

Vincentian Collaboration

An Outside Perspective¹

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Sisters and Brothers in Christ, Greetings to you all,

It is an immense privilege to be invited to speak to you today, and one which I approach with a sense of significant trepidation. For two reasons:

Firstly, I am asked to speak to the members of the Vincentian Family – men and women who have dedicated their whole lives to the glory of God in the service of the poor. What can I, with my part-time involvement for only the last few years in one small organisation bring to the knowledge and wisdom assembled in this gathering?

And secondly, I am invited to speak on collaboration, based on my life and career experiences. But, if I look around to find good examples of collaborative work, there are few instances that have stood the test of time better than those that are found in this room. Very few organisations can show over 350 years of working together to pursue consistent goals in the way that the Vincentian organisations have followed the goals laid out by Saint Vincent and Saint Louise all those years ago. And even fewer organisations will be able to show how the spiritual values – the Vincentian Values – have remained constant and enduring, how they enabled and inspired new organisations to add to the work, and how the Vincentian Family has grown in service and example over the centuries.

But perhaps this second reflection provides an important message:

¹ Vincentian Family Meeting, January 2016.

Firm Foundations for Collaboration

As a Vincentian Family seeking to renew the spirit of collaboration, we – you – begin from a position of great strength and firm foundations. So that our challenge becomes one of building on those foundations to work together even more effectively – to take advantage of the spirit of collaboration which has been working within the Family for hundreds of years and to shape a renewed spirit of collaboration as we go forward.

So what might I usefully share from my own experiences, primarily in the oil and gas industry and more recently in the not-for-profit sector which might stimulate discussion and debate as we move through the workings of this conference?

The Forms of Collaboration

Collaboration in commerce and industry can take many forms: partnerships, joint ventures, consortium, service agreements, etc. Our legal friends can spend many hours, and generate substantial fees, in advising on the preferred arrangements – but these are not, I think, of prime interest to us today.

But what should be of interest, I would suggest, is the need to document – to write down in simple terms – the nature of any forms of cooperation or collaboration so that there is clarity between the parties as to the intention and form under which we might work together.

You will know better than I, of that famous quote from Saint Vincent which states “this is a wonderful charity, but it is badly organised.” A simple document to capture the essential elements of any collaborative arrangements will prove useful – both in its creation, and in its application.

Why Collaborate?

While the structure and form of a collaborative venture might need to be addressed, the more important question is why should we pursue this goal of working together anyway? What are the reasons and motivations to come together?

In my experience in the oil and gas sector, there are a number of drivers which prompt collaboration between companies. Three of the more significant ones will be:

A. Opportunity to gain access to oil and gas reserves

B. Sharing of risk

C. Benefits of sharing complementary skills / expertise / resources

Could any of these find application in our Vincentian Collaboration, and what might we learn from them?

A. The opportunity to collaborate as a means to find access to oil and gas reserves can take many forms: one might be the situation where a small company has discovered a huge reservoir of oil, but the company is too small to bring the resources to bear to successfully produce the oil. In that case, a collaborative arrangement might be made with a large company in which the larger one brings the necessary investment, in both money and expertise, and they share the rewards.

The treasures which our Vincentian Family might seek are not those of oil and gas, but rather of the poor and marginalised who need our support. Perhaps the parallel here is in those projects which have been initiated by one of the Daughters or confreres, who have identified the need and taken measures to begin the work, but then realise that the scope of the project is too large for them to manage alone, so that a collaboration with other members of the Family will be beneficial to all.

What can we learn about collaboration between smaller and larger entities? We will come back to that later in this talk

B. Collaboration to share risk is quite common in the hydrocarbon industry. In some parts of the world, the cost of drilling a single well to find out if there is any oil or gas present can exceed hundreds of millions of dollars. It can be quite attractive to share the risk of such investment; as long as we are also prepared to share the rewards, of course.

The immediate parallels with our Vincentian Family are not so clear in this case. But, we should always recognise that the creation of a collaborative undertaking will generate its own set of risks. The need to recognise and manage risks associated with our work is always present so that modern approaches to risk identification and mitigation may find application in our work.

All too often, we acknowledge, with the benefit of hindsight, that things have not worked out as we anticipated. Risk management techniques can serve to bring that hindsight into full view at an early stage.

Taking measured risks in the interest of finding solutions to alleviate poverty and distress are hallmarks of the Vincentian way. But there is a difference between taking measured and visible risks, and simply hoping for the best; although I have to admit, of course, that divine providence works in mysterious and unpredictable ways.

C. The third driver for collaboration – to share complementary strengths – speaks for itself. Individual companies may be recognised for their knowledge and expertise in certain aspects of the work, for example how to develop oil and gas fields in very deep seas, or how to transport liquefied natural gas between continents. Other companies may not have these skills but have others which can complement the success of the overall venture.

In my view, this motivation for collaboration – that of sharing skills and expertise – is probably the one which finds a ready home in the Vincentian Family. We have among us many different and complementary capabilities, which can be harnessed in the service of the poor. You will know what these are better than I, but our collective challenge is then to find ways to work together most effectively.

Successful Collaboration

So, if those are some of the drivers for collaboration, what are the secrets of success? To answer that question, I will simply provide my personal views:

- The first one will be the genuine sharing of goals between the parties in the collaboration: what does each party hope to achieve by working together? The overriding goals are usually clear – in commercial terms, to achieve an economically successful outcome for the venture – but underlying those goals may be differences of emphasis or focus. For example, one party may wish to apply new and revolutionary technologies with a longer

term goal in mind. Another may wish to generate revenue more quickly and minimise risk by using tried and tested techniques. To avoid conflicts, and ensure success, it is important that the goals are openly shared – and it does not always happen.

The same will apply, I think, in our Vincentian Collaboration. We will come together with the shared goal of alleviating the suffering of those most in need. But perhaps our approaches will differ. Some of us may wish to focus on raising funds to buy a building to support the poor, while others may give attention to mobilising support to provide immediate relief for the suffering. All such goals may be valid, of course, and successful collaboration will see them shared openly and discussed to reach an agreed way forward.

- The second key to success, and this is one which plays to the strengths of the Vincentian Family, is that of shared values among the participants in the collaboration. We have a huge advantage here. Our values speak for themselves among all members of the Family. That is clearly not the case in the commercial world, and many ventures will fail due to a lack of shared values between the players.
- A third important aspect to successful collaboration is that of mutual respect between the participants. And coupled to that will be a sense of humility and openness to hear the opinions and aspirations of others.

I have to admit that, in my experience, while a sense of mutual professional respect is often to be found among companies – based on recognition for professional competence and technical/commercial capability – humility and openness can be lacking! But I have seen strong collaborative working in evidence, particularly in the research arena, where a genuine sense of enquiry and readiness to learn from others can pay great dividends.

For ourselves in the Vincentian Family, humility and mutual respect will be our second nature, I am sure. But our egos can sometimes get in the way, and we might ask ourselves whether we are always genuinely open to hear and understand the opinions of others as we work in our collaborative environments.

Barriers to Successful Collaboration

If these are some of the keys to successful collaboration, what are the hurdles that we face? What gets in the way of effective working together when we share common goals and values, and are determined to work to a common cause?

- The first barrier might be a lack of genuine trust between the parties to the collaboration. We have spoken about the need to document the arrangements, and that is always necessary – but the real trust is not expressed on paper but in personal relationships between individuals and organisations. We will never achieve a successful collaborative model if we are constantly trying to second-guess the real motivation and intent of our partners, simply because we do not trust each other implicitly as well as explicitly. This is not always easy – and brings us back to that spirit of humility – but will be essential if we are to work together in harmony.
- A second barrier, perhaps related to the first, is that of how to exercise influence and direction to the collaborative venture. It will often be the case that one entity will become the “operator,” responsible for the delivery of the services and activities while others will take a more passive role. But each one, understandably and correctly, will wish to bring its own knowledge, experience, and expertise to the benefit of the collaboration. The operator will need to be open to this, and the ways in which all can contribute and influence direction will need to be agreed – ideally, before we begin!

One of the challenges to maintain a successful collaboration over the longer term is that of potential divergence in the goals and aims of either the individual players or the collaborative venture itself over time. The needs of the people whom we serve, and the societies in which they live, are subject to frequent change in focus and direction. It may be that our service, the collaborative venture, is no longer required – or is required to deliver a different priority and that this is no longer aligned with the expertise and capabilities of the partners. We should always be prepared to step aside, and to agree up-front how this will be done – an exit strategy – so that any changes in the collaboration are handled harmoniously, and with no repercussions for those in our care. An exit does not imply failure, but will always need to be carefully arranged.

Finally, that question of size difference in collaborative arrangements. In my professional career, this remained a constant challenge – how to work together with two entities of quite different size and capacity. And we have highlighted how this challenge may emerge in the Vincentian Family.

The key, to my mind, is to remain genuinely respectful and appreciative of all that each party brings to the venture: to recognise that, while a larger entity may have wide and broad expertise from around the world, an understanding of the local circumstances and situation will almost always be unique. And this will apply both to the understanding of oil and gas developments, as well as to the needs to those living on the margins of society.

Humility, and openness to learning local circumstances, will help to promote successful collaboration, where the capability of the larger organisation can be leveraged to the advantage of the locally identified needs.

Closing Thoughts on Collaboration

I would like to conclude my words to you today with one or two simple messages:

- Firstly, we should play to our strengths. We – you – have a very strong history of successful collaboration in the service of the poor. Your website shows great examples of activities and services from all around the world, where members of the Family come together to achieve great results for those in need. Let us continue to do that – to serve those at the margins by harnessing our collective talents from all sides.
- Secondly, and perhaps more challenging, can we extend our models of collaboration beyond the Vincentian Family and share our talents with other organisations, while perhaps benefitting in turn from new skills and capabilities. I have not spoken of this aspect and I am aware that many Vincentian groups work very effectively with government agencies and other not-for-profit entities. But are we sufficiently open to think about such collaborative working more frequently? Can it provide an opportunity to promote our Vincentian values and ethos to a wider society?

- Finally, let me once again express my humble appreciation for the opportunity to speak in this forum today. There is little that I can offer you, except for a sincere personal conviction that it is only by working in genuine collaboration with each other will we truly be able to promote the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. The examples are given to us by Saint Vincent and Saint Louise and they in turn are doing no more than to follow the message of Jesus Christ when he encouraged his disciples to go out two by two.

Can we, in our work of service to those most in need, do any less than work together – collaborate – in His name?