

THINKING AHEAD

The Newsletter of Vision Ministries Canada



They Will Know We Are Christians by Our Love

BY SANDRA REIMER

The Apostle Paul compares the universal church to a human body—what a picture of cooperation. But what does interdependence actually look like between congregations?

Three churches in the VMC network are living examples of mutual blessing. Wallenstein Bible Chapel, in the Mennonite heartland of Ontario's Waterloo Region and Spirit of Truth, a congregation of former Muslims in urban Toronto, have formed an unlikely friendship. Meanwhile, Toronto China Bible Church has begun collaborating across denominational lines with Hebron Christian Reformed Church in Whitby, Ontario.

A Kingdom Friendship

Ron Seabrooke, Outreach Pastor at Wallenstein Bible Chapel, “blames” Gord Martin for the relationship between his congregation and Spirit of Truth’s fellowship of new Canadians. “Gord is the eternal inviter and networker. A few years ago he invited me to visit Spirit of Truth in Toronto,” says Ron.

Inspired to see former Muslims freely worshipping God, on a subsequent visit Ron brought twenty to twenty-five other church members. “But I wondered if we were really doing any good [by visiting],” says Ron. He knew that the visit had a purpose when Spirit of Truth Pastor Siamak Shafti-Keramat, thanked him for coming because it doubled the number

of visitors the service attracted. “They wanted to meet you,” Siamak told Ron.

“The way people from Wallenstein Chapel come to us is a huge blessing,” says Siamak. “They don’t look at us as immigrants... they serve us as if they are serving the Lord. We really appreciate this.”

Wanting to make the organic friendship even more mutual, Ron invited Spirit of Truth to Wallenstein last year. One Sunday, about 150 church members and their friends loaded onto buses in Toronto and arrived in the early afternoon in Wallenstein. Old and young from both congregations had a hilarious time as they played tug of war, a balloon stomping game, and many other activities that helped them mix and mingle.

According to Siamak, two-thirds of the people who came to the event from Toronto were unbelievers. “People were asking, ‘We are still Muslim, why do they love us?’ They had never seen anything like it,” says Siamak. Often as immigrants they have felt alone, like no one cares about them. He says that as the two groups played games, worshipped together, and shared a meal “it was a real example of what the Kingdom of God will be like.” He adds, “Our friends from a Muslim background, see the reality of the gospel because they see the love between the two churches.”

One of the things that most impressed Ron and his congregation about Spirit of Truth is their passion for inviting non-Christian friends and colleagues to events. “They are looking for any ‘excuse’ to invite people. They do everything they can to reach the lost,” says Ron. “We are learning about evangelism from them.” The congregation has about 60 regular attenders, but can swell to more than 200—mostly non-Christians—for special events.

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Ron and the Wallenstein congregation have also been impacted by Spirit of Truth's freedom in worship. "They are humble and cry out to the Lord at the front [of the church] unashamedly. While our people are a little more reserved," says Ron. At Spirit of Truth, it is common to see a huddle of people praying together following a service. After interaction with the other congregation, Ron was pleased to see people at Wallenstein begin to pray for each other at the front of the church.

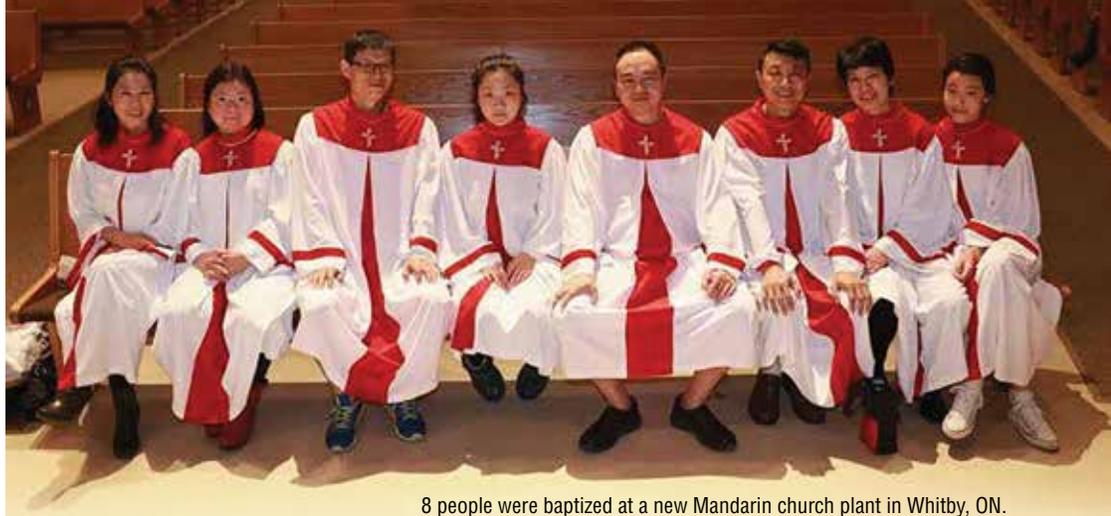
The Wallenstein group has also been blessed by Spirit of Truth's "warmth and hospitality." Ron says, "You can tell they are Christians by their love."

This friendship has become so important to the Wallenstein Chapel that, without Ron asking, the leadership team set aside a generous amount to host Spirit of Truth at Conestoga Bible Camp this summer. The two churches will plan group activities and bring food for a day-long celebration that will include baptisms from both congregations.

"Every day we are so grateful for what God has done for us through VMC and Wallenstein Bible Chapel," says Siamak. He hopes that this kind of cooperation can happen between other churches in the VMC network and that this partnership can be a model. As Spirit of Truth grows, Siamak wants to be a blessing to other churches. "God loves us more than we can imagine. Because of Him there are so many people who are acting in love like our Lord," says Siamak. ■



Pastors Siamak Shafti-Keramat (Spirit of Truth Church, Toronto) and Ron Seabrooke (Wallenstein Bible Chapel) foster cooperation between their two very different congregations.



8 people were baptized at a new Mandarin church plant in Whitby, ON.

Mandarin and English-Speaking Believers Find Common Ground

Eight brothers and sisters were baptized at Easter. The English congregation [at Hebron Christian Reformed Church] was so excited because they did not have any baptisms for three years," says Ming Peng Gong, a pastor and church planter with Toronto China Bible Church (TCBC). Ming Peng has been working alongside TCBC for the past fifteen years, during that time the main congregation has planted six other sites. The most recent fellowship meets in Whitby, Ontario.

This new work started when a former member at a TCBC congregation began sharing the gospel with Mandarin-speaking students while attending the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. As more students responded to Christ, he asked TCBC for help. The church sent a theology student to lead a Bible study on the campus. More recently, TCBC commissioned two families to shepherd the emerging fellowship.

Last year as the growing Chinese fellowship searched for a place to congregate on Sundays, they approached Hebron Christian Reformed Church (CRC). With roots in a large immigration of Dutch Calvinists who came to Canada in the early 1950s, CRC congregations first worshipped in Dutch but later most transitioned to English services. As a denomination they know what is like to settle in a new country and rediscover how to live their faith.

TCBC held their first public gathering at Hebron in October 2015. Following concurrent English and Mandarin Sunday morning services, children and youth from both congregations attend joint programs.

From the beginning, Hebron's leadership and congregation wanted to be more than a landlord. They have fully embraced the TCBC church plant and want to help

reach the approximately 20,000 Mandarin speakers in the Durham region that surrounds Whitby. "They see it as part of their mission work," says Ming Peng.

In a circle of mutual blessing, the Mandarin youth will infuse new life at Hebron as they integrate into the aging English-speaking congregation. Meanwhile, the Chinese believers, who are mostly first generation Christians, appreciate the long-established faith of their Christian Reformed co-labourers. "We really learn a lot from them," says Ming Peng.

Though working together has not been without challenges, Ming Peng says Hebron's pastor, Darren Hoogendorn, has been very accommodating. For example, CRC churches usually baptize babies by sprinkling and adult believers give a public "profession of faith." But on Easter Sunday in 2016, new Mandarin Christians were baptized by immersion in a tank at the front of the church.

According to Ming Peng, the oversight of the church will gradually be handed over to Hebron through a three stage process. During the first stage, which has been completed, TCBC primarily supervised the church. In stage two, which started in January 2016, Hebron's English congregation began overseeing the Mandarin congregation while TCBC continues to be involved. After three years, Hebron will be completely responsible for the plant and the Mandarin leader will be ordained as a CRC pastor. VMC provided funds to help fuel this life-giving partnership.

Thinking like the visionary he is, Ming Peng hopes that other English-speaking congregations will adopt Mandarin church plants. "If the Lord is willing, this model of cooperation could be done in a wider area with more churches." ■

Overcoming Cultural Barriers Through Inclusion, Communication, Potlucks, and Picnics

BY A.A. ADOURIAN

Church Profile: New Creation Church, Winnipeg

“Our goal is to have a growing circle of association with all people, including those from other cultures, that we are befriending, caring for, and living as Jesus would among them,” shares New Creation Church (NCC) Pastor Frank Robertson. Home to Karen people originally from Burma, along with First Nations people, immigrant families from the Philippines, and long-time Canadians, NCC began as a multi-ethnic church in 2012 with 50 members.

NCC works to overcome the challenges that occur among a diverse group of about 100 worshippers, by encouraging communication and inclusion, and managing expectations.

Members wear nametags to help people feel more comfortable talking to each other. Robertson uses simple vocabulary and short sentences (combined with a bit of humor) via Power Point presentation when he speaks. He also makes sermon transcripts available. Messages are sometimes translated into other languages.

NCC strives to have members from each ethnic group on its leadership team, welcomes all volunteers, and consults widely before a decision is made to ensure transparency. As traditional expectations are challenged, they are addressed. For example, “people who come late are welcomed and not judged in a negative way. We are just real happy to see them,” Robertson says.

Setting aside some traditional expectations, encouraging all to participate, and communicating effectively helps NCC focus on relationships. “We interact at birthday parties, potlucks, and picnics. We help one another build fences and fix cars. We attend ethnic events together. Relationships are built as we talk about what is happening in our lives and pray for one another,” recounts Robertson.



Cultural Connectors Andrew Karram, David Cottril (pastors with Mosaic Church and North Park Church in London, ON) and Jean-Marc Princivil (originally from Haiti, pastoring in Sherbrooke Quebec) at the Thinking Shrewdly Consultation in April 2016.

“Bridge People” Foster Trust in Intercultural Churches

After meeting for five years, the ethnically diverse Mosaic Church in London, ON still finds it challenging to foster cross-cultural friendships. Church planter David Cottril, who led Mosaic as it emerged, says “bridge people” are important connectors. “A bridge person can usually speak more than one language or is not put off by language barriers. They inhabit more than one cultural space and are not afraid to interact,” says David. In addition, they draw on positive intercultural experiences that keep them coming back for more. David and current Mosaic pastor, Andrew Karram pray frequently about helping people to form bonds across ethnic divides. When there is a clash, underlying fear between people groups can be aggravated and negative stereotypes reinforced. “We need to create trust,” says Andrew. ■



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Editor: Sandra Reimer

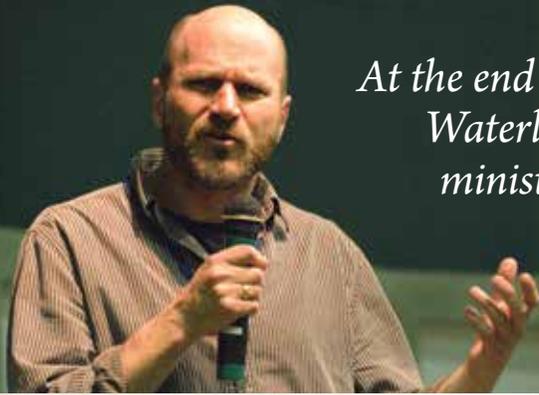
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Thinking Shrewdly

We praised, laughed, ate, connected & thought



At the end of April, VMC convened its national consultation in Waterloo ON. More than 160 pastors, church planters and ministry catalysts gathered over two days to learn, connect with other leaders, be inspired and consider together how they might better collaborate in mission.

Redemption is scandalously particular...Think about your location and your local proximity. It is not sexy, contextual reality means becoming flesh and blood and moving into your neighbourhood. What does it look like to care for your neighbours?

—Randy Hein, Hollydene Community Church, Victoria

VMC Affirmed During “Family Conversation”

In Friday afternoon’s ‘family conversation’ led by Mike Stone, participants voiced strong affirmation for the way in which VMC has been seeking to forge a partnering network of churches. Randy Hein summed it up, saying to the VMC staff, “You have a lot more currency with us than you realize,” which was greeted with warm applause.

People expressed appreciation for the authenticity, vulnerability, and humility that the movement’s leaders modeled in the past. While there is a general embrace of Vision’s beliefs and values there is also a longing to create space for diversity within our constituency. Participants responded favourably to the idea that relationship and mission will provide the primary cohesive bond for our tribe. There is a sense of gratitude that VMC has historically avoided heavy-handed, top-down ministry. However, as we look to the future, church leaders are encouraging the VMC team to lead boldly and unapologetically, as catalytic, entrepreneurial, mobilizing agents across the VMC partnering network.



VMC Partnering Network Gathers April 29 to 30th, 2016

In the main sessions, Randy Hein, church planter with Hollydene Community Church in Victoria (pictured) and David Ralph, lead pastor of Lakeside Church, in Guelph challenged participants to embrace new ways to be Church for the eighty percent of Canadians who are no longer interested in church. Hearts were encouraged through worship, lectio divina and a first person narrative rendition of Ephesians 3-4. Over forty peer learning forums, spanning themes related to spiritual formation, church ministry, missional

methodology and ministry among particular people groups were facilitated by in-house specialists—‘experts’ from within the VMC partnering network.

Peer Learning Forums Friday 2:15PM		
Session	Floor	Room
1. Seeing people with God's eyes	Main	101
2. Discerning God's voice	Barr	Children Res
3. The juggling act: family & ministry	2nd	261
4. Parish: Engaging neighbourhoods Being the community in a community	2nd	211
5. The multi-congregational church	2nd	215
6. Building trust with the unchurched: the importance of being honest	Main	Auditorium



Consultation 2016

shrewdly... now it's time to take action

Passing the Baton

During the main session on Friday evening, Gord Martin was honoured for his twenty-four years of faithful service as founder and executive director of VMC and Mike Stone was commissioned as his successor. The consultation culminated in the final session on Saturday with a celebration of the Lord's Supper. Participants gathered around half a dozen communion tables, served bread and juice to each other, and were blessed by the beauty of spoken-word poetry uttered over them.

Connecting with Old & New Friends

Though the schedule was full, participants still found time to connect. Like most conferences, off-stage opportunities to renew old friendships and forge new ones were as life-giving as the up-front ministry. Participants were mutually nourished by conversations with ministry colleagues from across the country and returned home with a deeper sense of belonging.

Thanks

VMC is grateful for those who volunteered to make this event a meaningful experience for everyone who attended. Special thanks goes to the people of Lincoln Road Chapel who nourished participants with delicious food, opened their homes to billet almost 35 pastors, and opened their facility to provide Thinking Shrewdly 2016 with the perfect home.



VMC Board, Staff, and volunteers praying over Mike and Sharon Stone as Mike succeeds Gord as VMC ED.

Interesting TS2016 Facts:

- Approximately 100 registrants were from Ontario
- Participants also came from BC (22), Alberta (13), Manitoba (6), Quebec (11), Maritimes (8), USA (2) and Kenya (1)
- About 65 VMC churches were represented—about a third of our partnering network
- Full-time ministry people accounted for 2 out of 3 registrants
- For the first time, women were only outnumbered 3-1

**BE HERE
NEXT YEAR**

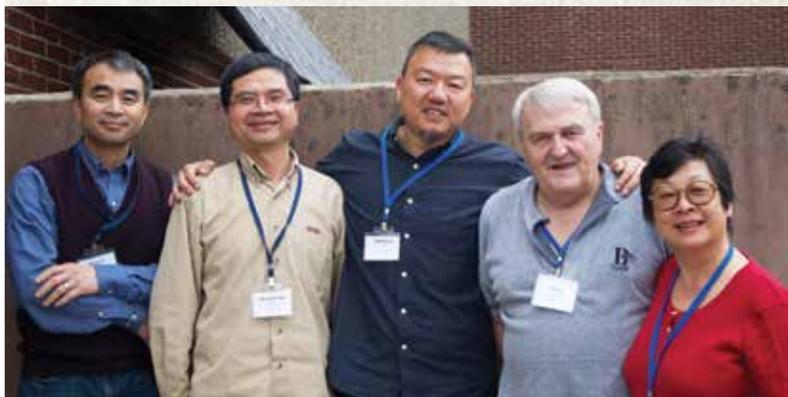
**Thinking
Shrewdly 2017
April 27-29 in
Waterloo, ON**



Praise for TS 2016

"In our tiny corner of the world, we are connected with something much bigger than ourselves. I am thankful to be part of the VMC family of ministries. I brought a young, developing leader for his first conference. He has returned filled up, encouraged, and enthusiastic for the next steps in his ministry. Together, we made some excellent connections that will benefit our ministry. We are excited to see what the Lord has in store for us, next, as well as for our sibling churches and ministries in the VMC."

—Kevin Mast (pictured) Church Planter, Hope City Church, Barrie, ON



When There's No Map or GPS

REFLECTIONS ON 24 YEARS OF VMC

BY GORD MARTIN

There was no map or GPS for starting VMC, but there was a strong and clear impression from God at the EFC Consultation on Evangelism in Ottawa in the spring of 1990 that something new needed to be done to bring many more Canadians to a life of following Jesus. For some people that might have meant producing a compelling movie, writing a book or leading a prayer or renewal movement.

But God often leads us to do something with what is already in our hands. What was in my hands? Experience at outreach-oriented church planting in Latin America with International Teams and seeing the wonderful things God can do through an effective new church like Lakeshore Bible Chapel, the one I was then serving in a full-time capacity. So, in my case the “what” was clear: help people start new churches; help church leaders work together to accomplish their mission more effectively; and help churches find a way to work together to accomplish these ends, in spite of some minor differences over theology, ministry styles, geography or ethnicity.

In the fall of 1990, David McClurkin, David Booker, Paul Fletcher, and I convened an event at Don Valley Bible Chapel in Toronto to launch what we called Vision Ontario. Although the “what” we were to do was clear, the “how to do it” was not. That’s when Bruce McNicol of Interest Ministries in Chicago heard about what we intended; he expressed interest and provided some coaching and valuable support. The ministry was officially launched in 1992.

I began by inviting everyone I knew in Ontario who might be even remotely interested in planting new churches and introduced them to inspirational training

on church planting by Bob Logan. Little by little the idea became contagious, and some began to plant. I invited church leaders to come together for mutual encouragement and invited experienced leaders to share their wisdom with us. Cultivating a collaborative and supportive network of churches was a more elusive idea. All of us knew a great deal about autonomy but almost nothing about effective cooperation for the purposes I believed God had in mind for us.

But God was not calling me to solitary ministry. He began to provide people who would provide valuable help. Bruce Fournier, one of the elders at Lakeshore Bible Chapel suggested that perhaps Jay Gurnett might be persuaded to join the leadership team at Lakeshore and give valuable time to help broaden the ministry of Vision Ontario. When Jay joined us in 1997, our focus shifted immediately to Vision Ministries Canada – not just Ontario. Jay Gurnett has been a creative friend and wonderful partner to me for almost 20 years.

God continued to connect us with wonderful people to work with who shared our passion. The first was Henrietta Koenig, an unassuming courageous person with great capacity for helping to get things done. He gave us Norm Gentry who provided a calming influence. He gave us Dave McClurkin who could improve any idea I came up with (losing him was a great loss). He gave us Doug Loveday who loves and prays with everyone he meets, Ming-Peng Gong who has a passion for Mandarin-speaking Chinese, Indy Cungcin who has a huge heart for the Burmese people, Yonatan Hiruy who longs for Eritreans and Ethiopians to know Christ, Siamak Shafti-Keramat who has concern for the Persian people, Sandra Reimer who is able to keep Jay and I on track with our publications, and Mark Anderson who has a deep passion to help leaders stay on course. In addition He gave us board members, volunteers, and financial resources through people we knew well and from some we had never met, and He continued to inspire us through experienced leaders we kept meeting along the way.

I could not have imagined all that God would do when we first started. Since 1992 we have:



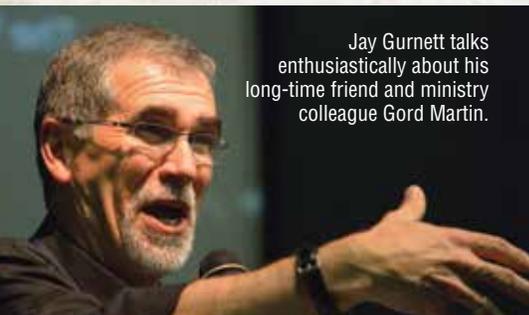
At a celebration held Friday, April 30th, former VMC Executive Director, Gord Martin, thanks his wife Heather for standing by him through 24 years of ministry.

- Helped start and coach 90+ new churches
- Provided seminars, conferences, consultations for church leaders
- Cultivated a partnering network of about 190 congregations of great ethnic diversity
- Encouraged, helped and supported pastors and elder groups from coast to coast
- Developed positive working relationships with other denominations and mission agencies
- Written all kinds of documents to assist churches with their leadership and administration
- Explored possibilities for exporting VMC internationally
- Helped start and support Vision Ministries Kenya

One of my hopes and prayers has been that God would provide a suitable person to lead VMC into the next steps of the wonderful unknown. I believe He has answered our prayers in the provision of Mike Stone. Pray for him and support him.

I have never wanted to quit, but there have been discouragements and times when I wondered where the funds would come from for all that lay ahead. Through it all I have often found encouragement in the regular reading and reflection on Scripture.

And in the end, I learned again, that He is our map for our unknowns, and our ultimate GPS. His mercies are new every morning, great is your faithfulness, O God my Father! ■



Jay Gurnett talks enthusiastically about his long-time friend and ministry colleague Gord Martin.

VMC News and Events

Vision Ministries Kenya ED Ribs & Lauds Gord Martin at Thinking Shrewdly



Ishmael Ochieng

Ishmael Ochieng, Executive Director of Vision Ministries Kenya, had the audience in stitches as he lovingly poked fun at Gord Martin during a presentation honoring VMC's former Executive Director at the National Consultation in April.

The two met in 2007 at a Brethren conference in Belgium and sensed an instant kinship. Ishmael had been wanting to expand God's kingdom in Kenya but felt limited and under equipped. Through a partnership with VMC and a mentoring relationship with Gord, in 2011 Ishmael pioneered Vision Ministries Kenya. This network of 40 member churches is making

progress. Ishmael is in the process of identifying the right leaders to establish regional networks.

"Coming here [to TSC 2016] has been helpful for me," says Ishmael. Learning how things are done in our culture gave him insights that he could translate into his own country. He also enjoyed hearing the testimonies at the consultation—especially of how God was working among ethnic groups in Canada. God also used Ishmael to bless Canadian Christian leaders at the event.

"During the workshop on prayer, I shared how my prayers affect my life, my ministry, and my family. People were really encouraged." In true visionary fashion, he adds, "My desire is to see VMK across Africa—beyond Kenya to touch our neighbour countries—that is my dream."

International Ministry Fund Established at TSC 2016.

VMC established the Gord Martin International Ministry Fund in honour of Gord Martin's 24 years' of service as Executive Director.

On the Friday evening of the Thinking Shrewdly Consultation in April, those gathered donated over \$4,000 toward Gord's continued ministry establishing VMC-like groups around the world.

Trainers needed for Kenya missions trip Summer 2016

We are looking for experienced trainers for a missions trip to Kenya, Aug. 11-23, 2016

Youth worker, 1
Pastors and elders, 2

Participants will have to raise funds to cover costs. If you are interested, please contact doug.loveday@vision-ministries.org

...CONTINUED FROM BACK COVER

Imagining new possibilities for shared mission

Genuine collaboration sets us free from myopic visions and parochial obsessions. It invites participants to momentarily lift their eyes to consider what God is doing elsewhere. Churches in a vibrant partnering network are thrilled when others succeed and are broken by news of their heartaches. They find ways to

passionately tell each other's stories, celebrating their wins and praying for their challenges. They lend people with particular ministry expertise, share facilities and give financially to advance the initiatives of other churches. Their leaders find deep satisfaction in spending time with each other. In humility they learn from those who are 'doing it well' and share wisdom with those who are 'stuck' but who long for something better. Inevitably, they come to the table and together imagine new possibilities

for shared mission.

Among VMC churches there is a fresh openness to work together as evidenced in MMF and similar cooperative efforts—but we have further to go. The impact of our partnering network rests in our capacity as churches to fully embrace Paul's advice, "Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too." Phil.2:3-4 ■

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The Value of Interdependence and Collaboration

BY MIKE STONE

“Genuine collaboration sets us free from myopic visions and parochial obsessions.”

Business leaders and organizational gurus have long touted the virtue of team work, a communal way of achieving goals that draws strength not just from numbers but from the power of synergy and symbiosis. Synergy is a dynamic in which the whole is greater than sum of the parts, where one plus one doesn't equal two but rather three or even five. Symbiosis refers to the mutually beneficial relationship that exists between two very different organisms. The clownfish and sea anemone couldn't be stranger partners yet they are uniquely suited to protect each other and enhance survival. Creation reminds us that we are better together than we are alone—that we need each other to thrive. What's true for people is true for congregations.

Collaboration in the early church

The degree of interdependence and collaboration in the first century church is astounding. These early congregations partnered with each other despite barriers of culture, ethnicity, language, and vast geographical distances. The salutations in Paul's letters reveal not just familiarity but meaningful affection between congregations (I Cor. 16:19).

Their ability to collaborate appears to flow from a depth of relationship. Paul commending Phoebe to the church in Rome indicates an openness to lend ministry personnel (Rom. 16:1-2). He also encouraged churches to share theological resources by directing them to circulate his letters (Col. 4:16). His instructions to take up an offering in Corinth for the church in Jerusalem

prompted a pooling of resources among fellowships (I Cor. 16:1). Congregations deliberated together when leaders from Antioch and Jerusalem convened to resolve tensions related to the sudden influx of Gentiles into the church. Long before the emergence of a global village connected by internet, rapid transportation, and ubiquitous urbanization, New Testament churches found a way to partner for the gospel despite their diversity.

What to expect from a modern network of partnering churches

What can we expect from a partnering network of churches two millennia later? Moving the Mission Forward (MMF) provides VMC churches with an opportunity for meaningful relationship and missional collaboration. The National MMF team is experimenting with ways to identify national church planting opportunities, share financial resources for church multiplication, pray together for new initiatives, celebrate the good news stories widely, and consult with churches longing for greater kingdom impact. The regional expression of MMF shares many of these same objectives but based on geographic proximity, these regional clusters of churches also allow for deeper relationship, sharing of people resources, collective learning and locally focused mission. In both cases, deliberation, consensus-making and missional efficacy flow from authentic relationships of love, trust and mutual self-surrender.



Mike Stone and Jay Gurnett collaborating

Independence strengthens togetherness

Ironically, it may be the fierce congregational independence from our heritage that ultimately strengthens our togetherness. In the absence of rigid macro structures and heavy-handed centralized control, our family of churches has thrived as a bottom-up, self-organizing adaptive system, in which the responsibility for congregational vitality has been shouldered at the local church level. In non-denominational contexts, leadership development is a home grown enterprise and local governing teams learn the art of decision making.

Freedom from the imposition of restrictive, pan-tribal rules and sensitivity to local realities allow for greater contextual innovation. Without the resources and support of a denomination, there is a higher expectation on congregants to sacrifice time, use their gifts and financially support the ministry—it's a matter of sink or swim for the local church.

Certainly, there are dark sides to hyper-autonomy to avoid but a partnering network like VMC should explore ways to leverage the virtues of congregational independence—to bring the wisdom learned and competencies forged locally into dialogue with our shared vision and common objectives.

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