Mission in a Network Society

The concept most frequently used to describe and explain socio-economic trends in the world today is undoubtedly globalisation. This powerful yet ambiguous term is typically used to indicate that individuals, organisations and states in one part of the world are influenced or affected by forces or agents elsewhere on the planet. They are interconnected in various ways, both harmful and beneficial; and will subsequently respond in positive, negative and ambivalent ways.

In this edition of Vista, we focus on one key expression of interconnectedness – the **network**, a form that in some ways epitomises modern society, and has increasingly been used by Christians in service of God's kingdom.

In a world that is increasingly complex, networks "are becoming the paradigm to uncover the hidden architecture of complexity."[1] The last 20 years in particular have seen much progress in network science and theory, allowing a certain level of abstraction and way of looking at the world. Network theory can help us understand how things are related to one another, as well as how groups emerge and evolve.

In a highly influential trilogy[2] published between 1996 and 1998, sociologist and theorist Manuel Castells described what he termed the "network society," a new form of human society that resulted from socio-cultural and technological developments at the end of the twentieth-century. The impact of this network society is hard to overstate, being no less than "a transformation of space and time in the human experience."[3] Individuals experience this through more connections between the local and the global

EDITORIAL

Paul's Gospel Network

Paul's extraordinary success in spreading the gospel among the Gentiles was in no small part due to the network of Christian brothers and sisters who worked with him. Between eighty and ninety people are described as Paul's co-workers in Acts and the NT letters, depending on how broadly we apply the term. Networking has always been key to Christian mission and is the theme of this edition of Vista.

Chris Ducker's lead article introduces the theme of networks, provides a review of the types of networks found in today's globalised world and sets out some of the benefits and dangers of networks for mission. Phill Butler takes this analysis further and considers how networks and their outcomes can be evaluated. He then gives some recommendations for collaborative mission initiatives. And Mark Oxbrow provides a challenge to remember that at the heart of healthy partnerships are relationship-building and shared lives.

Jo Appleton presents the results of our survey of Vista readers and their networks. She sets out the advantages and disadvantages that you identified, and highlights the importance of shared vision and values, leadership and good communication.

This edition of Vista concludes with two case studies. Jaume Llenas and Pedro Tarquís describe the emergence of vibrant media networks in Spain and Katrina Kessler recounts the origins and development of the European Leadership Forum, which enables leaders from across Europe to connect with others in the area of their speciality.

Jim Memory

(leading, to tensions between universal tendencies and local, rooted identities).

The first lesson for those interested in mission within Europe, is that the missional context has changed. Western society is less linear and more multi-directional, more connected, than ever before. Good mission practice depends on understanding our missional context, and that context is increasingly characterised by the networks we belong to, whether personal social media networks or more formal networks linking institutions we work for or with.

Secondly, we should be asking how networks can be established, utilised or harnessed as Christians participate in God's mission in Europe: what do networks help us do (or be)? What might they look like? What problems might they cause or alleviate? And how do we know if they're working? Some of these questions are at least partially answered in the articles that follow.

We can identify at least five major types of network relevant to our discussion: geographical, demographic, denominational, special interest and resourcing (see sidebar).

There will be, of course, variations within these different types of network: they may be predominantly online/virtual, or mainly physical; they may be more or less hierarchical; they may be relatively open or more closed; more or less tightly defined or regulated. Some networks straddle two (or more) of the five types identified here; and we should also acknowledge the existence of meta-networks (networks or clusters of networks), which may connect different regions or diverse special interests.

What are some of the anticipated benefits of such networks? In a recent article on networks across the global church, Kärin Butler Primuth identified three: access to information and resources; opportunities to partner; and leveraging mutual strengths to achieve more together.[4] Aside from these practical or efficiency gains, there is surely a positive missional impact: when Christians, churches and agencies cooperate or collaborate, their unity and mutuality are a positive expression

of the very Gospel they proclaim.

Despite these benefits, however, there are three dangers that we need to be aware of. Firstly, networks have the potential to be exclusionary if they are not connecting all the relevant people: are there barriers to entry that prevent certain types of people from joining any given network? These may not be apparent at first but are worth trying to identify. Secondly, networks may potentially exacerbate the "bubble effect", whereby we only hear from – and engage with – those who are like ourselves. Recent research has indicated that social media networks such as Facebook have contributed to this tendency. And thirdly, we need to ensure that networks are not purposelessly duplicated, instead asking what is the additional value of any proposed network. Not only is duplication inefficient, it can also lead to competition between networks ostensibly working towards the same goals. For networks involved in Christian mission, it is important to recognise each network's particular strengths and contribution to mission, and to develop a spirit of cooperation and collaboration.

A final thought returns us to one of our opening observations: that modern life is increasingly characterised by interconnectedness and what was termed "the network society." The question is whether mission-minded Christians are making the most of existing, alternative networks – outside of the Christian networks outlined here, and elsewhere in this issue of Vista. For all our focus on starting or joining missions networks, are there other ('secular') networks that we could utilise? Joining such networks will at times be more effective, more strategic and more productive than exclusively Christian alternatives: it may be more appropriate, for example, to join a social justice network or group of community activists, rather than creating a parallel (or conflicting) network specially for Christians.

Those who pause to reflect on theological aspects of networks, and their implications, typically refer to one of two passages, each of which conveys

TYPES OF NETWORK

Geographical (e.g. local, national, regional)
Networks based on local, national or regional geographical areas. These have a long tradition and a clear logic; they also tend to be effective at ensuring coverage and representation. Europe-wide examples include EEA and EEMA, and national examples include AEM (Germany) and EZA (Netherlands).

Demographic (e.g. based on ethnicity, gender, age, etc.)
Based on commonalities or similarities amongst participants such as ethnicity, gender or age, for example the Mission-Net movement and congress for 16-30 year olds across Europe. Strengths of this type of network are common identities and, to an extent, shared values and experiences. But there may be a narrowness or lack of awareness of alternative perspectives, given their relative homogeneity.

Denominational
Whilst interdenominational collaboration is certainly a feature of European mission, it is equally true that some networks are based on a shared identity, practice and theology, such as the European Baptist Federation.

Special interest
These networks are a comparatively recent development and based around issues ranging from church planting and unreached people groups, to advocacy, Muslim ministries and refugees.[5] This development means that some forms of missions network have become highly specialised and focussed.

Resourcing
To an extent, all networks are resourcing networks, especially when one considers information and knowledge as a key resource. However, some networks exist specifically to resource individuals and organizations, whether financially or through other means of support, including prayer, training and member care.

a powerful image: the vine and branches from John's gospel; and the church as body in Paul's letters, most notably 1 Corinthians. Each of these images is instructive for Christian networks, communicating a deep interconnectedness, akin to elements of a living organism – and, crucially, connection to Christ. A different but complementary view is to see secular networks across Europe as opportunities to "let your light shine before others" in effective and strategic ways. That is to say, networks are both tools for further mission and mission fields in their own right.

Chris Ducker

[1] Caldarelli, G. & Catanzaro, M. (2012) *Networks – A Very Short Introduction*, p.6.

[2] Castells, M. *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* trilogy – Volume 1: *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996, 2009); Volume 2: *The Power of Identity* (1997, 2009); Volume 3: *End of Millennium* (1998, 2010).

[3] Castells, M. (2010, p.xxxi).

[4] Primuth, K. (2015) "Mission Networks: Connecting the Global Church," *EMQ* 51, pp.214-218.

[5] See www.lausanne.org/all-issue-networks and www.linkingglobalvoices.com for examples.

WHAT IS THERE TO MEASURE IN PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKS? PHILL BUTLER

'There is no other way society will achieve large-scale progress against urgent and complex problems, unless a collective approach becomes the accepted way of doing business.'

Stanford Institute of Social Innovation Journal, Spring 2012

Manuel Castells, the most frequently cited sociologist of our day, states in the preface to his landmark book, *The Rise Of The Network Society*: 'Because networks do not stop at the borders of the nation-state, the network society constituted itself as a global system, ushering in the new form of globalization characteristic of our time.'

The evaluation of effectiveness [in mission networks] is essential to stewardship and is part of the nature of God: planning, executing, and then evaluating. Shortly after what many call the birth of the modern ministry partnership movement in 1986, there was an evident need for evaluation.

Since then, experience of the last 30 years has identified three broad categories that can and should be evaluated:

- The scale of the challenge

- The nature of the network: its development and the effectiveness of its organization and operation

- The nature of the network's outcomes: specificity and realization of stated objectives

By 1990, the emerging partnership movement was evaluating each of these three sectors of information at varying levels of depth and consistency.

1. The challenge: both scale (numbers) and where and who?

The majority of international ministry partnerships over the last 30 years has been focused on some aspect of frontier evangelism. Providing a framework for strategic evaluation was the focus of the early effort of groups such as the Joshua Project, the US Center for World Evangelization (now Frontier Ventures), Operation World, and the research arm of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board. There exists an increasingly definitive database of the 'unfinished' challenge as these groups share information and continue to refine methodology. Currently a global network of researchers regularly track progress and share information to update the databases.

Image: Global Server Nodes Network

2. The nature of the network

Here, two issues emerged:

a. Key elements of effective partnership development could be defined and documented. In other words, progress toward a potentially effective collaboration could be evaluated. These elements are broadly grouped into assessment of three 'stages' of development:

- Exploration (research and due diligence)
- Formation (the critical go/no-go stage based on consensus)
- Operation (clear vision, achievable objectives, and full partner engagement)

b. Key indicators of partnership operational effectiveness were defined. These shape the likelihood of the partnership realizing its primary or other specific, related objectives.

Among those agreed key indicators are:

- Levels of prayer support
- Clarity and specificity of objectives
- Strength and continuity of leadership/facilitation
- Limited achievable, measurable near-term objectives
- Clear definition of timelines and responsibility
- Effectiveness of internal communications
- Levels of partner engagement
- Commitment to regular network evaluation

Examples of both evaluation tools and of objectives set and realized in the two broad categories above can be found at http://bit.do/NetworkEvalExamples.

3. The nature of the network's outcomes: realization of stated objectives

As the partnership/collaboration movement matured, of particular significance was the realization that time and ability to achieve certain objectives was a critical consideration. Collaboration objectives and the potential for their evaluation fell into a range of short to medium-term objectives as well as longer-term ones. Naturally, the formation and effective operation of partnerships fell more within the influence of those working to launch and sustain these partnerships. The 'big picture' outcomes often related to enormously challenging Great Commission issues. Typically, these outcomes called for change of centuries-old patterns and complex variables that were not directly influenced, much less controlled, by the partnerships.

The evaluation of network effectiveness is essential to stewardship

Recommendations on ways forward

1. There needs to be a radical and broad new level of commitment to common working, acknowledging that effectively addressing challenges such as the fulfilment of the Great Commission can only be done collaboratively. In response, ministry leadership, field personnel, Boards of Trustees, and kingdom investors need strongly to affirm, support, and engage in practical collective action.

2. Based on widely acknowledged secular research, funders need to take a serious look at their investments in single ministry, single strategy approaches, as opposed to collective approaches such as effectively operated ministry networks and partnerships.

3. Kingdom investors must get behind specific initiatives to develop common language, categories for evaluation, and standards of documentation and reporting. Their efforts will have a disproportionate impact, certainly 'getting the attention' of field ministry leadership.

4. A global, coordinated documentation of developing and operating partnerships similar to the documentation done from 1990–2000 would provide extraordinary dividends for both operations personnel and kingdom investors alike. This is an ideal opportunity for real collaboration.

5. Working discussions should be launched between funders, ministry leadership, and seasoned partnership practitioners to explore practical action on common vocabulary in defining the nature and specific elements of critical sectors of ministry operations and collective efforts and common standards for evaluation of kingdom-focused collaborative initiatives.

Phill Butler

You may recognise this situation. I have sat next to Clive (not his real name) at many meetings over the years and we talked a lot about ministry. He died last month. Suddenly I realise that I have no idea whether he was married, had children, or where he lived. Did he enjoy music? Where did he worship? Had he experienced serious loss in his life? What were his passions – his temptations? So much I do not know. Sure, Clive was a colleague in mission but I never knew him as a brother in Christ. John (his real name) is an Orthodox priest with whom I have spent very little time over the years but we did spend a night together camping in a rocky field in Alaska and catching salmon on a raging torrent of a river. He really is a brother in Christ.

When Jesus put his team together he was not looking for functionaries who filled person specifications, he called sisters and brothers to follow him into places where 'the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'. He was into relationship building, shared lives, intimacy and self-sacrifice.

No one sat down in 2000 and said we need a global network of mission agencies to focus on issues of discipleship but that was the year that Faith2Share was born. The birth was rather unexpected – six mission executives gathered to celebrate a bicentenary (of CMS, founded in 1799) and out of that fairly intimate union a new life emerged, un-named for four years, but now a strapping teenager named Faith2Share.

The movement was born out of relationships, relationships that mattered, people who liked being with each other and had time to give to each other. It seems crazy now, but at one stage we flew eight CEOs in one small MAF plane to northern Kenya: risk assessment – not a thought, bonding – by the ton, especially as the pilot abandoned his first landing attempt.

Four years into the growth of this relational network we entered a discernment process seeking to discover why God had drawn us together in this way – by this time Africans, Indians, Americans, Brits and others, from Anglican, Evangelical and Independent backgrounds. That process took us two years but gave us firm foundations on which we still stand today. We discovered three things:

- We were together because we shared a passion for seeing children, women and men following Jesus more closely every day – our 'glue' was **discipleship**

- We knew we needed each other, none of us was self-sufficient in mission, we believed that mission is by its very nature collaborative – **collaboration** was our life.

- Together we were excited to see God raising up **new mission movements** around the world – in Bhutan, in Canada, in DR Congo – and we wanted to stand with these movements of the Spirit and learn from them.

Today Faith2Share has grown to 39 member agencies relating to around 600 mission leaders every month and supporting over 7,000 mission workers, but those three foundations remain. Even more importantly, we remain a **relational network**. Your family, your struggle with sickness, your child's exam, are just as important to other members as your ministry or your organisational finances.

What about the pain? Genuine relationships not only embrace joy and pain, they also cause them both, and the relationships within Faith2Share are no different. Together we are committed to struggling with some of the hardest issues in mission today. Financial disparity, especially between our Global North and Global South members is painful, but we try to find ways of dealing with this – with dependency, with the power that attaches to money,

with accountability. Different hermeneutical processes ensure that our theological outlooks, and spiritual disciples, often clash – we must deal with that within the family of Faith2Share, with respect, humility and trust. Models of mission which have worked well for two hundred years in Europe and North America fail to enable others to flourish in mission today – must we face the pain of abandoning old models? By building strong relationships we create a place where it is safe to face hard questions, every to be angry and to be hurt.

To be honest, Faith2Share did not start with theology, but as we have gone on we have come to see that there are very strong theological roots to our commitments to relationality, collaboration and embracing new mission movements (and of course to an over-riding commitment to discipleship). The centrality of relationships is rooted in the personal nature of a triune God and in His mission we first see the collaboration of three persons with one objective – the redemption of all creation. When we add a pneumatological perspective to the *missio Dei* we begin the grasp the importance of moving with the Holy Spirit who is not constrained by our organisational tidiness but constantly enlivens the People of God into new, missional, movements. Our struggle is often to keep up with the movement of God's Spirit in His world.

> **The centrality of relationships is rooted in the personal nature of a triune God... in His mission we see the collaboration of three persons with one objective**

As I have written these words I have been sadly aware that it will be read by some of you who are "Clives" in my life – for that I seek your forgiveness. If you are a "John" to me, I thank you for the pain and the joy and I anticipate with hope the mission journey we continue together, shaped by the relational, collaborative, discipling God who goes ahead of us, constantly raising up new movements by His Spirit.

Mark Oxbrow
International Director
Faith2Share
(www.faith2share.net)

In February/March 2017 we carried out a small-scale survey to find out more about the networks you, our Vista readers, are involved in. 31 people responded, identifying a total of 83 different networks. A full list, with website links where available, is on the Vista blog (see https://europeanmission.redcliffe.ac.uk).

You are from a variety of countries including Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the UK. Regional or denominational networks you identified reflected these locations, and we are aware that there may be other equivalent regional or denominational networks in countries not represented by this survey.

On average, you each belong to 3 networks although some of you are involved in many more. The majority are international or regional, with 'special interest' and church planting coming just after. Many of the church planting networks named could also be considered mission organisations or agencies e.g. CMS, SIM or ECMI, however they possibly are thought of as networks because they have a more decentralised structure than other agencies.

Denominational networks are identified less frequently – is this perhaps a reflection of the move towards post-denominationalism? Of those that are, some are specific denominational networks (e.g. Baptist) while others are groupings of independent churches with similar theological viewpoints e.g. FIEC (Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, UK) or FIEIDE (Federation of Free Evangelical Churches in Spain).

Fewer of you belong to virtual or age related networks. It could be said that age related e.g. youth networks could be classed as special interest, although a youth network could include a variety of streams such as leadership development, evangelism and social action.

Types of networks you belong to
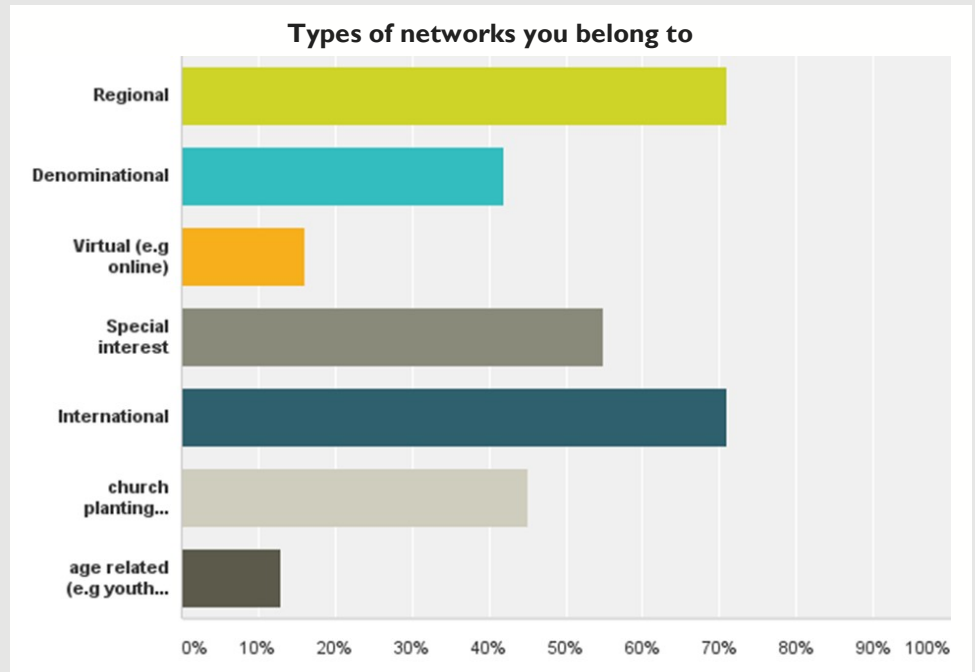
And given that as the majority of you feel that meeting face to face is a key ingredient for building a successful network, it is no surprise that not many of you are member of virtual (e.g. online) networks.

Advantages and disadvantages of networks

Where a network is international, you feel it 'gives a global view of God's mission' and allows cross-regional co-operation and worldwide contacts.

Where you feel isolated in your day to day role, being part of a wider network may bring encouragement, friendship, inspiration and support. For some, membership of a network also brings legitimacy to your ministry, for example one respondent explained that "Our Union of Churches is a full member of *Fédération Protestante de France*: Advantage is national recognition by French authorities."

While specialist networks allow a specific focus on a particular area of ministry (for example Refugee Highway Partnership or SAT7), you generally see networks allowing the sharing of different perspectives, ideas, best practice and information. "It brings resources

The majority of you feel that meeting face-to-face is key for building a successful network

together, making possible what would otherwise be impossible," said one respondent.

Take this one step further, and depending on the type of network, they allow the pooling of resources, training or advertising job vacancies or sharing the cost of events among organisations within a network. They are also perceived to enable creative solutions through access to people and know-how. Indeed, for one respondent, this has resulted in significant culture change:

"Our church's contacts with other Free Churches in Germany and USA in particular, has led to changes in our Union, to help us change our fundamentally traditional and stagnant culture into one of healthy missional churches."

However, all of this takes time – which you cite most frequently as a disadvantage of belonging to a network, particularly when face to face meetings are involved: "Finding dates people can do, getting everyone there and following up when all work is pretty much voluntary is challenging."

Alongside this – and perhaps particularly when membership is voluntary, if one or more members lack commitment to the network, it can be frustrating for everyone

else and slow things down. It can also take longer to reach consensus and move forward.

With so many networks, there is also the risk of duplication. "We have to work together with other networks to ensure complementarity rather than duplication," explained one respondent.

So what makes for a successful network?

'Relationships, relationships, relationships' commented one of you, while another said 'relationships that are respectful, compassionate and which honour the Lord'. This includes other elements of good relationships which you identified: trust, openness, the ability to listen, sharing unselfishly and good communication.

But in order to make this happen you highlight the need for some organisational structure (no matter how organic). Organisationally there are three broad categories that your responses fitted into:

1. Shared vision and values

'Without vision the people perish' it says in Proverbs, and for a network to thrive, there needs to be a clear aim and shared vision for why the network exists. Otherwise, as one of you observed, it is a 'waste of time.'

Some of you felt 'meeting like-minded people' or even a 'common theological framework' was required, and cited difficulties in belonging to a network which was not evangelical in focus. This may be more of a requirement in some types of network e.g. denominational, than in others which are predominantly focused around an issue. It is also possible to have differences of opinion within the framework of common values, and several of you felt that a 'plurality (to a certain extent)' and 'using the diversity of members' gifts' were key ingredients. The phrase 'iron sharpens iron' comes to mind, and if your relationships within the network involve mutual trust and respect, it can be strong enough to allow a frank exchange of views and the ability to agree not to agree.

Image: Wikimedia Commons

2. Facilitation / leadership

While a network may begin as one or two people's 'good idea', you've already said that it takes time and focus to make them happen. You identified leadership as an important factor – although this is most likely not 'command and control', rather facilitation, and providing direction to the group. Depending on the size and reach of the network, you felt that having a team to carry out some of the administration for network events and to be a central contact point would enable smooth functioning.

3. Good communication

Any relationship rises and falls on the quality of its communication. As already stated, you prefer networks allowing face to face meetings. Where this takes the form of conferences or events, your preference is for annual or six-monthly events, with expert input and plenty of time to network and meet people in the programme.

Between times, you want to be kept up to date with relevant and useful resources – either through a regularly updated website or newsletter or where appropriate or phone/Skype Calls, WhatsApp messages etc.

> **In 1 Corinthians 12, God's people are likened to a 'body' – we independently and as groups play a part in God's purposes**

Of course, networks are not a new idea – Paul's letters were written to networks of small groups across Central Asia and Southern Europe – creating vision and shared values, giving leadership and fostering good communication.

In 1 Corinthians 12, God's people are likened to a 'body' where we need one another, and each of us – independently and as groups – play a part in God's purposes. Being part of a network allows this to happen – as one of you summed up so succinctly:

"There is so much more that we can do together that none of us could do independently."

Joanne Appleton

Is there any other network that, in terms of its geographical extent and its ethnic, cultural and generational diversity, can compare to the church of Jesus Christ? The church was designed by God himself to be both one and diverse and that is how it should function in practice. At one and the same time it is a decentralised yet cohesive structure that enables every Christian to share in one Spirit and be a child of God through Jesus Christ.

When the church is artificially centralised so that it takes the form of an institution it may seem stronger but it is also more fragile and vulnerable. Decentralised structures, where the "intelligence" is dispersed across its members, are better able to cope with times of difficulty, such as persecution or marginalisation. In the early years of the church, when it was concentrated in Jerusalem, the authorities attacked it seeking its destruction. Yet its unintended result was to disperse the church such that it set the world on fire. The power of the church isn't in the centre, in the institution, but rather in the living reproducing life of each cell, every Christian. When decentralised organisms are attacked, they become stronger since persecution only makes them disperse further. With centralised organisms, the opposite occurs. If they can't repel the attacks, they die.

The Spanish Evangelical Alliance seeks to function like a network, a movement. Its purpose is to promote and make visible the unity of the church, facilitating mission that society itself might be transformed. Rather than bringing together institutions, denominations and hierarchical organizations so they can be even more powerful, it seeks to mobilise individual Christians into action and provide, as we like to put it, a dancefloor where partners in mission can find each other.

In order to promote unity, it is essential to put a spotlight on what is happening on the stage. So the Alliance doesn't draw attention to itself, but rather to what is happening on the stage. It also functions like the

Image: Public Domain

spotlights that illuminate a building at night. If they are oriented correctly, what is seen is the building not the lights themselves. The basis for promoting unity is that the dancefloor or spotlight are barely visible but that the results of unity are clearly seen: the joint projects that are part of the mission of God that brings about the transformation of society.

Jaume Llenas
Spanish Evangelical Alliance

A practical example of this paradigm is how our media platform functions as a network of networks. I am writing from my experience as the founder of *Protestante Digital* and Evangelical Focus. *Protestante Digital* began some fifteen years ago and today has more than a million visits a month.

Jesus said to his disciples that they should be fishers of men. A fishing net is a beautiful metaphor for our current initiatives in media and social networking. Like a fishing net, a network must be solid and well-constructed, one that is highly professional and not just happy with saying "well, it is for the Lord". It doesn't have to be perfect but we should always be aspiring to doing our job in the most excellent way possible.

At the same time, it should be connected to other networks so that it can cover as large an area as possible. A small net has its uses, as does a

fishing rod, but it has very limited potential. This is the case for many ministries which, for one reason or another, whether out of fear or preference, refuse to be associated with others who are fishing in the same waters.

In my experience the real problem is due to the design of the network, specifically in two aspects which might appear contradictory but are in fact complementary. The first is the avoidance of pyramidal control. The second is the establishment of solid working criteria that are journalistically, theologically and spiritually robust.

In our case, we are a professional media network run by evangelical Christians but with an open perspective on the context in which we operate and drawing from a broad range of evangelical and non-evangelical sources, especially in regard to current affairs.

On the other hand, our statement of faith and our ethical framework are those of the Spanish Evangelical Alliance, which acts as a Council of Reference when doubts arise. These establish the boundaries of our position on certain issues and the worldview within which we operate.

With these fundamentals, we can propose strategic alliances, establish joint projects with other groups and networks, and know when we should reject proposals of collaboration.

As a result our media group has prospered, but at the same time we have established solid collaborative

relationships with other media networks across the world. Consequently, our resources and results have been multiplied way beyond what we imagined at the beginning.

Of course, as with all living things, there are surprises, doubts and complex situations. Yet we see these as positives: we would rather this than live in the sterile peace of a lonely graveyard.

Pedro Tarquís
Protestante Digital/Evangelical Focus

The Spanish Evangelical Alliance was created 140 years ago as a fruit of the World Evangelical Alliance established in London in 1846. Its members are evangelical Christians from the majority of Protestant denominations and theological persuasions with the purpose of demonstrating unity, promoting mission and transforming society. *Protestante Digital* is a Spanish EA digital media project which seeks to reflect those objectives of unity, mission and transformation. It has become the most widely used evangelical digital media platform in Spanish, not only among evangelical Christians but more broadly.

Two years ago, an English language equivalent was launched with the same vision: *Evangelical Focus*. Alongside these we have developed a collaborative internet radio platform *Global.Radio.FM.*, and an annual award, the *Unamuno Friend of Protestants Award*, which is bestowed on an individual or non-evangelical organization which has made a significant contribution to the integration of Evangelical Christianity in Spanish society, and which brings together professionals from the world of media and politics and evangelical leaders at its annual ceremony.

GOSPEL UNITY: THE RELATIONAL NATURE OF THE EUROPEAN LEADERSHIP FORUM   KATRINA KESSLER

In Philippians, Paul exhorts believers to set aside their differences and pursue unity in their "partnership in the Gospel."[1] Over the past 15 years, the European Leadership Forum (the Forum) has brought together hundreds of Evangelical leaders from over 40 countries at its annual conference and year-round events in pursuit of this Gospel unity.

The Forum attempts to minimize the conflict and divisions caused by denominational or cultural differences by grounding the Forum content in core biblical principles and by pointing participants toward a united vision of re-evangelizing Europe and renewing the biblical church. Out of this conference has come a partnership movement – an estimated 850 events, seminars, and speaking engagements occur throughout the year in participants' home countries as a result of connections formed at the Forum annual meeting.

The European Leadership Forum came out of a desire to cultivate relationships. In 1999, after completing his PhD and then spending 3 years as COO of an investment firm, Greg Pritchard began teaching at colleges and universities across Europe. Within a matter of months, Greg met two Christian counsellors who had been in

European Leadership Forum Meetings, Poland 2016

Image: European Leadership Forum

ministry for over a decade and were wrestling with the same challenges in the midst of a secular culture. Even though these two leaders lived only two hours apart, they had never met each other. Greg was struck by this: *"They couldn't help each other. They couldn't share best practices. They couldn't encourage each other."[2]*

Greg realized that the problem of isolation for ministry leaders was pervasive across Europe. Greg brought this problem to Nick Nedelchev, then president of the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA), and asked if the EEA could start Europe-wide networks for leaders to connect with others in their area of specialty. Nedelchev agreed

The Forum seeks to create a place to foster life-long friendships, regional ministry partnerships and continent-wide collaboration

with Greg that such networks were necessary and asked him, "Could you help us do this? Could you start an annual conference with networks to unite and train leaders?" In response in 2002, Greg gathered a group of European leaders to plan and host an apologetics network for over 100 apologists from 20 countries.

The leadership team Greg brought together for this conference had a strong sense afterwards that the Lord had used the apologetics network in a powerful way, and expanded it into an annual meeting with multiple networks to train leaders in different callings. The Forum annual meeting has now grown to 28 networks and will host over 740 hand-picked leaders from 50 countries in May 2017.

The Forum seeks to create a place to foster the life-long friendships, regional ministry partnerships, and continent-wide collaboration necessary to work towards the vision of re-evangelizing Europe and renewing the biblical church. The networks allow participants to learn from and connect with others in their field to be trained, supported and encouraged in their ministry calling. Participants have the opportunity to receive formal mentoring from an experienced leader. Through casual conversations with other leaders, participants receive a broadened perspective on the powerful ways in which God is working through other ministries, organizations and churches across Europe.

A commitment to sacrifice is a crucial part of the Forum's collaborative nature. Network leaders and speakers volunteer their time and resources throughout the year and pay their own conference and travel costs in order to train and mentor others at the Forum. In this way, leaders come to the Forum both to receive encouragement and to serve the body of Christ. This posture of service does not end after the Forum annual meeting. All participants are expected to share what they have gained with their churches and ministries.

The impact of the relationships built at the Forum extends far beyond the annual meeting. According to research at the 2016 Forum, participants form an average of 7.4 new significant relationships as a result of the Forum.[3] These relationships increase collaborative ministry efforts across Europe. Because of their involvement in the Forum, 84.9% of Forum participants say that they plan to connect with other participants to build new ministry partnerships.[4] Many Forum leaders travel and provide unpaid speaking events, training, and mentoring to other leaders from the Forum and their communities throughout the year.

Finally, five National Forums modelled on the European Leadership Forum have replicated this concept in order to

Delegates of the European Leadership Forum

provide contextualized training and networking opportunities to even more participants in their native country and language. One of these Forums, the Russian-language Eastern European Leadership Forum, has over 600 participants with network tracks unique to their cultural context.

God is working through the relationships formed at the Forum to encourage European Evangelicals and to reach nonbelievers with the good news of the Gospel.

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[1] Philippians 1:5.

[2] Pritchard, Greg. "European Leadership Forum Vision and Strategy." 25 May 2013. FOCL Online. <http://foclonline.org/interview/european-leadership-forums-vision-and-strategy>.

[3] An independent research firm, Dialogues in Action, conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the Forum in 2016.

[4] Research by Dialogues in Action.

The European Leadership Forum is sponsored by the Forum of Christian Leaders. To learn more about the European Leadership Forum, visit their website at euroleadership.org. To access their resources year-round, visit foclonline.com.

Vista

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Please Note: The views expressed in Vista are those of the authors of each article and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

Image: European Leadership Forum