

Multiplying the gifts

Habits of highly effective mission networks

BY HUNTER FARRELL

Since 1995, when Trinity and Shenango Presbyteries and the then-Worldwide Ministries Division together birthed the Sudan Mission Network, almost 40 mission networks have risen up out of a shared commitment of Presbyterians to a country or people group. Today, the size of the different mission networks ranges from three individuals to more than 110 representatives of collaborating congregations and presbyteries. Some of the networks are highly functioning; some of them, barely existing. The successful networks share several common traits.

Shared Identity. Effective mission networks are clear on what they are and what they're not.

Mission networks gather and channel the energy, hopes, capacities, and needs of members into relationships and shared work, rather than focusing on officer elections,

bank accounts, and meeting minutes. For Presbyterians, the temptation to over-organize can be fatal to a mission network.

Understanding the Power of “We.”

The first stage of mission network development might be called “Getting to Know You.” The second stage might be thought

of as the “Mission Marketplace.” This describes what happens when everybody comes to the mission network meeting with a favorite project and tries to lure members of the mission network to support it. While the marketplace is colorful and interesting, many networks die a slow death as participants slowly lose interest in mission project shopping and yearn for a space of greater focus and effectiveness. Sadly, these networks die of centrifugal force as everyone pulls away from the group toward individual objectives.

The third, more effective, stage of network development: that of “Collective Impact.” These networks achieve a higher level of effectiveness because they bring together a large number of congregations that work together. Frankly, only about 30–40 percent of our mission

networks have reached this stage. Some examples are the advocacy work of the Cuba Partners Network for fairer US-Cuban relations; the Israel/Palestine Mission Network’s formidable grassroots educational strategy (seen in their high-quality resources used in our denomination and beyond); and the Sudan Mission Network’s capacity to generate significant funding for mission co-workers and partner projects.

Group, Not Individual,

Members.

While sitting together and sharing mission stories with a few individuals can be gratifying, mission networks increase their effectiveness to the extent that each person

present sees her/himself as a representative of their congregation



or presbytery.

While they often don't officially represent a larger body, they should understand their first objective as drawing in the resources, commitment, prayer, and insights of their home community. This simple shift in "frame of mind" ("I am here for my congregation—how can I phrase this mission concern in Guatemala in terms my people will understand?") can increase a network's effectiveness exponentially because it engages an entire group's strengths and social location.



A Diversity of Gifts at the Table.

While God multiplies whatever we bring to God's mission (from a few loaves and fishes to our time and talents),

those mission networks that are able to draw together congregations and presbyteries with a variety of gifts, perspectives, and backgrounds are able to bring a wider array of gifts to bear in God's mission. A mission network that includes diverse participants can open up our partial, limited perspectives into a more God-sized vision. Diversity can come in many forms, including people of color; people from both small and large congregations; old and young; rich and poor; and conservative and liberal.

Global Partners' Voices.

Every effective mission network includes representatives of our global partner church or organization in the circle.

Their absence opens the door to becoming a space where we



Americans describe a partner's needs according to our experiences and then propose solutions that might work in Peoria, but certainly won't work in Pakistan.

In fact, our Presbyterian understanding of mission requires the active participation of global partners in a mission network—they keep the conversation "real," the interaction more honest, our activities more fruitful, and the entire enterprise more reflective of Christ's body. Their participation also helps us acknowledge the often-hidden power dynamics present in many mission conversations; our best intentions in mission to "do with" our mission partners can quickly become painful experiences of "being done to" that all of us want to avoid.



The Presence of "Bridge People."

The huge chasm caused by differences of language and culture (and the aforementioned power dynamics created by economics, politics, and history) is so great that effective mission networks need bridge people—folks who have lived in the country of service for an extended period, can translate language and cultural practices, and even raise a timely question that requires deeper conversation with the global partner. PC(USA) mission co-workers serving in over 50 countries around the world with global partners often fill the role of bridge people for mission networks.



Leadership.

Leading a mission network is not like chairing a committee. Mission network conveners need an openness to the Spirit, the capacity to discern the

gifts around the table, a willingness to set aside personal agenda for the group's, strong cultural proficiency, and an abiding recognition of the difference between a network and a committee. The most effective mission network leaders are those who serve for a designated time (two years is optimal) and then allow others to serve; who naturally encourage every participant to consider how they can further the network's common objectives; who think strategically or ensure that strategic thinkers are included in discussions where priorities are identified and agreed to; and who understand leadership as leading in the way of Jesus Christ—as a servant leader. Mission networks that lack this kind of leadership need to prayerfully consider how to fill this gap.

Margaret Meade said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." This is even truer for Christ-centered mission networks that are willing to prayerfully plan, intentionally include, and sacrificially give time and talents to engage together in God's mission in the world. This is one way the Spirit is enabling us to change the world one life at a time—including our own!

Hunter Farrell is director of World Mission in the Presbyterian Mission Agency.