needs, and what they feel are the greatest roadblocks to addressing these needs.

- Based on this information, make a yes/no decision on moving forward.

Objectives:	Activities:	Outcomes:
1. Identify resources, leaders, and ministries interested or already involved in the Kingdom issue the network or partnership will address.	1. Individual private meetings.	1. Preliminary exploration meetings with leaders/ministries.
2. Enlarge database of knowledge about the issue.	2. Small group meetings. 3. Bibliographic research.	2. Current resources identified and available.
3. Identify histories of agencies currently involved int he issue and their perceptions of self, others, the task, priorities, and roadblocks.	4. Communications: travel, email, phone, correspondence, etc. 5. Analysis/feedback/confirmation. 6. Report/letter writing.	3. Readiness of ministries to meet and explore cooperation. 4. Advisory and prayer support groups in place.
4. Identify problems or roadblocks in current activities or relationships in the potential partnership's sector of interest.	7. Listening & Prayer!	
5. Grow the number of relevant contacts/relationships.		

6. Evaluate current overall spiritual/social/economic/ organizational context of the issue under consideration.		
7. Determine consensus re: interest in exploring development of a partnership.		

Formation

This is the critical, "go/no-go" phase in the life of partnership development. It's when potential partner ministries say, "We agree, the only way we can accomplish this vision is by working together." Or, a time when they say, "At least for now, we don't think so." You can know in advance what is most important to give your partnership the best chance of being launched on solid ground—and with realistic, positive expectations.

In the Exploration phase we have just covered, you will have developed information and relationships that are invaluable. You're poised for the big next step: "Will they or won't they?" It can be a heart-stopper. The process of partnership can also be tremendously rewarding, both for the facilitator and for the participating people.
Building on the information and relationships you developed in your Exploration efforts, you're now at the key "go/no-go" phase.

There are a number of factors that will help you achieve a successful launch for your partnership. Here are some of the essentials:

- Enough of the "influentials" are in your initial face to face discussion. You don't need everyone, but you do need enough of the people or ministries with high credibility to bring that same credibility into the partnership formation process.

- Everyone clearly understands what the objectives and expectations are for the first round of discussions. If everyone knows the agenda and has had a chance to participate in or comment on it, the trust factor goes up and your likelihood of success as well.

- Your initial meeting/discussion time is long enough to allow you to develop a common information and relational base among participants. Trying to cut corners for busy people will return to haunt you!

- In the process of preparing for and holding your initial partnership formation meeting, the building of Trust is critical. As you build "equity" in your "trust account" it will greatly strengthen your ability to serve and facilitate the new partnership. And, word will spread that the partnership and its leadership have integrity.

- You have kept the big vision before everyone. There has been agreement on that. But, you and the others have identified and agreed on limited, achievable near- to medium-term objectives that are the important, initial steps toward achieving that big vision. Those initial objectives meet two key criteria: (1) Everyone knows that they are something God wants done—that is, they are Kingdom objectives, not private ones. (2) Each participant can see how achieving those objectives support their own ministry's vision and goals.

- Careful planning and facilitating of this initial face-to-face meeting is vital. Don't leave the plans or execution to chance or the last minute. Planning pays off—big!

- Before you get to the vital, "go/no" question, make sure the majority of your participants have at least general agreement on (1) The specifics of the challenge—clearly articulated and understood. (2) The history of the challenge you're addressing. (3) The key factors that currently affect the challenge. (4) The roadblocks standing in the way of a breakthrough. (5) If they and others worked together on the challenge, what one or two action points or changes would have the greatest impact?

- All your participants have gotten to know each other much better than when they walked in the door and, so, should trust each other more!

Objectives:	Activities:	Outcomes:
Seek consensus on ...	1. Individual meetings with leaders/ministries.	1. Vision and long-range Kingdom expectations/impact clarified.
1. Current context: social/political/operational/spiritual.	2. Encouraging/building vision.	2. Relationships strengthened.
2. Long-range Kingdom outcomes desired.	3. Close work with advisory group.	3. Near- to medium-term objectives and timetable agreed.
3. Priority needs/roadblocks.	4. Initial exploration and organizational meeting of larger group: setup/planning, admin, facilitation, follow-up.	4. Structural/organizational approach agreed.
4. Limited, high-value, achievable, near-term objectives with clear relationship to medium- to long-term objectives.	5. Listening & Prayer!	5. Individual, working groups, and leadership roles defined.
5. Plan for evaluation (metrics), feedback, and reporting.		6. Agreed expectations re: specific outcomes, communications, and reporting.
6. Plan for distribution of responsibilities and form of leadership.		7. Participants encouraged and given hope.
7. Timetable/schedule for action.		8. Communications undertaken with partner agencies' leadership and funding/praying constituencies.
8. Policy on security and information-sharing issues.		
9. Policy on shared reporting of outcomes/success.		
10. Means for monitoring problems and dealing with conflicts.		

Operation

So, the groups that you have worked so hard to assemble have taken that big, first step; they've said, "Yes, we want to work together on this challenge rather than go it alone." But, to get any real, lasting results, a partnership or network not only has to come together, it has to stay together.

Congratulations if you have worked your way through the Exploration and Formation stages of your partnership or network. To get this far is a real challenge: spiritually, emotionally, and relationally. It also provides a real test of your commitment to the vision God has put in your heart—whatever that may be.

If your group has said "Yes" to moving forward, you have every right to be thankful and heave that sigh of relief. Effective partnership or network facilitation is hard work—no matter how valuable the vision or goal. Those who have worked with you, those who have prayed for you and the process, and those who have taken part in the Formation process have all made a commitment. But, time to relax? Probably not just yet!

Now you need early successes. The important but limited/achievable objective(s) that your group set as their first priority must be achieved. All of the action priorities I suggest in the next section need to be focused on this. If the group senses that coming together in the partnership or network has really demonstrated its value, they will be encouraged, will continue to participate—possibly even more enthusiastically—and will be ready to consider more significant objectives. If the group fails to meet its initial objectives it will reinforce a commonly-held view that Kingdom collaboration really isn't practical or doesn't work, disappointment will be high, and it will be doubly hard to revive their interest.

Frequently in new networks or partnerships the long-term vision requires that you put a structure, or facilities, or a team in place in order to be able to implement the core vision.

This means that it's important that we "unpack" the process of what our vision will ultimately require and identify those elements in our plan. Those pieces can be key milestones for our network or partnership, helping us identify success or suggesting course corrections we need to make.

By defining the important steps that will be involved in getting to our ultimate goal we are developing a "road map" for the vision. Road maps are important. They point to the destination, they help everyone see what the main points are along the way—which route we will take—and they give us points to measure our progress. If this road map is in place, the points become markers that everyone involved can see. They become points around which our mutual expectations and communications can occur.

Don't get too complex but develop a road map that contains the main points that everyone can understand. Some prefer a simple list—putting the steps in order with, possibly, dates for completion alongside the main points. Others prefer a horizontal timetable with key action points, dates, and persons responsible identified. The main point is to help everyone understand how you plan to move forward—and, who does what, when.
This is also vital in helping you define success along the way and to be able to celebrate your progress.

In moving to the operational phase of a partnership or network it is often easy to be totally engrossed just getting the key elements of the collaboration in place. Once you have moved into the active program phase of operations—the real reason you came together in the first place—it is important to keep all eyes focused on the primary goal(s): changed lives or the other primary objectives you had in mind from the beginning.

Here is a checklist of things you should be looking for as your group moves forward. They're all signs that you're making progress. You don't have to see them all happening at the same time but keep them in mind as signs of health and growing maturity:

- Clear agreement on short- and medium-term objectives

- Clear understanding and agreement on what constitutes "success" for each of those objectives.

- Clear understanding of the timetable/schedule

- Well defined, understood roles of who is doing what

- Communications expectations defined and responsibilities in place

- Growing sense of ownership/vision/commitment by partner agencies

- Identification/availability of additional priority resources needed for the effort

- Evaluation/monitoring/reporting-feedback system in place and working effectively

- Participants organizing into functional working groups to meet specialized tasks/objectives

- Individuals emerging to share partnership/working group leadership roles

- Growing trust and openness among partner agencies

- Effective documentation program operational

- Balance of participants and resources (church, para-church, ethnicity, etc.)

Objectives:	Activities:	Outcomes:
1. Near- to medium-term objectives being met, communicated to all parties, appropriate "celebration" of progress to date.	1. Individual meetings.	1. Near- to medium-term objectives (metrics) being met and celebrated.
2. Enlarged objectives, increasing integration of strategy, wider cooperation in/with the network or partnership.	2. Annual review/planning meetings with leadership. 3. Working group meetings.	2. Clear connection between objectives and the partnership's priorities. 3. Setting of 'next level' objectives - building on the partnership's growing maturity.
3. Deeper sense of ownership/ vision/commitment by partner agencies.	4. Encourage/facilitate: coordination, communications, evaluation, reporting/ feedback, training, and a sense of success.	4. Growing sense by partner agencies of the partnership's "added value" - to their individual ministries and the impact through their joint effort that would otherwise be impossible.
4. Identification/availability of additional priority resources.	5. Travel, phone, correspondence, etc.	5. Growing sense of community and strength of relationship between partner agencies and their leadership.
5. Evaluation/monitoring/ reporting/feedback system working effectively.	6. Monitor progress/ problems and develop appropriate response.	6. Partnership's self-evaluation indicates growing maturity and realization of agreed objectives.
6. Ministries organizing into functional working groups to meet the network/partnership specialized ministry tasks.		

7. Individuals emerging to share partnership or working-group leadership roles. 8. Effective inter-agency and interpersonal communications. 9. Growing trust and openness among partner agencies. 10. Effective documentation program operational. 11. Balance of agencies/ resources: church, para-church, ethnicity, etc.		

LESSONS LEARNED

I hope the foregoing overview of the principles and process of effective partnerships will be of some help to you in your own ministry. In closing, let me leave you with the following collection of important insights that I and my colleagues have discovered in our collaboration consulting work with numerous networks, agencies, and other organizations over the years.

Lesson #1

Don't wait to start until you have "everybody" you want or need! That's a recipe for frustration and inaction. You need a few people who are trusted and capable—individuals who have a vision for and some knowledge about the challenge you want to address and who are committed to at least trying to work together. Momentum and simple but tangible progress early on will have a big impact on your ability to recruit others into the partnership.

Lesson #2

The longer-range the vision, the more challenging it probably will be to form and sustain the partnership. Increasing the number and diversity of partners adds still greater complexity. You don't need to have all the players ready to talk about possible cooperation. But you do need people with a vision for the outcomes, commitment to the idea of God's people working together, and some of the agencies, ministries, and their leaders that are already recognized as credible and competent in the field you want to reach or serve.

Lesson #3

Always remember that what attracts and keeps people committed to a partnership is: (1) a great vision—something they or their organization could never accomplish alone—and (2) seeing results—real, practical progress toward outcomes that provide fulfillment and encouragement. Talking about organization never excites people or sustains vision!

Lesson #4

All durable, effective partnerships are built on trust: (1) trust in the members—starting with the leadership (facilitator or facilitation team), though ultimately, trust must exist among all the participants; (2) trust in the process—the way the partnership is formed and operated sends strong positive or negative signals with far-reaching implications; and (3) trust in the partnership's vision, specific objectives, and plans for implementing the objectives.

Lesson #5

Significant spiritual change occurs over time. It usually: (1) involves more than one person and more than one form of communication; (2) acknowledges that different people in our audience are at different stages in the spiritual process; (3) allows strategic partnerships to put all available Kingdom resources to work, since different forms of service and witness are appropriate for different members of the audience; and (4) means that individuals touched by a ministry at one point on their spiritual journey can be consciously linked or referred on to another because the partnership empowers this kind of coordination and effectiveness.

Lesson #6

At any point in time, different people in the audience are at different stages in their spiritual life-change journey. Often effective partnerships are addressing more than one segment of the audience at the same time. As a result: (1) we begin to see more clearly that everyone's role in the partnership is important; (2) we realize that linking the work of different people or diverse ministries together to address these segments of the audience not only makes sense, it greatly expands our ministry capacity; and (3) the big vision or long-range objective(s) of the partnership can be kept clearly in mind while addressing and seeing breakthroughs on vital, intermediate steps.

Lesson #7

Partnerships are durable, effective, and usually strategic when they are driven by a great vision—a vision that is clearly: (1) greater than anything that can be accomplished by a single individual or ministry; (2) one all participants agree is a "God idea," a high priority, and not someone's private agenda; (3) one that, in the early stages, can be broken down into high-value, achievable elements that will give participants experience working together, growing confidence, and a sense of achievement; and (4) made up of objectives all participants see as highly relevant to their own ministry vision and mission.

Lesson #8

Satan doesn't want us to work together. That means we're engaged in spiritual conflict. It also means effective partnerships need an intentional prayer strategy. Experience suggests two key elements: (1) a group outside the partnership's day-to-day operation that is committed to praying for the partnership, its people, and its vision. These people must be seen as an integral part of the partnership and receive regular updates regarding challenges and progress; and (2) inside the partnership prayer must be central, regular, specific, and personal. One of the most strategic parts of a partnership is a prayer task force that communicates both within the partnership and with those outside who are actively supporting the initiative.

Lesson #9

If you know your long-term dream eventually has to involve others, take time now to assess what the vision may involve. Then make the choice to risk slowing down and working through the steps to develop a healthy partnership. Keep the vision alive. But don't plunge ahead and end in disappointment.

Lesson #10

In effective partnership development, someone has to be at least acquainted with everyone! Why? Someone has to be acquainted with all the main issues. And someone has to know where the historical, relational, and operational land mines are located! The facilitator or the facilitation team need to know as much as possible: about the history, relationships, players, current feelings and relationships between the players, and what they think about the vision under discussion.

Lesson #11

If at all possible, it's important that your partnership or network team include individuals who represent the group you are trying to serve or reach. Trying to develop a partnership to reach or serve the street kids in your city? Better have some who have "been there, done that" in your discussions and planning. Hoping to change the way ministries coordinate their efforts? Better make sure leadership from those ministries is involved. It may seem obvious. But many times this key principle is overlooked—particularly when language, cultural, or social circumstances are natural barriers. The conscious effort to include these people will pay rich dividends.

Lesson #12

The more neutral the partnership facilitator is, the easier it will be for that person to approach others with experience in the field. It is usually very hard for staff from a ministry already engaged in the issue to facilitate a partnership's development. Many will fear that they really represent their own organization's agenda—not the common good. Is it impossible for an insider to facilitate such a process? No. But, without hiding their identity, an insider has to take off their own organization's "hat" and consciously seek to be a neutral honest broker.

Lesson #13

You don't need to have all the players ready to talk about possible cooperation. But you do need a few of the leaders or ministries already recognized as credible and competent in the field. I have found that if you have thirty to fifty percent of the more influential people, you have a good start. The initiative will become linked to their credibility. If the partnership moves forward, the others looking on will eventually be drawn in.

Lesson #14

No partnership or network can effectively be launched, much less sustained, without a commonly agreed upon base of information and assumptions. This "common data set" involves history, social/spiritual context, information about organizations and their leadership and teams, understanding of roadblocks, and so on. Sharing this information allows for a common "vocabulary" and a set of assumptions participants will draw on as they move forward. Where their experience confirms what has been said, they can indicate that. Where it doesn't, they can use the common information as a point of reference.

Lesson #15

If the group of people you are working with has any real experience with the subject under discussion, their ideas will tend to cluster around certain common themes. You can predict with reasonable certainty that the eighteen people working on a single question such as that posed above will identify only eight to ten issues—not eighteen. In fact, it would not be surprising if they came up with only six to eight. Their common history and understanding about the matter under discussion accounts for this. This is true in virtually every consensus-building process you will use in partnership development.

Lesson #16

Group meetings that work on processes like this develop their own personality and emotional atmosphere. As facilitators, we need to work actively to be positive, constantly engage the group, calling on those who may be less forward. Make sure the group knows where it is in the process and what progress it has already made. Referring back to the road map is always helpful.

Lesson #17

The limited, achievable objectives of the partnership must always meet two key criteria: (1) all participants must be able to say, "This is something that is vital to reaching our common objective, and it is something that none of us could ever do alone;" and (2) these same individuals must be able to say, "If we achieve this objective, I can see how, in the not too distant future, it will help my vision or my ministry achieve its vision/mission." The goal has to capture everyone's imagination. But everyone who represents a ministry or organization must also be able to see the specific, potential value for the organization's mission. It's a simple equation: Unless these two elements coincide for all the players at the table, they will ultimately opt out of the process or question the partnership's relevance for them.

Lesson #18

The challenge is always to develop a structure that will meet the essential needs of the partnership's vision, while allowing individuals or organizations to retain their own identity and freedom in other sectors of life and ministry. Dozens of partnerships have found they can operate very effectively based on consensus, with very limited rules guiding their joint efforts. Others work from a middle ground and use a memorandum of agreement or other document to give structure to their alliance. Still others develop more formal structures with membership, decision-making procedures, and other elements that define how they will work together. But until your task force has a chance to work, think, pray, and get back to the wider group, serious consideration of such details is probably premature.

Lesson #19

Investing quality time at the Formation meeting helps you and your partners lay an essential foundation for good relationships and strengthen the partnership's later work. It establishes healthy patterns and increases confidence.

Lesson #20

No process is perfect. If problems have arisen on the way to achieving your vision, that is natural. You don't have to achieve 100 percent of your objectives. What is important is that you have made good progress, are clearly headed in the right direction, and your partner ministries and their personnel can see how the progress to date is leading to eventual success. It is also critical to keep everyone in the group fully informed about how things are going during this process—no secrets, no cover up. Active, positive communication is central to strengthening ownership and trust in your group and the collaborative process.

Lesson #21

Keep in mind that for participating individuals and ministries, the partnership's vision and operations must meet two criteria. The partners must believe that accomplishing this vision is clearly something God wants done, and that accomplishing this vision will help them realize their own mission more fully.

Lesson #22

Celebrate the milestones you reach! Acknowledge those who have made special contributions to the progress of the partnership or network. Let your success to date energize and encourage the group to continue toward the dream with even greater appreciation and confidence. All great journeys are made of up incremental steps.

Lesson #23

It is vital to address differences or conflicts directly and immediately. However, the way in which you deal with the conflict is critical. Those who are actually involved in the problem need to know that the issue is being addressed. But the number of voices heard in dealing with the issue must be manageable. Confidentiality is usually vital. Conflict or disagreement among a few can have a major psychological and spiritual impact on many who may not know the background and who, in the end, have little to nothing to do directly with the issue.

Lesson #24

It's just as important for the facilitator as it is for the overall partnership or network to set limited, achievable objectives with a realistic timetable. While keeping the big vision always in mind, establish your personal, valuable, near-term goals in a way that allows you to focus and be encouraged as, step by step, you see progress.

Lesson #25

Working together in effective partnership creates a world where you learn new ways of doing things, imagining outcomes beyond your own capacity. Sharing the load with other ministries instead of just doing what you can do alone. You will make decisions involving people who may share your vision but not your history or organizational culture. Together, you will have to deal creatively with the funding the joint effort requires. Seeing each of these elements as opportunities rather than roadblocks can transform your collective spirit and the success of your outcomes!

Lesson #26

Even the simplest form of collaboration needs active facilitation. Someone must take initiative. This is a person equally committed to effective connections within the group and to achievement of the group's objectives. Whether it is an informal covenant group of a few people or a complex, constitutionally based partnership of many agencies, servant leadership committed to both the process and purpose is vital.

Lesson #27

Count on the fact that the more you talk about the structure and use specific words to define it before your group has met, talked, prayed, and worked together, the more problems you will have and the more explaining you will have to do—often unsuccessfully. At that point, you and the people you are talking with probably have little mutual experience of working together and, therefore, little in common to draw on. This is why structure should always follow and be defined by the purpose—the compelling vision that has brought you together. More often than not, words need to be defined by action and experience.

Lesson #28

Start with the minimum structure you need. It is easy to add elements to the way you work together. But it is much harder to dismantle structures once expectations and ways of doing things are put in place. Remember: simple is good. The less structure you need to accomplish the vision, the less maintenance you need and the more resources can be focused on your primary outcomes. An old proverb says: "*Sad is the man who builds a tower to protect his land and in becoming a caretaker of the tower, loses his land.*"

Lesson #29

Partnerships are powerful because the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. That's the definition of synergy. It isn't easy, but working together is worth it, because working together is God's idea. God lives in community, in tri-une relationship. And we were created in God's image. Our individual potential is only realized, our wholeness only experienced, in relationship with others. We were created to trust and to work with others as a community - a "common-unity" - of love and action. In that context, God's power is released. That's why, for centuries, Christians have dreamed that the world might really be changed ... if only believers could work together rather than doing their own thing.

Lesson #30

This is where you get to write the rest of the story.

What are some things you've learned? We'd love to hear about your experiences! Success and perseverance stories are great for motivational purposes, but even (and potentially more so) stories of our failures in ministry can be of great benefit to others who are struggling in the same ways. Join us at the Power of Connecting site (**powerofconnecting.net**) and share your stories and lessons learned.