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## CHAPTER 18

### PARTNERSHIP: THE SPECIAL CHALLENGE OF CITIES

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#### *CORE IDEA*

*The migration of world population into the cities is creating unprecedented challenges for planners, governments, educators, sociologists, and businesses—not to mention the impact on individual lives, families, and communities of all sorts. Cities are the most complex organizational and human social structures. They present unique, extraordinary challenges to those wanting to serve, reach, or see their cities transformed through the power of Christ. Simply put, no single ministry or individual can ever hope to “reach a city.” Only by working together could the dream ever come true. This chapter helps you explore the key issues you will face in forming networks, partnerships, or other coalitions to reach and/or serve your city. It will give you ideas and suggest practical steps to “get your arms around” one of the truly great modern ministry challenges.*

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Over the centuries, cities have served as trading centers, communications crossroads, centers of political and financial power, and safe havens where minorities could disappear and carve out a life for themselves. Because of their diversity and dynamic environment, cities have always been home to the best and the worst: a hotbed for innovation, crime, development of the arts and culture, clustering of technology, and political and financial power. As cities have grown more diverse, they have become a breeding ground for ethnic ghettos and conflict, as well as a microcosm of the world’s haves and have-nots.

## *WE LIVE IN A NEW WORLD*

Melbourne, Australia, is now the second largest Greek city in the world. Toronto, Amsterdam, and Fremont, California, are centers for diaspora Afghans. Chicago has more Poles than San Francisco has people. Vancouver, British Columbia, with a large, growing Chinese community is now dubbed HongCouver by many. Los Angeles, called by some, Tehrangeles, is the second largest Persian-speaking city in the world. It's a city in which over 175 languages are spoken every day and 82 languages are used in formal education! Washington State, fifteenth in population among American states, is third in linguistic diversity, with over 180 languages spoken by its population!

Fifty million Chinese live outside of China. By 2010 there will be more Muslims than Jews in the U.S. And in Brussels, the center of the new "unified Europe," one in every four babies is Arab.

## *POWERFUL FORCES PUSHING AND PULLING PEOPLE INTO CITIES*

Consider—if the whole world were a village of just 100 people:

- 57 would be Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 would be from North and South America, and 8 would be African.
- 70 would be non-white; 30 white.
- 70 would be non-Christian; 30 Christian.
- 50% of the wealth would be in the hands of 6 people, all of whom would be Americans.
- 70 would be non-literate or functionally illiterate.
- 50 would suffer from malnutrition.
- 80 would live in substandard housing.
- 1 would have a full college education.

Then imagine a city ten thousand times that size. Certainly, no city is a perfect representation of global circumstances, but all the brutal realities are ever present—in some cases, in even more extreme measure.

Every year Delhi, India, the capital of the world's largest democracy, grows by the size of the city of Richmond, Virginia—approximately 200,000 people! When I first started visiting Karachi, Pakistan, in the mid-1970s, it was a comparatively quiet trading center on the Indian Ocean, with a population of about 3.5 million. Today its size has increased by over 400 percent. The population is more than 14 million, made up of dozens of ethnic groups, most of whom have migrated to the city over the last 30 years. Public services have broken down, violence is rampant, and only the presence of the Pakistani Army provides a modicum of stability.

## *KINGDOM COLLABORATION: A WAY OF SEEING YOUR CITY*

1. *See your city in its diversity.* Try to break the city down into strategic parts of a size or complexity that can be known and understood. With research, love, and work, you can see your city as an organic whole that has at least four dimensions (and hundreds of smaller, yet vitally important subdivisions!):

- *Geographic segments.* Where do people live or work? What are their natural groupings?
- *Demographic groups.* What is their age, gender, socio-political association, economic situation, level of education?
- *Ethnicity/language.* With whom do they identify? What language binds them together?
- *Function.* What are the natural sectors of interest/activity such as media, labor, youth, business, education, churches, political structures, sports?

*These are the natural groupings by which we organize our lives and our relationships.* They are the categories to think and pray about when you consider how to reach and serve your city—or parts of it. Each of these four groups is likely to include subgroups. Other groupings may cut across several of the categories.

Some examples:

*Ethnic and language background.* Possibly the oldest and most predictable clustering of people in cities. Language and culture are the heart and soul of our human experience. With migration so significant—people on the move all over the world—is it any wonder that, in an environment of change and uncertainty, we naturally gravitate to those who think and talk like we do? We want to hear our own language, eat our own food, and know what to expect and how to act when we meet with others. That’s why ghettos of all kinds have always been so pervasive in cities. Today those ghettos may not necessarily mean economic hardship but, rather, a simple desire to be with “people like us.”

*Geographic location.* This element of cities and communities has usually been aligned with economic circumstances. How wealthy you are or *are not* was frequently a predictor of *where* you lived in the city. In a high percentage of cases that paradigm continues today. Money provides choice. While this can be a helpful way to look at a city, times are changing. In cities with a growing number of people who possess more evident economic options (usually the middle and upper income brackets), choice is creating very mixed neighborhoods, particularly in the center of great cities. Many people choose to be near the center of the action, where there is a sense of life and diversity. With choice comes independence, and with independence frequently comes new structuring of communities. The old notion of being able to connect with people personally because they are part of a neighborhood or community is, in many cases, a lost dream. High rise apartments, security systems, sound-proof construction, mean you can live alongside individuals for years and hardly know them. “Don’t bother me. I won’t bother you.” For those wanting to connect with, reach, and serve people like this with the love of Christ, these changes create new challenges for communication.

*Function.* What do you do or what are your special interests? Union members from the factory may bowl together. Musicians or actors may frequent the same restaurants. Business people may belong to the same clubs. In the Middle Ages it was the guilds that brought specialized trades or workmen together. Today it may be the Rotary Club, women's organizations, educational associations, or other special interest groups.

*Cutting across the Lines.* Community initiatives like United Way, the symphony orchestra, 4-H Clubs, or youth sports programs frequently bring very different people together. While these activities often reflect influences of economics, the geography of your city, or the education of the participants, increasingly there are groupings that cut across the lines and provide a meeting point for diverse members of the community.

Sadly, or naturally, some might argue, our local churches usually reflect these same realities. The average suburban church has few ethnic minorities. The immigrants—particularly first generation—quite naturally want to hear the music and message in their own language and to be able to interact with others who think like they do! Further, churches frequently reflect an economic and/or educational bias, with higher concentrations of wealthy and influential people in certain churches. While shining exceptions exist, the churches that reflect racial, economic, educational, and vocational diversity are rare. In most cases, those exceptions have been because of great effort, sustained vision, determined commitment, and intentional structuring of the content and style of the church's ministry.

So what does all of this mean? Simply that no single partnership can ever hope to reach or serve these widely varying special needs. This suggests that *any* effort at a city-wide initiative will probably be best structured as a network, not a partnership. Networks exist to help individual ministries with a *common vision* do their own individual work better. (They often have specific partnerships associated with them that undertake specific projects.) In partnerships, all members are focused on a *single outcome*, with each partner playing a role in that commonly agreed-upon goal. If you're doing something with a highly specific focus and very specific outcomes, a partnership may be fine.

This diagram may help demonstrate how the various pieces might fit together. The items on the far left represent the wide range of Kingdom resources in the city.

On the far right is a range of specific points of need that God's people might seek to address by working together. These could include:

- The homeless
- Street kids
- Single parents
- Sports outreach programs
- Camping programs
- Immigrant groups
- Employment/work programs
- Tutoring programs
- Support of public services (police, fire, etc.)
- Support of educational services

- Ethnic services

The puzzle pieces on the right demonstrate that each of these initiatives (and many more I'm sure you can imagine!) needs some kind of partnership or alliance of people or ministries to respond to the challenge.

The oval second from the left represents the fact that, to maximize Kingdom assets, the wide range of people and resources working on the specific or specialized projects on the right need a forum or network where they can connect and:

- Encourage each other
- Share information on resources
- Report on challenges and progress
- Coordinate efforts, where appropriate

Even in a town of modest size, the challenges are complex and call for specific responses to specific needs. While it may be called different things, a network *combined* with partnerships or alliances addressing specific needs and opportunities is needed.

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2. *See your city through the scriptural model of evangelism and transformation.* We discussed some of these ideas in Chapter 5. Everyone comes to Christ because of a process. Jesus repeatedly talks about planting, watering, and reaping (John 4:35-38). The missionary, Saint Paul, confirms this vision of individual transformation (1 Cor. 3:1-9). Being faithful and consistent in our life and witness and realizing that *it takes all of us to do God's work* paves the way for fresh appreciation of the need to work together. Cities are big, complex places. At any one time, thousands of people are at these various stages of coming into the Kingdom and growing in Christ. Our city's transformation network and partnerships can help link the elements consistently, effectively influencing these lives through a progression from antagonism or indifference to becoming a follower of Jesus.

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3. *See your city as a collection of individuals in a decision-making process.* Change, spiritual and otherwise, does not happen overnight. We need people who are committed for the long haul: coming alongside and working with individuals and communities as they move through the process of change. Working together, these different, often distinct, but important roles, can bring about transformation in cities. Check Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of this decision-making process and its significance to evangelism and development of the Church. That chapter has several wonderful case histories from scripture that illustrate the points.



4. *See your city through the perspective of its many communications channels.* All forms of communication are important—private prayer, one-on-one conversation over coffee, the mass media. Research makes clear that each of these forms of communication plays different roles as people move from stages of resistance or antagonism through indifference to becoming seekers and, eventually, believers. When we value, respect, and link these roles, the potential for transforming our cities becomes much greater! In linking these roles in effective networks or partnerships, we will not only coordinate more effectively, we will be able to see the work of God more clearly, as our conscious effort to communicate with each other will monitor more clearly how God is using our work.

In this chart we see that the influence of the mass media, for instance, can be effective in the earlier stages of the process. But its influence declines as people approach the critical decision-making point, at which interpersonal communication becomes increasingly important. In reaching our cities, all forms of communication need to be coordinated to see the greatest possible influence for Christ.

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5. *See your city through the perspective of its many collaborative possibilities.* As we discussed earlier, cities usually can be broken down into many segments, some highly visible, others less so. It is of tremendous value for people working in these various segments have a place to meet, learn from each other, share progress and problems, and be able to pray for and celebrate with each other. In short, partnership is critical. A partnership dealing with ethnic groups in your city, for example, may involve prayer networks, Christian media, local churches, youth or sports, social service ministries, business and marketplace ministries, and those experienced in developing local fellowships of new believers. The diagram below suggests the “warp and woof” of how these opportunities and Kingdom resources can intersect in a city transformation network.

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#### *THE CHALLENGE OF CHOICE*

Any initiative that will have any real impact has to make difficult choices. As in every aspect of life, you can't do everything equally well. Even when you have made your choice, you must crawl before you can walk, then walk before you can run.

Every city presents a huge diversity of ministry opportunities concentrated in a comparatively small area. That's why seeing with the perspective suggested in the diagrams above is so important. The complex nature of cities means that our earlier discussions about setting limited but high-value, achievable objectives is *so important* in this setting.

#### *KEY PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE:*

- There is no “right way” for a city initiative to begin or to be organized. However, the key elements discussed earlier in the book, such as strong vision, deeply committed leadership, clear, high-value limited objectives, strong ownership of the process by all the players, prayer support, and practical, short-term outcomes are vital.

## *THE CHALLENGE OF HOW AND WHERE YOU START*

So, if you have a heart for your city, where do you start?

Do you and some of your colleagues call a meeting of “influentials,” and try, from the outset, to look at the big picture of the city’s need? Does an existing, effective network of specialized ministries working in the city see the potential of wider influence and invite others to help realize the vision? Do pastors who are meeting and praying together try to turn their fellowship into tangible action? Any of those approaches may be effective, depending on the circumstances in your city or community.

You face at least two key questions: Who needs to be involved? Later in the chapter we explore possible answers to this question in a section called *The Challenge of Power and Ownership*. Then, what should the partnership try to accomplish? Let’s start with the second question.

You and your friends who are concerned about your city may want to ask yourselves: “If Jesus’ power was let loose, top to bottom in our city or community, how would it look different in five years?”

This question poses a tremendous challenge for modern believers because the Church, for so many years, has been substantially disconnected from the city around it. Many Christians are active in the community’s businesses, schools, medical services, and other institutions. But the Church has rarely asked, “What is our responsibility and role in the community to demonstrate the power and love of Jesus?”

Such a question raises fundamental issues of how God’s grace and power affect everyday life. *It really comes down to this: What do we mean when we talk about the transformation of a city?* When we look at the individuals in scripture who were touched by direct contact with Jesus, we see him addressing a wide range of human needs. Notice he never demanded that they first talk about religious issues or use religious terms. Wholeness in people’s lives *was* his business. While his ministry, of course, was ultimately focused on redeeming our eternal destiny, day to day he lived out God’s vision: “I have come that you might have life—life in all its fullness.” (John 10:10 TEV) So we ask, “What does that mean in *our* community or city?”

### *PARTNERSHIP SUGGESTION:*

- Try this with your partnership facilitation team or the leadership of your local church. Next time you have a retreat or some space to think, talk, and pray together, meet where you have a white board, flip chart, or other means for recording your thoughts. Then ask, “If Jesus’ power and love were let loose in our community, top to bottom, how do we think it might look different?” It’s another way of asking, “What are the elements of daily life in which we think Jesus wants to make a difference?” Start by brainstorming some of those categories. Each community is unique but, across communities, there are many similar needs. What are the signs of brokenness in your community? What circumstances seem to be out of sync with what you know to be God’s character? Remember that often the brokenness can be well disguised! It is not only individuals who are good at “faking it.” Communities do it, too.

Once you've identified some of the categories in which you think Jesus wants to make a difference, ask, "Which one or two of these issues would seem to be a priority for attention?" Once you've worked through that prioritization, ask, "What do we think it would take for God's people in our area to see a breakthrough in this (these) issue(s)?" I strongly urge you and your group to take time to pray and listen to God's Spirit at each step along the way. As you do that, I believe you will hear his voice and, as a result, will have greater conviction and clarity in any action you are led to take.

Frequently city-wide spiritual initiatives were the last thing on an individual's mind when they helped launch a ministry. Here's an example.

*PARTNERSHIP IN PRACTICE: SMALL BEGINNINGS BIRTH BIG VISION*

*Naomi's vision was to minister to single mothers by demonstrating Christ's love. She had started by getting women volunteers together to provide a variety of support services to single mothers whose children were in day care or early school years. At first it involved just people from her church and mothers of children in a couple of local schools. Within a couple of years women in other local churches had heard about the program, and by the beginning of the third year over fifty women from five churches were touching the lives of dozens of single mothers with children in about ten area schools.*

*In the third year the members of Naomi's leadership team asked themselves, "Why couldn't women from churches all across the city do this?" Within months, they had identified individuals leading women's ministries in more than forty local churches. Some were volunteers, others members of church staff.*

*When a larger working meeting was called, Naomi's group indicated they just wanted to share what had been happening in their initiative and explore whether others might like to be part of extending the vision to touch other single mothers in need. They told stories of the challenges and blessings. When it was over, representatives from twenty-five other churches said they would like to explore doing the same thing in their areas of the city.*

*The next year, the expanded group began to talk about all of the other needs and opportunities they were finding in the local schools; things local churches and volunteers could do. They came up with a list of potential points of service and ministry—key roles that volunteers could play. When they called a working meeting this time, their church list had expanded to more than fifty, and they invited both men and women to the discussions.*

*Within another twelve months, what had started as a small, local initiative from one church had expanded to involve committed believers from more than forty churches volunteering to provide services to parents and children in more than twenty schools.*

*Naomi's small beginnings eventually became a network of God's people who were committed to the young people across the city. Working together, they were able to look at the big picture of children and young people from a Kingdom perspective and seek to implement initiatives that would impact a wide range of the next generation.*

#### *THE CHALLENGE OF POWER AND OWNERSHIP*

Often in city initiatives, particularly if we think of a vision for city-wide transformation and who needs to be involved, it's natural to think of the senior pastors of the larger, influential churches. The local fellowships of believers are the heartbeat of God's community, whether these are small house churches or high-visibility, large congregations with substantial facilities. Ultimately, local church involvement in virtually any collaborative Kingdom city initiative is essential. However, that may or may not be the place to start.

As far as we know, not one of Jesus' disciples had formal theological training. In short, they were ordinary men whose lives were touched, challenged, and changed by the power of Christ. They were ordinary people doing extraordinary things through God's power. The story of Naomi above illustrates the point.

Consider the true scope of Kingdom human resources in your community. Think of the hundreds of influential and highly competent, Kingdom-minded lay men and women in business, education, government, law enforcement, social services, and the legal system. These are people who, day after day, routinely set objectives, make plans, and successfully execute those plans. They have to be able to ask the big picture questions like, "What's going on in our specific sector of responsibility and our surrounding environment that guides us regarding *what* to do and *how* to do it?" They have learned how to engage other resources and work together for common goals. These are the often invisible and overlooked core of God's army in your city.

Then there are the countless parachurch ministries serving various elements of the city's needs—youth and student ministries, ministries for homeless and street people, Christian media organizations, ministries specializing in urban service and outreach, and organizations dealing with specific ethnic groups. These ministries are populated by highly committed, often very experienced leadership and staff. And at the heart of their programs are volunteers from that vast group of lay people mentioned above—God's "invisible army" in the community.

In your city partnership or network you need the widest ranging ownership possible. The effort must be *inclusive*. If it's *exclusive*, it will never get to first base. But often, the apparent power and Christian influence in a community is held by a few senior pastors of large, influential churches. You will be challenged to have these influentials as part of the partnership's guiding team, while engaging the para-church ministries, and the large number of highly competent, spiritually mature laypeople. In an effective city partnership or network, you cannot afford to have power and/or ownership in the hands of a few.



## THE SPECIAL CHALLENGE AND ROLE OF THE LOCAL CHURCHES

Because of the role local churches do play, the perceived authority ascribed to them, and the vast human and other resources concentrated in them, they *must be* part of any plan for spiritual initiatives in your community. At the same time, pastors, particularly senior pastors of the larger churches, are frequently intensely busy, with dozens of voices demanding access to their time and energy.

The senior pastors of the more influential churches in your area need to be aware of what your initiative is doing. Their reaction and vision for the issue you're trying to address needs to be heard and seriously considered. You will need the affirmation of at least a representative group of these pastors. But, typically, they will not be able to give you much time. Their blessing and the involvement of people in their church are likely to be vital to your partnership dreams. Remember that not only do pastors have multiple demands on their time, they have had dozens of well-intentioned individuals bring ideas for outreach or ministry initiatives to them. If your vision gains "traction" and, with that, credibility, you will find the pastors and the churches much more ready to talk.

In some city partnership initiatives the leadership has not felt they could move forward without a high percentage of the senior pastors' blessing *and involvement*. For the reasons already outlined, my recommendation is, while churches, particularly the influential ones in your community, need to be aware and involved at some level, do not be intimidated by their perceived power or influence.

Once pastors are aware of and committed, at least in principle, to the partnership or network initiative, often a way to engage them without placing undue expectations on their time is to establish an advisory board or committee to provide input for your effort. Just make sure that those on such a group are genuine advisors—sought out and listened to, not just window dressing!

This might be a good time to go back and reread Chapter 10 on "Partnership Exploration," which focuses on these issues in much more detail. As you consider who you *really need* in the early stages of your initiative, prayerfully consider the *whole range* of God's people in the city. Remember those that I outlined in the last section on Power and Ownership. Many of your city's less well-known Christians may, in fact, be huge assets to your partnership. Remember: *inclusive* not *exclusive*. Keep in mind this principle from Chapter 10:

### A KEY PARTNERSHIP PRINCIPLE:

- You don't need to have *all the players* ready to talk about possible cooperation. But you *do need* people with a vision for the outcomes, commitment to the idea of God's people working together, and *some* of the agencies, ministries, and their leaders that are *already recognized* as credible and competent in the field you want to reach or serve.

## THE CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINING COMMITMENT

Life is a process, not an event. That is true with individuals, families, and communities. That process of living is, of course, made up of countless events—some large, some small. Events can be a source of inspiration and anticipation, they can be fulfilling or a source of great disappointment. They provide the fodder for our memories—good, bittersweet, or filled with regret. Linked together, they often demonstrate a lifestyle pattern, productive or destructive, whether for an individual or a community.

Much Christian collaboration, just like that in the wider community, has been focused on events. The classic illustration is a crusade by Billy Graham or some other well-known individual or group. Despite best intentions, as we discussed earlier in the book, the partnerships or coalitions that are forged for such initiatives rarely last beyond the event itself. For these events to be successful, these coalitions require tremendous focus and commitment. Ask anyone who has been active on the organizing committee or part of the working team for such an event.

Countless cities have talked and prayed together about the desire to sustain the work of the coalition beyond the event—to further deepen spiritual impact in the community. While the event may have long-term impact in individuals, sustained impact across the city rarely happens. Why is this? Here are some common reasons:

*Fatigue.* Frequently events require people to make an intensive effort over what seems to be a comparatively long period of time. That may be weeks or months. When the event is over, everyone says, “I’ve got to get back to my life!”

*Scale of the goals.* Events usually are associated with special goals for special reasons. Major goals are often established that are only possible because of a highly concentrated effort.

*Diversity of those involved or touched by the objective.* Partnerships, networks, or other alliances are usually most successful when they have well-defined, limited objectives. It’s something we have said again and again in different ways in this book. A Billy Graham crusade, for instance, calls on volunteers across a huge range of age, denominational background, vocational and educational differences. Often hundreds of churches that would never work together under other circumstances are linked to support this event. And the audience the event seeks to influence, hopefully, reflects the city’s diversity.

Developing the vast array of people, prayer, money, and other resources necessary for such an event is a huge, intensive task—usually supported by a professional staff. Structuring some kind of *ongoing alliance* that addresses the tremendous diversity of resources involved and lives touched is almost impossible. Particularly since, once the event is over, the professional support team that served as a catalytic force behind the scenes, guiding and holding the collaborative effort together, is usually gone—quickly. In a sense, the very strength of the event is its weakness for long-term sustainability; its goals are too large and the group it seeks to serve is too diverse.

Again, we see that the more specific the focus of your partnership, the more you can break down the long-term goals into attainable yet clearly valuable elements, the greater the potential for sustainability.

It may be that your partnership or network is coming together specifically to stage an event more effectively by working together. That's fine, just as long as you are aware of the difference between an event and objectives that take long-term commitment.

*Transformation is a process, not an event.* Individuals may have exceptional “Damascus Road” experiences like the Apostle Paul (Acts 9:3-9), in which their lives are turned around in a single experience. But, for even the most deeply committed, our spiritual journey will be a process. As Peter was reminded by Jesus, he would not have to forgive seven times but “seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:22). Likewise, cities may be shaken by exceptional events. *But the fundamental changes that transform and last are rooted in sustainable work, prayer, and commitment over the long haul.* That is why your partnership or network needs to take the long-term view.

Here is a brief checklist you can use to evaluate the sustainability of your partnership or other collaborative initiative in the city:

- Is the goal or are the objectives clear and compelling?
- Have you and your team been able to break down the larger goal(s) into achievable, near- and medium-term elements, where you can see success, mark your progress, or correct your course?
- Have you established a challenging but realistic timetable for action?
- Do you have a prayer team that understands the challenge of what you're taking on and will stand with you through the process?
- Do you and your leadership or facilitation team have a long-term commitment to this vision? Is there going to be continuity? Are you ready to stick with it, though it takes time and you are likely to face moments of great discouragement?
- Is there a growing sense of ownership of the vision among the participants?

Seeing lasting change in cities calls for long-distance runners! Sprinters may be good for short-term project or events. But to see real transformation, your team has to function like long-distance runners. Clear objectives. Deep commitment. Concentration and discipline. Ready to pace yourselves. Clear markers of progress along the way. As God fuels your vision, your spirit, and your energy—jump into the race! We won't ever change the world standing on the sidelines.

The Appendix has books, Web sites, and other resources specifically for those interested in more help as they seek to reach or serve their city.

If you have ever worked in any aspect of the business world, take a look at the next chapter. These principles have practical implications for business and the marketplace. God's principles of Kingdom collaboration are true and applicable everywhere!

