

MISSIONS IN THE “NETWORK SOCIETY”

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One of the most significant challenges we face today, as a Global Church, is to know how to work together in unity in the face of difficult and complex situations. Christ said He would build His Church and He is doing just that. While we would all claim to be part of Christ's Church and that He is our Lord - yet so often each member is doing their own ministry in isolation. Is there a way that we can achieve greater unity? The good news is that today we can witness how Christ is leading His Global Church to work together in unity.

INTRODUCTION

We no longer live in the industrial or post-industrial age. Sociologists say we are now in a “network society”. The term network society is an expression we began to hear in the late 1990s and was related to “the social, political, economic and cultural changes caused by the spread of networked, digital information and communications technologies”. This definition is taken from Wikipedia.

The Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells published his landmark book, “The Rise of the Network Society” in 1996. Since then the secular world has aggressively wrestled with the question of how one's organization can best engage and thrive in this new reality. Unfortunately, the leadership of the Evangelical Church is only just now beginning to reflect on this challenge.

After completing a program at the University of Colorado on Network Theory and Network Leadership I have focused on studying how the different parts of the Global Church connect and collaborate around difficult and complex challenges and specifically the role networks can play in encouraging this. I currently track over 750 networks globally and mentor network leaders into more effective ministry.

For the purpose of this paper, I make a distinction between a network and a partnership. This distinction is best understood from the leadership perspective. A network is an open space where totally autonomous entities come together because of a shared passion or a common geographic context. In the pre-network society, individuals and organizations were associated with a network as a matter of identity. They were part of this group and not that group. But now, in our current reality, Individual parties are attracted to the space because of the information they can acquire and the connections they can make - which ultimately helps them function more effectively. They associate in various degrees with multiple networks.

On the other hand, a partnership is something that takes place between different parties that know each

other and who share a common vision for something that they can accomplish together, something neither of them could accomplish on their own. Leading a partnership requires the constant clarification of the objective, the celebration of achievements toward the objective, and the constant building of trust between the members. Trust grows - encouraging the partnership relationship to grow from one of communication, to cooperation, and then finally to collaboration. Well-run networks are empowering and are constantly birthing partnerships.

The Evangelical Context:

While we live in a network society, our reality as evangelicals is further nuanced by three factors - each driving us into a new world that we must come to understand. The first of these drivers is the fact that there are believers today in every country of the world. Christ said He would build His Church and He is doing just that. These believers know their context and understand how God is working. It is incumbent on us to hear them if we ever expect to work together in unity. And the good news is that we can now hear those that usually are not heard.

The second driver is the technology that allows believers from almost anywhere in the world to connect with others around the world. This, perhaps more than anything else, is broadening the playing field of those involved in cross-cultural collaborative ministry to now include those who in the past could only support others who “were sent”. Today we see individuals, ministries, and local churches getting involved in what God is doing without having to work through a traditional mission agency to be sent to where the unreached used to live. I am not at all suggesting that being sent to where they all used to live is no longer necessary but rather that being sent is no longer the only option. Technology-enabled collaborative ministries are now taking place between those who are sent and those who remain at home - as they work together with diaspora-rich unreached people groups.

And the third driver that is redefining our reality is what the United Nations calls the Global Diaspora Movement. We are told that there are over 350 million people who have moved or are in the process of moving from their historic context of origin to another part of the world. While in the past one needed to “be sent” to other parts of the world to share the Gospel with an unreached people group, today we learn that the vast majority of the unreached people groups have parts of their ethnic group now living as migrant workers or immigrants in locations in close proximity

to Christ followers. And while they are dispersed, they are in constant communication with family and friends back in their original geographic context.

This new global reality is requiring significant changes. Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, is famously quoted as saying: "When the rate of change inside your organization is less than the rate of change outside your organization, the end is in sight". How we, as the individual parts of the Global Church, adapt to this new reality is fundamental for effectiveness in ministry. Working independently and in isolation is no longer acceptable. Perhaps the most challenging changes are being faced by those leading mission agencies that were developed pre-network society. These agencies find themselves trying to sustain organizational structures that were so relevant at one time but are now a financial burden.

Different Kinds of Evangelical Networks:

Networks are not organizations as such but rather spaces where different parts of the Body of Christ come together. We find different parts of the Global Church coming together in different kinds of networks.

There are both geographically defined as well as issue-focused networks. There are two categories of those networks defined by geography. First, we have the evangelical alliances representing the believers both at the country level as well as at the regional level. The second category of geographically defined networks is connected to the task of missions. These in turn are divided into two categories. The first of which represents a missions movement from a country or region where the church is fairly established. There are approximately 70 of these mission movement networks. The second category is what I refer to as mission focus networks - in countries or regions where the church is weak. There are 28 of these mission-focus networks.

The second broad category of networks is those we refer to as issue-focused. For the most part, these are global in nature and focus on a specific challenge or issue. These cover a broad spectrum such as working with refugees, reaching Buddhists or Muslims, pastoral training, orality, children and youth ministries, reaching Muslims, business as mission, orphans, working with those that have been trafficked, church planting, sports, media, education, discipleship, etc. There are hundreds of different issue focus networks - or spaces where those that share a common passion come together to learn from each other and to find potential partners for ministry.

If God has placed in your heart a passion for a specific issue, then you can connect with others who share that same passion regardless of where they live around the world. These networks are beginning to fill the role of authentic leadership originating from ministry practitioners.

SOME KEY NETWORK PRINCIPLES

These are basic principles associated with the network society both in the secular as well as in the Evangelical world. Understanding these principles will help one know how best to engage and function in this new reality. Our world has radically changed.

Bounded Set & Centered Set:

One of the main principles associated with the discussion of network theory revolves around how one sees oneself in relation to others. In the pre-network society, one saw himself as part of a closed entity. You were either a member or you were not a member. The collaboration that took place was between members of that entity and partners were those from the outside who supported the activities of those on the inside, those in the bounded set.

But today, individuals and ministries connect through technology with various groupings because of shared passions not because they belong to the same entity. This is referred to as functioning in a centered set perspective. They see themselves as highly interconnected with others both within and outside of their organization with whom they share something in common. When they speak of "we" they refer to themselves and others that they connect to and partner with - regardless of where they live around the world or what organization they are officially members of.

Network Leadership:

I want to be very clear on something. While I suggest that those leading networks would have much greater impact if they did so from a centered set perspective, I am not saying that what they currently do from a bounded set framework is bad. I'm just saying that they could have far greater influence if they understood how those they try to lead are in fact looking for leadership. People follow differently in the network society and so leaders must lead differently.

There are two primary global networks in Evangelical circles - the World Evangelical Alliance and the Lausanne Movement. Both of these tend to function as bounded sets with "their sub-networks" focused on regions and issues. The disconnect is seen when a leader of a particular issue focus network is given the title of "Director" when in fact no one engaging to any degree in that network space would consider the individual to be "their director".

Network leaders need to understand that those they seek to lead follow differently than they did pre-network society. Today followers seek to be influenced by those that create spaces where they can learn how God is working, where they can acquire good practitioner-sourced information, and where they can discover potential ministry partners. They are seeking what they think will help them be more effective in what they sense the Lord leading them to do. The effectiveness of a network leader is determined by the

degree to which they empower those they serve into more effective collaborative ministry relationships. While the secular world has tools to measure this, Evangelicals are seen as the only ones who still measure their "effectiveness" in leading a network by how many attend their events.

Multi-Level Networks:

My observation has led me to conclude that those global or regional networks, under which other networks are grouped, tend to function more in the bounded set leadership perspective. We see this with the regional evangelical alliances as well as regional missions networks which in theory serve or represent other networks at the country levels which in turn engage directly with practitioners. From the ministry practitioner's perspective, they are becoming less relevant.

Two Leadership Role Perspectives:

Those in Evangelical network leadership roles fall along a spectrum of how they perceive their role. On one end of that spectrum are those who hold to a "leader-centric" perspective. They feel the focus of leadership is on them, given their gifting and their experience. For them, they are key to influencing others. It is almost as if they see their network as a platform from which they perform. On the other end of the spectrum are those who hold to a "follower-centric" perspective. They see their primary role as that of creating a space where their primary constituents are empowered with an understanding of how God is working, with good information, and great connections. In the network society, these individuals have far more influence than leader-centric leaders even though they are not usually in the spotlight.

Network Platform:

The term network platform is used when describing the core identity of a particular network. The network platform for the Refugee Highway Partnership global network is "working with refugees". The core identity or platform for the European Freedom Network is "working with rescued trafficked people in Europe". Networks that understand themselves as functioning in the centered set reality build collaborative relationships with other networks connected in some way with their platform, in order to better empower their primary constituents. Those networks that still function in the bounded set world try to create other in-house networks for the different issues related to their platform.

Primary & Secondary Constituents:

Every network has both primary and secondary constituents. The primary constituents of the AMTB - the Brazilian missions network are the Brazilian churches, pastors, ministry leaders, and mission agency leaders that make up the "Brazilian missions movement". AMTB's secondary constituents would

be those networks that would bring added value to their effort to serve and empower their primary constituents. Some of their secondary constituents would be the networks representing the believers and others serving in areas of the world where the Brazilian missions movement is focused. They would also be those focused on training pastors in newly planted churches, the networks representing media ministries, those working with refugees, etc.

A Network Engagement Strategy:

The number of networks and the degree to which they are engaged is unique to each ministry or organization. But the average small organization is intentionally engaging with about 35 different networks while large mission agencies are engaging with well over 120 different networks. Those living in the centered set world do not see themselves as joining an organization when they engage with a network. They engage to the degree to which they find what they are looking for.

There are four different degrees of network engagement, be that for geographically defined or issue-focused networks. The first degree is to watch a network's website, their Facebook page, and subscribe to any bulletins that they send out. One is seeking to learn how God is working, good information on the context, and the potential of finding good partners - so that one's ministry is empowered to be more effective. The second degree of engagement is to attend an event, either virtually or in person. Again, one is looking to learn how God is working, for information on the context, and connection that will empower one for more effective ministry. If the network is proving to be an outstanding space where one is empowered for more effective ministry, then you may decide to go deeper - moving to the third degree of engagement by connecting with those of the inner core who know the subject or region deeply and from whom one can learn and grow. And if the value of a network is such that the individual or ministry feels it is worth their strongest commitment, they then move to the fourth degree of engagement. This level of commitment is exercised by offering to join and support the network's leadership team in order to expand one's influence in that particular area.

Collaborative Ecosystems:

The term collaborative ecosystem describes a space where various networks, that intersect around a particular challenge come together - so that ministry practitioners can discover their unique role within a highly interconnected and complex situation. For example, the Ukraine crisis connects with individuals and ministries connected with at least twelve different networks. These networks include the Evangelical leaders of Ukraine, the WEA, the European Evangelical Alliance, Lausanne Europe, Refugee Highway Partnership Europe, European Freedom Network, Member Care Networks, as well as

the evangelical alliances from the different European countries in addition to those alliances from the countries receiving Ukrainian refugees.

There are a number of complex challenges requiring collaborative ecosystems in order for the challenge to be effectively addressed. These include the need to encourage effective collaboration between the different ministries serving the diaspora moving into large urban centers around the world. Another area we see today where collaborative ecosystems are needed is around the unreached people groups that are diaspora rich. We know for a fact that there are Rohingya Muslim background believers, believers who have ministered to the Rohingya people, and now believers in over 57 different countries of the world who are reaching out to serve the Rohingya refugees coming into their neighborhoods. Today we have the technology that allows us to create space for all of these folk to connect with each other, learn about resources that others have developed, and share what God is doing with the Rohingya in their area, pray together, and function in unity as the part of God's Church that He is using to build His Church among the Rohingya.

CONCLUSION

Never before in the history of mankind have we had a church in every country of the world, technology that enables us to interact with fellow believers from around the world, and where our local context reflects the global reality due primarily to the global diaspora movement. While the potential for collaboration between different parts of the Global Church exists, our current leaders are just now beginning to understand the need for radical change in how they lead or rather empower different parts of the global church to work "in unity" as part of what God is doing to build His Church. .



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Eldon Porter grew up as a missionary kid in Nigeria and then served for 27 years in Latin America with a large international Western mission agency. Recognizing the huge changes taking place around the world, he left the formal world of missions to do a program at the University of Colorado on Network Theory and Network Leadership. Sociologists say that we now live in the Network Society. For the last 13 yrs, Eldon has been researching how the different parts of the Global Church come together in collaborative spaces around difficult and complex challenges. He tracks about 750 networks globally and mentors network leaders as well as those serving in mission agency leadership roles as Chief Collaboration Officers. Understanding the part your network or ministry plays as part of the Global Church is foundational for effective collaborative ministry.

