Local Networks: A Way Forward to Finish The Task

I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one-as you are in me, Father and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. …So they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. **May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me…**

John 17:21-23 (New Living Translation)

Context

We live in an era of networking and collaboration. Networking and collaboration have become very common in the corporate and political world, government, and public sectors. In the Christian world, over 500+ international, regional, country, and local networks have emerged to focus on unreached people groups, regions, and issues. This collaborative mindset has advanced the Gospel to unreached peoples and places. This increased connectivity gives Kingdom workers access to more information, trainings, and resources.

In India, there are several large, countrywide networks. These networks have made a great impact on mission organizations and churches. At a regional level, this has helped move the Gospel from South and Northeast India to East, Central, and North India. This has also helped the Gospel move into both low and high caste communities. Moreover, an increasing number of leaders across India now understand the value of networks and collaboration. While this helps grow the movement, in a big country like India, capacity, resources, and influence of these countrywide networks at the local, grassroots level remain limited.

The last two decades have seen the development of a new model of collaboration with the emergence of statewide and local networks (local networks being made up of a few districts in a region of a state). These networks have emerged out of local leaders and locally-led ministry organizations' need for close and regular fellowship, encouragement, and help in times of crisis.

With the coordination of these networks, the Gospel is progressing from towns and cities to rural areas, where most people in India live. Even though this is a significant emerging phenomenon, there has not been intentional effort to identify and strengthen these networks.

Only in October 2016 was the first national summit organized in Nagpur for network and partnership facilitators from different regions of India. Now, a strategy is unfolding to identify and train regional and local network leaders. I am sure, if a survey is conducted, multiple networks in each state of India will be discovered.

The rest of this article describes these networks, their needs, and how we can recognize and help these networks grow and mature.

EBC and Other Examples from Bihar

In December 2008, a network, Empower Believers Connections (EBC), was launched in Bihar state to meet the needs of locally-led ministry organizations and advance the Gospel. Beginning with just 20 partners, this network has grown to partner with over 65 ministry organizations. We have seen leaders maturing, thousands of new worship groups emerging among unreached peoples, ministry moving

towards self-sufficiency, and communities transforming. Leaders who felt alone and isolated now feel connected, supported, and highly motivated.

During the EBC network leaders' meeting at the end of 2016, the Lord led us to discuss strengthening local networks in Bihar. All the leaders agreed and affirmed that the Lord is inspiring local leaders to be a united witness in their communities. We have a plan to strengthen the six local networks on the map.

One incredible example of these emerging local networks happened in Bihar. In 2015, the EBC team was exploring partnerships in the North Bhojpuri districts. Colleagues and I met with a group of leaders who described their networking efforts and their vision. They had formed a network of leaders working in three districts: Saran, Siwan, and Gopalganj. These network leaders meet once every month to share stories, pray and encourage one another, and share resources and connections. They have a goal of seeing 10 percent of the people in their region become followers by 2025. This is a purely local initiative without any direct outside involvement or motivation. In the past, some outside organizations betrayed these local leaders, so they created a local network to unify and help each other. We were quite surprised to see their network and their vision. This is God's work. It took some time for us to gain their trust, but now we are partnering with them and they are very encouraged.

Another example of a local network's impact took place in 2014. During Christmas, activists attacked a worship group in the Magadh region, severely harming the local followers. When they appealed to local government officials, they were ignored. Assessing the situation, several leaders, trained in collaboration skills, gathered other organization leaders and organized a peace march in the town. Over 1,000 followers joined the procession. When attackers saw the unified crowd, they stopped attacking local believers. The network allowed organization leaders to take the initiative to demonstrate unity in a time of crisis.

Yet another example is the Patna Christian Leaders Fellowship (PCLF), a network of leaders belonging to different organizations, churches, and denominations. We meet once a month for mutual fellowship, prayer, and encouragement. We also have a WhatsApp group, which helps all of us keep in regular touch. In the midst of the recent socio-political scenario, this network is playing a vital role in encouraging kingdom workers throughout Bihar.

Why Local Networks?

1. **The number of worship groups and leaders have increased significantly**. They feel the need to have regular fellowship, encouragement, and help in times of crisis. This desire has resulted in the formation of natural informal networks across multiple districts.

2. **Country and statewide network leaders live very far from one another.** Because of distance, the clash of schedules, and the lack of funds for travel, frequent network meetings are often not possible. Leaders can only meet 2-3 times a year, or on special occasions. Distance and the inability to fellowship regularly creates a gap in the lives of leaders, especially when they struggle with local issues. In contrast, local network leaders can meet regularly without having to travel far. Living so close together also makes these networks more functional and lively.

3. **The work of many ministry organizations is growing rapidly.** Because of this exponential growth, the needs of ministry organizations increase day by day. Increasingly, they expect their needs to be met by state or nationwide networks, and even global or international networks. In many cases, needs such as fellowship, training, learning opportunities, and finance cannot be adequately met. In this situation, local networks are often able to supplement a local ministry organization's needs where the larger networks are not able to help.

4. **Independent churches in a network can be in active fellowship with other churches and can receive financial help and theological instruction from recognized network leaders.** Even if they are not organized as a denomination, they are taken care of and can be part of the larger Christian community. Moreover, in this structure, each believer gets opportunities to exercise their gifts.

5. **It's a natural way to organize things that can be grasped by the average Christian.** When organized around local relationships, resources, and needs, networks make sense to people and are simpler to build and sustain.

6. **Local believers have much in common**. Believers in local networks share a common locality, witness to the same community, and feel many of the same local pressures. Thus, it makes sense to work together.

7. **Local issues are best addressed locally.** Local issues, such as persecution, can be best handled by local leaders. They understand the local needs and often the best way to address them. They also often have the relationships necessary to find a workable solution.

8. **The presence of a local witness strengthens the credibility of the Gospel.** A local witness is not seen as coming from the outside, preventing the church from being blamed for sponsored conversion. Local networks are visible expressions of prayer offered by our Lord in John 17:21-23.

9. **Locally-networked churches have greater energy, creativity, and adaptability.** Local churches have greater motivation and ownership to spread the Gospel. With training in collaboration, local leaders can help believers and churches work together to have a bigger local impact and witness. They can keep the movement going until the task is finished.

Biblical Example

We should consider how the early church was organized. John Edmiston[i] in his book entitled, *Beyond Denominations – The Networked Church,* describes four kinds of local church networks that were present in the New Testament.

1. **Ethnic network:** This was a network between Hellenistic Jewish Christians and Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christians, and between Jewish and Gentile networks in Rome. Current examples are the Sindhi network and the Lingayat network.

2. **Citywide house church networks**: Churches within a city were well connected to one another, even though each house church was an autonomous body. Any happenings spread very fast to all the churches by word of mouth.

3. **Regional and national networks**: Several examples from the Bible where city churches were networked together include: Northern Galatia (Galatians), Crete (Titus), and Asia Minor (Revelation).

4. **Intercontinental networks:** The networks above were all well networked through apostolic-type leaders like Peter and Paul.

As we talk about local networks, we envision creating similar to citywide house church networks. These state and nationwide networks would be connected through church and organization leaders, whereas, churches in local networks are connected both through leaders and individual believers.

Challenges

1. Statewide/national networks or ministry organizations may see local networks as a threat, thinking they demean or lessen their value and function. (In reality, local networks, being on the ground, can fulfill the vision and purposes of the state and countrywide networks. In other words, if state and countrywide networks want their vision fulfilled sooner, they should intentionally focus on strengthening and resourcing the local networks.)

2. Many denominations and ministry organizations restrict their groups from interacting with other groups belonging to different denominations and ministry organizations.

Conclusion

International and national networks are fairly common, while the emergence of local networks is a recent phenomenon which needs attention. Early churches were organized around local networks, which provided great opportunity to spread the Gospel. Today, if we want the Good News to reach the unreached peoples, we should strengthen local networks.

For training on networking and partnership:

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Note: This article is taken from *New Wine Calls for New Wineskins* written by Chandan Kumar Sah and is available on www.amazon.in. You can read more articles on current issues at www.easternwind.org

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[i] John Edmiston, *Beyond Denomination-The Networked Church*; page 7-8; http://www.ntslibrary.com/Beyond_Denominations.pdf