

# **Understanding Relational Networks**

## **A HarvestNet International Position Paper**

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This paper is one in a series of provisional position papers prepared for HarvestNet International. These papers are "provisional" in that while they represent some current thinking on the matters raised within the papers they are also subject to amendments, additions, and corrections coming from additional revelation and understanding. Because of this, we are pleased to receive comments and affirmations from those interacting with these papers. Although the councils of HarvestNet International have reviewed these papers and approved them for circulation, the content remains the responsibility of the author.

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### Introduction

Throughout the history of the Christian church, God has led the church to organize itself in many different ways. Each of these ways of organizing have had their strengths and their seasons of effectiveness. None of them have represented an “ideal” form of church organization. They have all had weaknesses that stem from human sinfulness. All these forms of organization have been provisional and temporary even though most developed with the good intention of advancing God’s Kingdom.

Over the past few hundred years, the primary way churches have organized themselves has been in the context of what might be called "denominations". Although many other forms of organization have existed, such as "house churches", independent churches, and loose confederations of churches, formal and informal denominations have greatly influenced churches throughout the world.

Although it is very popular today for Christians to deride and reject “denominationalism”, one cannot deny that denominations have served as a powerful force for good within the worldwide body of Christ. While we would agree that denominations have had their day and that overall the Holy Spirit is doing a "new thing" in the earth, we would also express our thanksgiving for how denominations have advanced God's kingdom and built up the body of Christ in many places around the world.

In the Western world, we would argue that denominations have been the primary expression of general church organization for at least the past 300 years. We would assert that over the past 50 years or so the influence and effectiveness of denominations for good has been on the wane. Instead of healthy denominations, denominationalism has arisen creating spiritual myopathy and structural calcification in ways that have become antithetical to the advancement of God's kingdom or the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As we look over the past 30 years, we see that God has been raising up a new kind of organization for the body of Christ. This new organization allows churches to have great flexibility to hear the Spirit of God and follow His leading along with great connectivity to share health and resources not only among churches within nations – irrespective of denominational affiliation – but also across political and geographical boundaries around the world.

The common label for this new way of connecting churches globally seems to be the word "network". Obviously, this label has emerged from our increasingly connected world seen in the internet and social networking. But unfortunately, the word "network" has taken on a number of meanings and may have many different connotations with respect to churches. Some uses of "network" mean little more than “give a little donation and receive a monthly newsletter”. Other uses of "network" indicate a group that is so tightly knit that it completely resembles the denominations from which many churches have sought to escape.

To complicate matters further, some people have chosen to apply labels to describe more fully what they mean by a network. Some people might call their network a "revival" network. Others might call their network a "house church" network. Many have chosen to describe their network as a "relational" network. Regrettably, these extra labels have not always clarified what is intended by the word "network". Additionally, when we consider how these labels might be understood by people across national and cultural boundaries, we can see how people might have a lot of confusion about what a network really is.

HarvestNet International (HNI) has chosen the words “relational network” to describe how God is leading us to organize ourselves and to relate with one another as leaders and organizations. In

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this paper, we would like to describe more fully what we intend by the concept of “relational network”. We will begin by indicating what relational networks are *not*, from our perspective.

#### Relational Networks Are *Not*

First, relational networks are not “families”, at least in the basic understanding of that word. Different people in different cultures have very different concepts of the word “family”. In addition, individuals will have wildly different experiences of “family”. Having said this, we do acknowledge the importance of some aspects of “family” in relational networks. There are some ways in which we can use “family” language in a relational network. (See below for a fuller discussion of this.)

Although we might use some “family” language to discuss how we related together, we must keep in mind that a relational network is not like a small family with a mother, father, and a few kids. Neither is a relational network like an extended family with aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins and even further extensions. Although any given relational network might share some of the same dynamics as families, they are not “families” in the same way. In relational networks, we might discover family-like relationships but no relational network can promise this will happen.

Second, relational networks are not like individual churches or “church families”. This is a common misperception of a relational network. A relational network will never function like an individual church. Indeed it cannot. We might describe our individual churches as “families”, but this idea can never extend to relational networks. The reason for this is that healthy churches depend on frequent contact among the people in a reasonably close knit environment where people can get to know one another easily and so help disciple one another effectively. Relational networks might occasionally provide this, but they cannot consistently provide this environment.

The combination of proximity and time enables churches to shape the lives of people as disciples of Jesus Christ while providing people an opportunity to grow in love and friendship with one another. By its very nature, unless a relational network is limited only to a dozen or so churches within an easy drive of one another so that church leaders and church members might fellowship together regularly and frequently, the relational network will never become like a church family. If it does become like a church family in this way, the relational network will never expand.

Third, and closely related to the second, relational networks will generally not be places where church leaders — not to mention church members — will find their “best friend” or develop the really deep relationships that give meaning and depth to our lives. Such relationships demand proximity, time, chemistry, shared activities, and many other factors that only a local church or local relationship with other church leaders might provide. The only exception to this would be where people develop their relationships over the course of several years of intense and highly consistent commitment to a nonlocal group of people. Most people do not have the time, energy and financial resources to enable this to happen.

To be sure, many church leaders *will* develop very close relationships within a relational network. And in one sense, this is always the hope and potential. However, if such relationships do occur in a relational network, they will occur only as a *byproduct* of the network and not as it's necessary or designed outcome. We realize that some church leaders join relational networks because they are looking for such deep and lasting friendships. Sadly, they expect that such relationships will develop quickly and without much effort, but often they do not develop at all. We should pursue such relationships, but we cannot demand such relationships.

Fourth, relational networks are not “pseudo-denominations”. Relational networks do not exercise governmental oversight or control of individual leaders and organizations. The leaders and organizations within relational networks govern themselves, support themselves and grow themselves. They have a healthy sense of independence while maintaining a healthy connection with one another.

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Relational networks will seek to resource, encourage and connect these leaders and organizations, but they are not responsible for them.

Finally, relational networks are not exclusive, like a denomination that demands total commitment to the denomination. Relational networks cannot demand allegiance or complete commitment. They must always remember that relationship by its very nature is a gift of grace which cannot be demanded, coerced, cajoled or in any way forced. Unlike marriage, relational networks do not demand a lifelong commitment. They always need to be open, free associations that invite mutual relationship, love and faith to serve the building up of the body of Christ and the advancement of God's loving rulership into the world.

### **The Two-Fold Dynamic of Relational Networks**

Relational networks will always exhibit a twofold relational dynamic that becomes the foundation for their existence, their health and their effectiveness. It is only in this sense that they might truly be called "relational". It is also through this twofold dynamic that they might acquire the connection that allows them honestly to embrace the word "network".

The first dynamic of a relational network must be relationship with God. Here we are talking about an intimate relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This intimate relationship with God must flow with integrity from the Bible as God's Word, the only authoritative standard for the life and faith of Christians and Christian organizations. This intimate relationship with God must also have a connection of integrity with the historic Christian faith as expressed in the life of the church throughout history. In the words of Jude, we contend together for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints (see Jude 3).

In a relational network, we must always remember that our relationship with God is an ambassadorial relationship (see 2 Corinthians 5:20). In this ambassadorial relationship, we do and say what the Father wants us to do and say in a way that glorifies the Son Jesus Christ and flows through the power of the Holy Spirit (see John 5:19-24). Whenever we try to do things according to our own will in our own way in a relational network, we violate this first relational dynamic which removes any spiritual authority that the relational network might have.

The second dynamic of a relational network is our relationship with others, especially others within our relational network. As suggested above, relationships are a gift of grace from the persons who give themselves in relationship to others. Relationships can never be forced or coerced or demanded. To do such violates the second relational dynamic and destroys the relational network.

In a healthy relational network, relationships must first be based on true love for others within the network, and even those beyond the network. Love in this sense is a zealous, self-giving commitment to others for their benefit. Others must choose to receive that love. Such love is completely removed from any notion of sentimentality or emotionalism. Such love is a choice we make, not a feeling we have.

Second, in a healthy relational network, relationships must have mutual cooperation. This mutual cooperation must seek God's best for everyone involved as well as the advancement of God's kingdom. Mutual cooperation always implies a certain degree of what the Bible calls "submission". But biblical submission is not something demanded by those in authority but freely given by those who want to have relationship within the relational network.

Third, in a healthy relational network, relationships must have Spirit-given, altruistic unity. The Holy Spirit unites us so that everyone might grow in fruitfulness and joy. Such unity is altruistic, seeking God's best not only for ourselves and our organizations but also for other leaders and other organizations within the network. Our relationships exist not so that we might be personally satisfied

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and fulfilled relationally but so that we might together advance God's kingdom in a way that brings mutual benefit as well as God's glory.

While we hope that everyone would receive a blessing as part of a relational network, we do not become part of a relational network only because of what we feel we can get out of it. Instead, while it is not wrong to receive a personal benefit from being part of a relational network, we must join a relational network with the idea that we might bring something good to others within the network that will help them and make them more effective in advancing the kingdom of God. Our fundamental question for joining a relational network must be whether we are willing to give ourselves fully to others within the network, not whether we see some personal advantage in the network.

Relational networks may only be called "relational" when they fully embrace this twofold relational dynamic. This twofold relational dynamic is most fully embodied in the two greatest commandments according to Jesus: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and, love your neighbor as yourself (see Matthew 22:37-40).

#### When "Family" Is Not "a Family"

When is a "family" not a family? When it is a relational network. Although we cannot equate relational networks with "family" per se (as discussed above), we do acknowledge that relational networks will share some family dynamics. The Bible talks about family relationships in three ways that has immediate applications to a relational network.

First, we remember what Jesus said when told that his mother and brothers were outside looking for him:

*"Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:33–35 ESV).*

Those who are united with Jesus in doing the will of God will be like "family" to Jesus. Those who *actively* and *purposefully* unite themselves together in a relational network will become more and more like "family" to one another. We become like family as we do the will of God together. Sharing mission, sharing the desire for the harvest of people becoming Christians, and sharing our struggles and challenges are some of the ways that God transforms relationships within a relational network. It is good for people to want to become "family" in this way. If we commit ourselves to doing the will of God within a relational network, we will often develop a strong sense of "family".

Second, we remember that we are all "sons" of God (see Galatians 3:26). Both men and women are "sons" of God, having a destiny and inheritance in the Lord. Because of this, we share a familial relationship with our heavenly Father. We share the same Father. In addition, we share a familial relationship with Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God (see John 1:14). Jesus is our Elder Brother, the perfect Son of God who is our example of sonship. We are adopted sons of God. Jesus is not only our Lord but also our Brother. When we join together in a relational network, we join together as sons of God who are called to be about our Father's business of advancing the Kingdom of God. The more we understand ourselves rightly as adopted sons and the more we join together in our Father's business in loving response to our Father, the more we will enjoy some of the positive dynamics of "family" – although we will never be *a family* in the standard understanding of that word.

Third, God sets us in relationships with others. These relationships promote our growth to maturity as people of God. Some of these relationships are like brothers and sisters in a family, as described above. We can describe other relationships using "parent-child" terminology, particularly

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the words “father” and “son”. We might have many teachers, but we do not have many “fathers”, according to Paul (see 1 Corinthians 4:15). Although Paul is using familial language, Paul is clearly not describing a family as such. We know this because Paul implies in the language that he chooses that we might have multiple “fathers” in the faith. These are men and women who love us, nurture us, and sacrifice for us, giving themselves freely so that we might develop to maturity as Christians. In relational networks, we might connect ourselves to several “fathers”, men and women who have a mature character and a healthy ministry and are willing to work with us to develop into the people God has designed us to be. In this sense, relational networks might have a “fathering” dynamic in the lives of those who connect with it.

This father-son familial dynamic is essential for any healthy relational network. Malachi even seems to suggest that the hearts of the “fathers” must be turned to the hearts of the “children” and the hearts of the “children” to the “fathers” for the land to be healthy. When this relational dynamic is not present, certainly people, churches and even networks might experience “destruction” or “cursing”. When this relational dynamic is present, it seems to result in a blessing, perhaps even revival.

Every healthy relational network will have positive family dynamics that enable and encourage healthy mission and ministry. We need to affirm how important this is. At the same time, we must take care about how we use the language of “family” to discuss or describe a relational network. Too often the metaphors and language convey unhelpful ideas or create unhealthy expectations that no relational network of any size is able to fulfil. When we say that a relational network is not a “family”, we simply want to avoid unhelpful, unhealthy or unrealistic notions and expectations while embracing the full biblical language of “family” as applied to the kingdom of God.

### **Creating Community in Relational Networks**

People long for a sense of “community”, especially the people of God. God has created the local church as the place for developing community in the Body of Christ. We acknowledge the failure of many churches to create a healthy environment in which community might develop, but we would never want to undermine the role and importance of local churches in developing such community. From the beginning of the Church in Acts 2, Christians have gathered together in communities of people devoting themselves to the apostles’ discipleship training, the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer (see Acts 2:42-47).

Relational networks will never replace or substitute for God’s design for the local church. However, relational networks can promote a biblical understanding of community in a number of ways. First, relational networks might promote community by helping local churches become healthier and stronger. One understanding of a “community” is that of a group of households (homes) contained within a certain region – like small town or a subdivision. Each one of these homes governs itself, supports itself and propagates itself. Every home, every family, is different. However, communities like this might do things together to help everyone be healthy, to help homes connect together for common purposes, to provide schooling for the children, and other shared activities that promote well-being.

Relational networks are a collection of “households” (local churches and leaders) who might function in some of the ways local communities actually function. They can promote health in the individual households, as invited in by those households. They might promote good education and training for the “community”. They might coordinate the work of households in achieving things that have mutual benefit or serve the wider region. This is one sense of community that relational networks might help develop.

Second, relational networks will help promote a biblical understanding of community by growing a group of leaders and organizations that share values, vision, activities and a network

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“identity” (similar to the way supporters of a sports team have a sense of shared identity). When we intentionally relate together with people who share our values and interests, a sense of community will naturally develop. When we work together with people to achieve certain mutually agreed outcomes, we will create a sense of community. It always happens. Relational networks will develop community in this sense, even more because we share relationship within the “family” of God.

Third, relational networks will help promote a biblical understanding of community as they provide opportunities for people to work – and even live – closely together for the sake of Christian mission. We can call these “missional” communities or “intentional” communities. They form together around a common purpose. People intentionally – not spontaneously or accidentally – gather so they might develop as followers of Jesus in close proximity to one another for a defined period of time.

People who meet and minister together for four months in an intentional internship in a house of prayer will naturally develop a powerful sense of community, of relationship, that shapes and forms not only them as people but also their destinies in the Lord. People who participate in an intentional ministry “school” for a period of time will often experience the same sense of community. People who travel together on a short-term mission trip will usually create a sense of community. When such communities form, they become powerful for growing disciples of Jesus Christ and preparing leaders for other communities.

In order for these intentional communities to be healthy, they need to have several characteristics. They need to be *missional*. They must share a sense of purpose, advancing God’s kingdom as they grow disciples of Jesus into leaders. They need to focus on the “harvest”. Mission must shape these communities and enliven these communities.

These communities also need to be *temporary*. They will live for a season, perhaps even a couple years, then they will “die”. In the case of an internship, they may live only for a few months before they die as new people are added and others are sent forth into the harvest. Although the network that sustains and nourishes these intentional communities will live and grow over many years, these intentional communities will serve their purpose and then “die” or fade, while those who have participated live on more fully and purposefully for the kingdom of God.

Finally, these communities need to *relate to the church*. These communities are not the local church. They do not substitute for the local church. Instead, they must build up, support, encourage and resource the local church. Too often, intentional communities become refuges for those wounded by or escaping the local church. When this happens, they can begin to undermine God’s purposes for local churches around the world.

Relational networks provide an opportunity for people to experience community within the wider context of the Body of Christ. Networks may neither guarantee nor force community to happen. However, they might provide a healthy environment in which people may experience community and in which individual communities that are part of the network might develop and grow healthy, leading to the development and growth of healthy disciples of Jesus Christ who will share in the harvest.

### **Authority in Relational Networks**

By their relational nature, relational networks must embrace relational authority. Relational authority only occurs in the context of relationships of mutual love and respect. People freely give authority to those with whom they have a relationship and that authority grows as the relationship grows. Relational authority does not derive from position, calling or giftings, but from the two-fold relational dynamic of a relational network – first from relationship with God and then from relationship with others, both sets of relationships being characterized by love.

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#### *Types of Authority*

We have many different ways to understand the concept of "authority". First, we can understand authority as "legal". In terms of networks, legal authority occurs when a network embraces a formal contract method of relating to one another in light of the laws of the land. In such networks, authority is legally enforceable. Many denominations in the West embrace such authority, although in no situation does it normally lead to healthy relationships.

Second, we can understand authority as "structural". In terms of networks, structural authority occurs when the network embraces a more formalized way of relating to one another. We can usually chart such ways of relating using standard organizational charts. For networks that embrace structural authority, the authority might reside in a select group of people, a constitution, a voting process, or some similar means of achieving structural unity.

Structural authority has the benefit of resisting the kind of personality-based authority or dominance found in many networks. It also has the benefit of setting forth clear expectations and requirements for those in the network. However, structural authority normally creates rigidity and inflexibility within the network so that the network can neither respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit nor respond to the changing times.

Third, we can understand authority as "hierarchical". With hierarchical authority, there is normally one person or perhaps small group of individuals who reside at the "top" of the organization in such a way that they provide the sole leadership in the network. In hierarchical authority, we normally encounter a "top-down" way of organizing the network. In many cases, people are rewarded with greater "authority" as they recruit more and more people, churches and organizations to the network.

No matter how it is expressed, hierarchical authority is open to significant abuse and dysfunction. Control and manipulation often become a major problem in a hierarchical network. Much of the spiritual abuse and wounding that leaders experience comes from networks that embrace hierarchical authority. Additionally, many hierarchical organizations become weak or die when the original leader is no longer available to lead.

#### *Relational Authority*

In a relational network such as HNI, authority is inherently relational. This means that, rather than one leader or leaders taking or assuming authority in the network, people who freely join the network choose to *give* authority to the leader or leaders as an act of grace and trust. In this context, leaders will only accept and use this authority as a matter of stewardship and only for the benefit of those who have given this authority to them and the advancement of God's kingdom.

With relational authority, a leader or leaders cannot demand or acquire authority based on their position, title, background, church size, wealth, education, or any other personal factor. People give authority to the leaders; the leaders cannot take or force authority. In relational networks, people will give authority to leaders on the basis of the leaders' character, fruit and intimacy with God. People also give authority to leaders on the basis of their quality of life and their willingness to suffer for the benefit of those they lead.

Relational authority always exists in a plurality of leadership. All leaders submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (see Ephesians 5:21). Often relational networks will operate using conciliar leadership, groups meeting together for mutual encouragement, advice and plural leadership. Although every network will have a few key leaders, these serve merely as first among equals and in relationship with others in the network.



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New people who come into a relational network, by virtue of their choice to come into the network, freely give authority to leaders in that relational network who have come before them. In a healthy relational network such authority is not only given to a central leader or small group of leaders but is freely given to others within that network with a sense of mutual respect and love. Leaders choose to submit to one another as a choice to cooperate with others so that God's best might be achieved in their lives and the organizations in the network.

We make the choice to cooperate with one another based on two Biblical passages. In the first, from the Ten Commandments, God tells us to "honor your father and mother that it may go well for you in the land the Lord your God is giving you" (see Exodus 20:12). We honor the spiritual fathers and mothers in the network, and we honor those who have gone before us, so that things might go well for us in the land God gives us. "Land" in this context is the place of God's promise over our lives, our organizations and our churches. The promise is that as we honor spiritual fathers and mothers we will receive a blessing in the place of God's promise over our lives.

The second passage is Hebrews 13:17 where we are told to obey our leaders and submit to their authority. The concept for both "obey" and "submit" in this passage is a bit different than what we normally understand in English. The word "obey" does not call for blind, military-like obedience. Instead, the word connotes allowing ourselves to be persuaded by our leaders. In other words, we may not fully agree with what our leaders are saying or doing but unless it is sinful we allow ourselves to be persuaded that we should follow their leadership.

The word "submit" in this passage is not calling for some blanket submission to our leaders whereby we cater for their every whim. Instead, the word suggests a spirit of cooperation with our leaders so that our leaders might achieve God's best as leaders as well as God's best for the people and organizations which they lead. We submit to our leaders so that our leaders might become really good leaders. We cooperate with them so that we might all achieve beneficial outcomes.

The promise of the second passage is similar to the promise of the first passage. If we allow ourselves to be persuaded by our leaders and cooperate with them in their leadership then they will enjoy leading and their leadership will benefit us. On the other hand, if we fail to do these things so that it becomes miserable to be a leader, then we actually undermine our *own* well-being and our *own* benefit, not only individually but also in the context of the organizations we lead.

In the end, relational authority comes from the power and strength of our love as leaders – love for God and love for people. Any other understanding of authority in a relational network will ultimately cause a breakdown of that network. Authority in a relational network is never an issue of power or position, but always an issue of love.

Once we understand what relational networks are *not*, the twofold dynamic of a relational network, and how authority operates uniquely in a relational network, then we can begin to understand what exactly it is that relational networks do or what outcomes relational networks might hope to achieve. Such an understanding is absolutely essential to our involvement in a relational network because it helps us to overcome unrealistic or idealistic expectations that most often lead to hurt feelings, disappointments and disillusionment in a relational network.

### **Managing Expectations**

This concept of expectations has vital importance for experiencing a fulfilling and satisfying engagement in a relational network. Many people, leaders and churches will join a relational network with expectations that are unrealistic, unagreed, and virtually impossible to achieve. Unless they evaluate these perceptions and expectations quickly and restructure them accordingly, people will often leave the network disappointed and demoralized. We have known people who have gone from

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one network to the next never to experience the joy of that network because they undermined themselves with unrealistic expectations.

For example, I serve a church in London England. When I joined HNI there were no other leaders or churches in England connected to HNI. When I attended my first Leaders Summit, people warmly welcomed me and spoke to me. I did not stay with one of the several leaders of the network, but in the home of a church member who graciously welcomed me and provided a good place to stay. (However, I must note that I would have been willing to get a hotel room if needed.) I ultimately chose to join HNI because I met many healthy leaders, encountered a really healthy church in Ephrata Community Church, and recognized God's favor on the network.

In terms of expectations, I did not expect anyone that I met on my first visit to become a close friend – although I did hope to make some good connections. I did not expect to find my emotional, spiritual or social needs met by becoming part of the network. I did not join the network because I had received any promises of help, encouragement or support – although I did realize that I could ask for non-financial help or encouragement and I would probably receive it. I did not expect HNI to build my church, win my city, or provide the spiritual warfare prayer cover that I desperately needed at the time in my ministry. Before coming to the Leaders Summit, my wife and I had only met Barry and Cheryl and realized that they were healthy leaders and that we had some personal “connection”.

So what were my expectations? My fundamental expectation, which was centered in God and not in the network, was that by freely connecting myself with something that had spiritual and relational health at its core and clearly carried the favor of God on its existence I would receive from God a share in that health and a share in that favor. I need to say as well that I realized and expected that I would personally have to invest something in the health of the network by my free choice to connect with the network. I knew that receiving such a benefit from God required that I gave a blessing to the network in terms of my time, energy, and – dare I say – money. I expected such a requirement of me.

A second expectation I had was that connecting with HNI would give me some opportunities not only to receive ministry on the occasions when I made the effort to put myself in the place where I could receive ministry, but also to share ministry when I made the effort to put myself in the place where I could give ministry, where I could serve others. I knew that the privilege of ministering to others would not only bless others but would also become a blessing for me personally.

A third expectation I had was that connecting with HNI meant that I personally would have to submit to others within the network, actively seek God's best for the network, and conform my way of thinking theologically and doing missionally to that of the network. My expectation was that I would have to *change* personally, not that the network would have to change to meet my preferences, expectations or perspectives. For me, this meant that I was extremely careful to review the core beliefs and values of HNI to make sure that they reflected as much as possible my own beliefs and values.

A fourth expectation, related to the third, was that by connecting to the network I was joining myself, my ministry and my future to the network and its ministry and its future. I would not be an independent entity in a relational network but I would be linking myself fully and freely as an act of grace to the destiny and favor of the network. I expected to lose any self-focused independency for the possibility – not the certainty – that such a loss would bring great gain in ways that I could never fully anticipate.

Of course, as I joined the network, I hoped that I would develop good friendships, learn how to minister more effectively, build connections with brothers and sisters in Christ around the world and grow as the network grew. However, I knew that I could never make these “hopes” into either

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expectations or demands. Thankfully, over time God has not only met my expectations but in many ways exceeded them as he also fulfilled many – but not all – of my hopes.

To the expectations I had we might add a few others legitimately. One person shared the expectation that becoming part of a relational network would give them the opportunity to join “shoulder to shoulder” with others trying to bring in the “harvest”. They knew that one leader or church could not do this alone. We need other spiritual gifts and ministries that we may not have personally so that we might become more complete together. So the expectation would be in part that by joining the relational network we are joining with people with whom we can work together.

Another person suggested the expectation that joining a network meant that we would be with others who had similar passions, values and goals. These shared values and goals would bring the alignment we needed with each other to see God’s kingdom come into our world. People in a relational network naturally expect to share their values and goals, otherwise they would never become part of the network.

Yet another expectation shared by someone is that we can expect a *response* when we share a need. That response may not be exactly what we might want or demand, and we might not get the response from whom we might specify, but people in a relational network will respond to one another. The response might include many things, such as the giving of encouragement or time. However, people will respond in some way. We must note the importance of sharing the need in the first place. We need to *invite* the response. We cannot expect that others will naturally respond to something we have not expressed in the first place.

Finally, we might expect simple authenticity. We are inundated with advertising that paints an often false picture of reality in order to persuade or coerce people to adapt to our agenda – whether it is buying a product or supporting our political candidate. Relational networks will only thrive when people are simply authentic with one another – “what you see is what you get”. We can expect that people will not lie or deceive us about who they really are.

We would suggest that these expectations form a basis for the expectations others might have from a relational network. Having expectations beyond these will set ourselves up for disappointment. So we must examine carefully any expectations we might have to ensure that they are realistic and achievable – as well as being agreed with the network.

### **What Relational Networks Do**

Once we break through the barrier often erected by our unrealistic or idealistic expectations we can begin to understand more accurately and realistically what relational networks might do or what outcomes they might achieve. Although this list is in no way exhaustive, it does present some of the key benefits or activities of a relational network.

First, relational networks facilitate the free exchange of life and vitality, especially through the cross-pollination of various leaders, organizations, churches, and other networks/groups of churches. We benefit by being connected to one another and having the opportunity to learn from one another, grow with one another and go with one another. It is important to note that relational networks cannot force this to happen nor can they ensure that it actually does happen. All they can do is try to facilitate this free exchange of life and vitality.

Second, relational networks provide access for leaders, organizations and churches to strategic global and translocal ministry, mission or kingdom advancement initiatives – not only those of the network itself but also those of the organizations within the network and the partnerships beyond the network. These networks allow us to take part in something much bigger than ourselves and our organizations. They give us access to ministry that not only might change the world but also

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will change us and our organizations. However, a network will only give us "access". It will not guarantee our involvement unless we choose to take responsibility and initiative.

Third, relational networks provide a context in which people might develop relationships with others for mutual edification and support. Relational networks never guarantee such relationships, because that is much beyond their purview and ability. Relational networks merely provide a context in which such relationships might occur. The normal relational dynamics of proximity, time, chemistry, shared values and activities, and similar things still apply. We might even find ourselves going for very long periods of time trying to establish relationships but never finding the relationships we desire. However, rather than being disappointed, we must continue investing ourselves in others and sowing relational seeds that may one day sprout into mutually edifying relationships.

Fourth, relational networks provide resources for mediating disputes and helping leaders and organizations in other times of crisis. Relational networks can never force themselves on other leaders or their organizations. They never have the right to demand or require submission. They might only compel by the force of character and good counsel along with the wisdom that comes through suffering and intimacy with God. People must request such resources; they may never demand them. Once received, people must agree to submit to these resources and allow them to bear fruit in their lives and their organizations. The only and ultimate censure that a relational network has is to exclude a person or organization from the network in the spirit of Matthew 18.

Fifth, relational networks help connect leaders, ministries and other groups of churches translocally and globally for more effective ministry and mission. Relational networks realize that we are stronger together than we are separately. Therefore, they seek to help people connect with one another in order to promote healthy ministry and mission. Relational networks cannot force such a connection. They may only provide opportunities for such connections. It is always the responsibility of any leader or organization to take advantage of these opportunities.

Sixth, relational networks provide a pool of expertise to help support and build up leaders and organizations. No one leader or organization has everything that is needed to promote healthy churches, healthy ministries, healthy organizations and the advancement of God's kingdom. Relational networks help to identify people who have proficiency or expertise in any number of areas, such as financial management, healing ministry, church leadership, business development, establishing houses of prayer, cross-cultural missions, evangelism and other areas of discipleship. People and organizations within the relational network may then call upon these individuals and organizations to help them in times of need or to help them in times of growth. Relational networks do not promise that such expertise will be accessed at no cost or at the convenience or requirements of any one individual or organization. They simply provide a pool of expertise from which individuals and organizations may draw as needed and desired.

Seventh, relational networks provide training and models of effective ministry. People and organizations connected with these relational networks may then receive the training or learn from the models so that they might implement what they have learned into their own ministry or organization. Relational networks do not promise that they can provide every type of training or meet every need for training, but they offer what they have for the benefit of those in the network and beyond.

Eighth, relational networks provide relational links along which various five-fold ministers may flow effectively to fulfill their biblical purpose, which is to build up the Body of Christ (see Ephesians 4:11-16). In this sense we distinguish the concept of "purpose" from the concept of "calling". "Calling" must be received and acknowledged by others under the rubric of relational authority. Relational networks do not exist so people might advance their own "calling", but relational networks may help affirm "calling" as it is discerned within the network.

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Relational networks also do not provide a vehicle by which five-fold ministers might increase their "ministry" or by which they might gain more speaking engagements. Relational networks have no obligation to advance anyone's ministry or increase anyone's sphere. Instead, they simply seek to link up various five-fold ministers so that they might explore ways to work together in order to build up the Body of Christ more effectively and help the people of God achieve the full measure of the stature of Christ.

Relational networks provide a context in which "familial" relationships might grow, especially spiritual father/spiritual son type relationships. As we have said above, relational networks are not "families" per se. However, there are familial relationships that may develop within a relational network. Most notably, relational networks provide a context in which "sons" and "daughters" might connect with spiritual fathers and mothers. In these relationships, the spiritual fathers and mothers invest themselves in their sons and daughters for their benefit and growth – not for the benefit of the fathers and mothers (see 2 Corinthians 12:14-15).

In summary, relational networks allow local leaders, organizations, ministries and churches to participate in the translocal advance of the Kingdom of God in ways beyond their ability if alone. These leaders and organizations connect together to form a "net-work" that might expand the net across the globe in order to advance God's loving rulership and bring in the harvest.

### **Funding for Relational Networks**

One sticky issue that every relational network must face is the issue of funding. Money is essential for the effective growth and operation of any relational network. One of the greatest temptations that any relational network faces is to impose a set amount that every participant in the network must give in order to remain in the network. Once this happens, it fundamentally changes the nature of any network and undermines its relational dynamic.

Establishing set fees or dues implies more of a structural authority and structural unity in which people "pay" something and "get" something in return. This undermines the relational dynamics of a network by basing its funding structure on more of a Western, consumerist model as opposed to a biblical model. This may seem reasonable and logical initially, but it can have a tragic effect on the network. It has the tendency to create the sense that I must receive something because I have paid something. This always leads to disappointment because rarely do people who give sacrificially and selflessly feel like they receive what they deserve in return for such giving.

In order for a relational network to thrive, people and organizations must give selflessly and sacrificially in a way that is faith based and grace based. They must give freely and cheerfully as led by the Holy Spirit, and not under compulsion (see 2 Corinthians 9:6-10). They must give with the realization that they are sowing into something much larger than themselves and consequently one day they will reap from the Lord a great harvest and a great blessing.

To be sure, leaders of relational networks must clearly and directly challenge people to give selflessly and sacrificially in order to sustain the relational network. The apostle Paul clearly challenged the Christians of Corinth to give as an act of worship to the Lord and as an act of love for their fellow Christians (see 2 Corinthians 8:8-15). Leaders in relational networks must fearlessly challenge people to give even beyond their means.

In order to make such challenges effective, leaders must be leading the way by giving themselves sacrificially and selflessly. No leaders can challenge others to give who are not giving themselves. The failure of people in leadership to give undermines the effectiveness of funding in any relational network. Leaders must fully invest themselves in the relational network so the network will grow healthy.

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#### **Growing Versus Building**

We need to understand one final dynamic of a relational network as opposed to a structural network. How do such networks expand? It is a great temptation for leaders, particularly those in the West, to try and develop compelling vision statements and comprehensive five-year strategic plans that will propel their network into the future. Vision statements and five-year plans are not necessarily bad, but they generally emerge from structural networks as opposed to relational networks.

In a structural network, the dominant metaphor for the expansion of the network is that of "building". We build *structures*. We start with the foundation, we add the walls, and then we put on the roof. When the structure needs to expand, we demolish what is there and seek to build again or we seek to add to what is there and create a larger structure. "Building" as a metaphor implies something that is planned and regimented. It requires expertise and skills.

In a relational network, the dominant metaphor for the expansion of the network is that of "growing". Growth is something that is organic, natural and generally unforced. Of course, it may require watering and fertilizer, along with a little pruning, but then it expands as God has designed it.

Growing things might be helped along by those who have some level of skill or expertise, such as the expert farmer. Often, we refer to people who help promote growth effectively as people who have "green thumbs". The notion of a "green thumb" suggests that of a gift, something that does not necessarily come naturally to all people but is especially given by God. The Bible is clear that we can plant, we can water, and we can reap the harvest. So people certainly have a role in the growth of a relational network.

Although people can plant, water and harvest, the Bible is also clear that only God gives the growth. It is God who grows the kingdom. It is God who grows the church. It is God who grows a leader. God alone is the source of growth. God alone provides the resources for growth.

In a relational network, only God really provides the growth. We cannot structure growth and we cannot develop a five-year plan that will guarantee growth. All we can do is help promote growth in the ways that God directs us. God determines whether the network will grow to encompass the globe or simply grow to encompass our community.

The metaphor of growth keeps us humble and makes us thankful for every blessing that God gives us in a relational network. Although the growth of the relational network depends on God, the health of the relational network and our ongoing connection to it depends on us remaining connected to Jesus as the vine as well as us remaining connected to one another in self-giving love.

#### **Engaging Fruitfully with a Relational Network**

In light of the above, how should we choose to connect with relational network such as HNI? First, we must embrace humility. If we have any trace of pride or arrogance in our lives then we will not thrive in a relational network. Pride will always tempt us to think of ourselves more highly than we ought, to seek our own advantage, and to promote our own idea of what is right. Humility leads us to come as servants to others in the manner of Jesus (see Philippians 2:1-11). Pride will cause us to make demands of others and of the network. Humility will lead us to accept other people where they are and as they are, looking to ways to bring benefit to their lives.

Second, we must pursue relationships – and not just with the central leaders! Contrary to popular belief, relationships do not generally happen quickly, easily or "naturally". Healthy relationships require time, effort, shared values, shared activities, and similar things. Many people come into a relational network expecting the relationships to come to them. However, we must

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actively and intentionally pursue relationships with others if we are to develop relationships with others.

Third, we must give grace to other people. We must assume the best of them. We must give them the benefit of the doubt. When people hurt us or disappoint us, we must forgive them quickly and give grace to them just as God in Christ has given grace to us. We must choose not to take offense.

It seems very popular today for people to become offended. However no one can be offended unless they choose to *take* offense. People cannot offend us unless *we* allow them to offend us. Many people may try to *give* us offense, but they cannot offend us unless *we take* offense. Refusing to take offense is key for healthy participation in a relational network.

Fourth, we must take advantage of our opportunities. HNI provides many different opportunities for partners in the network. Here are just a few:

- We need to participate in the annual **Leaders Summits** as a priority. Participating in the Leader Summits involves not only attending *all* the sessions when possible, but also sharing in the common meals, receiving ministry, praying for others and actively trying to meet and engage with as many people as possible.
- We need to attend the monthly meetings, provided we are close enough to do so. These meetings provide a great opportunity to connect with other leaders in HNI.
- We can participate in the various conferences offered by HNI, ECC and partner organizations. Every year HNI directly or indirectly provides many conferences and learning opportunities.
- We can become involved in the various mission trips offered by HNI, ECC, and partner organizations. In addition, we can offer to go on other trips with various HNI five-fold ministers, to offer our encouragement and ministry support.
- We can invite various five-fold ministers into our organizations to lead conferences, provide counsel, meet with our leadership teams, or do something to share what God is doing around the world in the church.

It is our responsibility to discover the various opportunities we have and then take advantage of those opportunities.

Fifth, we must manage our expectations. We cannot expect the relational network to take responsibility for our ministry, our health, our growth, or anything else that God says is our own responsibility. We cannot expect the relational network to provide us our financial support or to raise financial support for us. We cannot expect a relational network to provide us speaking engagements or opportunities to advance our own ministries.

To be sure, sometimes being part of a relational network leads to an increase in our financial support or gives us more opportunities to minister to others. However, if these things do develop, they must develop organically. If we try to use the relational network to advance our own ministries then we will often violate our relationships within the network and prostitute our ministries.

Sixth, we must ask clearly and directly for help when it is needed, but we must accept help as it is offered. We cannot expect leaders or anyone else in a relational network to know our needs unless we clearly express them. We also cannot expect leaders to give us direct help unless we ask for it directly.

If leaders offer to help us, then it is our responsibility to cooperate with their offer of help. We cannot make demands about the help we receive. We cannot demand *when* the help might be given, *how* the help might be given, or specify the required outcomes for the help. We simply express

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our need for help and cooperate with the leaders and the Holy Spirit to ensure God achieves the best outcomes possible in our ministries.

Finally, we must invest ourselves personally in the relational network. We must first invest ourselves in prayer and worship. We need to pray regularly for HNI and her leaders. Need to pray for the partner leaders in organizations in the network. We need to stand in the gap with intercession and we need to serve as a watchmen on the walls.

We must secondly invest our time, energy and – dare I say – money into the network. We need to sow bountifully into the network with the realization that as we do sow God has promised that we will reap bountifully – not from the network itself, but from God who is the source of all good things in our lives. We need to sow blessings in terms of words and deeds for the good of others in our network. We need to sow our money as led by the Holy Spirit and decided in our hearts, according to our means and even beyond our means.

We cannot expect to reap any blessing in connection with a relational network unless we choose to sow abundantly into that relational network. We also need to remember that we must persevere in our sowing because it is only those who sow and do not give up that eventually reap a harvest (see Galatians 6:9).

### **Conclusion**

We see God establishing relational networks all around the world. HNI just happens to be one of many that God is using to advance His Kingdom in our day. We hope that many more leaders and organizations will join with HNI in the coming years so that this network remains a vital part of God's strategy to advance His loving rulership around the world and bring many people into His churches everywhere. We hope that an understanding of how relational networks function will help leaders and organizations participate more fully, freely and effectively in relational networks for the glory of God through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.