

Forming New Partnerships: What We Have Learned at Partners International

Partners International has more than 65 years experience of discovering, growing and launching sustainable indigenous ministries, through partnering with non-Western ministries. The purpose of this document is to capture some of the lessons-learned and to serve as a guide for our team to help us move forward in the same direction.

Relationship – The Starting Point

Allen Finley, the first full-time President of PI, often said that ministry is about “relationship, relationship, relationship.” Partnership works so much better with those you know. No amount of written documents that supposedly clarify what each partner will do can succeed if there is not a bedrock of trust. This goes both ways - we need to help our partners know us as much as we need to know them.

It is rare for PI to take on as a new partner someone who contacts us directly. Rather, our Area Directors who reside in and are experts on different regions of the world are out on the field getting to know local ministries. They learn about groups that they think we should consider. They spend time developing a relationship, hearing their stories, praying, drinking many cups of tea, dreaming together and encouraging them before there is any talk of a formal partnership.

Occasionally a partnership is highly recommended to us by others and appears to be a good fit for PI. Even then an Area Director needs to visit and start relationship building; we do not take on any partnership that has not had first-hand field research by the Partners International Area Director for that region.

The most foundational element of our ethos – and the thing our partners appreciate most about us – is that we want to hear their vision of what God is calling them to do. Usually, their experience by far is that agencies from the West already have in mind some methodology to try in context of the local partner. In our experience, it is safe to say that it is unanimous among our partners that they don’t want that. They want partners to be sure, from the West and non-West, but they want people who will come and get to know them and learn first what they, and God, are already doing. Only later, out of a mutual friendship, comes the time to talk about what to do together. We have found that often potential partners are looking for a servant and participatory relationship, not a business venture.

Strategic Fit

We obviously don’t have the capacity to help everyone. So we need to choose. The first consideration should be one of strategic fit – is the potential partner interested in the same things we are? Are we called to the same things they are called? Is God leading us in the same direction?

This is where our mission statement is important:

Partners International is a global ministry that works to create and grow communities of Christian witness, in partnership with God’s people, in the least Christian regions of the world.

As well as our vision statement:

The vision of Partners International is to see a hurting world transformed by the power and love of Christ. By advancing a global network of partnerships, we envision thousands of growing, vital communities of Christian witness bringing real hope and real change to the least Christian regions of the world.

Together with locally-led ministries that are living out the Great Commission and Great Commandment, we serve the physically deprived and the spiritually hungry in the “hard places” of the world. Where there is darkness, we bring the light of Christ. Where there is misery and suffering, we bring compassion and relief. Where there are deserts of despair, we create life-sustaining oases of hope.

From Morocco to Malaysia, from Beijing to Bangalore, our passion is to bring real hope and real change through real partnership.

Some things that stand out from the two statements above that apply to partner selection include:

- *...create and grow communities of Christian witness* – we are looking for partners whose main focus is to plant and grow the church. Almost any ministry can say that their work somehow helps this to happen. For PI, we prefer partners whose work intentionally results in planted churches rather than just having an indirect effect. What is meant by a “church” is determined by the context – in some difficult regions, home meetings with just a few families may be all that is possible.
- *...in the least Christian regions of the world* – every country, even the United States, has unreached people groups living in their midst. In order to create more focus, PI has chosen to work in what we call the “least Christian regions” of the world. To us, this means countries where the predominate religion is not Christian. Most of these countries are in or near the 10/40 window. We place a priority on work in East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Middle East, North Africa, and Islamic parts of West Africa and the Horn of Africa.
- *...together with locally-led ministries* – There are many fine Western ministries and Western-led initiatives to the non-Western world. Non-Western initiatives are very effective and under-resourced. Our emphasis for more than 65 years has been to assist non-Western, locally-led ministries. This means the leadership and board of the prospective partner is made up of local people and the vision is one that came out of the local context.
- *... are living out the Great Commission and Great Commandment – The Gospel is, and has ever been holistic, but ministries might not be.* We seek ministries who have a holistic approach, meeting both spiritual and physical need as integral aspects of their approach.
- *...by advancing a global network of partnerships* – our partners are our peers, they are not organizationally somehow under the direction of Partners International. They make their own decisions about who to work with, and we encourage them to partner with others as well who have needed resources or expertise. Similarly, we also take

- initiative to draw other organizations, Western and non-Western that could be helpful to the partnership.
- *...real hope and real change* – this is not a vague concept to us. We measure the outcomes of our partnerships according to the following criteria:
 - *Lives* – won to Christ, disciplined in Christ
 - *Leaders* – identified, trained, mentored
 - *Churches* – planted, growing, reproducing
 - *Communities* – transformed with Kingdom values

The priority is to seek partners whose ministry is involved in all of these areas rather than those that specialize in one area.

Each region that Partners International works in has an Area Development Plan (ADP) that is created by the region's Area Director. Partners approach to each individual region is guided by the Area Development Plan (ADP). The ADP provides the regional strategy and objectives of the work Partners is engaged in. It outlines types of future partners to be considered and future areas of expansion that have been identified as strategic. The ADP is used as a road map in alignment with the Partners mission and vision to provide guidance in identifying and forming new partnerships.

Types of Ministries that We Seek for Partnership

Any group exploring a partnership with Partners International will want to get to know us better and will have in mind some expectations that they feel we should be able to meet. This is appropriate, as partnership is different than general fellowship in the body of Christ, in which we should all strive to be one and to encourage each other as we can. In partnership though, the relationship should go further to have specific expectations of what the partners can do with each other to help achieve the common objective.

In that spirit, Partners International also has in mind expectations for our partners. Over time we have learned what kinds of groups are likely to work well in partnership with us. The following points are additional criteria to consider besides the major emphases on relationship and strategic fit described above. There are many fine ministries that aren't right for us, or for whom we aren't right for them.

1. **Cultural identification** – we look for ministries that are close as possible to the language and culture of the people being reached. In the few places where no close-culture partners are at work, we are willing to consider working with non-Western groups that may come from a distance but as much as possible still share cultural similarities with the local people.
2. **Broad partnerships** – we might help various organizations in one way or another, like through an invitation to a training seminar. But we use the term “partner” for those organizations who want to have a deeper relationship and benefit from many of the resources that we can provide, like seed funding for projects, organizational development assistance, professionals that provide short-term assistance in their areas of expertise, or learning exchanges where non-Western ministries with similar needs can come together to share and benefit from each others' experiences. How all this will work is documented in a written “Partnership Development Plan” that is

discussed between the local ministry leader and board and the Partners International Area Director for that part of the world.

3. **Organizational structure** - we look for partners that are well organized and have their own, indigenous accountability structures (board of directors or an equivalent). The board should be informed, involved, and consider itself ultimately responsible for the work. We don't recommend that Western organizations partner with ministries overseas who are supposed to then be accountable directly to the USA entity rather than to local people who are part of the community. We also don't recommend working directly in long distance cross-cultural partnership with individuals who are not part of a local organization that is accountable to a local body.
4. **Doctrinal stand** - the ministry's theological position must be compatible with Partners International's Statement of Faith. We use the same Statement of Faith as the World Evangelical Alliance, as that is a well-worded, broadly-accepted statement of evangelical Christianity that is known and used across the world.
5. **Developmental mindset** – we seek partners that are interested in learning new approaches and growing in their organizational capacity, and are open to how partnership can help them make these advances. We also seek partners who are ready to share what they have learned with others in similar situations.
6. **Supplemental funding** – we look for groups that are doing all they can to raise up local resources, and are looking to Partners only to supplement what they are already doing in order to accelerate their work.
7. **New opportunities** – we seek groups that are poised on edge of unique opportunities for unusual breakthroughs and need partners that can help them take advantage of the open door.
8. **“Seeds” of the future**- for new partnerships, we favor developing ministries who have the potential to become leading movements of the future as opposed to establish work that is already mature and likely is already well connected.
9. **Non-formal approach** – Though we know the impact of many fine institutions, for new partnerships we lean toward those whose approaches don't take an institutional approach to solving problems that involve costly structures and staffing that might be better served by mobilizing the church or the community to address the issues.
10. **Past performance** - it is generally preferable to partner with ministries with a record of proven results that have demonstrated the commitment to forge ahead with whatever resources they already have available rather than a group with a vision for something but with no track record.
11. **Holistic approach** – we prefer ministries that have a vision for both spiritual ministry and holistic projects that serve the local people, believing that Christian witness in difficult places for ministry often require both in order to transform a community.
12. **Accountability** – we partner with leaders with an eagerness to be accountable to their local board or a similar local accountability structure and transparent with us, even as we strive to do the same with them.
13. **Goals** - should be clear, measurable and achievable.
14. **Policies and procedures** - while they may be very basic, particularly for small ministries, they must be adequate enough to guide the workers and to provide a system of accountability for the organization.
15. **Personnel** - the staff must be adequate in both number and skill to accomplish the ministry's intended goals.
16. **Local credibility** – other evangelical leaders who know the ministry should be able to recommend it without reservation. There should also be a solid base of local

- people who believe in the ministry and are involved with it, giving of their time and finances.
17. **Cooperation with other local groups** - it should be determined whether any significant tensions exist with other ministries in the area, and whether the ministry is actively working in partnership with other groups.
 18. **Legal standing** – except in some situations where Christian ministries have no choice but to be underground or work without officially approved status, the ministry should be legally registered, have permission to receive funds from outside their own country, and property should be registered in the name of the ministry and not in the name of an individual.
 19. **Other existing relationships** - if the ministry is asking for assistance in the USA through groups in addition to Partners International, there must be clear communication about what aspects of the work are being assisted by each organization to avoid the appearance of parallel assistance for similar projects. Also, though we do partner with groups that have multiple connections, it is generally our preference to seek out under-represented groups who might be more in need of someone to come alongside to help them. Over time, as the partner grows, we expect and encourage them to increase their involvement with other partners besides Partners International, locally and internationally.
 20. **Partnership both ways** – we seek groups who not only are aware of the kinds of help they need but also what they can give. Every partner has things to teach to other ministries like theirs as well as to USA resource partners interested in their work. Because of the latter, though it's not essential, it is helpful if the ministry has someone with the skills to communicate with churches or small groups in the USA in order to build the sense of partnership with those groups.
 21. **Reporting ability** - there should be an eagerness to provide regular and timely reports for those who assist the ministry in English, including audited reports of how funds were used.
 22. **Partners International's capacity** - in addition to all of the above, it is equally important to evaluate Partners International's capability. Are we ready and able to take the time to maintain a good relationship with the prospective partner? Are we ready to learn about their vision and work, to stand with them when they need us, and to seek out the kinds of help they need?

Clearly, all prospective partners might not strongly have in place all aspects mentioned above. They should all at least have a start along the way, to have some minimum capacity in each area that shows they are ready for an in-depth, cross-cultural partnership, and willingness to develop further in areas that need strengthened.

Partners International has much experience in partnering with ministries that need to be very careful due to security situations in their countries. We will work with those organizations to know how best to help without putting ministry personnel and programs at risk.

Steps Toward Partnership

Partnership is complex and not everything proceeds in tidy steps. Specifics for each step of the process are included in the International Ministries department handbook, but generally, most partners go through this route:

1. Developing a relationship with Partners International's Area Director for that region

2. Completion of a New Initiative Profile and Organizational Maturity Levels form to be sent to Partners International headquarters office.
3. During the first phase that might last from one to three years, Partners International gets to know the ministry and they are getting to know us.
4. If it is decided to move to the next level, then completion of a Partner Ministry Profile form and the sending of it to the Partners International headquarters in the USA
5. Review of the profile by Partners International staff, consulting the recommendation of the Area Director
6. Work with the Area Director on a Partnership Development Plan that describes how we will move ahead together.
7. The anticipation of a “launching” stage of Ministry Partner development, which is mutually defined between the ministry and Partners leadership.

Outcomes of Partnership

Partners International desires to see our partners develop to the point that they are able to sustain and grow their ministries through a strong base of local and international relationships without significantly relying on Partners International or any one group. When this point is reached we can celebrate what has been accomplished, still maintain a relationship, but spend more of our energies on other emerging groups. It is Partners International’s expectation that our longer-term partners, those that have grown significantly, can also help us in the discovery, growing and launching of ~~with~~ newer, emerging groups.

Ultimately, partnership is about Partners International and a ministry partner working together in advancing God’s kingdom, serving each other towards mutual accomplishments. It is about growing together and learning from one another as stated in the Covenant of Partnership:

The best partnerships arise out of rich relationships based on shared passion, mutual goals, and much time spent together. There is no greater work of partnership than the building of relationships in love by which all peoples will see Christ.

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