

Collaboration as a Necessity to Starting and Strengthening Churches

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If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” This African proverb summarizes an attitude we learned quickly when we sought to start and strengthen churches in the city of Berlin, a secular, post-Christian capital in the most atheistic part of the world¹ where Christians are the minority. Though many in Berlin retain formal church membership and vestiges of Germany’s Christian heritage remain evident, regular church attendance in Berlin is estimated to be as low as one percent. In certain areas in former East Germany only a few dozen people may attend church in districts of several hundred thousand.

“What is a pastor?” was the first question our mailman asked after we moved back to East Berlin in 2004 to start churches. Most Germans are not in contact with active Christians who can articulate their faith, since such expression was discouraged by the secret police in East Germany and remains culturally inappropriate in Western Germany more broadly. Church buildings continue to occupy central locations in many towns that comprise Berlin, but the churches themselves have very limited influence in a city dominated by naturalistic, secular, and progressive worldviews.

The church’s declining influence has produced a survival mentality, in which protecting one’s own congregation often eclipses the desire to be missionally active. Churches that do seek to reach out to their com-

¹ See Tom W. Smith, “Beliefs about God across Time and Countries,” NORC at the University of Chicago, April 18, 2012, http://www.norc.org/PDFs/Beliefs_about_God_Report.pdf.

munities have had to learn how to start and strengthen churches as an under-resourced minority community. In order to regain a hearing for the sake of the gospel, many churches have had to learn how to form coalitions and partnerships not only with other Christians but also with secular and civic leaders and organizations.

In this article, I share the value of collaboration through ministry experiences in East Berlin, offer a biblical and theological rationale for such collaboration, and conclude with a set of questions for reflection. My hope is that readers will be encouraged to invest in collaborative partnerships in their own ministries.

“We Need Your Help”

In my experience, the humble confession “we need your help” has proven to be one of the most effective tools for mission and collaboration. I learned this lesson in collaboration in 2009. The year before, our church plant had hosted an exhibit of lithographs from Marc Chagall’s painting of the Old Testament cycle of fall and redemption. This was an effective way to engage an intellectual, atheistic, and art-loving audience in gospel conversations. While the art outreach was a success by some measures (even the American actress Katie Holmes attended), it followed a fairly traditional model of self-sufficiency. We held the event in our own facilities and pulled it off with our own volunteers, through our own limited means. After much sweat and preparation, we opened the doors to present our great exhibit/event/product to an outside audience. We did not realize that we overworked our people and degraded those with whom we sought to connect as mere consumers and spectators.

My paradigm shifted in 2009 in a quarterly meeting of local business and cultural leaders, a group I had formed years before for the sake of collaboration. I suggested we repeat the Chagall exhibit with a different theme. My suggestion was well received, as the event had given some pride to the larger community. But then this paradigm-shifting sentence came out of my mouth: “We cannot do it alone this year. We need your help.” Because we were able to identify the many areas of need to offer the event, local car rental companies, marketing companies, and civic organizations took ownership of the project, and the exhibit became a community event, not simply a church event. Collaboration happened on personal levels as well, for example when the daughter of the car rental owner, an art student at Humboldt University who had transported the pictures from Western Germany, began to give tours of the Exodus Cycle.

The simple admission “we need your help” turned consumers into

participants and provided many conversations on various levels. It even led to my performing a wedding years later for the leaders of the North Berlin business association. “We need your help” is countercultural to Western philosophy of ministry, which is often individualistic and self-sufficient. However, the humility of asking this question led to very fruitful collaboration and relational evangelism in the years that followed. “We need your help” has created—in this order—a coalition, deeper relationships, and a right to hear and to speak the gospel in this context.

“We need your help” also has practical application in the context of evangelism and starting churches, which are inseparable in a secular context like Berlin, where growing a church depends on evangelism. Every couple of years our church plant was visited by a student choir from (now former) Grace University in Omaha, Nebraska. The old ministry paradigm would have led us to utilize this amazing choir to host an attractional concert, inviting not-yet believers to enjoy the performance. In a city that offers around one thousand cultural events daily, attempting to attract people to such an event would be a bold endeavor without participation from the larger community.

The game changer was a newspaper article in which we communicated the need for families to host the singers. Within only a few days, thirteen, mostly atheistic, families had called offering to house a pair of students. What a wonderful opportunity to visit the potential hosts at home, hear their stories, and build relationships. The families were happy to help and were proud to offer a room, often in small Berlin apartments, meals, and enthusiastic city tours. The gospel was shared not at the concert alone but through one-on-one interaction, as host families looked through pictures of the singers’ families and churches and heard their personal stories. For some hosts, that was the first time a Christian had ever stayed at their home. After the choir left Berlin, the local church could follow up on the new collaborative relationships. Some have hosted several teams over the years.

Our approach to summer vacation Bible school provides another example of the benefits of collaboration. Rather than simply producing our own flyer to advertise a church-run vacation Bible school week—when neither the event nor the flyer would have been welcomed by atheistic families—we instead created a network of secular educational organizations who offered art classes, English camps, and drama clubs during the summer. This network was united by the shared desire to advertise our respective summer programs and by the vision to serve parents by providing a helpful overview of all summer events in our part of town.

We created a “Ferien [vacation] in Pankow” flyer and a website that listed all summer programs and events, including the Christian VBS. While no school would have forwarded our VBS flyer to students, this overview was highly demanded and recommended by the schools.

Forming a coalition of partners required an initial investment of time and effort, but it proved to be far more effective in the long run. The cooperation extended beyond shared marketing. When we learned that the art school could only offer classes in the morning because of a lack of afternoon teachers, the church and a mission team jumped into the collaborative effort by working with the kids in the afternoon. This resulted in many great relationships and conversations with only a fraction of the effort that went into hosting our own VBS.

Collaboration in Church Planting Efforts

Collaboration has been essential to our church planting efforts as well. Before we even gathered our core team, the twelve founding members of Kirchehoch3 (then FeG Berlin-Pankow), we made sure other partners were ready for the ministry marathon of building relationships and planting a church in atheistic Eastern Berlin. The first global team was a team of individual prayer partners: one hundred people from five different continents who committed to pray daily for us to “plow the concrete” seven days a week (thus the group name “pankow7hundered”).

Within the first months of church planting we hosted the first Pankow Partner and Vision Days. It was a conference with representatives from our German sending denomination (Bund der Freien Evangelischen Gemeinden, sister church to the ECC), two West German partner churches, and three American partner churches as well as individuals from the United Kingdom who were considering moving to Berlin. This was our first coalition of this collaborative church planting effort. We explored the needs in Berlin-Pankow, praying about what would be needed to reach this part of Berlin, which was home to about 120,000 people in a two-mile radius, and we listed the combined recourses of our various partners. We have repeated Pankow Partner and Vision Days in 2008 and 2012, both because this collaboration continued to strengthen the young church in the subsequent phases and in order to nurture the relationships that have developed among different partners.

All along, Kirchehoch3 has been waiting for opportunities to start its first daughter church. For just over two years, efforts have concentrated on another Northeast Berlin neighborhood, Karow. This too is a collaborative effort of international ministry teams, such as ECC Serve

Globally missionaries Greg and Kristi Faus, the leadership of a refugee camp, social workers, and local church leaders. We know that young Christians from other cultures can reach atheistic Germans in ways other Germans cannot. We also know that a church started solely in a refugee community would not be very sustainable. However, the collaboration of recent migrants, long term German residents, and some established internationals proved to be a very strategic, synergizing effort that painted an inviting picture of the diversity of God's children and his kingdom.

When we move beyond asking, "How can we strengthen our own church?" or "How can we plant one daughter church/campus?" and begin to ask, "How can we start a church planting movement in our city?" broad collaboration is inevitable. In Berlin, church planting leaders from different networks and denominations started to dream together and plan what it would take to assist each other, initiate prayer, recruit church planters, coordinate training modules, and host shared gatherings for the planters in the city. With the support from our interdenominational, collaborative city network *Gemeinsam für Berlin* (Together for Berlin) and other networks and mission organizations, I am helping coordinate some of these efforts and we will launch several city-wide church planting events in 2021.

Biblical and Theological Basis for Collaboration

After looking at these practical examples, it is fair to ask whether the rationale for collaboration is merely pragmatic. Is collaboration only a circumstantial necessity due to our small number of Christians, churches, and ministries—and therefore optional in contexts where the Christian community is larger and resources do not have to be shared?

The term "Christian community" suggests already that collaboration is central to Christ's intention for the church, that faith activities in isolation were never God's design. This can be observed in the Trinity, in the Old Testament people of God, and in the body of Christ. Often the "one another" of New Testament exhortations is applied within one church or within one small group. I believe the body of Christ in one city or country broadens the reference of that metaphor and calls us not only to a recognition of others but also to actively seek unity between churches and larger networks of believers such as denominations. Christ's prayer that the church be one (John 17) and Paul's body metaphor (1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4) serve as a basis for collaboration. The call to good stewardship of God-given talents (Matthew 25) stands at odds with the prevalent individualism in some church ministries. The world

can be healthier and more fruitful if the church connects outside the body of Christ.

Is there any basis for collaboration with secular organizations, public services, or individuals of other faiths or no faith? Here I am challenged by the incarnational approach of Christ himself whose rescue mission on earth happened among the people he came to save. For at least parts of his ministry, the Son of Man, had no place to “lay down his head” (Luke 9:58); he was dependent on the mercy and collaboration of others. He expected the same of his disciples when he sent them out with little resources in search of “a person of peace” and people to host and feed them (Luke 10). The Apostle Paul travelled with sailors and business-people who held the shared goal of reaching an overseas destination (Acts 27), co-labored with other tradesmen to finance his missions efforts and build strategic relationships (Acts 18), and sought out helpful gentiles to further his mission in any given city if the Jews he approached first proved uncollaborative (Acts 17). Paul’s ministry promoted cooperation over self-sufficient silo thinking.

Building on these biblical examples as well as on the intercultural and cooperative practices of starting and strengthening churches exemplified above, it is a short step to locate church planting within the whole gospel mission of the church. Choosing a perspective that encompasses the whole city will quickly lead to collaboration. For Kirchehoch3, being part of an international family of denominations (the International Federation of Free Evangelical Churches, which includes the German FeG and the US-based ECC and EFCA) as well as local networks like Gemeinsam für Berlin connects us to church and parachurch ministries that serve in the areas of discipleship, leadership training, mercy ministries, and missions. None of these areas is compartmentalized, but all flow together naturally. By seeking to multiply churches that train disciple-makers and seek to be holistic and transformational, the whole gospel finds local expressions.

For example, ministry partners in Berlin work in anti-human trafficking by reaching out to women in prostitution, starting safe houses, or engaging in political discussions concerning trafficking. By partnering with these ministries from the outset of a church plant, we are not outsourcing mercy ministries but letting them transform the church. The same is true when it comes to work with refugees or serving globally.

While these partnerships and networks can feel artificial or constructed, seeking to plant transformational churches naturally attracts individuals who are passionate for specific people groups (socially, geographically, etc.) and sequentially inspires the church from the inside out. I think

of a Chinese leader in our church who is active in the discipleship of other Chinese Christians in Germany and China. Quite naturally, this focus on international discipleship impacts her ministry within the local church as well.

Another member of Kirchehoch3 has helped strengthen the church to become more holistically focused when she started an orphanage near Mombasa, Kenya (when she was already seventy years old). The collaboration of support and inspiration formed a two-way street. Other tools and experiences also travelled on a two-way street, such as the ECC's Church Vitality instrument and pathway, another example of collaboration. While we employ this tool (or better, toolbox) in Berlin, we are also exploring how to make it accessible to other German speaking churches—thus gathering around another platform for leadership development. Once again, it is collaboration that brings the whole gospel to the whole city.

Reflections for Effective Collaboration

To apply these particular experiences and lessons in different contexts, I suggest reflecting on the following set of questions.

1. Are leaders set free to seek and foster synergies with others? It takes time not only to discover but to then build and test relationships with other leaders, churches, ministries, and organizations. There is no guarantee that success will come quickly or that it will come every time. Collaboration is messy and consumes leadership resources. It also requires apostolic gifting to constantly have a kingdom focus and seek the good of the city beyond the ministries of a single church. Do we make room for leaders to invest into these kingdom relationships, or do we demand their full attention in our own church without any margin? Leaders who would like to network more with a missional purpose might ask, do I have the full support of my church to be a bridge builder in our city?

2. Do we prioritize relationships? Collaboration is messy and takes time because it is more than simply pairing organizations. It is about relationships. Hardly any ministry happens in a sustainable and long-term way without honest communication in the context of loving relationships. Are we prepared to invest in people and not just formal ministries when we want to develop partnerships to bring the whole gospel to our city?

3. Are we humble enough to let go of our name? “We need your help” is a vulnerable attitude. The humility to give up even tested ministry models for the sake of developing new, common ways to collaborate requires letting go of the need to have our own name on the possible results. Can we celebrate when others reap what we have sown?

4. Do we seek the good of the city and kingdom over our personal ministry success? This is a variant of the previous questions. To develop a healthy habit of asking for the good of our city and not just our current constituency is another foundation to working well with others. Unless we develop a vision at an altitude that sees the whole city (or country or continent) in a way it renders a solo effort senseless right from the start, it is hard to make collaboration a priority.

5. Can we formulate common goals collectively? After checking our posture, freeing capacities, and investing in relationships, one important step is setting common goals. Has one partner simply adopted the goals of the other(s) (for whatever reason) or has there been a process of praying, listening, brainstorming, and formulating together? This can be especially tricky if one of the partners contributes the most resources, but it is essential to the process of collaboration.

6. Can we sustain a long-term process? Planting churches in secular Central Europe is like running a marathon. Do we have a long-term perspective? Are we ready to take the necessary breaks to reflect and gain renewed strength to continue the work? Can we forgive and remain committed to our partners when something unexpected happens? Do we need to go fast, or are we ready to go far and go together?

This article was written before anyone knew about the challenges of COVID-19. A shared experience of the pandemic has strengthened most of the partnerships described here. To me this is further proof that efforts made to invest in these partnerships are bearing much fruit over time. My hope is that these kinds of collaborations will bless many other local and global mission efforts as they did ours.