
TOGETHER: A Collaborative Approach to Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy

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Against a backdrop of division in our world today, followers of Christ are invited to engage in relief, development, and advocacy efforts *together*. There is a new movement of organizations and leaders abandoning an individualistic approach for a collaborative one, and this kind of cross-sector teamwork is radically changing the landscape of international development. From Christ's prayer for our unity to His exhortation for us to seek first the Kingdom of God, we are invited to participate in a mission greater than anything we could ever accomplish on our own.

Introduction

Years ago, I had two simple charts on my wall—one for fundraising revenue and another for the families served. By 2010, I was focused on ensuring that HOPE International was serving one hundred thousand families and had annual fundraising revenue exceeding \$10 million. With clarity, I saw the annual growth rates we'd need in these two categories over the next five years to achieve that goal.

In setting these goals, my thinking was rather simple: Growth is good; ambitious growth is even better. Besides, \$10 million and one hundred thousand families served by 2010 sounded catchy. There wasn't detailed deliberation in setting these goals, and although they were established rather arbitrarily, they quickly became my obsession.

It didn't take long to realize that growing at a measured, incremental pace would not get us to these ambitious targets. So, I began to dream of other ways to boost our growth.

On a trip with a group of supporters, I excitedly pitched a new initiative that had the potential to help us reach our goal of one hundred thousand families and \$10 million of revenue: apricots in Uzbekistan. Through a connection, I had learned of a partnership opportunity for an apricot farm in the former Soviet Union. It would require a significant investment, but it would create opportunities to serve thousands of families and hopefully raise additional funds.

Mentally, I said yes to this opportunity almost immediately and began exploring ways to raise the funds. I could almost see the growth charts moving up and to the right and could almost taste the apricots. Did I mention I love apricots?

After my pitch to the group of supporters, Wil, a friend and investor, asked me something that knocked me right out of my apricot trance. "What is the current unmet demand for what you're currently doing?" Roughly speaking, at the time, microfinance institutions and savings groups were at best serving 25 percent of the global market. And Christian organizations were meeting less than 1 percent of the global demand.

His second question was even more pointed: "What expertise does your team have in apricots and farming?" His message was clear: Why would we expand to apricots when there is so much unmet demand for our core mission? What was the compelling reason to expand programmatically? Wil challenged me to remember our organizational limits and reconsider if this type of expansion was the right choice for us. His questions forced me to realize I just wanted more.

By God's design we are limited. To leaders with insatiable appetites for growth, these limitations chafe. But temperate leaders know there is beauty in embracing our limits. The truth Wil helped me discover is that an insatiable or gluttonous approach to leadership will lead our organization astray. Apricots in Uzbekistan wouldn't have been an area of strength for us. Moreover, shimmying our way into the apricot market could very well have taken business away from our "rival" organizations like Partners Worldwide,

Sovereign's Capital, and other Christian ministries equipped to serve entrepreneurs with these types of businesses.

In retrospect, my initial response when hearing about an apricot farm should have been, "That's outside of our area of expertise, but I would be honored to introduce you to people who are doing terrific work and might be able to help" (Greer and Horst 2018, 131-132).

This approach is powerfully captured in a speech about the future of charity by Baroness Stowell, the Chair of Charity Commission in the United Kingdom. She shared that she recently met with the leader of a well-known charity and described:

Under their leadership, the charity will not compete to deliver a contract if that service is already being provided well by another local charity. Why? Because that leader understands that the charity's purpose is to help their beneficiaries, not to grow bigger and stronger for the sake of it - or worse, at the expense of another, smaller charity.

And because they are aware that as a leader of a charitable organisation, they have a wider responsibility towards the flourishing of charity as a whole, so more people benefit. To making society a bit better, a bit kinder (Gov.UK 2018).¹

As leaders and organizations grow to understand their limits, and their role in a bigger mission, the entire world benefits.

Of course, recognizing that others are more qualified for a job requires a modest amount of humility, but it leads to far greater outcomes. What if would-be "competitors" recognized and validated one another's strengths, deferring opportunities to the most qualified player? Imagine the Kingdom impact if this attitude were common.

In time, HOPE grew. Perhaps not at the rate I had hoped when setting my short-sighted goals, but, thanks in large part to Wil's courage in questioning my motivations, our growth was measured and mostly healthy. It did not compromise the quality of our services nor the heart of who God called us to be. We aren't purveyors of the fine fruit, but we are honored that God has chosen to work through us—in our limitedness—to provide financial services and discipleship to impact families around the world.

The truth is that we don't have to be experts in everything; in fact, we're far better off if we're not. Specializing in one mission gives us the opportunity to

focus on building our strengths while, at the same time, empowering others to do the work that they do best. Followers of Christ are invited to engage in relief, development, and advocacy *together* to fulfill the mission God has given us. We were never meant to do this work alone.

Already, God is on the move as we work, share, and partner together to advance the Kingdom. Leaving egos and organizational logos behind, Christ-centered leaders and organizations are moving the needle in relief, development, and advocacy work like never before, growing our reach and furthering our impact.

Wind at our Backs

To effectively capture a Kingdom vision and not just hawk our individual organizational agendas, Christian leaders need to better understand the transformational work God is doing through all of us together.

Collectively, Christ-centered organizations play an enormous role in alleviating suffering and advancing the common good in our world today. This is not based on conjecture but on research done both here and abroad. Where Christian faith-based organizations abound, communities flourish.

For example, in American cities where there are more faith-based homeless shelters, there is a smaller homeless population (Goodrich 2017). In American cities, the average church contributes approximately \$150,000 of social services to their communities annually (Brookings 2016). Forty percent of the top fifty American charities are faith-based (Grim 2016). Across all sectors, churches and faith-based organizations create \$1.2 trillion in economic value annually in the United States alone (FaithCounts 2017).

Faith-based urban mentoring organizations, Christian schools, pregnancy resource centers, prison ministries, refugee settlement agencies, job training organizations, and all sorts of other creative endeavors dot street corners across the country. And when disasters hit, it is often Christians who lead the response. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), 80 percent of hurricane and other disaster recovery happens because of nonprofits. And 75 percent of the nonprofits doing the recovery work are faith-based (Singer 2017).

But the effect beyond our borders is perhaps even more striking.

Over a dozen studies confirm political scientist Robert Woodberry's findings that countries in which "Protestant missionaries had a significant presence in the past are on average more economically developed

¹ Quoted verbatim from Baroness Stowell's speech, *The Future of Charity*, as presented by Gov.UK. Please forgive any grammatical inconsistencies.

today, with comparatively better health, lower infant mortality, lower corruption, greater literacy, and higher educational attainment (especially for women)” (Dilley 2014). Beyond Protestantism, the Catholic Church has made a colossal impact in the world—specifically within the health care system. Rachel Leinyuy Kahnyuy, of the Norwegian School of Theology notes, “The Catholic Church is the largest single non-governmental provider of health care services in the world” (Kahnyuy 2017, 24). In addition to providing health care services, Catholic ministries have engaged in disaster relief, conflict resolution, education, and more throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

“In an age where there’s a growing belief that religion is not a positive for American society, adding up the numbers is a tangible reminder of the impact of religion,” said Dr. Brian Grim, scholar at the Religious Liberty Project at Georgetown University. “Every single day individuals and organizations of faith quietly serve their communities as part of religious congregations, faith-based charities, and businesses inspired by religion” (FaithCounts 2016). The Pew Research Center reports that 85% of men and women across the world consider themselves “religious.” Therefore, faith-based organizations have the important opportunity to provide a tangible expression of their faith through their service.

From leading initiatives on clean water, Bible translation, job creation, and literacy to fighting human trafficking and hunger, Christians are actively responding to material, spiritual, and social needs in communities around the world. God is at work through the Church. And this remarkable work gives our neighbors a glimpse into the Kingdom of God.

Moving the Needle

“No single organization is responsible for any major social problem, nor can any single organization cure it,” wrote John Kania and Mark Kramer on the *collective impact* trend in the Stanford Social Innovation Review. “Large-scale social change requires broad cross-sector coordination” (Kania and Kramer 2011, 38).

For faith-based leaders and organizations, we are small players in a much more significant story. Take poverty alleviation, for example. Global poverty is multi-dimensional in nature, affecting an individual not only physically, but also personally, socially, and spiritually. Because of this, the solution to poverty cannot be one-dimensional. It requires a holistic approach. We are abundantly grateful for the wide variety of specializations and connections that so many organizations provide to help fuel our mission at HOPE to invest in the dreams of families in the world’s underserved communities as we proclaim and live the Gospel:

Curriculum

The Chalmers Center has poured time and resources into listening to and learning from those living in poverty, answering the question: how can our poverty alleviation efforts truly help our brothers and sisters rather than continue an unhealthy cycle of dependency? Through their resources and curriculum, Chalmers empowers the Church to address poverty holistically. They have a host of resources for individuals, organizations, and churches who seek to learn how to care for those in poverty biblically and effectively. We have benefited from their expertise in savings group curriculum and consider them allies and friends in this mission.

Partnerships

We cannot hope to alleviate the injustices in our world on our own, but partnerships with like-minded, missionally-aligned organizations and churches are a powerful force for the Kingdom. While formal partnerships aren’t always the right answer, organizations can support each other by sharing resources, knowledge, and connections. Most recently, we have been fortunate to partner with Compassion International in training their staff in implementing church-based savings groups to positively impact the families of the children they serve. (There also are many opportunities to collaborate with secular, and even other-faith, organizations. When determining how to respond, we might consider the advice of Dr. Barry Corey, president of Biola University, who shares the significance of developing a firm center and soft edges in his book *Love Kindness*. When you know your identity, you have the freedom to pursue different partnerships with care and intentionality, even if you don’t see eye-to-eye on everything.)

Church mobilization

Organizations like World Relief are mobilizing the global Church to care for the most marginalized and the least reached. Their commitment to going into the hard places to spread the love of Christ has paved the way for organizations who follow in their footsteps. These organizations have rallied the Church to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly alongside brothers and sisters in countries around the globe. Partnering with them in joint programs has made both of us stronger and better able to implement our missions—especially in emergency or fragile contexts.

We could keep adding to this list as we consider the growing number of organizations around the world bringing relief to war-torn areas, combatting human trafficking, establishing property rights, eradicating

homelessness, reconciling racial differences, and advocating for refugees. Poverty alleviation, specifically, relies on the success of many of these individual missions. Truly, we need *all* in the body of Christ in order to see the Kingdom of God advance.

What would it look like if we regularly recognized other organizations in our space and celebrated what we were all doing together? What if celebration and collaboration, rather than rivalry and competition, were our default approaches? Or at the very least, what if we could all take small but important steps towards greater unity and deeper relationships in this work? What would change? Already, this is beginning to happen around the globe as organizations pool together resources, knowledge, and ideas.

Rooting for Rivals Case Study: Esperanza International

Led by Alex Nunez, Esperanza International is a Christ-centered nonprofit organization in the Dominican Republic with a comprehensive approach to poverty alleviation. Over 40 percent of the men and women living in the Dominican Republic live below the poverty line, making between \$2-4 each day (Esperanza 2017). Esperanza restores dignity and hope to these men and women by offering financial and holistic services to lift themselves out of poverty.

But they aren't doing it alone.

"People need a lot more than just money," Nunez notes. "They not only need capital to start a business, but they also need other services like health screenings and education trainings. Most importantly, they need to know that there's a God who loves them and who came to give them life in abundance" (Greer 2018).

Esperanza specializes in financial training and access to capital, but they partner with other organizations to care for the physical and spiritual needs of their associates as well. For example, Esperanza partners with the Crown Council and Smiles for Life to provide routine dental care services for their associates. Twice per year, Esperanza takes the Smiles for Life dentists to the rural communities they serve in the Dominican Republic. Men and women who typically can't access dental services now receive high-quality services—cleanings, extractions, fillings, reconstructive surgeries, and more—through Esperanza's partnership. Not only that, but in biweekly health trainings Esperanza educates associates and their communities about the importance of oral health.

"We are not the dental experts," Nunez shares. "But we partner with a group that is not only amazing at what they do, but they have the resources to do it well. This leads to beautiful results for the people we serve" (Greer 2018).

Dental hygiene aside, Esperanza has made an intentional effort to care for their associates' spiritual health by establishing alliances with local churches of different denominations, groups who may traditionally have been defined as competitors. Esperanza's team meets with pastors who want to serve their community outside of the four walls of their organization, but don't know where or how to start.

Instead of jumping into church partnerships with their own ideas and plans, the Esperanza team asks local pastors: "What are the needs in your community? How can we support you?"

Since learning the pastors' desires and the community's needs, Esperanza staff have given local pastors the opportunity to join loan meetings and share the Gospel. Many of Esperanza's associates may not want to step foot inside of a church, but this provides a way for pastors to address spiritual hunger without anyone showing up for a church service. Esperanza may visit the groups only twice per month, but because the pastors are regularly available, they're able to serve the needs of the community, even without Esperanza staff present.

It's not just these formal partnerships that define Esperanza's spirit of unity. Their entire organization—from their earliest beginnings to their operations today—is bathed in collaboration and a Christ-centered mindset.

Esperanza exists to glorify God with their entire organization. They serve with an underlying belief that *these are not our resources, our people, or our mission. The resources belong to God and we are simply stewards of all that He has given to us. This is not our mission, but rather God's mission that we have been invited to join.*

Out of this emerges an upside-down, Kingdom perspective on partnership. Instead of "what can I get," they ask, "what can we achieve together?" Instead of "how can I be served," they ask "how can we serve?" Instead of seeking to win points with donors, they seek to celebrate all that God is doing through a united front with a variety of organizations. It's about playing a smaller role in the bigger Kingdom. It's about less repetition and more cooperation. "We could work alone," Nunez says, "but together our work is better" (Greer 2018).

As Esperanza works with other organizations and churches around the world, their associates not only receive remarkable services, but they are empowered to lift themselves out of poverty and truly understand the truth of Jesus Christ. Esperanza is but one example of the numerous organizations around the world who are seeing transformation in international justice through cooperation.

Assessing Impact

But how do we know if collaboration is really making a difference?

Let's take a look at extreme poverty again: Just two hundred years ago, nearly the whole world lived in extreme poverty. Today, less than 10 percent do. In the past forty years alone, the percent of people living in extreme poverty has dropped by over 30 percent (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina 2017). There is no one approach or organization that can claim credit for this massive movement. Many factors have contributed to this trend, and we celebrate that poverty is on the decline as businesses, investors, organizations, leaders, and churches work together to transform the landscape of international development.

Across the world, everything from Bible translation to college ministries has seen rapid acceleration simply because a few leaders said *yes* to cooperation. The men and women pioneering this "rooting-for-rivals" approach are not weighed down by trivial disagreements nor concerned with who gets the credit. More important than being recognized for good deeds, they understand, is the ability to *together* move the needle of relief, development, missions, and advocacy in a way that we haven't been able to do on our own.

As cutting-edge thinkers on organizational collaboration, Hanleybrown, Kania, and Kramer state, "There is no other way society will achieve large-scale progress against urgent and complex problems, unless a collective approach becomes the accepted way of doing business" (2012, 2).

Intentional, Christ-centered collaboration allows us to participate in more significant initiatives with far greater impact.

Seek First

In John 17, Jesus, in his longest recorded prayer in Scripture, prays "that [we] may become perfectly one" (Jn 17:23),² so that the world may know the Father's love. The implication is that our witness to the world hinges on our unity.

"Christ's prayer for unity and endurance is formed, uttered, and accomplished at the greatest hour of trial in all redemptive history," writes K.A. Ellis. "At this critical juncture there is one relationship on his mind, and it is ours" (2015).

Jesus says that our oneness is the way that others will identify us as His followers: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35).

In Matthew 6:33, Jesus reminds us in clear language to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Our hope is that we might all be encouraged and equipped to keep looking up and to keep *seeking first* the Kingdom of God. To choose to serve with open hands instead of clenched fists and be reminded that "our mission" is so much greater than "my mission." The beauty and joy of what God is doing through us working together is far more compelling to the world around us than anything we can do alone.

First Steps

Collaboration accelerates transformation as we focus on our shared goal of living out the two Greatest Commandments—as we take our focus off "what's in this for me?" and instead ask how to fully love God "with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul and with all [our] mind and with all [our] strength" and to "love [our] neighbor as [ourselves]" (Mk 12:30-31).

Once leaders understand their "why"—and establish interest and vision for collaborating—what are some practical first steps to working together in relief, development, and advocacy to see the Kingdom of God advance?

Focus on a Kingdom mission

We acutely feel the gravitational pull toward self-preoccupation. When we wake up in the morning and go to work, our vision rarely extends beyond the walls of our own organization. There are urgent issues clamoring for our attention, looming deadlines, fundraising constraints, and a variety of other organizational challenges (Greer and Horst 2018, 53-54). But what if we first focused on the Kingdom of God? Dream about what it could look like if the Kingdom came fully to your areas of influence. Submit your dreams, plans, ideas, and missions to this grander mission.

Identify what we have been given

In Exodus 4:2, God asks Moses what he has in his hand. Little did Moses realize that the staff he held would be used by God to give powerful signs to Pharaoh, to split the Red Sea in two, and to deliver the Israelites to the land God had promised to them. What is in your hand? What resources, connections, and knowledge do you carry to bring about God's plans and purposes? Is there curriculum that you could give to another organization for free? Is there time you could

² All biblical passages are taken from the English Standard Version.

invest in building stronger relationships with leaders from other organizations? What is the unique role you could play in a Kingdom mission?

Enlist collaborators

“The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them,” writes Ellen Johnson Sirleaf—the first female head of state in Africa—in her memoir, *This Child Will Be Great* (“If Your Dreams...” 2011). Who do you need to help you achieve the mission God has called you to? What (or whose) skills or gifts might be missing? Make a list of the names of potential leaders and organizations already doing great, like-minded work. How can you spend time prioritizing these relationships and dreaming together?

Serve with humility

Seize opportunities to serve and love—and do it often. Look for the tasks that receive little recognition and be the first to jump in. Find your area of expertise and serve with excellence. Clothing ourselves with humility means rejecting comparison games, “how am I different?” language, and subtle critiques that elevate us at the expense of others.

Celebrate together

Take steps to intentionally remember and celebrate God’s goodness together. Share the victories—the ways you have seen God on the move as you’ve worked in collaboration instead of competition. How can you integrate gratitude into the daily rhythms of your work? Look for ways to highlight other organizations and celebrate shared success.

This certainly is not an exhaustive list, but rather the beginning steps of collaboration and openhandedness as we seek to advance God’s Kingdom.

The Invitation

As Christ’s followers, we have the opportunity to work as one body to bring Shalom: peace, flourishing, the world as God created it to be. That is a grand mission and one that will require our unity.

We’ve entered a time when the Church is no longer associated with love and compassion but rather with judgment, hypocrisy, and infighting. We’re no longer known for the sacrifice or humility Jesus modeled but rather for failing to look beyond ourselves and our issues. If we want this to change, we must take hold of the invitation to rediscover our unified mission and prioritize it above our own agendas.

We need to look beyond our organizational boundaries to catch a glimpse of a bigger and bolder vision of the Kingdom of God. Our organizations are small players in a much more significant story. Understanding this story and the imperative of unity among followers of Christ should help us to do more than just get along.

God calls us to engage in relief, development, and advocacy as a unified team, not as fractured and disconnected organizations. He calls us to rediscover our unified purpose and tenaciously pursue a mission that extends beyond any one organization.

Partnership won’t always be the answer. Partnerships are difficult and some can even be unwise. Just because two faith-based organizations work in Zambia doesn’t always mean they should work together. Partnership can be a philosophical, geographical, or strategic impossibility. But even when we decide against partnership in the formal sense, it’s always possible to assist one another by sharing resources, knowledge, or connections. It’s worth investing the time to thoroughly consider opportunities that could help us step more fully into our shared calling of furthering God’s Kingdom.

When we consider coming alongside others, we can go beyond just *fighting* extreme poverty to thinking about *ending* extreme poverty. Beyond rescuing young girls and boys from human trafficking to putting traffickers out of business. Beyond translating parts of the Bible into just a few languages to translating the entire Bible into every language.

It’s time to reaffirm a higher allegiance than the logo adorning our business cards. We are not just people working for organizations. We are not on rival teams, but, in Christ, we are brothers and sisters united for eternity.

As we take part in relief, development, and advocacy efforts around the globe, we must remember that we’re not just fulfilling individual missions. Our success is not defined by where we stand in relation to our “rivals” or how long our name endures.

In that light, rooting for rivals—cheering on those the world sees as our competitors—doesn’t feel all that crazy. Hundreds of years from now, our descendants will likely not know our names, nor those of our organizations. But if we successfully embrace the unity Jesus taught, our descendants will remember what the Church did together. They will remember that this generation continued the work of bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming freedom for the prisoners, and setting the oppressed free. They will remember that the gospel was translated into every language, racial injustice was confronted, and extreme poverty was eradicated.

If our descendants talk about us, they will talk about the miraculous ways God worked in and through

the Church to bring hope, truth, compassion, and joy to our world (Greer and Horst 2018, 21).

Imagine what we could do together.

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