

10 Fruitful Practices of an Urban Diaspora Collaboration
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1. **Get strategic prayer engaged and maintained.** This is a spiritual enterprise, not a business partnership. You need to get prayer involvement early and throughout the process as you *will* face spiritual opposition. The enemy will not give up ground easily. Consider that God sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus' coming. In the same way, God may be directing His people to stretches of strategic prayer before the conversations about a coalition might begin.

In Houston, when we had our first coalition meeting, Rickie Bradshaw of KSBJ radio told me about the years of prayer work that had been going on for the city. He said, "Don, you may be here today in response to the foundation of prayer that has been laid up to this point." He talked to the group about how important it is to follow the pattern of repentance from John the Baptist's ministry in order to see the fruit come in.

This was instructive to me about the importance prayer and repentance as a foundation before collaboration can be built. In fact, whenever you hit roadblocks, let that be a reminder to go back to repentance and prayer to get breakthrough.

2. **Meet with strategists vs. practitioners.** Practitioners are those who are directly engaging in daily evangelism, discipleship, and church planting (or other direct-ministry functions). They are so engrossed in their important relational ministry that they often don't have the bandwidth or skill set to enter into a city-wide strategy or coalition.

Let them stay in their lane and focus on their relationships and invite someone else from their organization into the collaboration's conversations. These would be Executive Directors, Vice Presidents or CEO types. They have the skill set to see the big picture and help network silos together without getting bogged down in the details.

Also, practitioners are so committed to their ministry philosophy, that coalition meetings can get de-railed by debates about tactics or approaches. We had a meeting where people started debating which disciple-making strategy was best. It took up 1/3 of the meeting before I could get the ship righted and move on, and it did little to build comraderie in the long run.

Make sure you keep meetings focused on the bigger picture and do not let tactical issues be on the agenda. If tactical details do need to be discussed, offer to help navigate them through separate outside meetings.

3. **Start with more small group meetings than large group meetings.** Spend most of your time in 1-1 or small group settings where you can let people be candid about their concerns. If you bring too many people into large groups, you introduce potential for cultural misunderstanding, awkward group dynamics, posturing, and rivalries that can slow down the process. It might seem logical to get everyone in the room to form collaborations, but that can be counter-productive. It is often more efficient to meet with members individually to build trust and participation.
4. **Broaden your ecosystem beyond what seems obvious coalition membership.** Make sure you include all aspects of the diaspora, not just refugees or immigrants; think about professionals (business, diplomats, medical professionals), and don't forget international students. Seek diverse involvement of all ethnicities, church sizes, and parachurches.

Actively seek out involvement from the Black and Hispanic church, as well as diaspora churches. Help them think cross-culturally beyond their own communities. Offer to train their leaders and parishioners to pivot into the changing demographics where their church is located.

Seek involvement from DMM/organic churches as well as megachurch and legacy churches. Seek the inclusion of existing city-reaching networks like Movement Day or City-Reaching. Don't limit yourself to Christian ministries who will be coalition members but think about who can help your coalition without being a member: local government, academia, and even secular social agencies; anyone who might give information, resources, or guidance. Include simple activities like patronizing diaspora-owned businesses or restaurants.

Encourage involvement from Perspectives in the World Christian Movement or Kairos. They have current and former students who may be looking for a way to be involved right in the city where they live.

Include prison and re-entry ministries in your coalition. Prisoners who get good bible training during their incarceration become excellent cross-cultural evangelists because they learn how to minister among a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, and have learned how to suffer for their faith. When prisoners are released, they need 12-18 months to adjust from prison culture to the outside world,

so churches can play a part to help former prisoners transition to civilian culture before being more involved in diaspora ministry. Contact us at Completion Global for details on how to implement prison and re-entry ministry.

In your coalition, include basic orientation to world mission awareness. Many believers have not been taught about the Great Commission, let alone understand how the mission field has come to their city. Provide basic tools to help pastors and small group leaders orient their people to basic mission through organizations like MomentumYes! and EveryInternational.

Include urban ministries, trafficking and other specialized parachurch organizations who can put believers' gifts to good use in diaspora ministry. Include other non-apostolic opportunities such as administrative support, demographic research and technical support.

5. **Keep the group focused on the objective.** Be aware that some may attempt to use the coalition as a platform for their own ministry or philosophy. Others will drift into areas that are beyond the scope of the coalition. Remember your focused task; this is an urban diaspora coalition, not a group to do everything under the sun in your city. Respect their goals but gently re-direct them back to the coalition's mission and vision. Frequently remind members of the purpose.

In most of my emails to the Houston Diaspora Coalition, I put the mission statement at the beginning of the email as a header, and in every meeting, we open with the reading of the mission statement to keep the main thing the main thing.

6. **Expect to make progress in a zig-zag fashion.** This kind of work rarely moves forward as the crow flies, so be ready to take three steps forward and two steps back. Move in incremental steps and don't get discouraged by setbacks. If this was easy, it would have been done before. You are in new territory, so be patient with yourself and others.

Always be in the mode of continuous evaluation and learning. Ask others what they thought of the meeting just concluded. Evaluate each activity even when you thought it went fine. Be guided by the Spirit to know when to let things simmer and at other times when to turn up the heat. In God's history, He was willing to wait long centuries before moving ahead. There was 400 years of prophetic silence between Malachi and John the Baptist. So sometimes waiting is the best thing you can do.

Sometimes, I have felt like our collaboration in Houston was getting stalled and losing momentum, so I was tempted to get things moving. But God is at work even when nothing is happening on the surface. Sometimes as a collaboration leader you need to let things simmer so people and organizations can develop their own burden for the collaboration. You can jump in too soon. God may be letting people experience the frustration of working in isolation until they are ready for greater collaboration.

You want to build participation from others, so if you do too much, members will let you do the work. Sometimes you need to let things stay undone until someone steps forward to take ownership. On the other hand, you may need to step in and take initiative.

In Houston, we suggested the development of a website for member organizations to recruit workers. Nothing was happening. After a time of prayer, I sensed that the members needed a visual example of what I was describing before they could endorse it, so rather than continue to wait, I hired a young person to help me develop a website to show them what it would look like. I was the best person with the overall vision to show what it looked like.

Sometimes you need to wait and let it simmer; other times you need to turn up the heat. If you wait too long for them to participate, they may never get involved; if you act too soon, you may create too much dependence on you. Trust in your calling, believing God wants to get this formed through you. Ask the Lord. Do your best to follow, learn from mistakes.

7. **Use minimal structure and avoid complexity.** Don't build any more structure or hierarchy than is necessary. Try to err on the side of less structure than more. Fight against bureaucracy, policies, formal agreements, or rules. You want to make it easy for people to participate, contribute, and try new things.

When you make it difficult, people will not engage. Keep it simple. One way to employ simplicity is through the use of pilot projects. Rather than launch into something on a large scale, test it out on a small scale, work out the bugs, and then roll it out.

Don't let people kill the energy by quoting past historical failures, their expertise, or their seniority. It is good to be informed by the past, but not to be limited by it. What failed before might work this time. Look out for bottlenecks created by pride or insecurity.

I have worked with groups that were so intent on controlling everything, it made them nearly impossible to collaborate with. They put in place several systems and policies that restricted good ideas, stemming from a root of insecurity and fear. Make sure you act out of humility and generosity or you will kill the collaboration.

Let people form other networks without feeling they are in competition. If you hear of a competing group, avoid jumping to conclusions. Investigate the facts to make sure this is the case, because it might be a misunderstanding. If there is another potential competitive group, pray and then consider if the two groups can find a way to move ahead by complementing each other.

In Houston, I heard about another coalition, and upon further investigation, found they were focused on training rather than broad diaspora collaboration, so we included their network with ours and are proceeding in unison rather than competition.

8. **Utilize broad evangelical commitments to manage theological differences.** In this age of so many forms of bizarre theology, it is important to be clear about the essentials to be faithful to Jesus. There are several solid statements of faith available, such as Lausanne or the National Association of Evangelicals. But I recommend you use the Nicene Creed as your statement of faith because it is the one statement agreed upon by all the branches of the Church and predates denominations.

When I was with World Impact, we developed what we called Urban Church Associations. Church leaders from different denominations or theological traditions could meet together, share resources, and help each other do ministry among the urban poor in their community. These pastors found it helpful to associate with each other because of the common challenges they experienced serving their under-resourced communities. Oftentimes, their denominational leadership did not know how to advise them in regard to urban ministry and they did not have the financial wherewithal to take advantage of denominational opportunities for training or conferences held at expensive retreats or event centers.

So these Urban Church Associations had pastors from various denominations, representing a wide variety of bible-believing organizations. While we wanted to allow them to retain their theological distinctives, we knew we also needed to have a statement of faith that articulated a shared theology. So we adopted the Nicene Creed as a way to give membership access to this wide array of solid churches. So, using the Nicene Creed is a proven way to allow for wide participation in urban collaborations.

9. Accelerate horizontal communication versus vertical communication. McChrystal, in his book “Team of Teams,” gives several helpful principles of effective engagement that apply to your coalition’s formation. One idea is what he calls “horizontal communication.” Horizontal communication is information sharing across organizational lines.

For example, a church planter with Pioneers communicates directly with a field worker at a local ESL ministry. This is in contrast to vertical communication, where the church planter communicates up to her agency supervisor, who then communicates to the ESL’s executive director, and then the information goes back down to the ESL field worker.

Encouraging horizontal communication increases efficiency and empowers ministers to make collaborative decisions closest to the problems. This also creates an agility to adapt to rapidly-changing conditions without having to go up the chain of command to make decisions.

Encourage coalition members to increase their horizontal communication with each other by training their field staff to share information with their counterparts on the field. Organizations can have horizontal communication, but so can networks. Try to help local, regional, and national networks make connection with each other, where information can be exchanged.

10. Consistently communicate key elements. Remember you are thinking about the coalition every week. But as it is forming, the members may not think about it in between meetings. Report progress and give appreciation for those who are participating. Remind people where the coalition is on the “map.” Provide qualitative milestones leading to the completion of the coalition’s task and where they are in that process. Remind members to be confident in the Lord and His desire to reach the nations. Stay focused on the big picture.