



THE PILLAR NETWORK

Why and How should we develop International Collaborations? Victor Rodriguez

A few weeks ago I had the privilege of visiting several churches and pastors on the island of Cuba. It was an experience where I was able to witness the great need that the Cuban people live in but at the same time the great fidelity of pastors and brothers in Christ who, despite the circumstances, strive to expand the kingdom of God together. Throughout the week I could clearly see the willingness and intention of pastors to collaborate with other pastors and churches in the work of the Lord. For them, the lack of resources, political oppression, ideological persecution, and other barriers are not impediments to collaboration, on the contrary, they are drivers that remind them of their identity as children of God, their hope of eternal life in Christ, and that they need each other.

Collaboration between local churches is something that has been present in the Christian faith. In the Scriptures we can find examples of collaboration between congregations...it is not something new that is just beginning and that is why many churches have fruitful collaborations both locally and internationally. Now, there are also many pastors who long to involve their local churches in developing collaborative relationships with other local and international churches, while others do not have it on their radar because the circumstances and barriers around them have become impediments that keep them focused on their own needs.

This article aims to appeal to the importance of developing international collaborations and give some suggestions on how to do it.

The essence of collaboration

On the last day of our stay in Cuba, while we were heading to the airport with Pastor Israel, we decided to make a stop at the meeting place of the church he pastors, the Reformed Baptist Church of Holguín. In an extremely humble neighborhood, we arrived at this house, without a sign or anything to indicate that it was the meeting place of a church. It had two floors which served as housing on the lower part and as a meeting room on the upper part. As we climbed the stairs and entered the room there was a sign hanging at the top of the altar and going from corner to corner which read: "Collaborating with God in the reconciliation of the world with Christ." What a great reminder of the very essence of collaboration!

That is what the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth in 2 Corinthians 5:18: "And all this comes from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." In other words, Paul is telling the Corinthian saints something that applies to every true believer today: that God has reconciled us to Himself through Christ and makes us sharers in His work so that others can also be reconciled to Him. What a great privilege to be His ambassador here on earth! And as ambassadors, we are authorized representatives of God, the Sovereign King, and His Kingdom established by the redemptive work of His Son

Jesus Christ, to be ministers of reconciliation to a fallen and hopeless world that lives in rebellion against its Creator.

But, here's the warning, like the Corinthians, we have a tendency to become careless as a result of the flow of circumstances. A few verses later, in 2 Corinthians 6:1, Paul continues by telling them:

“And as collaborators with *the*, we also exhort you not to receive the grace of God in vain;” **(NBLA)**.

Paul exhorts the Corinthians not to receive God's grace in vain, that is, this call to participate in the work that God is carrying out in Christ, and of which Paul himself is his collaborator. He urges you to respond to this call urgently without considering the limitations and barriers that may arise along the way. It is as if Paul was saying to the Corinthians: we are collaborators because God has made us His Cooperators. We are not God's co-workers in the sense of helping Him complete a task. The work of redemption is already completed in Christ. Nor in the sense that the Corinthians must collaborate with Paul to fulfill their agenda or that Paul must collaborate with the Corinthians to fulfill theirs. We are God's collaborators in the sense that He has made us participate in the propagation of the message of redemption, of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For him who is lost this is madness, but for him who believes it is salvation from God.

This is the essence of collaboration: believers are God's collaborators in the enterprise of proclaiming the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, although it is true that the management of a local church and the efforts of proclaiming the Gospel require resources to carry them out, we must keep in mind that collaboration does not depend on having many or few resources, but rather depends on alignment between two churches that are committed to proclaiming and living the Gospel of Christ.

For this reason, every time the brothers of the Reformed Baptist Church of Holguín gather to worship God, they are reminded with that sign that the mission of the Church and of each individual that composes it, is not carried out in isolation, but in collaboration with God and with each other, not only among themselves, but also with local, national and international churches.

The Apostle Paul gave us an example through his ministry that collaboration with God is manifested in collaboration between churches.

Collaboration with God is manifested in collaboration between churches

Consider this: How do we show that we are his disciples and that we love God? Jesus answers that question: By keeping his commandments (John 14:15) and having love for one another (John 13:35). We see that loving God is not about simply saying it, but about actions that demonstrate it. Likewise, there are actions that demonstrate that we are God's collaborators: obedience to the command of the great commission (Matt.28:20; Acts 1:8) and collaboration with each other as demonstrated by Paul himself. He was faithful to Christ, collaborating with other brothers: In 1 Corinthians 3:9, Paul corrects the Corinthians by saying that the center of attention is not him or Apollos, but God Himself and that they were collaborators in His work. In the letter to the Romans, he names collaborators Priscilla and Aquila (16:3), Urban (16:9), and Timothy (16:21). In the second letter to the Corinthians, he calls himself and Timothy as co-workers in the joy of the believers in that city (2 Cor. 1:24) while identifying Titus as a co-worker among them. In the letter to the Philippians, he identifies Epaphroditus (2:25) as a collaborator and fellow soldier while mentioning Clement and the other collaborators whose names are written in the Book of Life (4:3). In the short letter to Philemon, several

collaborators are also named including Philemon himself, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke (Phil. 1:24). And finally, in 1 Thessalonians 3:2, Paul sends “Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith;”. Note how the collaborations were with God, with brothers in the faith, and with different churches located in different countries and served to strengthen the ministry of the local churches, their leaders and their members. When we collaborate in the expansion of the Kingdom of God with people from different cultural, social, geographic backgrounds, etc., it allows us to see in an amplified way the unifying effect of the Gospel of Christ and the reality that He purchased “for Godagent out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev5:9).

But, let me clarify something about international collaborations

For the purpose of this article, when I use the term “international collaborations” I am specifically referring to Churches from different countries working together in fulfillment of the Great Commission to go and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:20). Therefore it is highly connected to the mission of God and consequently, the mission of the church. To clarify a little more let me use the definition of “Mission” and “missions” that Pastor Sam Masters uses in his book “Doing Missions”.¹: he defines the mission of God as “the purpose that God has carried out in history to redeem a people for Himself who recognize the lordship of Jesus Christ to the glory of the Father”; while defining missions as “the fulfillment of the great commission that is carried out across cultural and geographic barriers to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and disciple believers with the goal of planting new churches.” So, God's mission is not a collaboration between churches, but the collaboration of churches is a means to carry out God's mission.

Unfortunately, the essence of collaboration between Churches is affected today by a complexity of circumstances that range from doctrinal differences, seasons of crisis within the church, and even bad experiences of collaboration in the past. These circumstances gradually cloud the vision of the mission that God has established for his church.

That is why I would like to share with you 3 practical suggestions on how to develop international collaborations.

1. **Begin in Prayer considering options and involving the local church**- would seem a very obvious suggestion, but it is necessary so that our consideration of international collaboration begins in dependence on the Lord in prayer. Praying the Word of the Lord considering the biblical examples of collaboration between churches would be a good starting point. Prayer is key to determining with whom, how, when and where to collaborate. Pray to ask God for direction on how to collaborate with particular churches. If you know a pastor or church in a country other than your own, pray for them intentionally and consistently. Share this feeling with the pastoral and deacon body of your church. Involve the church by praying about this feeling in public services as part of your pastoral prayer in Sunday services or prayer services offered during the week. Be intentional about teaching biblically about collaboration and emphasizing the theme in the applications of your messages (as long as it is a valid application drawn from the text you are preaching). Also, pray that the Lord encourages other

¹ *Doing Missions* (Copyright 2019 Sam Masters), p.6;12.

brothers and sisters in the congregation to pray and serve international churches. You can prayerfully meditate on the following questions: What are some areas of strength in your congregation that could be of benefit to other churches? Every true church has something to contribute. Could it be that God has gifted your congregation with good teachers who could help teach and or mentor other pastors and leaders? Could it be that God has provided economic resources that could serve to advance and strengthen other churches in other countries? Could it be that God has provided your congregation with people who could put their work talents at the disposal of other churches in short-term projects: doctors, bricklayers, plumbers, graphic designers, accountants, etc.? Finally, pray that the Lord Himself will guide your local congregation in establishing collaborations with other international churches.

2. **Collaborate in a relational way, not transactional**- the very essence of our Faith is relational, not transactional. Biblical examples abound: from God walking in the Garden of Eden with His creation (Gen. 3:8); God relating to his people in the OT despite their rebellion; the Incarnation of His Son Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us (Mt 1:23); The relationship of the Triune God (John 15:26); The Holy Spirit taking up residence in the believer (Eph. 1:13); the essence of the Church and the mandates of one another (Acts 2:42, Ephesians 4:4-6, 1 Thes.5); the imminent return of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Marriage of the Lamb (Rev 19); etc Likewise, we must ensure that the collaborations we establish with other churches foster relationships between their pastors and their members. Collaborating in a transactional manner will only give a false sense of conformity to the parties involved. On the other hand, collaborating relationally entails genuine care for brothers and sisters in Christ who faithfully serve the Lord and who face constant struggles with their remaining sin, the world, and Satan himself. Sometimes we underestimate the impact that a text message, email or phone call can have. Sometimes we only think about collaborations with the end product of a church plant or seminary established, etc. in mind, but we ignore the slow process of developing a trusting relationship. For example, I would be short on words trying to explain what a blessing it has been for me to receive a text message every Sunday at 7 AM from Pastor Juan Luis in Puerto Rico, exhorting and encouraging me to preach the word of the Mister; or when I receive a photo of Pastor Juan taken during the service of the Rescate Mission Church in Barranquilla while the congregation prayed for us while they projected a photo of my family on their screens. Words would also be lacking to express the emotion and joy we felt a week ago when we witnessed and were part of the beginning of the Piedra Angular Church in Monterrey Mexico after a process that began more than a year and a half ago. In short, relationships are not created overnight, but rather they begin as a small seed that could become a very robust tree, as long as that seed is cared for and nourished regularly.
3. **Get to work while you explore the possibilities** - Who do you know who has experience collaborating with international churches? It will be very important for you to be able to inform yourself about the way in which others are collaborating with international churches. If you know of churches that have maintained fruitful collaborations for many years, be careful not to fall into the trap of wanting to achieve in a short time what has taken them years to develop. Try to know the process in which little by little they developed trust and shared experiences that formed the path

of a solid collaboration. If you already have a clearer idea of potential collaborations, start exploring by giving them a visit to meet them in person and spend time together. Certainly, God works through the hospitality, fellowship, and laughter that arises around the table among brothers in Christ who seek to be faithful to the call of the great commission. Not only visit and explore collaboration possibilities but also invite potential collaborators to visit you and get to know your environment. In our particular experience, the collaborations that have borne the most fruit have been those in which we have been able to spend time with them in their country and they have been able to spend time with us in ours. The relationship stops being between leaders and the entire church is involved. Now it is not only you as a pastor having the desire to serve, but also the members of the local body having the same feeling of being part of a collective effort that has as its goal the glory of God. Also, take advantage of the opportunities that exist within the Pillar Network and the vision trips that are being coordinated in different parts of the world including different countries in Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. For more information about these opportunities, you can contact the following addresses: victor@thepillarnetwork.com, liam@thepillarnetwork.com or dave@thepillarnetwork.com.

There is definitely so much more that could be added about the why and how of international collaborations and this article only covers a speck of the tip of the Iceberg. Still, it is my prayer, that like the brothers in Christ in Holguín, we are constantly reminded that “we are ambassadors of Christ, as if God were praying through us, in the name of Christ we beg you: Be reconciled to God!

Soli Deo Gloria