

# Building a strong



By David Mays

A spider's web is an amazing natural phenomenon. In order to construct a web, the spider releases its silk and waits for the wind to blow it to a firm place where it sticks, providing the web's foundation. Slowly and methodically the spider constructs an intricate web that is both incredibly light and amazingly strong. Its tensile strength (the amount of longitudinal stress that a substance can tolerate without being torn apart) can be five times that of steel. By connecting independent, disconnected points with its silk, a spider creates a net that provides food.

Likewise, missions leaders benefit from the web-like structure of a network. Networks, like webs, are light and flexible yet strong in what they can provide. Often the folks who are leading missions ministries in local churches feel alone in their love for missions and in their burden to increase missions involvement. They simply need a source of regular encouragement, which networks provide. Also, many churches

are doing a couple of aspects of their missions ministries well, but are lagging behind in other areas. Networks provide participants with peers' practical examples of excellence and sources for new ideas. The Missions Leaders Network of Indianapolis is a great example of the benefits of such a network. Here's how it started and developed.

Over the years as I've become acquainted with missions pastors and lay missions leaders in the local churches of Indianapolis, I became convinced that it would be helpful for these leaders to meet and encourage each other. I invited several of my area contacts to a lunch where I proposed the idea for an Indianapolis missions leaders' network. They received the idea enthusiastically. Initially I invited missions pastors, but the circle has widened to include anyone who is leading the missions ministry in his or her church.

Every one in our group is busy, and so our goal is to keep the administrative

overhead to a minimum and to make the participation requirements simple. We meet on the second Wednesday of each month from 12:00-1:30 p.m. Our meeting site rotates between the churches that are involved. For lunch we either bring our own, or the host church provides the lunch.

While we eat, people trickle in between noon and 12:30. By 12:25 I introduce any new people and make announcements. By 12:40, our featured facilitator/speaker begins his/her presentation about the predetermined topic. The session is highly interactive. Participants feel free to ask questions. The presentation lasts until 1:20 or 1:25, at which point we make any final announcements and determine the location of next month's meeting. At this point we determine future topics for discussion and who might be available to lead the discussion. If no one in the group can facilitate the discussion, or if no one in the group knows an outsider who can lead, the topic is shelved until a

**Network:** Any group of individuals and/or organizations who communicate with one another, who share information so as to enhance their individual purposes, and who come together as and when they individually wish. (Interdev)

# WEB of Relationships

later date. We end promptly at 1:30.

We handle all of the administrative work through email. As the facilitator I send out one invitation ten days before the meeting, and a reminder notice on the Friday before the meeting. At any given meeting 8-22 attend, with an average attendance of 15. If you facilitate such a network, don't be initially discouraged if attendance is sporadic, especially if several of your attendees are missions pastors who must travel frequently for their jobs.

We are beginning the third year of our network. At first we met bi-monthly, but those who had to miss a meeting found themselves out of touch for four months, so we began meeting monthly except for summer months. The topics we've covered are quite varied, including:

- Obtaining foundation grants for churches' local cross-cultural ministry
- Understanding the Biblical basis of missions
- Caring for missionaries
- Learning from the three biggest

mistakes you've made in short-term missions trips

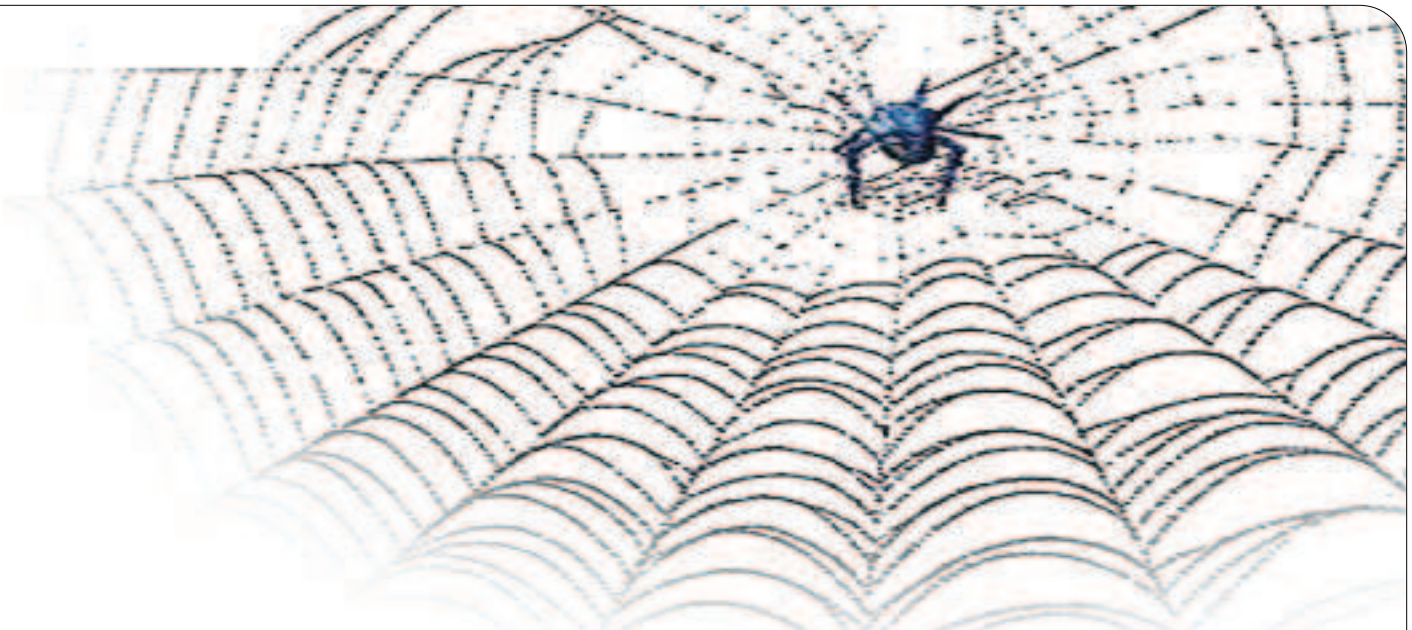
- Raising the missions profile in your church
- Ministering cross-culturally in our city
- Recognizing the dangers of dependency (sending money to support nationals)
- Using technology to promote missions
  - Setting up email lists for distributing information and prayer requests
  - Developing attractive Power Point presentations
- Ministering to Muslims
- Increasing your missions giving dramatically
- Helping your pastor increase his missions interest.

Our network's members enjoy and benefit from our meetings. Nancy Ray is currently involved in Heartland Church, a new church plant of 180 people, on the northeast side of Indianapolis. Thus far the church has focused its outreach efforts locally. Nancy says, "I believe that one of the reasons

God has called us to this church is for us to keep 'the ends of the earth' on the church's radar screen. I go to the meeting every month so that I can keep abreast of both the latest missions trends and what everyone else is doing. These meetings are really helping me keep my focus right now."

Dave Baldwin of Faith Missionary Church says, "I am blessed by our meetings and I carry away several ideas to use at our church."

Corporate fruit has fallen off of the trees of our meetings as well. While joint projects were never intended as an outcome of the group, some have occurred. Several churches banded together to work on a house construction project. Also, at one of our earliest meetings five churches discovered that they are all trying to reach Hispanics in our city and none of them knew that the other churches were attempting such outreach. This may lead to future cooperation.



If you'd like to facilitate a network of churches in your area, here are some practical suggestions.

**Do . . .**

1. Simply get acquainted with other local missions leaders. Find out their interests, concerns, strengths and weaknesses. Begin with a core of four or five leaders, and ask them to invite friends whom they know would like to be involved. Then you'll begin with perhaps 10-12 participants.
2. Keep the logistics as easy as possible. Do all the planning work at the actual meeting. Only next month's facilitator needs to invest time between meetings.
3. Look for weak spots in the group. This can help determine future discussion topics. For example, in our group there seems to be some neglect of the overall goal of missions and of ongoing missions education.

**Don't . . .**

1. Communicate that being part of the network will add to people's heavy workloads. Don't create expectations that a major joint project will evolve as a result of the network. Rather, bill the group as an information and relationship network.
2. Let the group become parachurch driven. We've avoided having organization representatives come to present funding opportunities because this is not the purpose of the group.
3. Push your personal agenda on the group and fail to solicit the concerns of other churches. Do let them provide the topics they want to discuss.
4. Go overtime. Do end on time. Don't let the conversation be dominated by one person. Don't let your discussion wander down rabbit trails.

Besides the Indianapolis-based network mentioned in this story, several others such missions leaders' networks are meeting around the country in the following cities:

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