

Could You Benefit From Strategic Partnerships?

By Stephen E. Brimmer

What if churches could collaborate with community leaders, government entities, and corporations to make a recognizable difference in the quality of life for local citizens? What if the faith community was viewed, as in by-gone days, not as an obstacle to progress but as the center of activity for addressing social issues?

Churches need to rethink their purpose for existence and explore the unprecedented threats and opportunities that accompany today's volatile climate. Rapid technological advancements and societal evolution alter the habits, needs, and lifestyles of our audience. Uncertain times have created economic and societal difficulties that require the best minds and purest motives to resolve. Why should the church be on the sidelines or worse, taking a judgmental posture rather than a leadership role?

In today's challenging environment, a leader's value increases when he or she demonstrates the ability to foresee coming change and mitigate risks while anticipating and seizing opportunities. For church leaders, the challenge of making good strategic and economic decisions with any degree of confidence is more difficult than ever. One effective strategy for navigating uncertain times is to utilize proven forecasting methods to identify beneficial strategic partnerships for future opportunities. This article explores the advantages to ministry leaders engaged in strategic partnerships.

Seeking Solutions through Strategic Partnerships

Simply reinforcing existing patterns of thinking and acting rarely solves complex problems. Listening to others with different viewpoints provides a measure of cross-pollination that helps break down dangerous groupthink. To succeed, partnerships must be based on sound principles of collaboration and knowledge sharing. According to Hughes and Weiss (2007), 60-70% of partnerships fail, in part because they attempt to suppress rather than learn from differences and disagreements.

Spirit of Cooperation

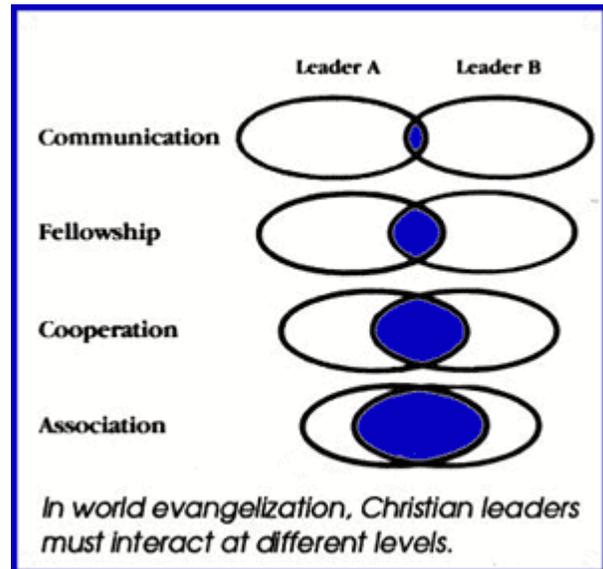
Even within the faith community, we don't always agree on strategies and methods for fulfilling our mission. However, we do have a mandate from our Lord to demonstrate love and unity so "the world may know that You have sent Me" (John 17: 23).

Love and unity can be expressed on a variety of levels that takes into consideration the degree of differences between believers. Glasser (1988) offers a model for cooperation among leaders on four levels. **Communication** At a minimum, moderate effort should be made to listen and engage with those with whom we disagree.

Fellowship is enjoying times of being around those with whom we have sharp differences.

Cooperation indicates willingness to work together at least occasionally and in so doing declare public oneness.

Association is the deepest level of commitment and occurs when we join forces in long-term service.



Source: Arthur F. Glasser

Goals of Strategic Partnerships

Strategic partnerships represent "cooperation" in Glasser's model. The partners share a fundamental compatibility in strategy but bring diverse areas of expertise to the relationship. Our future effectiveness can be maximized if the goals of these strategic partnerships include the following:

- Tangible service – working together to create positive and welcome solutions to societal problems
- Common good not individual agenda – looking out for all members of our nation regardless of their support of our beliefs

- Holistic – seeing society and its systems as a whole rather than operating with a myopic view of personal interests
- Sharpen each other – sharing a common quest for truth, demonstrating the humility to recognize none of us possesses all the truth, and showing willingness to learn from those with whom we disagree

A Model for Strategic Partnerships

The problem with many churches is that they have disconnected the Bible from real life. In American culture, the unfortunate result is widespread negative perceptions and hostilities toward the church. However, encouraging efforts are afoot to reverse this trend. The C4 Group, for example, provides support to churches to help them “*influence culture by improving their community*”. Following the example of social engagement demonstrated by Christ when he fed the hungry, healed the sick, and comforted the hurting, the C4 Group assists churches in developing a customized Community Care Strategy. The four-step process helps churches:

1. Coordinate – determine how the church can best utilize its capabilities and resources to meet matching community needs.
2. Communicate – interface with church members and community solution providers to communicate a vision for community transformation.
3. Collaborate – implement efforts to join the faith community and local solution providers to improve the community.
4. Cultivate – build a relational bridge for community members to cross over into the church.

Evangelical churches around the globe are beginning to see the need and benefits of social engagement. They realize that practical solutions previously discarded as “social gospel” go hand-in-hand with spiritual solutions. Instead of complaining about the culture, they embrace the opportunity to influence it in a positive way. By getting outside its four walls, the local church can overcome negative perceptions, and more importantly, fulfill its God-given mission.

Conclusion

Strategic partnerships provide a means for churches to collaborate to provide a higher level of service with increased efficiency and effectiveness. For these partnerships to work, leaders must be willing to learn from each other and to cooperate rather than dominate. By overcoming the challenges that accompany the development of strategic partnerships, the Evangelical mission can acquire bold new approaches to bringing a vibrant faith into the future.

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