



TACKLING the Summit of PARTNERS



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PRECIPITOUS CLIMB SPECTACULAR VIEW!

By Scott Todd

HIPS

I LIVE IN COLORADO surrounded by 52 mountains that pierce the sky above 14,000 feet. We all love to look at those majestic peaks, but climbing them is serious business. Ministry partnerships are mountain peaks — beautiful to look at from a distance, arduous to climb. Full of dangers to the uninformed, and majestic and exhilarating when you reach the top.

Unfortunately, ministry leaders can be guilty of attempting to summit partnership peaks with good intentions, but without the climbing gear they need to succeed. Too often, partnerships start their climb ill-equipped and are forced to turn back, or worse, they suffer falls, injuries, and needless disappointment.

Despite the high cost and probability of failure, Christian churches and organizations are increasingly entering into ministry partnerships. Some pursue the added complexity of cross-cultural partnership, as thousands of churches send groups abroad to form relationships with local indigenous churches for mutually supported work.

These globe-spanning relationships begin with broad smiles and warm hugs. People genuinely call each other “brother” or “sister” and feel the amazing and mysterious truth of being one in Christ with people of other cultures. These very real and beautiful spiritual connections offer a critical foundation for partnership, but they are insufficient to guide mutually pursued work over the long run.

REALISM OVER PESSIMISM

At this point you might think I am anti-partnership, but don’t mistake my realism for pessimism. The truth is; I’m committed to thriving ministry partnerships. In fact, I’ve given my life to it. I serve as chairman of the board for the Accord Network (www.accordnetwork.org), which is a “catalyst for building collaboration and Christ-centered unity” among more than 70 Christian relief and development organizations. I co-edited a book, *Shared Strength*, on excellence in cross-cultural Christian partnership. I serve as chairman of the board for 58: (www.live58.org), a “global alliance of Christians, churches, and poverty-fighting organizations working together to end extreme poverty by living the true fast of Isaiah 58.” And in my work for Compassion International, I serve as senior vice president of international partner development.

It’s precisely because I have a passion for partnerships that I am passionate about seeing them implemented well. Partnership is serious business. I hurt when I see the mistrust, disappointment, conflict, and poor performance that result from failed partnerships. One who loves mountaineering doesn’t encourage everyone to climb Mount Everest. So consider this:

If your organization can accomplish a mission task on its own — then tackle it on your own.

Don’t enter into the hard, slow, and sometimes messy climb of partnership unless you must. But if your mission is bigger than your organization, then you don’t have an option. When God calls us into missions bigger than our own organizational selves, then we need to discover new ways of working together. If that’s where your church is, if that’s the future for your organization, then approach partnership with a commitment for excellence and these partnership requirements.

1. DEFINE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Not all forms of working together are partnerships. When organizations are considering collaborative work, their first steps are to define the purpose of their partnership to help align expectations. At Compassion International, for instance, our partnership philosophy calls for clarity of purpose: “Partnership is different from mere community or fellowship. It is not simply having tea together. It is having tea in order to work together on something that you both care about and can’t do alone.” The emphasis here is not solely the relationship, but also the goals driving you to collaborate.

2. LISTEN STRATEGICALLY

Compassion International works with more than 5,500 church partners in Africa, Asia, and Latin and South America. To better understand how these churches felt about working with Compassion, we held workshops and focus groups around the globe. We asked them to draw pictures representing their experience. One African pastor drew a picture of Compassion as an elephant dancing with his church — a mouse.

When one partner is a \$590 million global organization and the other is a local church with sporadic electricity and a latrine, it creates true partnership challenges. The elephant certainly doesn’t want to stomp on his dance partner. And when there are 5,500 partners on the floor, dancing is a delicate business!

Listening strategically isn’t easy to do, especially when some of the responses are tough to hear. But you can teach an old elephant new tricks. Compassion developed a Partnership Accountability and Collaboration Tool (PACT). Within it, more than 5,500 churches evaluate Compassion. It’s a 360-degree assessment that came from asking, listening, and then responding. The PACT is now one of several strategies, tools, and practices that are built into Compassion’s partnership model designed to secure intentional, regular, and strategic listening.

3. MUTUAL COMMITMENT TO THE MISSION

Compassion President and CEO Dr. Wess Stafford often refers to three models of partnership, and how different each one feels. He cites the cowboy and the horse, the farmer and the cow, and two oxen plowing together. No one wants to be reined and controlled like a horse. Certainly no one wants to feel like they are being milked. And yet, parties in partnerships sometimes feel exactly that way. In contrast, two oxen bound by a structural yoke of alignment can pull side by side and produce greater results than either could produce alone.

When I was in high school, my brothers and I started a lawn-mowing business. We were insanely committed to quality. I remember my older brother picking up his mower and carrying it off a newly mowed lawn so he wouldn’t leave any extra lines. The three of us would compete in excellence and speed. In short, we were “all in.” We were

so successful that we formed a legal corporation as a partnership (with a few signatures from Dad). In our third year of mowing, we earned more than \$100,000 in revenue. That’s a lot of lawns!

A generation later, I watched three of my sons head into the neighborhood with their snow shovels after a big snowstorm. They returned with the money they earned shoveling driveways, but there was a fracture in their business. The two older brothers complained that the youngest didn’t shovel hard enough. Since the perception was that he didn’t pull his weight, they didn’t want to divide the money equally. The partnership suffered conflict and hurt.

For partnerships to work, each party must be “all in.” Each party must see the contribution of others not just as necessary, but critical for mission success. Partnerships only work when everyone has skin in the game. Partnerships falter when organizations talk like partners but don’t deliver money, people or time.

If your partner isn’t spending, sweating and delivering results for the mission then maybe you aren’t oxen in a yoke. Maybe you’re just being milked. The positive way out is to reassess the relationship for what it is rather than lamenting what it is not. You may need to conclude that you are allies but not interdependent partners. It may be time to move on.

4. COMPLEMENTARY AND MUTUALLY VALUED STRENGTHS

Forgive the lame exegesis, but “part-ner-ship” contains “parts.” The best way to be a good partner is to do what you do extremely well, and no more. When you know your strengths — and your limits — you allow your partner to exercise their area of expertise. But if you overreach, you actually devalue your partner and dilute your own effectiveness as well as the impact of the partnership.

When we launched the 58: initiative, we recognized that there are different categories of ministry that need to be done to end extreme poverty — clean water, justice, food security, child development, and so on. We carefully selected lead agencies for each category and tasked each with developing “principles of excellence” in their category. This created clear domains of responsibility, authority, and accountability.

The 58: Initiative has just launched, so we are in the early stages of proving our strategy of complementary strengths and leadership. But there is great assurance that honoring each other and allowing each partner to do what they do best will bring partnership health in our pursuit of eradicating the most extreme forms of poverty in this generation. (To learn more, visit www.live58.org).

5. PRODUCE — THEN CELEBRATE!

With all the discussion about what makes a partnership work, it’s important to remember that the end game is not the mechanics of partnership. The combined mission is the goal — and mission must deliver results. We can hang all the spiritual platitudes we want on the partnership, but if partners cannot point to outcomes in their mutually accomplished work, then the purpose of the partnership should rightly be questioned. Without results, motivation will die, but with defined goals and tangible outcomes, it’s time to celebrate! Celebrating success strengthens motivations and partnerships.



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THE BROADEST VIEW — KINGDOM PARTNERSHIPS

The principles described above would be true for any collaborative work, Christian or otherwise. In fact, these principles parallel a highly recommended book, *Power of 2*, by Rodd Wagner and Gale Muller (Gallup Press, 2009). Yet there is something more for us, something of the kingdom. It is a way of partnership thinking that transcends our own needs and ushers us into caring for organizations and churches beyond our own.

In 1 Corinthians we are told, the body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body (1 Cor. 12:12). Paul says, “If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?” (1 Cor. 12:17).

Perhaps it’s my medical background, but I think the body is a fantastic insight into kingdom partnership. The kidney knows it’s a kidney. It does a great job of being a kidney while being incredibly grateful for the heart. Without the heart pumping away, the kidney dies. And frankly, without the whole body functioning together, its mission fails. So it is with organizations in Christ who are called to his mission of redemption and restoration. But are we truly aware of our dependency?

What would happen to Christ’s cause if our seminaries failed? What if Christ-centered poverty-fighting organizations disappeared? What if Bible publishers and other Christian content producers quit? Think through the myriad of inter-dependencies in the Christian world, and I believe we will rapidly conclude that we need each other. God designed it that way.

It wasn’t for ceremony that Jesus prayed for us that we would be one, “so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23).

Above and beyond practical organizational partnerships, are you leveraging any of your strengths for the broader health of the body of Christ? Are you looking for gaps across the Christian

WHAT KIND OF COLLABORATIVE WORK ARE YOU ENGAGED IN?

- Network** – Common interest
- Alliance** – Shared goal
- Collaboration** – Working together
- Partnership** – Interdependent work
- Joint Venture** – Formally structured partnership
- Merger** – Legal combination of assets

Each term on this list describes increasing commitment and responsibility and carries the characteristics of previous terms.

landscape? Are there tithes of prayer or gifting of your experience to other organizations? Have you ever celebrated the success of another ministry or given a portion of your resources to a cause other than your own? Any of these mindsets reflect a kingdom partnership accompanied with a concrete act.

They are just the mindsets that Jesus would approve of as answers to his prayer. When it comes to partnerships, that just may be the summit Jesus had in mind. ●

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