

Mission Networks: Connecting the Global Church

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"In our interconnected and globalized world, mission networks are playing an increasingly important role in shaping Great Commission strategies."
– Karin Butler Primuth

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Through networks, ministry leaders from around the world are connecting with others of similar vision to collectively address some of the greatest mission challenges and opportunities in the world today.

Like never before in history, God is uniting his Church to reach the unreached. Those actively participating in networks are moving beyond talk about collaboration to real action with others who share a similar mission vision. Participation in networks is becoming a high priority for many mission leaders and organizations, resulting in significant benefits to them and to the cause of Christ worldwide.

Today, there is a wide range of mission networks providing coordination among ministries at global, regional, national, and local levels. Some of these networks function primarily for information sharing, while others are highly participatory, with members contributing resources toward collaborative projects and commonly-defined goals. In recent years, there has been an increase in networks focused on specific mission issues such as refugees, sports, media, and outreach among the major religious groups such as Muslims and Hindus.

Let's consider some of the valuable benefits of participating in a network and what practical steps you or your organization can take to get connected to those networks most relevant to your mission.

1. Networks provide access to vital information, resources, and best practices to inform your mission strategy.

Networks offer the most comprehensive and current view of how God is at work and who is involved in a particular location or sector of ministry. Because networks draw from across different cultures, theological perspectives, and ministry methods, they bring people together with a wide range of expertise to provide access to information not available within a single organization.

Involvement in a network can enlarge your perspective by giving you exposure to people who think differently from those inside your organization. Networks provide a platform to aggregate best practices from across organizations, and to showcase what is working and what is not in order to learn from one another's successes and failures.

Networks draw on the collective experience of the members to solve problems and address barriers that can lead to significant spiritual breakthroughs. Access to this kind of information can significantly increase your own ministry effectiveness and also reduce your costs as you glean from what others are learning and reduce potential duplication of valuable kingdom resources.

Consider the example of a network for a North African country formed five years ago. This network has grown from thirteen initial partners to now over seventy partners that are coordinating efforts to see a thriving indigenous Church in the country. Their early dream of placing just a handful of workers on the ground has now grown to an active facilitation team coordinating five working groups focused on business as mission, English as a Second Language, church planting, relief and development, and prayer.

They share information on a secure website open only to network members, and coordinate in-country visits, projects, and employment opportunities. This network provides a rich source of information and collaboration for workers on the ground, organizational leaders, donors, prayer supporters, and partnering churches.

As you determine what kind of involvement to have in a particular network, there are **two key questions** for consideration:

- **First, what is it that you or your organization need that this network might provide? Is it information, resources, or specific skills?**
  By having a clear understanding of what you need, you will have a better chance of finding people in the network who can help you. If those people don't have what you need, they will likely know someone who does. Networks are valuable not only because of the people who are in them, but because of the people those people know and can connect you with.

- **Second, what can you contribute? Can you give time, leadership, expertise, organizational resources, information, or personnel?**
  The more willing you are to contribute, the more quickly you will connect with others who also need what you have to offer. And all of that moves you more quickly to the center, where you will have the greatest opportunities for connections and access to important resources.

A network is only as valuable as the contribution of its members. There are a lot of people hanging out on the edges of networks that join only to take rather than contribute, and as a result, they experience limited value. As Steve Moore, president of Missio Nexus, affirmed in his video blog on Network Science, "People who participate in the right networks and position themselves toward the center will harvest the greatest amount of value."

To move to the center of a network and have access to what is of value requires commitment and investment, rather than sitting on the edges only to glean what you can get with minimal involvement. Some organizations that recognize the benefits of networks are choosing to second personnel to networks to provide much-needed leadership for more effective coordination. The benefits of network involvement increase for each organization as members invest resources toward achieving greater outcomes made possible by the collective.

One of the best ways to initially get connected to a network is to attend the annual or bi-annual consultation which many networks hold. These events provide great opportunities to see who is participating in the network, begin to make connections, assess the effectiveness of the network's outcomes, and hear the remarkable stories of how God's Spirit is at work in some of the most challenges places on earth.

2. Participation in networks provides opportunities to partner with the rapidly growing Church and expanding mission force of the Majority World.

Dr. Hans Rosling, Swedish doctor and professor of global health, has said that we need to "change our mind-set by updating our data-set." This is especially true when it comes to the current realities of mission sending. How current is the data-set of your organization? Are you seeing the world and developing your priorities through the lens of current statistics about the Global Church, or are you still operating from an old paradigm?

The facts tell us that the face of global mission has dramatically changed. Those who were previously receivers of missionaries have now become some of the most vital mission-sending churches in the world. While North America still sends the most missionaries, that picture is rapidly changing as the Church in the Global South has experienced exponential growth in the last twenty years and is mounting a major mission mobilization effort.

Brazil, Korea, and India are among the top ten mission-sending countries. China has a vision for raising up twenty thousand missionaries in the next twenty years. Nigeria has the fourth largest number of evangelical Christians in the world, and is one of the fastest-growing mission-sending churches. Over twenty thousand Africans serve as missionaries outside their own countries. Networks provide a level playing field to work in partnership with the growing Church in the Global South, giving opportunities for each one to contribute their unique strengths and resources towards God's mission to reach all peoples.

Networks offer a context to build trust across cultures and to genuinely listen and learn from our partners in the Majority World. They provide a platform for dialogue with our brothers and sisters in the Global South to mutually define what the North American Church can contribute to today's mission movement.

Many networks that were originally started by Western leaders now have active participation and leadership by nationals. At its recent annual consultation, the largest digital media network focused on Muslim evangelism had over 130 attendees representing 35 different countries and 77 different organizations. About forty percent of those attendees were Arab, and each year an increasing number are Muslim-background believers. This network is providing opportunities for national leaders from the region to give critical input as

attendees gather from across the globe to assess Internet evangelism and follow-up strategies for the Muslim world, where over fifty thousand people are responding online to the gospel every month.

These multicultural networks are one of the most visible and functional demonstrations of unity in the Body of Christ. In a world that is increasingly divided by race, culture, and religious identity, the Global Church has the opportunity to demonstrate a powerful witness to the world through our love for one another as we work together in partnership.

3. Networks enable you to leverage mutual strengths to accomplish more together than is possible by a single organization.

A network is born out of a vision to address a critical or strategic challenge that is beyond the scope of any single organization. A compelling vision is a God-sized dream, something of the scale or complexity that can only be accomplished by working together with others.

Individual organizations are limited by the capacity, knowledge, and information available inside their own organizations, which makes it difficult to address large-scale challenges. Networks are capable of aggregating information and resources needed to address big mission challenges beyond the scope of one organization.

Consider this God-sized vision of a global network of 170 organizations all focused on reaching Muslims: "This network exists to see effective church-planting efforts among all Muslim peoples. By the grace of God, we aspire to see this accomplished by 2025." That is an enormous mission challenge that no single organization can achieve! Yet the reality is that many mission agencies are still operating in silos, as if they could accomplish such bold goals on their own.

When we realize the magnitude of the challenges we are trying to address and can acknowledge we don't have all the solutions or resources needed, then we become open to collaboration. It's the realization of that God-sized dream that compels us to work together with others.

The key to accomplishing a big vision is to begin with something that is achievable. This provides a sense of real progress that can fuel the vision of the network to progressively take on larger and more complex initiatives. Networks often fail that try to do too much, too soon. Every big dream must be broken down into limited, achievable objectives that can be defined and communicated throughout the network. And that takes leadership, strategic planning, and the definition of shared goals and objectives.

As trust is built and network activity begins to grow, a more defined leadership structure is needed to ensure that ideas and information reach all the partners, and most importantly, that the vision is continually being communicated out to increase participation. The more a network can create opportunities for like-minded people to identify and connect with others who have shared interests, the better chance there is for innovation and collaboration that will lead to significant spiritual breakthroughs.

Ultimately, that is the greatest benefit of participating in a network—being part of God's redeeming plan to unite his Church to reach the unreached. History has demonstrated that inter-organizational partnerships not

only maximize resources, reduce duplication, and generate innovation, but when God's people work in unity, his Spirit is released in power to draw millions yet in darkness into the transforming light of Christ.

As God continues to unite his Church to achieve his mission, networks will have an increasingly vital role in making that possible. If you aren't yet involved in a network, take time to explore where you could both contribute and benefit.

To learn about the wide variety of networks that already exist, visit Linking Global Voices, a website developed by Eldon Porter, Missio Nexus associate for global connections.

If you're already involved in a network, then consider what steps you can take to move closer to the center, where you will find greater value and also make a greater contribution toward helping the network achieve its vision.

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One thought on "Mission Networks: Connecting the Global Church"



James nava
24 Oct 2022 at 10:06 pm

Networks offer a context to build trust across cultures and to genuinely listen and learn from our partners in the Majority World. Our mission is to engage churches all over the world, especially in Latin America and U.S. to embrace God's heart for the nations. By developing ongoing relationships with churches around the world, we can experience the Kingdom more fully here at home.

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