

**RESPONSE TO PAUL E. LARSEN'S  
"THE SPIRIT OF COLLABORATIVE EVANGELISM"**

*FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER EVANGELISM ROUNDTABLE  
"TOWARD COLLABORATIVE EVANGELIZATION"*

**October 4-5, 2002**

*BY DANIEL RICKETT, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF LEADERSHIP,  
EASTERN UNIVERSITY, ST. DAVIDS, PENNSYLVANIA*

While walking through a slum where the air was thick with the smell of human waste, children clambered on refuse heaps foraging for food, prostitutes slumped at the door of decaying shacks, and drunken men brewed illegal liquor, my friend David Kitonga asked, "What are you willing to die for?"

There are things in life that unite us and things that keep us apart. The things that unite us are basic, profound, and personal. A walk through the slums of our mega cities brings them to our attention by their conspicuous absence. Love, dignity, health, freedom, prosperity, justice and redemption are every child's birthright. Ironically, it is their absence that most forcefully draws us together.

For those who have been apprehended by the grace of God, there is no greater satisfaction than to usher people into the personal presence of Jesus Christ. If anything can move Christians to work together, it is the hope of creating passage for people from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

Paul Larsen's discussion of the spirit of collaborative evangelism exhibits this very passion. The single most important message in Larsen's paper is very simple. The spirit of collaborative evangelism is sharing Jesus Christ's passion for the salvation of the lost and the unity of all

Christians. It is, of course, absolutely appropriate that Larsen builds on the principal passions of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul does as much in the letter to the Ephesians.

The entire life and mission of the church, Paul explains, exists by the person and purpose of Jesus Christ. This fact is the foundation of every Christian's identity, purpose and hope. Because all Christians belong to Jesus Christ, they belong to each other, and each are gifted for the benefit of others so that all may grow into the fullness of Jesus Christ (Eph 4:1-5:2).

The truth of the church and its mission has many implications to collaborative evangelism. I cannot address them in this short response. For that I refer you to Charles Van Engen who has done the most in recent years to develop a theology of mission partnerships.<sup>1</sup> I can, however, describe a few characteristics of those who manage to co-labor in the work of the Gospel. Some of these characteristics touch on the four themes described by Larsen.

The spirit of collaborative evangelism is the understanding that all Christians are members of the one Body of which Jesus Christ is the Head. As Charles Van Engen has said, "We do not confess 'holy catholic churches,' or 'families of God' or 'peoples of God' or 'bodies of Christ' or

Israels.' In the biblical view of the church the plural only refers to the geographic location of local congregations, not the essential being of the Church. In its essence there is only one Church."<sup>2</sup> Christians who strive to co-labor in the gospel reflect the belief that, as Paul Hiebert put it, there are no others in the Body of Christ, there is only us.<sup>3</sup> True allies start with the view that they are brothers and sisters in Christ, called to one hope, one Lord, one faith (Eph 4:4-6).

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Van Engen, "Toward a Theology of Mission Partnerships," Missiology: An International Review, (29, No. 1, January, 2001): 11-44.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Van Engen, God's Missionary People (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 49.

<sup>3</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Issues in the Social Sciences and Their Implications for Mission Studies," Missiology: An International Review (24, No. 1, January 1996): 77-80.

The spirit of collaborative evangelism respects the giftedness of each member of the body of Christ. The most important links between allies are not only what makes them compatible, but also what makes them different –their respective capabilities, resources and opportunities. A ministry will form an alliance precisely because it lacks something in one or all of these areas. This is where the strength of one makes up for the weakness of the other, enabling the allies to leverage their strengths. Successful allies honor the gifts and calling of God’s people by acknowledging the gaps in their ministry capacity and building relationships with those who can fill in what’s lacking.

The spirit of collaborative evangelism is the disposition to consider not only one’s own interests, but also the interests of others. Co-laborers understand that people cooperate when it is in their interest to do so. Whether those interests are explicit or implicit, in the interests of others or self-interest, they define the underlying expectations of the relationship. People who are effective at collaboration understand that the relationship has to be reciprocal in some meaningful ways. Defining what is in it for each member is the first step to satisfying important expectations. Effective collaboration involves an honest assessment of one’s own interests and the interests of others (Phil 2:4).

The spirit of collaborative evangelism is a willingness, to an extent, to view theology as a work in progress. People who collaborate well know what they believe and understand the difference between elemental truths of the faith and important but secondary issues. They live by the maxim, “unity in primary things, liberty in secondary things, and charity in all things.” But this isn’t merely tolerating minor differences; it has a greater purpose than cooperation. It is the recognition that we all have much to learn, that learning occurs best in the global community of believers, and that learning has a purpose, namely, “...so that the body of Christ may be built up

until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12, 13).

The spirit of collaborative evangelism is the belief that we are “coworkers” in the gospel, coworkers with God and with one another. In practice this means sharing power, resources and responsibilities in the service of Jesus’ mission. Successful allies understand that collaboration doesn’t just happen. It requires a framework on which to operate. Generally, this involves clarifying the purpose, translating it into goals and tasks, and allocating resources and responsibilities. This may sound technical, but this is where collaboration actually takes place, praying together, planning together, contributing resources, taking on tasks, and sharing responsibilities.

In the final analysis, the core problem we face in collaborative evangelism is always the same. The central issue is seldom theology, organization, method or personality. All those elements, and others, are important. But the core of the matter is always about the way people treat one another as members of Christ’s Body. This is true even when it is necessary to keep doctrine pure (2 Ti 2:24-26). In successful collaborative efforts, people strive to relate to one another in humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another in love (Eph 4:2). This “walking in the Spirit” alters behavior sufficiently to overcome all of the many barriers to collaborative evangelism. Conversely, in failed cases, the “fruit of the Spirit” is found less often, if at all.

Paul Larsen is right; the heart of the matter is our proximity to or distance from Jesus Christ. As we walk closer to Christ, we will walk closer to one another, and the spirit of collaborative evangelism will rise among us.