In today's economy, businesses seeking to expand their empires are buying everything in sight and merging at a breakneck pace. Although only big-time mergers, such as the $140 billion AOL/Time Warner union, grab the headlines, organizations of all sizes throughout the economy are catching the merger bug..

In business, the best mergers are often those between two thriving companies that join efforts to increase their overall strength. Unfortunately, when Christian ministries merge, the principal motivation is often financial difficulties rather than a strategic effort to combine strengths. Nevertheless, if we believe that God has called us to a particular ministry, and that He has told us to cast our nets into specific waters, regardless of our circumstances we ought to consider the wisdom of joining our efforts with other ministries to bring enhanced results.

In Luke 5, Jesus tells Simon to put out into deep water and let down his nets. Though Simon had already fished all night without success, he obeyed the Lord's direction, and the catch was so great that he had to call his partners over to help. Simon could have tried to handle the entire catch himself, but the likely result would have been that most, if not all, of the fish would have been lost. As it was, both boats were swamped by the tremendous catch, but they were able to bring the harvest to shore. Following the Lord's leading into specific ministries and strategic partnerships may bring surprising results.

Merging for Strength

Well-conceived mergers between two ministries can strengthen both enterprises. It's better to combine your vision and resources with another ministry and prosper then to fail separately. Many currently faltering parachurch ministries would benefit from strategic partnerships. For example, in one city, four separate organizations are providing counseling and support services for crisis pregnancies. Because they are not allied with one another, each one struggles financially and competes with the others for volunteer staff members. Combining their efforts would streamline the overall administrative function, improve cost efficiency, utilize volunteers more effectively, and provide better service to their clients.

In another city, a successful youth-oriented ministry lacks an effective singles outreach in the 20- to 30-year-old age bracket, while a separate young singles ministry is struggling to go it alone. A merger of the two would give the larger ministry an immediate inroad into a key constituency, and the smaller singles ministry would be strengthened by its affiliation with the larger ministry and its well-established management team. The combination of the two ministries would also create a natural graduation process for young people in that city, who would easily move up from the teen group into the young adult singles group.

Merging for Reach

As illustrated in the previous example, another strategic reason to consider a merger is for each ministry to gain a key component that is missing. For years, major corporations have recognized the advantage of plugging holes quickly with acquisitions. Smaller businesses can immediately gain strength by becoming part of a larger group. Likewise, in Christian service, thriving ministries can extend their reach by merging with other organizations. An international outreach with a worldwide focus on teaching abstinence to teens might have a strong program in Europe and North and South America, but no presence in Asia. By teaming up with an Asian-based ministry that already provides abstinence assistance, the larger ministry would be able to fill a hole quickly, while the smaller Asian ministry would immediately reap the benefits of being part of a worldwide organization.

Finding the Right Partner

When considering a potential partner, ask yourself the questions, "Does this alliance make sense? Will the total ministry be stronger after the merger?" If the answer is yes, move forward. Review the mission statement of each organization. Are they compatible? This is a time to look at the big picture. Don't waste time splitting hairs. Focus on what is important.

What does each partner expect? Be specific and get all the major issues out on the table. For example, if a potential partner is looking for added funding or access to other ministry resources, these expectations need to be surfaced. Clearly define the financial parameters of the partnership and resolve them up front. Don't skip over important areas of concern. The time to make your expectations clear is before the merger, not after.

Finally, define the ministry culture. No two organizations will match up perfectly. What is important is to understand your differences, identify potential conflicts, and devise a plan to overcome those differences. Thoroughly evaluate every important issue before proceeding with plans for a merger. A yellow flag today may become a red flag later. If wide disparities exist in key areas, a merger is probably not a good idea. If the fit is wrong, now is the time to stop.

Merger Negotiations

If a merger still seems desirable, each organization should designate representatives to work out an agreement. The selected individuals must have the authority to negotiate a partnership. The leaders and directors of each organization should determine the key goals to be achieved. To facilitate these negotiations, it is often helpful to obtain an outside perspective from a respected business leader, who can offer objectivity, help the decision-makers to remain focused on the goals, and hold individuals accountable to the process.

At the outset, each party should provide a written outline stating their desired objectives, the goals to be accomplished, the potential benefits of combining, and any "deal breaker" issues that need resolution.

The first objective of the negotiating team is to draft a combined mission statement. Next, they should agree on a proposed budget for the combined entity and create a ministry plan covering at least the first year. The plan should be simple, but complete and measurable. Identify three key factors that will demonstrate ministry success. Measurable goals give each partner a clear gauge of success.

Keep a list of all agreed-upon points, and a separate list of outstanding issues to be resolved. When negotiating differences, maintain your objectivity. It's easy to focus on what you want, what you like, or what feels good, but these subjective factors can undermine consensus building. To avoid contention and develop the strongest possible organization, keep asking the questions, "What will enhance the overall ministry?" and "What is the most effective use of God's resources?

Barriers to Effective Mergers

Every merger will face obstacles, some practical, others interpersonal. Good reasons not to merge include major doctrinal differences, divergent ministry objectives, or when merging the ministries would not add value to each partner. Other practical barriers include incompatible cultures, insufficient economies of scale to overcome the complexities of merging two organizations, and poor management. Mergers should not be pursued out of desperation or panic, but only when God's work will be strengthened.

Interpersonal barriers can be equally difficult to overcome. Ego conflicts, turf battles, and stubborn willfulness can torpedo even the best of mergers. Individual goals and the desire for recognition must be set aside if the combined ministry is to succeed. John the Baptist modeled the right attitude when he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30 NASB).

Remember, part of the purpose behind your merger is to open both organizations to new ideas, new paradigms, and improved ministry opportunities. Don't allow your narrow sense of what is best, or "the way we've always done it," to derail the collaborative process. Be open to learning new ways of effective, successful ministry from your new partner, even if you represent the "stronger" of the two ministries in the merger. Talk through each idea carefully, and take plenty of time to listen.

Communicate With Your Constituents

Before you finalize a deal, talk with your paid staff and key volunteers. Explain the reasons for the merger and how it will affect the staff. Bring everything out in the open. Gossip will kill morale quicker than anything and must be avoided at all costs. Be direct and focus on the positive, but don't ignore possible obstacles or challenges. Emphasize how the overall ministry will be enhanced, improved, and made more efficient. Communicate essential information to your supporters and clients. Donors and ministry clients will be more concerned with the effectiveness of service than with exactly how things are done.

After the Honeymoon

Like any good marriage, the real work begins after the merger has been completed. Plan to allocate significant time to making the merger work. Schedule frequent staff meetings and establish strong written communication with your ministry constituents, donors, and users of your services. You can not communicate enough following a merger. Effective two-way communication is critical to your success.

Set reasonable expectations. Build trust, establish good relationships, and encourage one another daily. When problems occur, address them promptly and refocus everyone on the vision. Resolve all concerns quickly and completely following the model laid out in Matthew 18:15-16.

The Bottom Line

Ministry mergers are not for everyone, but under the right circumstances they will enhance the delivery of services and improve financial efficiency. If merging your ministry will result in a stronger, more efficient outreach to your community, explore your options. Don't insist on going it alone if by teaming up you can more effectively advance God's kingdom.

Steve Marr, Your Christian Business Coach

"When One is Better than Two" was a featured article in "Christian Management Report" magazine-September/October 2000 issue. cmaonline.org