

WORKING WITH OTHER CHURCHES

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. – *John 17:21*

One of the greatest ways churches can witness to the love and power of Jesus Christ is to work together. On a large scale this is often done by joining together in denominations or associations. Within a city or town this cooperation often takes the form of pastors meeting together, to pray for one another and plan cooperative ministries.

Denominations and Associations

Denominations are large formal groups of many churches. The pastors and churches share a common theological viewpoint and a common understanding of how churches should operate. There is usually a commitment to follow certain rules, and a means for disciplining those who break the rules. Sometimes the denomination plays a role in assigning pastors to local churches.

Associations are similar to denominations in many ways. The main difference is that an association usually has less authority over local churches, because membership is voluntary.

You or your church may already be part of a denomination or association. If you are not, most such groups would be happy to have you join them if you feel so led.

On the other hand, many pastors and congregations prefer to remain independent. They may object to what they see, often with good reason, as wasteful bureaucracy and interference from afar.

In many people's minds, independence is always a good thing. Why would anyone choose to come under the authority of some national or international group of churches? But let me suggest three reasons why banding together with an established group of other churches may make your church even better. I'm not trying to push you one way or another, just give you something to think and pray about.

Resourcing

One advantage to families of churches is the opportunity to pool resources. Such things as missions and relief work, pastoral training, curriculum development, pensions and benefits for pastors, and even purchasing of common supplies, can often be done more efficiently and less expensively by a large group of churches than by an individual congregation. A given church may only be able to offer a few dollars to a particular cause, but when that few dollars is multiplied by hundreds or thousands of churches, a lot can be done.

Voice

Jesus taught us to pray, *Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6:10, traditional Lord's Prayer wording). Often the conditions that make earth different from heaven are systemic issues that are too big for one congregation to tackle. Whether it's advocating for religious freedom or seeking justice for an oppressed minority, government and the press pay attention to numbers. A pastor who can say, "I represent a denomination of a million people," is likely to receive a better hearing than one who says, "I represent a congregation of

forty-three.”

Oversight

How do you and your people know you’re preaching and teaching orthodox gospel truth, instead of just your own understanding (or misunderstanding) of the Bible? How do you know you or your church are not accidentally violating some new law? Where do you go when you have a question about the appropriate way to perform some church function?

We already looked at the value of ordination: somebody is willing to stand behind you and say, “We’ve examined these pastors, and we’re ready to testify that they’re solid, they’re trained, they’re ready, and you can trust them with your church and your eternal salvation.” Often an established denomination may have better resources than an independent local congregation, and perhaps higher standards, for selecting and preparing people for that statement of confidence. And they probably have a tested process for investigating allegations of heresy or ecclesial wrong-doing, and meting out appropriate discipline and rehabilitation.

Submitting to oversight is not an admission that somebody with a more impressive title has a better line to God than you do. It’s a confession that it’s just possible that you might not know everything, you might not always hear from God 100% clearly, you might not always do everything right. In the New Testament, the words of the prophets are subject to the other prophets (1 Corinthians 14:29). Even Paul submitted his preaching to the oversight of the other apostles (Galatians 2:2; Acts 15).

Other Churches in Your Area

There are things about being a pastor that only other pastors can understand. There are things about ministering in a particular community that a pastor or denominational official who has never worked there can never appreciate. And Jesus said the way Christians show love for each other will be a powerful witness (John 13:35). For all these reasons, one of the most important things

you can do as a pastor, for yourself and for your ministry, is come together with other pastors in your area.

When the Bible refers to the church in a given city, it's not usually talking about a single congregation, but a collection of what we today would call house churches. Meeting in different homes, they inevitably developed slightly different ways of doing things. Still, all were part of the same body of Christ (Acts 2:46; 1 Corinthians 16:19).

In the same way, all the local Christian congregations near you, even with differences in the details of belief and practice, make up the church of your city.

What I'm saying is this: those **other pastors and churches aren't your competition. Your competition is the world, the flesh and the devil. The other churches are on your side.**

John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop because he wasn't in our group." "Don't stop him!" Jesus said. . . . "Anyone who is not against us is for us." - Mark 9:38-40

Local ministerial associations can have some of the same advantages in their area as a denomination has on a larger scale. As you identify needs in your community, your churches can work together to meet them. As you speak with one voice, you can influence local laws and policies. And as you get to know and trust each other, you can hold each other accountable

Prayer support

I have been part of a number of ministerial associations in different places over the years. Some were very effective; others were little more than social clubs. In my experience, those that were most helpful to me and effective for the community were those where we really prayed for each other.

Nobody understands the challenges of being a pastor like another pastor. That means nobody can pray as specifically and effectively for a pastor as

another pastor. You may disagree about the sequence of events at Jesus' second coming, or whether communion bread should be cut or broken. But as long as you are all preaching Jesus Christ according to the Bible, you are all on the same side. As much as you can, you need to be working together. And that starts with praying together.

Pray for each other personally. Pray for each other's families. Pray for each other's ministries. Pray for each other's churches. And don't just do this once a month when the ministerial association meets. Take time during your church service to pray for the other churches in your community. It will help them, as prayer always helps, and it will send a powerful message of unity to your people and anyone who visits.

Cooperative ministries

Are there any homeless people in your city? Are there children who need after-school care while their parents work? Are there any children who can't go to school at all? Are there refugees? Are there adults who don't know how to read or write? Every town has problems like this. And probably every church has Christians who say, "Something should be done to help these people. But what can one church do?"

One church may not be able to do a lot. But what if all the churches in an area work together? What if you and the other pastors choose one project, and all cooperate? You can make a difference in your community. And your community will notice.

Joint worship services

There are reasons why all the Christians in a given place don't worship together all the time. It may be too far to travel. It may be details of doctrine or church governance or worship. It may just be that your members prefer your style of preaching, and others prefer someone else's style. For whatever reason, most of the time we worship in our own congregations.

Every now and then, however, it can be a wonderful thing if the different

churches in an area can come together in a joint worship service. Imagine all the local churches in your city joined together to sing and pray and proclaim your mutual commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ. It probably wouldn't work on a Sunday morning, but it might on Good Friday or Christmas Eve, or on a national holiday, or even just a random evening. Your members could be greatly encouraged to see that there are more believers in their city than just your own group. And it's a great testimony for non-believers to see the unity of the church.

Mutual accountability

One of the mysteries of God is that he uses fallible human beings to do his work. That includes us pastors. We are subject to weakness and temptation just like everyone else.

One of the great advantages to praying and working with other pastors is that you can hold each other accountable. The more you pray together, the more you talk together, the more you laugh together, then the more you will trust each other, and the more you will turn to each other for help when you are faced with these things. It's amazing how just knowing that someone else is watching out for you can help you resist when temptations come.

But what if that isn't enough? What happens if a pastor is accused of misusing church money, or behaving inappropriately with a church member, or some other sin? I think you'll agree it's best if you can resolve the issue without bringing some kind of criminal charges. And what if the accusation is doctrinal instead of moral? You don't want the government making rules about how you run your church or what you believe. Yet **the members of a congregation should never have to sit in judgment on their own pastor.**

Ideally, the denomination or group that ordained the pastor should have a process for investigating and handling such issues. But if they don't, or if the church members are the ones who ordained their pastor, then the other pastors of the area may be best suited to handle the situation. But this can only really work if the pastors have already built up a relationship of mutual trust by praying, fellowshiping and working together. Otherwise, there can

be a strong temptation to try to take advantage of the unfortunate situation by luring away the members of the affected church.

Church hoppers and con artists

I heard a story about a man who was marooned on a desert island for several years. Among other things, he occupied his time in building. When he was finally found, before he left he wanted to show his rescuers the various structures he had made. They recognized his sleeping area and his kitchen and the hut where he stored coconuts, but there were two buildings they couldn't figure out. One, he told them, was his church. And the other? "Oh, that's the church I used to go to."

Wherever you find two or more churches, you are likely to find people who left one to attend another – often several times. Some of these people are genuinely looking for the place God wants them to worship and serve. Some may be upset about something that is actually a misunderstanding, that could easily be cleared up if the pastor only knew. And some are chronically unhappy people who leave a trail of conflict behind them.

When the pastors of an area talk to each other and trust each other, they can help each other with all these people. If someone visits my church but is clearly looking for something more like what you offer, I can recommend your church, and vice versa. If someone comes to my church because of something they think you said or did, I can let you know so you can clear up the misunderstanding. And if someone leaves my church after spreading conflict and discontent, I can warn you about them.

The same is true of con artists. Some people have genuine needs, and meeting those needs can be a fruitful area for local churches to cooperate in ministry. But some people just tell sob stories in hopes that the church will give them some money, and they tend to tell the same story to every pastor in town. When pastors work together they can identify these people, so they can use the Lord's money to help those who are truly deserving.

Multiplying Your Church

When God is sending revival, there may be so many people coming to Christ so fast that existing churches are overwhelmed. It happened at Pentecost, when three thousand people came to Jesus in one afternoon. Thousands more were added when God healed a lame beggar (Acts 4:4). Throughout church history there have been times and places in the world where evangelistic meetings and movements resulted in hundreds, if not thousands, of new believers.

Just in the last 250 years, for instance, America has experienced the First and Second Great Awakenings, the camp-meeting movement, the Pentecostal Revival, and the “Jesus Movement,” as well as the mass crusades of preachers like Billy Sunday and Billy Graham. In recent decades the ministry of Reinhard Bonnke in Africa has had huge effects.

We praise God for such preachers, but God doesn’t always use a big name. Often he uses people you and I will never hear of until we meet them in heaven. In parts of South America today, churches are multiplying so fast that you aren’t even considered a pastor if you haven’t planted five or ten congregations. In these situations, the problem is not drawing people to the Lord, but conserving the fruits of revival.

When I was a young pastor, I read stories of those revivals as if they were what God expected from me and my church. Over time I came to realize that these are the exception, not the rule. Absolutely we should study revival. Absolutely we should pray for a revival. Absolutely we should be prepared to minister if God sends a revival. **If you aren’t preparing for what you are praying for, are you really praying in faith?** (See Acts 12:5 and 15.)

But the fact is, for whatever reasons, most of the time, in most of the world, church growth doesn’t happen like that. And I think that’s alright. After all, when Jesus taught about the growth of the Kingdom, he didn’t describe an explosion. He said it would be like a seed growing, or a batch of dough being leavened – slow, often not very obvious, but happening nonetheless, in God’s own good time.

I don’t know if God wants you to be a famous evangelist preaching to

thousands of people in sports stadiums. If he does, praise the Lord! What I do know is that God wants you to be faithful in whatever he calls you to do.

That's why you should **prepare now for a great harvest in the future.** What will you do if God chooses your city for the next big wave of revival? You may only have thirty people in your church right now, but in the next five years each of those thirty could be needed to care for a group of new believers, and train them to care for the next wave. Who knows? It may well be that God is just waiting to send revival until there are workers trained to care for the baby Christians (Luke 10:2). It's your job to prepare those workers. Then, whether the growth is explosive or slow and steady, you will be ready. The harvest will not be lost.

Addition or multiplication

In America, churches of over one thousand people are called "mega-churches." Around the world, some churches are much larger than that. These churches can do wonderful ministry, and I praise God for them.

At the same time, I don't believe God wants every church to become a mega-church. Some studies have shown that five churches of two hundred can be more effective in reaching people and advancing the Kingdom of God than one church of a thousand. And there may be situations in which twenty churches of fifty people can be even more effective.

Does God want you to keep adding people to one congregation? Or is he calling you to form them into new congregations, perhaps in different places or with different styles or targeting different people? There is no one right answer for every pastor and congregation. Even for the same church, God's strategy may change over time.

If God is calling you to continue growing one congregation, there's not a lot I can add to what you already know. Questions of staffing, building use, and congregational care will arise, but by the time they do, you will be able to afford the kind of specialized training that will help you answer those questions. What I can do here is suggest a few possible scenarios if God is calling you to grow by multiplying congregations instead of adding new

people to your existing group.

What does multiplication look like? You could start a satellite location. You could plant a daughter church. You could start home groups, with the goal that they will grow into congregations. If you are in a place where there are few churches or Christians, you could be called on to provide support and oversight at a distance for someone who came to Christ under your ministry, but lives in an area without a local church.

Whether these new groups are the result of a carefully executed strategy or they just seem to happen, you need a plan to train the people in your church to take on the responsibility of discipling and caring for these new groups. You need a plan for how the resulting groups will relate to each other. And you need a plan for how you will exercise oversight over these groups.

Satellite locations

A satellite location is your church holding services in two or more places. Depending on distance, available people, and technological resources, you could preach at both locations at different times, or you could designate a pastor to preach at the new location. You could even use video of you preaching in one place to be seen and heard in the other. Satellite locations are clearly one church in two or more places. They use the same church name, the same general style, and major decisions are made by the same leadership group under the same lead pastor.

Daughter churches

Daughter churches are churches planted by your church with the hope that they will become self-sustaining, autonomous congregations. Most daughter churches start when a group that has been traveling some distance to worship grows large enough to start meeting on their own, closer to where they live. Others are started as intentional missional outreaches to an under-served area or people group. In either case, as with a satellite location, you may consider asking a certain number of your people to volunteer to form the

core of the new congregation for a period of time, until it's established.

House church networks

Throughout history and around the world, probably more Christians have worshipped together in small groups in homes than in designated church buildings. Certainly this was the case in Bible times and for the first few hundred years of the church. It's also true wherever Christians have been unable to build or rent buildings dedicated for church use, whether because of persecution or economics. Even in places where church buildings are free and plentiful, many Christians prefer the unique dynamics of a small group meeting in a home. One of the best ways to multiply your church may be by establishing a network of house churches affiliated with your church.

Most churches have small groups of people who meet together for Bible study, prayer, fellowship, some kind of service or mission, or a combination of these. Often these groups meet in homes. What is the difference between one of these groups and a house church?

Small groups, sometimes called cell groups, usually have one main function, such as Bible study. Fellowship, and sometimes prayer, is a by-product of getting together for the main purpose. In many cases they have a limited span of existence – a certain number of weeks, or until a certain study book or task is finished. They usually meet on weekdays. They are clearly a ministry of a particular church.

House churches, on the other hand, are intended as **fully functioning local churches**. They often meet on Sunday morning. They include worship, preaching, prayer, children's ministries, Bibles studies, and mission or service projects. Depending on the size of the house, they may run from four or five up to perhaps thirty people. Usually they include a group meal after the service. The close fellowship that develops through this is one of the major draws. Another is the fact that there is almost no "overhead cost" to operating a house church; the leaders are all volunteers and the meeting space is donated.

When house churches stand alone, they can be limited by their small

numbers and lack of resources. Also, the person doing the preaching may have limited Bible knowledge or training, and there may be limited oversight, if any. This can sometimes lead to unorthodox interpretations or dangerous practices. But if your church intentionally starts a network of house churches, these problems are alleviated. They can band together for projects, pool their resources for missions, and you as the establishing pastor can provide doctrinal and practical training and oversight.

I already mentioned that the New Testament church met in this way. Let me give you one other historical example.

The English church in the 1700s was by and large very formal, very much about appearances. The idea of a personal, loving, two-way relationship with God was a foreign concept to most English church members. Then a young Anglican priest named John Wesley was invited to a Bible study. His journal describes his experience this way:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

Wesley immediately started preaching about his experience. Many who heard him had the same experience of true faith. The numbers soon grew too many for Wesley, and the few pastors who joined him, to adequately care for the new believers, especially as the movement spread to other towns and villages. So Wesley turned to the Biblical model. He had them meet together once a week in somebody's house. Sometimes an experienced layperson from Wesley's group would feel led by God to move to where the new group was and take leadership. Sometimes a person from within the new group would show leadership skills, and Wesley would recognize this and appoint them as

leader. Wesley or one of the other actual pastors would travel around to visit these new churches. Since they rode their horses to visit a circuit of house churches, they were called “circuit riders.” Once a year they all got together to pray and discuss ministry matters.

Where there were no churches, the circuit riders started them. Where churches had been planted, they visited when they could, to preach and teach, deal with matters of church administration and discipline, and perform weddings and funerals. When the circuit rider wasn’t there, the laypeople went ahead and had church without them.

They were, in effect, a network of house churches. The fruit of this network can still be seen in the Methodists and other Wesleyan denominations.

This model worked well in the civilized environs of England. It was even better on the American frontier in the 1800s. With modern transportation and communication technologies, it could work still better today.

House churches are great for identifying and raising up potential leaders. A small group of people in a living room feels like a safe environment for a first-time preacher or worship leader. But **every church or home group does need oversight** by someone trained in theology and church history, as well as the practical points of running a church. This kind of knowledge can help leaders recognize mistakes or wrong directions before they become too big to easily correct. If local leaders don’t have this training, they should be clearly accountable to someone who does.

Points to Remember

- Joining together with other churches can provide resourcing, voice and oversight.
- Nearby pastors should be supporters, not competitors.
- Cooperating in ministry with other churches can strengthen all of you.
- You can multiply your ministry with satellite locations, daughter churches and networks of house churches.