

Going Together Where We Can't Go Alone: Mission Focused Networks

Heather Pubols

As many as 3,000 communities representing more than 200 million people¹ remain with little or no knowledge of Jesus and little to no visible and indigenous church presence. The majority of these Unreached and Unengaged People Groups (UUPGs) live in parts of the world where Christian faith is prohibited, restricted, or suppressed. This usually occurs because of government restrictions or the predominance of another major faith. Sharing the gospel in these environments is challenging at best.

However, persistent, quiet, and creative strategies continue to spread the good news of Jesus in seemingly impossible places. Mission focused networks play a critical role in these challenging contexts, facilitating collaboration among local and global organizations and believers, helping them overcome barriers that no individual or single organization could surmount on their own. They provide understanding of difficult areas to the global mission movement. They also encourage local believers and ensure their voice is heard and respected.

The Beginnings

The first mission focused network began in the late 1980s. Interdev, the predecessor organization of visionSynergy and International Partnering Associates, organized meetings bringing together representatives from several ministries working in North Africa.² Each person was experienced, but all worked independently of one another. Even though they came from evangelical denominations, some had organizational policies that prevented engagement with others who had certain doctrinal differences.³

Over more than a century, hundreds gave their lives to share the gospel in the region with little fruit. Even though a small and committed Church existed, growth eluded it. The meetings gave space for the group to consider growth hindrances and to pray together. Over several months of discussions and prayer, they discovered not only ways working together would eliminate obstacles, but also core protocols which would build a foundation for continued collaboration.

As duplication reduced and coordination expanded, opportunities opened for more ministries. Then, improved support to local churches helped multiply local believers.

This breakthrough continues to give energy to ongoing area cooperation. The slowly, steadily growing Church increasingly takes the lead in regional initiatives. And while the region remains one of the world's least reached, collaboration fosters a ministry culture that equips both local and foreign believers to serve side-by-side more effectively.

Building on successes like this, additional mission focus networks started in the 1990s and 2000s. By 2005 more than twenty of these networks brought together organizations in challenging settings. Today, there are more than one hundred mission focus networks that have launched thousands of partnerships.

Staying Secure

In many hard-to-reach places, isolation characterized evangelism efforts. Deeply embedded foreign workers often engage in "tent-making" jobs that provide them a presence in a country to cultivate gospel-sharing relationships with local people. Any organized connections with other workers or local churches could expel foreign workers from the country. They could expose underground churches. They could restrict visible churches or trigger the destruction of their properties. They could also land local believers in prison or cause their torture or death.

In one place, decades of collaboration attempts repeatedly failed. Staying separate provided protection and attaining enough trust to do otherwise seemed unattainable. In 2011 a partnership facilitator made one more effort to bring workers together. He says the group fell prey to a common false dichotomy. They believed sharing everything or nothing were their only choices.

Through a series of meetings, he worked with the group to move beyond this false

assumption. Building trust required agreed-to protocols. Together they created more than ten practices for information sharing – ways to protect data like names, organizations, locations, etc. – that everyone could agree on. Since then, the group has met every ninety days.

Security protocols like this are an operational standard for mission focused networks. Information-sharing practices allow content exchange with reduced risk. These networks universally require anyone attending their meetings to be recommended and vetted. Another network uses an app at its meetings to help participants to connect anonymously, if they desire.

Shifting Focus

For many years people prayed fervently for God to open the Soviet Union to the gospel. In the 1980s, one prayer movement focused on Soviet countries within Asia. As the empire crumbled in 1989, this prayer movement became a network. As more workers started to enter the region, the network provided a platform for working together.

Church planting was the highest priority, and as people worked together the number of local congregations increased. Collaborative efforts also brought notable progress to Scripture translation, medical ministry, and theological education. However, as the community of local believers in the region grew, so did their participation in the network. Today, believers from the region lead the network and make up more than half of this group which was once almost entirely foreigners. Network meetings are also now conducted in Russian along with English.

The change of network constituents shifted priorities. While church planting is still important, local concerns such as developing

youth ministries, organizing Christian business leaders, and supporting pastors have become leading issues for the network.

In another network, a partnership facilitator explains that increased local involvement unexpectedly shifted a meeting agenda. As local church leaders presented reports on the state of Christianity in their nations, they began to weep. The leaders spontaneously came together to confess, pray, hug, and restore their relationships with one another. Reconciliation wasn't slotted into the program, but it was clearly a plan deviation led by the Holy Spirit.

Amplifying the Local Voice

In 2004, an American businessman, John, went to a war-torn area in East Africa on a short-term medical mission trip. He witnessed first-hand the impact of the conflict's destruction. He described the area as bereft of infrastructure and observed people surviving on insects and bark. He came home motivated to give more help.

Over the next ten years, John continued researching, connecting with others in or from the region, and returning to bring humanitarian aid including food and medicine. His desire to do more gospel work in the region strengthened, and God connected him with local and international partners who wanted to join him. In 2014 they launched **GNAC** (gnac4nuba.com). The network brings together missionaries, church leaders, and humanitarian workers, including foreigners and local people as well as diaspora.

Nearly seventy percent of the network's participants are pastors and evangelists from the region, and a local pastor leads the network on the ground. Regular conferences enable these scattered and persecuted believers the chance to encourage each other, meet, and plan. Foreign participants learn from the local community, listen to their needs, and can then engage in ways the community feels are most beneficial.

In other networks, leaders confirm that high levels of local involvement in networks

amplify the voice of local communities to the global Church. When foreigners attending network events come with a teachable and humble attitude, they gain contextual understanding and develop local relationships that enable them to participate helpfully in the region.

Some churches enter foreign countries with the goal of spreading their own ecclesial-DNA. They use money to manipulate local pastors into using foreign strategies, curriculum, or church models. Bruce Huseby, a pastor from the US with long-term network involvement, notes that from his observation, this method consistently fails and fractures the local Christian body.

Beram Kumar, a network leader in Asia, describes an approach like this as a "moon-landing" because churches and agencies come into a foreign place with a strategy that has no input from local believers – as if they don't exist. Their good intentions disrupt the work of local congregations and cause pain to fellow believers who know the culture better than outsiders.


Through networks, foreign individuals, agencies, and churches can gain exposure to the context and develop local connections. When they come to network events to learn and not to push their own agendas, opportunities for ministry arise through relationships and are locally infused. In fact, the best networks cultivate "sharing economies" where all parties can give and receive from one another.

Getting Involved

Most mission focused networks do not advertise. Engagement begins with research and prayer. For those looking to enter a new region, the websites **peoplegroups.org** and **joshuaproject.net** provide information about unreached and unengaged people groups around the world. **Prayercast.com** has videos to facilitate prayer for nations. Ask God where he wants your organization or church to serve and see where he leads.

Connecting with mission focused

networks comes through personal relationships. Ask God to direct you to the right people. An entry could come through a missionary who serves where you want to connect or an agency already at work there. Many network leaders also present their networks at large mission conferences. For a more direct connection, the **GENMobile App** (genmobileapp.com) and **LinkingGlobalVoices.com** include directories of hundreds of networks including their contact details. They list some, but not all, mission focused networks.

Attend a meeting to learn, explore, and form relationships. Develop plans slowly in collaboration with local believers and discover together how you can give and receive from one another. Keep in mind that persecution is real and honoring security protocols may mean limiting what can be reported publicly. And, finally, remember that work in sensitive places usually produces few immediate results. Focus on how God is growing you with others as you labor together to sow seeds for a future harvest. 

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Notes

1. "Unengaged and Unreached People Groups of the World," ArcGIS, last modified April 12, 2019, <https://www.arcgis.com/home/item.html?id=807928071960422291fd231a2dda7e4e>.
2. "Interdev: Pioneering Partnership," History & Impact, visionSynergy, accessed November 18, 2018, <https://visionsynergy.net/history-and-impact/>.
3. Phill Butler, "Phill Butler: The North Africa Story," VisionSynergy, October 5, 2011, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/j7cmpxOnvyk>.