# Better Together: Finding Your Place in Today's Interconnected Reality

Eldon Porter and Heather Pubols

Perhaps the greatest challenge for the global church today is to know how to best work in unity. Though imperfect, networks seem to be the tool God is using to increase effective Church ministry worldwide. Networks are nodes that connect the global church and encourage the development of diverse perspectives on critical issues. Understanding where you fit in this highly interconnected reality is essential.

Theologically, if we look at Genesis 11, we see a post-Tower of Babel world where confused communication splinters a once unified human civilization, driving it into isolated pockets. Then in Acts 2 we see the first signs of the undoing of Babel, when a diverse, multilingual community all hear the mighty works of God in their own languages. Looking ahead to Revelation 7 we know that people from every community and language on earth will stand before the throne of God as one united, holy, chosen people.

We currently live in the space between Acts 2 and Revelation 7. Global shifts in current collective culture evidence God's continued work to achieve his purposes. Manuel Castell, in his book, *The Rise of the Network Society*, describes the end of the industrialized society in favor of a networked one as the greatest transformation in our era.[1] In the business world this means self-contained companies can no longer compete with those that work together with partners. The Church and the global mission movement confront a similar dynamic.

Three main factors contribute to this shift for the Church. First, the expansion of the Church to every corner of the globe. No country exists without a gospel presence. Second, technological advancements in communications offer previously unmatched methods of worldwide, real-time connection. Third, the movement of hundreds of millions of people away from their places of origin creates an unparalleled global diaspora of peoples. These unprecedented factors both demand and allow the different parts of the global Church to work together in unity as we accompany Christ in building his Church.

In John 17 we see that coming together in unity is essential for participating in God's mission. Today, this is happening on a global scale. Globalization and the resulting network society appear to be a part of God's plan for this period in history. If mission is finding out what God is doing and joining it,[2] then every mission agency, church, and believer needs to consider how they can be connected in this globalized context.

## What is a Network?

People use the terms *network and partnership* in a variety of ways. For example, individuals or organizations can network, but that doesn't mean they are a network. For our purposes, we will define a network as the coming together of autonomous entities because of something shared in common. On the other hand, we will define partnership as an intentional collaboration between known parties to achieve specific, measurable goals. The difference between the two lies in how they are led. Both facilitate cooperation and acknowledge that we achieve different and better things when we work together.

Networks take various forms but generally fit into two categories: geographic and issue-focused. Geographic networks include alliances of evangelical churches in a specific country or region. There are approximately 140 of these around the world and most are connected to the World Evangelical Alliance. One example of a geographic network is the **Evangelical Fellowship of India** (efionline.org) which has more than 50 Protestant denominations in its network.

There are also mission-related networks that are geographically defined. Some of these represent mission movements originating from countries with established churches. **COMIBAM** (comibam.org), the **Ibero-American Mission Alliance**, is an example of one such network. Others represent a collective effort focused on bringing the gospel to a particular unreached or unengaged area.

Issue-focused networks have greater variety. They are defined by adhering to an overarching cause, making space for global engagement, and providing leadership on global challenges. Some like the **Global Ethnodoxology Network** (worldofworship.org) concentrate on a ministry tool. In its case, global artistic expression. These networks help practitioners understand and use these tools. Another type of issue-focused network emphasizes outreach to a category of people. For example, **Vision 5:9** devotes attention to the global Muslim population; **Care of Earth** (lwccn.com) focuses on creation care.

Still other issue-focused networks give attention to a particular concept, a methodology, or another grouping of individual ministries. The variations are endless. Such networks are constantly birthed in areas where collaboration is needed. As ministry practitioners who share the same passion begin to process critical issues together, they become an authentic leadership voice on their focus area.

A few large global networks tackle both geography and issues. Those include the **World Evangelical Alliance** (worldea.org), the **Lausanne Movement** (lausanne.org), and **Transform World** (transform-world.net). These organizations develop regional networks and often form issue-focused networks of their own in an effort to foster greater collaboration within their community.

## Healthy Networks

Bringing people together to learn and connect is the primary focus of a healthy network. By curating information and relationships, networks help participants grow in knowledge and share resources. They

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gather practitioners together through online forums or at events so they can build relationships and share reflections. Networks that do this well serve as the front door for partnerships. By fostering collaborative cultures, networks give birth to an ever-growing number of partnerships among their participants.

Healthy network leadership further creates an attraction that draws those focused on their geography or issue together for the purpose of empowering them for greater effectiveness. The leaders do not direct or manage but rather facilitate, empower, and equip. They listen to their participants to gain an understanding of their needs. They encourage constant reflection on their context and its challenges. They highlight good examples. They invite contributions from those in semi-related areas or issues. And they encourage connections for cooperation and collaboration that facilitates everyone's success.

You could think of a network like a vegetable garden and the leader(s) as the gardener(s). The gardener puts the garden in the best location for the plants she wants to grow. Before planting, she prepares the soil, tilling it and adding nutrients. She plans out where each plant will go, positioning each plant for its optimal water and sunlight. This process is like facilitating the network culture. The gardener then pairs together plants that offer companion benefits to one another, putting carrots next to onions that chase away the carrot fly.[3] She even adds complementary plants like flowers that repel pests or attract bees and butterflies. The addition of earthworms keeps the soil aerated and releases ladybugs to eat harmful insects. This is like inviting participants, including those with both primary and secondary interests, into the network. Getting the garden launched is the beginning.

Now the gardener does not control the sprouting of the seeds nor the plant's ultimate growth. However, she can foster an environment that facilitates growth. In the same way, the network leader guides participation in their network, but does not control it. Back in the garden, once the plants begin to grow, the gardener continues to nurture the plants with nutrients and water. Bees, butterflies and ladybugs come and go helping when they are around. Earthworms travel in, out, and around, sustaining the garden in ways no one sees. The gardener removes weeds and may reposition plants for optimum growth. With careful tending each plant yields a harvest it could not have had without the support of the other plants, beneficial insects, worms, and the gardener.

However, networks are also fluid environments. Unlike a garden where certain parts are more stationary, in a network everyone is free to come and go and engage in their own ways. Networks and their leaders do not try to organize everyone under them or to get them all to do the same things. Networks are not organizations themselves so the organizations and individuals participating in them remain autonomous. Networks don't manage the partnerships that come out of them; the participants do that. Instead they foster a culture that encourages partnerships. In fact, that is the endgame for these networks. A well-run network is constantly birthing partnerships.

## Connecting with Networks

Engaging well with networks begins with understanding your purpose and identity as a mission agency, ministry, church, or individual. It's developing an understanding of the part you play. How has God equipped you? What do you bring that others can use or learn from? How can you grow or improve with what others could provide you? What kind of information and connections will help you do more than you can accomplish alone? This understanding creates the foundation for a network engagement strategy.

Four deepening degrees describe most types of network engagement. Those degrees begin with observation, then move to general participation. Later degrees focus

on deepening engagement and moving into leadership.

The first degree is prayer and research. Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to the networks that fit you best. Then read network websites or subscribe to their newsletter or other communication. This will help you evaluate the network's relevance for your particular reality.

The second degree is attending a network event. However, participation must be intentional to get the most out of this engagement. Just going, sitting there and hearing information wastes your time investment. Determine ahead of time why you are going, who you can meet, and what help you can give and receive. This degree of engagement may be sufficient for some networks. However, the next two degrees offer more value for causes and regions where you want deeper involvement.

The third degree is engaging in serious dialogue and reflection with other network participants. It's cooperating on research and evaluating issues that are essential to the core identity of the network.

Finally, the fourth degree of network engagement is becoming part of its leadership. When a network strategically aligns with an organization's identity and purpose, supporting and becoming part of the leadership can multiply the impact of both the organization and the network. Leaders all remain part of their own organizations, but in network leadership roles they can have tremendous influence on an issue or geographic region that is important to their mission.

## Technology

Technology is best utilized when it matches network participant's access and enhances network platforms. Some networks have robust websites with articles to read, documents to download, webinars, discussion forums, participant profiles, and more. Others find that Facebook groups or WhatsApp chat groups provide enough structure for connecting and sharing information.



The new multi-network **GENMobile app** (genmobileapp.com) is designed to help anyone explore the world of networks. It also provides strategic support to network leaders. The app allows users to explore networks by name, geographic region, or issue. Network profiles show ways to connect to networks, such as email or website addresses or Facebook pages or groups. The app also has an extensive calendar of network events of global significance. It utilizes the database of over 600 geographically defined and issue-focused networks managed by **Linking Global Voices** (linkingglobalvoices.com). Network leaders may request to create their own leader profile in a secure area of the app in order to communicate with other network leaders. This facilitates greater network-to-network collaboration around critical challenges.

Networks can also use the app to create their own workspaces where their constituents can build both ministry and ministry leader profiles. These profiles facilitate greater awareness of who is doing what and how constituents can assist one another. Chat rooms can be created to facilitate discussion around critical issues with the added benefit of inviting a leader from another network to participate. Networks that create a workspace can also activate a section to serve as their Event App, better communicating about their events as part of their ongoing effort to empower their constituents.

## Preparing for Network Participation

The newest "C-level" leadership position in the corporate world is a chief collaboration officer (CCO). This role can play a part in the mission and ministry world, too. In fact, churches, mission agencies, and networks could all benefit from a CCO.

A person in this position has no authority over a department or domain. Instead they look horizontally across all organizational areas to ascertain what geographic areas and issues are important to the organization holistically. They look at what their organization can offer as well as its needs. Then they research networks and build relationships. Most organizations are involved in several networks, so the CCO not only helps determine which networks to join but also the strategic degrees of engagement to have with each. However, it is worth noting that network engagement degrees may differ between organizational leadership and individual practitioners within the same organization.

Fostering an organizational culture that supports involvement in networks and engagement in resulting partnerships is another part of the CCO role. The first step is developing a value for working with others. Many older organizations still operate as self-contained entities. Moving away from this identity is critical to becoming ready for collaboration. A CCO can develop crucial buy-in for collaboration at all organizational levels.

A CCO can also facilitate an honest evaluation of policies, systems, and structures that hinder collaboration. Greater flexibility in areas like insurance requirements and official language can help organizations become more globally friendly. If "we've always done it this way" trumps "this is who we are and where we are going," engagement in networks will be limited and partnerships may not be possible.

In networks a CCO's role functions slightly differently. The role is important in this context because networks benefit from on-going connections and cross-pollination with each other. An example might be how **Refugee Highway Partnership–Europe** collaborates with **Evangelical Alliances** across the continent as well as with networks representing media and human trafficking in order to empower those serving refugees. While a network CCO can be involved in many of the same ways they would be within an organization – researching networks, building relationship, and evaluating degrees of engagement – in the network setting, they also reach out to other networks to build network-to-network collaboration.

The CCO role is relatively new, so few people will enter it with previous experience. The best candidates are big-picture and holistic thinkers often coming from public relations, communications, or marketing domains. To ensure success, a CCO may need special support. Eldon Porter (article co-author) offers coaching to agency and network CCOs to help them serve effectively.

## Why Bother?

We recognize that some organizations are reluctant to make the shift to networking and partnerships. They are satisfied in their self-sufficiency. Network engagement seems tertiary to their main goals and partnership seems fraught with challenging pitfalls and time-consuming changes. A failed past attempt at engagement could also be the root of hesitation.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of the time the Church and ministry organizations

operate this way. They develop expertise and believe they have the best answers. But we must recognize that we are each only one part of what God is doing. We are not the center–he is. This leads to questions: What is your organization here for? Are you more tied to your structures, policies and procedures than your ethos, beliefs, values, and objectives?

We are part of a huge global Christian movement, and we each have something to learn from others. Consider how you can grow. If you have great material, why not share it to see God's Kingdom work advance further? Christ equipped members of his body with different gifts to offer and receive. When we participate together in this form of biblical generosity, we accomplish much more than we can alone.

On a very practical level, we also need to be honest with ourselves about the impact of duplication and disunity. When we show up uninvited in another country where there is already an active church, with our pre-packaged solutions and without listening and engaging with them, we harm our fellow believers. When we attempt to run the same kinds of programs in the same areas in competition with other ministries, we do the same.

But what if a network includes organizations or individuals with whom you disagree? The beauty of networks is that you maintain your autonomy and engage only in the ways you desire. You connect with whom you want. Yet building understanding relationships with those you differ from may open new opportunities for learning. In fact, greater diversity in a network leads to greater authenticity among its participants.

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul describes the body as many parts that all fit together in one body. He goes on to describe the absurdity of body parts negating their role within the whole or one part telling another it's not needed. Every part regardless of size, strength or purpose is needed for the greater purpose of being a body. Each has particular needs and gifts. This passage is often applied to local churches, but we need to consider its implications in the global Church and mission movement. We need to discover what our part is and learn how we fit with others. Then when we work in agreement with others, we can truly function as the Body of Christ.

If we believe God is the architect of history, we can trust that he is behind this shift in global culture. If we believe his Word describes his design for us and creation, we can trust that our efforts and the efforts of others to work in his ways will be directed by him even when we do not fully understand or see the bigger picture. What matters is our faithfulness to do our part in harmony with others as members of Christ's one body.

Networks are not a fail-safe or a solution for everything. Some networks are not well run, and not every network is a good fit for every individual or organization. But the benefits outweigh the potential challenges. Networks follow what God is doing today and offer opportunities for global engagement on a scale never seen before. They open doors to accomplish things not possible on our own. They demonstrate how we are better together.

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## Notes

1. Manuel Castro, The Rise of the Network Society (Blackwell Publishing, 2010).

2. Rowan Williams, "Archbishop's Presidential Address – General Synod," (York, 2003), http://aoc2013. brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/1826/archbishops-presidential-address-general-synod-york-july-2003.

3. Amber Kanuckel, "10 Veggies That Should Grow Together," Farmers' Almanac, https://www. farmersalmanac.com/companion-planting-guide-31301.