

“PRAYER, EVANGELIZATION, & COOPERATIVE ENDEAVORS”

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BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

For the last sixteen years, with colleagues around the world, I have been engaged in seeking to bring God’s people into productive, whole, cooperative relationships that will empower effective evangelization. Our experience has demonstrated what is found throughout Scripture: evangelism is not a game of guns and money. We are working in an arena in which *principalities and powers in heavenly places* play significant roles and where an individual's entrance into The Kingdom is not the work of clever strategies but through *the washing and regeneration of the Holy Spirit*.

From early beginnings in North Africa, we have seen the growth of functional Partnerships for evangelism to include initiatives in over 60 countries. Additional Partnerships are now in development in over 70 more language groups. These Partnerships involve more than 450 ministries from over 55 “resource” nations. Universally, they are consensus-based, working, holistic, long-term, multi-agency, multi-national in nature – each focused on evangelism and development of a nationally-led church planting movement.

The participants in these partnerships are experiencing spiritual breakthroughs in which tens of thousands of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Tibetan Buddhists are coming into the Kingdom. Hundreds of nationally led churches are being established. And, these developments are occurring in countries/circumstances that, while still considered very challenging, less than two decades ago would have been essentially

considered “impenetrable.” In short, we are seeing the impossible dream come true. Hoped for outcomes that countless individuals have prayed for for up to two hundred years, and to which countless individuals have given their lives in the past, are being realized.

In this brief paper I seek to outline some core assumptions that bear on the topic; identify some functional areas of cooperative efforts of evangelism where prayer has been vital; move on to a few examples, and conclude with lessons learned.

ASSUMPTIONS

- Designed in God’s image, man was to live interdependently, in relationship -- in community. Adam’s choice of autonomy destroyed the divine relational plan. All of redemption has been mounted to address the restoration of relationships.¹
- The state of relationships has a powerful impact on the efficacy of prayer, the work of the Holy Spirit, and, therefore, on the process and outcomes of evangelistic efforts.²
- Satan seeks proactively to maintain man’s state of relational alienation; with God, with himself, with other humans, and with the created order. This is Satan’s principal means of destroying the credibility and effectiveness of the Church and its witness.³

THE ROLE OF PRAYER IN COOPERATIVE ENDEAVORS

¹ Passages suggesting --

A. God, Himself, living in community can be found in eloquent sections of Job, Daniel, and Ephesians.

B. God created man in His own; relationally-oriented image are clear in Genesis 1:25, 3:22, and 11:17.

C. Broken relationships at four levels are outlined in Genesis 3:8 (with God), Genesis 3:10 (with man's own “self”), Genesis 3:12, 4:9 (with others), Genesis 4:16-19 (with the created order).

² Passages suggesting the impact of relationships on the life of the individual believer, the wider Christian community, and the witness of the Church are found in such sections as -- Matthew 5:23-24, 18:15-17, John 13:34-35, 15:11-17, 17:20-23, Romans 16:17, I Corinthians 1:10, I Peter 3:7, I John 1:7-11.

³ Passages suggesting Satan’s explicit design on dividing the Body of Christ -- John 10:10, Romans 12:21, II Corinthians 2:10-11, James 4:7.

Consistent with the “spiritual” nature of this work, we have found that prayer plays a very significant role. The invisible and eternal God, who makes Himself manifest in His created order, works in ways such as prayer that, these days, may seem ephemeral in nature and elusive as we seek to trace or document their influence. However, we are convinced that prayer is central to outcomes of cooperative evangelistic efforts at several points – three of which I seek to address in this paper:

- Prayer is an essential element in the ‘stone clearing, sowing, and watering’ in spiritually hardened hearts -- whether that be an individual, a community, or a nation. The early stages of evangelism will never be realized without concerted prayer.
- Prayer is essential to the spiritual restoration of relationships. These transformed relationships are, in turn, essential to lasting, cooperative, Partnership-based evangelism initiatives
- Prayer is essential in developing consensus around priorities and setting Kingdom goals and objectives. Without this vision-driven consensus, cooperative evangelism efforts would be powerless.

PRAYER ESSENTIAL TO SOFTENING HARDENED HEARTS

Over the last fifteen years our experience suggests that while there may be active witness in an “unreached” people group, the prayer that is associated with the more explicit witness has a powerful impact on opening doors and hearts to the Kingdom. The reality of Jesus' words to the disciples in John 4:35-38, “I have sent you out to reap a harvest where others have sown ...,” is being demonstrated daily in the cooperative efforts in which we and thousands of others are engaged.

- In one Islamic country, faithful but lonely witness was carried on with little apparent results for over four decades. While this personal witness was underway, a growing awareness of and prayer for the people group – outside the country – was mounting. Today, a nine-year Strategic Evangelism Partnership of about ten ministries has seen over 20,000 documented baptized believers swept into the Kingdom and thousands more seeking Christ in dozens of local, home-based fellowships.
- Approximately one hundred years ago, in a Tibetan Buddhist country, missionaries and their families, over fifty in all, were martyred seeking to take Christ to the people. Following this incident, over the century, countless were moved to pray. In the last ten years, a cooperative, Partnership-based evangelism initiative has seen tens of thousands come into the Kingdom and national leadership emerge for well over a hundred local fellowships and countless smaller, informal groups of believers and seekers.
- In an influential Islamic people group, active Christian witness had been underway for over one hundred years. As recently as six years ago, there was not a single functioning church of that group -- using the group's language, with Scripture in the language, and with leadership being provided by nationals from the language group. When the Strategic Evangelism Partnership for the language group was established six years ago, developing a global prayer initiative was identified as one of the group's highest collaborative priorities. An internet-based prayer bulletin was launched along with a bi-monthly "hard copy" prayer bulletin that has had wide circulation. Today, churches are functioning in this people group; the New Testament is complete; and each of the local fellowships is led by nationals.

- The “praying through the window” initiative, (associated with the AD2000 Movement) between the years 1993 and 1997 engaged over 50 million believers worldwide. They actually signed a covenant to pray daily during the month of October for a massive harvest of souls among the major language groups in and around the “10/40 Window.” Focused prayer on this scale has never been known in the history of the church. The decade of the nineties has seen more people come into the Kingdom and more new local fellowships established in the Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Tibetan blocs than during the entire first ninety years of the 20th century. We believe the high degree of correlation between these two realities is no coincidence.

PRAYER ESSENTIAL TO RESTORATION OF RELATIONSHIPS – THE BASIS FOR COOPERATIVE ENDEAVORS

If the heart of the Gospel is restored relationships, cooperative, Partnership-based initiatives must be a classic test bed for dealing with this oft-ignored Kingdom principle. Over the last few years we have had countless experiences of having to address this issue proactively. Here are three illustrations.

- In an area of the world that is highly contested spiritually, hundreds of individuals were making enquiry about Christ. An inquiring individual might be exposed to the Good News via Radio, Bible correspondence courses, literature distribution, and personal witness. While interest was high, a total lack of coordination of all of these elements was reducing effectiveness and seriously jeopardizing the security of many national believers. In an effort to bring coordination out of the chaos, fifteen men from eight different ministries gathered and diligently worked for three days and nights. When they arrived, only four of the fifteen had ever met. Difference in age,

ethnic background, denominational/organizational histories, along with real and perceived theological differences created fear, mistrust, and an environment in which it seemed little could be accomplished. Three times each day the men broke into small groups of 2-3, and were asked to share personal needs as they prayed for the other. By the end of the working meetings, each man had prayed for everyone else at least twice, had been prayed for by all of the others at least twice, and had learned of the real needs, personal spiritual journey, and relationship to Christ that each one had. At the conclusion of their days together, tears filled the eyes of all participants. They had hammered out a multi-point action plan that has since transformed follow-up work with inquirers in that region. Despite their extremely different backgrounds and traditions, they had agreed that having communion together was important; and, they had come to know and trust each other in a new level of restored relationships.

- Seeking spiritual breakthroughs in an Asian country that had been “closed” during most of modern missions history, seventy-four people had gathered to pray and discuss the potential of working together in Partnership – . Divisions in some of the relationships were so great, a special international prayer network had been established to pray for each participant individually throughout the four-day working meetings. Similar to the example cited above, the group was divided into small, highly-focused prayer groups each day – allowing participants to share personal needs and to develop relationships. Additionally, in the most extreme cases, prayer and reconciliation meetings were arranged all three nights of the meetings to address the brokenness and hostility in relationships. (Remember that these are Believers -- committed to world evangelization!) When the wider group acknowledged that they

did want to move forward in a Partnership for the country, they agreed the concerted prayer and the pro-active restoration of relationships were what made the advance possible.

- A partnership of nearly a dozen ministries was working on a bi-lingual project in a very sensitive Islamic country. The ministries were both national and expatriate. They varied enormously in size. Their “contribution” to the Partnership's efforts varied greatly; from the natural-giving of significant resources by a major international ministry to the “widow's mite” from an impoverished national ministry. Culture, size, ecclesiastical traditions, and perceived influence of the participants could hardly have been more different. How to share “success” if God really blessed their joint effort. Prayer together eventually produced a remarkably simple solution: “Everyone can claim success for all that God does,” they declared. Only one caveat, “When a ministry refers to the project and God’s work through the effort, they must simply indicate ‘We are seeing these results as we work together with other ministries in a Strategic Partnership.’”

PRAYER ESSENTIAL TO DEVELOPING CONSENSUS AND COMMON VISION

By definition, in seeking to form and sustain effective working Partnerships for evangelism, my colleagues and I constantly work with highly diverse individuals. Coming from their extremely different backgrounds, developing relationships and personal trust is challenging enough. Developing trust in their ability to jointly hear the Spirit of God in establishing a common vision and action plan is still more challenging.

The circumstances are similar, whether a group is seeking a common vision and a related action plan for the first time, or an established Partnership doing an annual review

of their plan and re-focusing for the next 12 months. We have found that brainstorming the possibilities in small groups and then sharing them in an open forum is an essential step. However, helping the group acknowledge that it can't do "everything" and, therefore, must choose priorities, takes the need for trust and open relationships to another level. Prayer in this process is vital.

We have seen this reality demonstrated in cooperative evangelism efforts across all geographical areas including –

- West Africa
- The Middle East
- Central Asia
- The Indian Subcontinent
- China and the Tibetan Buddhist World
- Southeast Asia

Typically, in addition to the other forms of prayer suggested in the examples already cited, we find prayer essential at this critical, consensus-building point. The normal pattern is that once a group has developed a potential set of priorities and these have been shared in the wider group, we then ask them to go back into their small groups to pray together over the list of possible action points.

Only after they have prayed together do we then suggest that each person identify 2-3 points out of the longer list (frequently of 15-20 possible action points) that he or she feels the Spirit has spoken about. This exercise has consistently shown that, almost immediately, God directs the group toward a smaller cluster of 5-6 possible action points. Usually the group agrees that this number is still too large to tackle. Bringing the now

shorter list to a final consensus of 2-3 top priorities, again, can only occur by going back into small groups of prayer and reflection. Then, once they feel they have a sense of God's leading, we encourage them to identify those priorities.

Our team, and those with whom we work in over sixty Partnerships, are again and again both amazed and thrilled at what the Spirit of God does as people think *and pray* together! Should we be surprised? I think not.

It is this prayer-centered approach to developing commonly-held vision and agreed priority action steps that is a significant element in the success and durability of Strategic Evangelism Partnerships.

WHAT TO MAKE OF ALL THIS?

We continue to learn many lessons from our on-going work. However, we have identified some recurring themes:

- Intentional, concerted prayer is vital to defeat Satan's offensive to divide and, thereby, neutralize the Church's witness.
- Intentional, concerted prayer is vital to the development of trusting, open, restored relationships which is the basis for all cooperative Kingdom efforts.
- Intentional, concerted prayer is vital to being able to bring about consensus and to develop action plans that empower lasting Kingdom cooperation.
- Intentional, concerted prayer is too frequently considered an "add-on" rather than central to each step in planning, preparation, execution, and on-going sustainability of effective evangelism efforts.
- Intentional, concerted prayer is vital if the Church seeks the power and refreshment offered as God's gift in Psalm 133.