

Partnering Together for Africa

By Brian F. O'Connell, REACT Services

What can one church do to have positive impact for the Kingdom? Many things, of course. And, as larger churches have found, some can have significant influence just as one entity. But as an old Urdu proverb states, 1+1 does not equal two (or even three or four) -- it equals 11. In other words, there is substantial power unleashed when we come together as churches to try and impact our communities and our world.

All of us are be familiar with the Biblical references and mandates for the Body of Christ to work together. From Jesus' High Priestly Prayer, to Paul in Ephesians and Corinthians, there are clear mandates for cooperation and unity. But sometimes we can get confused as we turn to specifics. Few doubt the clear benefits to partnering: gaining access to combined intellectual capital, reducing duplication, integrating our specialties into the gifts of others, or just having friends with whom to share the journey. In addition, as we seek to come alongside what God is doing in Africa, we must remember that the core of most African cultures has a partnering and collaboration dynamic.

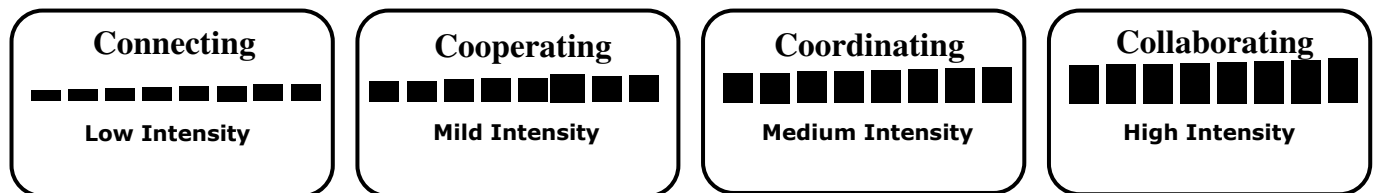
But we find that partnership is often associated with several things, from financial "sponsorship" to sharing information with each other to all-out joint venture collaboration with numerous entities. That can be a dilemma any potential partners without proper clarification. For the purpose of discussion here, we are referring to partnering as non-financially based, mutually beneficial, project-oriented efforts. That doesn't mean that some of the principles wouldn't work in these other settings.

I often make the point in my teaching on ministry partnerships that there is a difference between **partnering** the *verb*, and **partnership** the *noun*. Too often, churches (and ministries) want to focus on the structure that organizes them (the partnership), rather than the activity that brings them together (the actual partnering). As we wrestle with partnering questions, we begin by focusing on what we are going to do together to meet the needs we've identified.

The Partnering Continuum © REACT Services

A few years ago, I was assisting a group of churches as they were trying to plant churches in India. They had a desire to do things in a partnering way, but struggled because they had a theology that was non-charismatic and many of the ministries in the area they were working were mostly charismatic. "How can we work together," they asked me, "when we have such a difference in theology?" The answer was by cooperating together in a less intense way -- things like bible translation, literature distribution, and community outreach events. All are important to bringing people into the church, but not as complicated as specific church planting projects.

As a result of these discussions, we've discovered that it is sometimes helpful to see partnering as a continuum, with many flavors, distinctives and levels of intensity. We can see things like connecting and sharing information as a form of partnering, just as we can see full, more in-depth collaboration as partnering.



There are many obstacles we face as we attempt to work together more effectively in Africa. These include cross cultural naiveté (from both North Americans and Africans), dependency questions, viewing partnering as having others assist us on “our” projects, and learning how to communicate what we are doing together (or hope to do) – in other words how to share and convey success.

The Partnering Template © REACT Services

Just as when we open up a document and the word processing program allows us to use templates to assist our formatting, here are a few key words to us remind us of what aids good partnering.

1. Relationship and Trust. The foundation for good partnering is to develop firm relationships built on trust. The challenge for those of us in western cultures is that we think we can do this more quickly than we actually can. Trust must be earned and that takes substantial time together. Many of our African sisters and brothers know this well and can assist us in these areas as we allow them. Sometimes choosing the right partner(s) can be the most critical part (see section on Strategic Planning).

2. Common Vision. We need to always keep in front of us the reasons we are drawn to work together – our vision and passion for the community. This keeps us from getting distracted by day to day problems.

3. Process. Partnering is a process that needs to be understood and implemented. Though fairly simple, it is not always easy! As my doctor says, “we physicians *practice* medicine because it often times is as much art as it is science.” So, too, is partnering more art than mathematics.

4. Messy. If you or your church is looking for a clean formula for doing work together in Africa, partnering is not for you. There is no “magic” way to do partnering, though there are some principles and best practices that can guide you. Expect challenges and nurture flexibility. Every partnering effort looks different – because the people are! To assist in the management of messiness, have all involved communicate their expectations for the work together.

5. Consensus. Many effective partnering endeavors are based on a consensus model that builds wider ownership of those involved. Taken from the Latin, consensus basically means to “feel together.” While larger numbers of partners increase the complexity of the partnership, working by consensus still provides one of the more effective ways for churches to maintain broader guardianship.

6. Facilitation. All successful partnering is rooted in good leadership. Facilitation has been described as the art of making something happen by serving. Being a good listener is essential. It also implies the lack of a predetermined outcome, especially at the beginning of the partnering journey.

Next Steps

So, where can you go from here as you develop partnering projects? There are many good resources that can assist you – among the best are some of the other churches (and their leadership) currently involved in Churches Together! Many of them have experience and have developed wisdom in the art of partnering. In addition, a few others to begin with include: REACT Services (www.REACTServices.com), the Interdev Partnership Associates (www.Interdev.org), Partners International (www.PartnersIntl.org), and DualReach (www.DualReach.org).

Brian F. O’Connell was part of the original core group of people that helped form Churches Together. After leadership positions with Interdev, World Evangelical Alliance and the National Association of Evangelicals, he now serves as the President of REACT Services, a consulting organization specializing in training and coaching churches and ministries in partnering. His e-mail is Brian@REACTServices.com.