

# **In-dependence: The hard work and benefits of partnerships**

October 24, 2019

The very first church I pastored was the First Baptist Church in Rosebud, Texas. Rosebud wasn't exactly a bustling metropolis. We numbered 1,459 residents back in the day.

I remember going to denominational meetings and professional gatherings and coveting the resources larger churches had at their disposal.

Even when I moved to a larger church in Arkansas, we still had to partner to do a lot of things. We had a dream of commissioning some amazing friends and colleagues as missionaries to South Africa, but there was no way we could work all their needs into the budget of our medium-sized church.

We started a long, painstaking process of calling other churches. We managed to pull together a network, but it wasn't easy, and we always had to work to make sure we had enough resources to provide the necessary support for our missionaries.

I used to wonder what it would have been like to have enough all on our own, not to have to spend so much time coordinating the diverse hopes and decision-making processes of so many independent partners. It would have been easier.

In recent days, however, I have come to repent of any ill-considered impatience or frustration over such partnerships.

# Surprising findings from thriving congregations

The Center for Healthy Churches is involved with Belmont University in a study of alternative forms of congregational thriving. One of the clearest characteristics of the churches we've studied is that these thriving congregations don't just partner financially with other churches and organizations. The partnerships go much deeper than that. In most cases, there is a critical element of the church's identity that actually depends upon the resources, energy and know-how provided by that partner.

What we're seeing isn't so much a partnership but an ecosystem of cooperation that requires mutual dependency for mutual thriving.

In one congregation, it's a partnership with other churches. In another, it's a partnership with a school. In still another, it's a partnership with local government. In every case, something catalytic is produced by the exchange of ideas and, yes, even by the painstaking effort it takes to coordinate shared effort.

## Surprising pathway to innovation

In a recent edition of the *Harvard Business Review*, Chandra Gnanasambandam and Michael Uhl, two Silicon Valley executives, talked about pathways to innovation.

It might shock you to read that in the past decade Silicon Valley began to realize the giant innovative leaps of the 1990s and early 2000s had slowed dramatically. The heady days of a group of geniuses producing a leap forward in the dark, musty confines of a founder's garage weren't really happening anymore.

There was, however, an exception to that rule. Innovation had moved out from behind the locked doors of the research and design departments in Silicon Valley to barrooms and weekend getaways between friends. In the few safe places where people could have conversations across the lines that divided companies, innovation was still occurring.

And it's not just in Silicon Valley. A study was conducted a few years ago of the greatest scientific breakthroughs of the late 20th century, and one of the most surprising results of the study was that such breakthroughs weren't happening in the laboratories but the lunchrooms when scientists of different disciplines were discussing their work together.

## **The lesson for churches today**

There is a lesson here for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century church if we pay attention.

Mutually dependent partnerships open our congregations to mental and spiritual resources that go beyond the size and scope of our congregations. They also can give us opportunities to build relationships that might become missional friendships in which it's not just two people or two organizations partnering but a meeting of hearts and lives that includes Jesus in the mix.

If 90 percent of congregations in America are plateaued or declining numerically, then maybe one way of thinking about our metrics is that we should never want to be so large that we try to do things on our own. It might be easier, but it'll cut us off from lessons and opportunities that might accomplish even more for God's kingdom.

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