

“CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATIVE EVANGELISM”

FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER EVANGELISM ROUNDTABLE “TOWARD COLLABORATIVE EVANGELIZATION”

October 4-5, 2002

BY PAUL A. CEDAR, CHAIRMAN, MISSION AMERICA COALITION

It was John R. Mott who shared the following observation some six decades ago.

“The larger evangelism which we long to see will result inevitably from a large unity. On the authority of Christ Himself, real unity is an absolute essential to the realization of the highest evangelistic objective. He prayed – think of it – our Lord in His high-priestly prayer prayed that we all might be one, not as an end in itself, but ‘that the world might believe ... The clock has struck, the hour has come when in this vital matter of evangelization all who acknowledge the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ should pool not only knowledge and experience but personalities, funds, plans in the making and measures for the triumphant conduct of the work itself.” (Larger Evangelism, page 13)

In a real sense, Dr. Mott’s statement is a description of what the Mission America Coalition has become in our generation. It was in early December of 1994 that some 165 U.S. Christian leaders met together in Lisle, Illinois, for a consultation on evangelism. Co-sponsored by the U.S. Lausanne Committee and the Billy Graham Center, the consultation was used of God to give birth to one of the most remarkable coalitions in the history of the American Church – the Mission America Coalition.

The “gestation” period for this coalition began in the early 1990’s following Lausanne II – a conference on world evangelization hosted by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. Members of the U.S. Lausanne Committee returned from that gathering in July of 1989 posing the question, “What is God calling us to do in regards to cooperative evangelism in the United States during the last decade of the 20th Century?”

The Committee met together on several occasions to pray and to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in response to that important question. As a result, several “exploratory meetings” of Christian leaders were held throughout the nation climaxing in a Prayer Summit in Portland, Oregon, in the summer of 1993. Some 350 Christian

leaders from various denominations and ministries gathered together with no formal program or assigned speakers. They fasted, prayed and sought the Lord and His guidance concerning the spiritual needs of the Church and the nation. From that significant prayer meeting flowed the birth of the Mission America Coalition in December of 1994.

During the past seven years, all of us involved in the Mission America Coalition have learned a great deal about spiritual unity and cooperation and partnerships and ministry networks and collaboration. However, most of what we have learned has not come from formal study or from past experience. Instead, we have been learning as we have been advancing together under the leadership of Jesus Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Within this process, we have found ourselves experiencing the words of a Chinese proverb that states, "We are building the road as we are walking on it."

That is exactly what we have been doing. We have proceeded literally on our knees in a sincere attempt to follow our leader – Jesus Christ – step by step. Early in this adventure, we determined that we would not attempt to build this coalition in the normal "American Way." Instead, we have sought to do it in what we are calling the "Jesus Way." We believe that He is building this coalition. We have been experiencing the principle that the Psalmist declared, "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain (Ps. 127:1)." We believe that the Mission America Coalition is of God's doing, and we give Him the glory!

A MATRIX FOR COLLABORATIVE EVANGELISM

It has been only in recent days have we have discovered a model or matrix that seems to describe what we have been learning about collaboration in the mission our Lord has entrusted to us. Therefore, in presenting this first paper at this Evangelism Roundtable, I have been asked to take just a few moments to introduce this matrix to you

which was first published in 1994 by the National Collaboration Network of the Community Based Collaboration-Wellness Multiplied.

You will find a copy of this model as Appendix A of this paper. As you will see, there are five basic steps in the process that lead to collaboration. This model suggests that we must begin at the level of networking. Networks provide wonderful opportunities for dialoging and reaching common understandings. One of their most helpful functions is to provide a clearinghouse for the sharing of information.

The next level is that of cooperation or alliances. These kinds of relationships can provide some mutual accountability, the coordination of ministry and the limiting or reducing of competition and duplication.

The third level provides for a deeper partnership that results in a coalition – the fourth level -- that includes shared leadership along with common and prioritized communications. Only when a coalition is formed and becomes operational can the participants move on to the fifth level of true collaboration. This collaboration includes a high trust level of leadership and other partners, ideas and decisions that are equally shared and highly developed communication.

Needless to say, not all relationships between ministries ever reach the collaboration level. There is a very legitimate place for networks and alliances and partnerships that never become an actual coalition or ever become involved in functional collaboration. Cooperation and partnerships on any level of ministry are important for the advancement of the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As I have said, in many ways this five-step model summarizes what we have experienced in the Mission America Coalition for the past seven years. In truth, we have been discovering the five-steps of the matrix without being aware or following the model.

Instead, we have had the wonderful experience of being led by the Spirit through the various steps.

At the same time, let me hasten to make clear that we have not “arrived” at the fifth step or phase of collaboration with every partner that is involved in the Mission America Coalition. Many partners are still very much “in process.” For example, there are MAC partners that are still at the network level. And there are other potential partners and present partners who are still exploring how they “fit” within the partnership. Still others move in and out of the coalition according to their involvement in special initiatives such as the current “9/11 Remembrance” initiative.

The good news is that there is a “core group” that is growing steadily comprised of partners who are actually reaching step five and are becoming involved in effective collaboration. The building of the coalition and the facilitating of collaborative evangelism has been an exciting adventure. We are very encouraged and blessed by what has taken place. And we see great potential for the future.

MAJOR CHALLENGES TO COLLABORATIVE EVANGELISM

As we have experienced the growth of the coalition, we have encountered some challenges along the way. Networking, partnering and cooperating are not natural activities for the American Church. Collaboration in evangelism ministries requires initiative, resolve and commitment. And it also requires a large dose of humility and submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and of mutual submission to one another.

I confess that in my ministry with the MAC, I have tended to focus on victories rather than challenges. Although we have faced some very difficult challenges during the past seven years, our Lord has given victory after victory. Our *modus operandi* has been to thank God for those victories and then to move on as we seek to follow Him.

Therefore, it is rather difficult for me to step back and focus upon the challenges we have experienced. However it is a good discipline to do so. This prayerful investigation has caused me to overflow with thanksgiving to God for how He has led us and provided for the coalition.

As I have reflected upon the challenges we have faced in the building of this coalition for strategic collaborative evangelism, I believe that the following nine categories represent the major challenges we have encountered.

1. The Challenge of the Failure to Practice Spiritual Unity:

Many pastors and other Christian leaders seem to be significantly ignorant concerning the Biblical teaching regarding spiritual unity. Others seem to be simply neglecting or ignoring this important subject.

It is important for all us who are involved in leadership roles in the Church to be aware that the Scriptures share a great deal about the importance of spiritual unity. Although other presenters in this Evangelism Roundtable will give more attention to this important subject, I would remind all of us that our Lord Jesus Christ Himself gave a high priority to spiritual unity. For example, in His high-priestly prayer, "Jesus prayed specifically that we would become 'one' even as the Father and the Son are one. And He continued His prayer by praying that we would be brought to 'complete unity' so that the world would know that the Father has sent His Son (John 17:20-23).

The Apostle Paul also addressed this important subject with great conviction in his letter to the Church in Ephesus. As you will remember, He urged the followers of Jesus to make every effort to "maintain the unity of the Spirit." His basic assumption was that spiritual unity in the Church should be the norm. It should be expected (Ephesians 4:3). He assumed that we who follow Jesus and are filled with the Holy Spirit

should be inclined to spiritual unity. For, he stated, there is ONE Body and ONE Spirit and ONE Lord and ONE faith and ONE baptism and ONE GOD and Father “who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:4-6 NIV).”

As we have said, many Christian leaders are either ignorant of this teaching or are simply neglecting it. As a result, in some of the Church, there seems to be a growing movement towards independence and individualism. This is another of the major challenges we have been facing in collaborative evangelism.

2. The Challenge of a Spirit of Independence/Individualism:

One of the manifestations of sin is that of separation from God and from one another. One of the marvelous provisions of our Lord Jesus Christ is to bring us back in close fellowship with God and with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. The concept of the Church as the Body of Christ most clearly communicates the importance of every member living in vital dependence upon the Head, Jesus Christ, and living in a vital relationship of interdependence with one another.

One of the expressions of sin is for an individual to desire to “do our own thing” or “go our own way” and not to “heed anyone” or to be accountable to anyone but ourselves.” Unfortunately, this is a natural tendency that often creeps into the lives of Christians and even into the Church.

Partnerships and collaboration do not seem to be high priorities for many Christian leaders and many local churches. I believe that the “independent church movement” is an expression of this challenge as it continues to expand very rapidly across our nation. In the Biblical sense, the term “independent church” is an oxymoron. As we have said, our Lord has designed His Church to be dependent upon Him and interdependent upon the larger Church.

However, the challenge of an independent spirit is not merely a problem within local churches. It often affects denominations and Christian organizations who tend to merely go their own way or do their own thing without any regard for other members of the Body. In fact, one of the challenges we face within the MA Coalition is when ministry networks focus only upon themselves and their ministries without seeing any value relating to the larger coalition of potential partners who could share and even strengthen the effectiveness of their ministries.

3. The Challenge of Turf/Control:

Closely related is the challenge of independence is one of the greatest challenges being faced by the Christian community in the United States. It is the challenge of “turf” and/or “control.” This challenge seems to be experienced both internally and externally. For example, the “internal” question of “who is in control” in a local church is an area of major conflict and division in many churches across the nation.

In addition, there is the issue of what we may call the “external” control factor. This is a large area of concern for those of us involved in collaborative evangelism. Often pastors and churches look at their communities as “their turf” that they control. Many seem to have little or no concern for collaborating in evangelism with other churches in their community. Quite to the contrary, they tend to frequently look at other churches as competitors, as inferior or even as irrelevant.

However, churches are not the only entities that struggle with control or turf issues. Many Christian organizations suffer from the same mentality. They often see themselves as carrying on the only ministry that is truly significant. If they subscribe to any concept of partnering, it is usually an attempt to recruit others to help them achieve

their goals. They have little or no concept of what true collaboration is about and seem to have virtually no interest in doing so.

4. The Challenge of Personal Kingdom Building:

Another challenge that is closely related to individualism and turf/control is that of churches and/or ministries that focus upon building “personal kingdoms” rather than the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Most “personal kingdom builder” leaders are highly gifted, visionary, entrepreneurs who are focused and literally consumed with what they are doing. Again, these are leaders who have ignored or not understood the Biblical concept of the Body of Christ and how the Lord of the Church has designed His Body to function with dependence upon Him and interdependence with the other members of the Body. For the most part, they have little or no involvement with the other pastors of their community and feel no responsibility to serve them or to minister with them. I believe that most who are guilty of personal kingdom building are not aware of the sin they are committing.

A short time ago I was invited to have lunch with a well-known pastor of one of the largest mega-churches in the United States. Much to my surprise, he literally wept through most of the luncheon. I was deeply moved as he shared his heart with me. Although he had been used of God to build one of the most “successful” churches in the nation, he had recently come to recognize some of the great social and spiritual needs of his community that were not being met by his church or any other.

He kept saying, “There are hundreds of thousands of souls in our community that are on their way to hell, and we haven’t realized it.” He went on to say that he had come to realize that his church could not do it alone. They needed to band with other churches to reach out to their community with the love and grace of Jesus Christ so that every

person would have the opportunity of being touched with the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

In short, he had been building a church with the heart of a CEO building a large and successful company. But now, God was breaking his heart. He had come to look at the church and community with the heart of a pastor who was moved with compassion by the needs of those around him. He was now interested in being used by the Lord to build the Kingdom of God!

5. The Challenge of Cultural/Racial Divisions:

Our nation and communities have been deeply divided over the years by racial and cultural divisions. Someone has said that the most segregated period of time during the week is on Sunday morning when people of the nation gather for religious services. How tragic!

We have found this issue to be a major challenge in building a coalition. Many ethnic denominations or churches have been so deeply wounded that they have turned inward and have become self-sufficient. Others are angry and do not want to be a part of a “white man’s” coalition. In contrast, many Caucasian and traditional churches have not taken major steps towards repentance of racial sins and have not sought forgiveness and reconciliation.

Class-consciousness can also be a problem. For example, those who are involved in a “high church” often look down at those who are a part of churches they consider to be “lower class.” Also, the matters of music, worship styles and order often relate to class affinities.

6. The Challenge of Denominational/Theological Divisions:

Without a doubt, the key to authentic spiritual unity is the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit. How ironic then is the fact that no doctrine of the Christian faith seems to be separating the Church in our culture more than the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

Although we can be encouraged by the significant progress being made in the American Church in these areas, there are still great divides between many traditional evangelicals, classic Pentecostals, Charismatics and, most recently, the "New Apostolic Movement."

Another major area of division in many church and denominational circles is that of the role of women in the Church. This can constitute a major barrier to collaborative efforts.

7. The Challenge of Reconciliation Issues/Right Relationships:

During the past seven years, the Mission America Coalition has given birth or has related to over 70 ministry networks across the nation. Dr. Cornell (Corkie) Haan has been used of Christ in a most remarkable way to help facilitate many of these networks into being.

Over the past six years, Corkie has observed many obstacles that challenge the forming of effective ministry networks. Without exception, he has discovered that the most common, consistent obstacle is that of broken and/or fractured relationships that require reconciliation and the restoration of right relationships before any kind of collaboration in ministry can take place.

Dr. Haan has used a rather earthy illustration to describe that which he has observed to take place over and over again. He states that ministry leaders coming

together for the first time tend to act very much like two or more dogs getting acquainted for the first time. They follow the procedure of “sniffing, growling and checking.” Only then are they prepared to move ahead together.

8. The Challenge of the Immediate vs. Long Term:

Our city/community team leaders have identified another challenge we face in collaboration in evangelism. It is the fact that most collaborative evangelism takes place around a short-term program or a special event such as a Billy Graham Crusade. It is certainly not “bad” that such collaborative evangelism events take place. Quite to the contrary, they are often used wonderfully by our Lord to advance His Kingdom. Christians and Churches are often strengthened and there is usually a significant spiritual harvest that takes place of new believers coming to follow Jesus Christ with many of them incorporated into local churches.

However, the “bad” factor is that often when special events or programs are ended, the spirit of collaboration quickly fades and churches are soon once again doing “their own thing” rather than being engaged in continued ministries of collaborative evangelism. Throughout recent history, Evangelicalism has too often had the sense of the “immediate” rather than what Eugene Peterson has called, “a long obedience in the same direction.”

9. The Challenge of Separationalism:

Perhaps the most difficult challenge to collaborative evangelism is what we may call separationalism. This is segment of the church that does not believe in cooperative or collaborative evangelism. They separate themselves from any and all Christians and churches that do not agree with them on the minutest detail of doctrine. These churches

are usually evangelical in their core theology but so overemphasize secondary issues that they separate themselves from other evangelicals.

However, as Paul Larsen, the former president of the Evangelical Covenant Church, has observed, there is also another level of separatism in the American Church. Historically, we have an expression of separatism when Evangelicals have left a church or denomination when no hope for reform seems possible, i.e. separation from liberals. However, there has developed a “second degree” form of separatism that is the separation from evangelicals who are viewed as those who have not separated from liberals.

This tends to exclude committed Evangelicals who have sensed the calling of God to remain in liberal denominations. We often refer to this phenomenon as “guilt by association.” This can be a very serious form of separation within the Evangelical Movement.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

Indeed, there are some serious challenges to the mission of collaborative evangelism. However, I believe that there are factors involved that can overcome any and all challenges. For example, I believe that collaborative evangelism is God’s idea and not ours. He has a deep desire for His servants to dwell together in spiritual unity and to collaborate together in the fulfilling of the Great Commission that He has given to His Church. It is His Church and His mission and His commandment.

Over the past years, we have seen our Lord provide resolution of conflicts, reconciliation of divisions and motivation of the Holy Spirit to unite and labor together. The path is not easy. Our enemy opposes every step.

Coalitions – even Christian coalitions – are fragile at best. Effective coalitions are dynamic, always in process. Whenever they do take place they are marvelous

expressions of the love of the Father, the grace of the Son and the power of the Spirit.
Only our Lord Himself can bring such coalitions together.

To collaborate in evangelistic ministries is not natural or easy for any of us. But
it can be done! It is being done! It must be done! Thanks be to God who gives the
victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” -- Ephesians 4:3-6 NIV

APPENDIX A

The National Network for Collaboration has identified five levels of relationships moving from Network, the lowest level, to Collaboration, the highest level.

LEVELS	PURPOSE	STRUCTURE	PROCESS
Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dialog and common understanding • Clearinghouse for information • Create base of support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-hierarchical • Loose/flexible link • Roles loosely defined 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low key leadership • Minimal decision making • Informal communications
Cooperation or Alliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match needs and provide coordination • Limit duplication of services • Ensure tasks are done 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central body of people as communication hub • Roles somewhat defined • Links are advisory • Group leverages/raises money 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitative leaders • Complex decision making • Formal communications within the central group
Coordination or Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share resources to address common issues • Merge resource base to create something new 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central body of people consists of decision makers • Roles defined • Links formalized • Group develops new resources and joint budget 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomous leadership but focus on issue • Group decision making in central and subgroups • Communication is frequent and clear
Coalition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share ideas and be willing to pull resources from existing systems • Develop commitment for a minimum of three years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All members involved in decision making • Roles and time defined • Links formal with written agreement • Group develops new resources and joint budget 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared leadership • Decision making formal with all members • Communication is common and prioritized
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accomplish shared vision and impact benchmarks • Build interdependent system to address issues and opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus used in shared decision making • Roles, time and evaluation formalized • Links are formal and written in work assignments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership high, trust level high, productivity high • Ideas and decisions equally shared • Highly developed communication

National Collaboration Network, Framework Model, Community Based Collaboration - Wellness Multiplied 1994.