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Abstract

A discussion of the problems that emerge when relief and development activity are confused. The article presents theological and organizational principles to guide these activities. *From an address to the Association of Evangelical Relief and Development Organization (AERDO) in the late 1970's or early 1980's.*

Don Quixote is the story of a man who creates a world in his mind and then proceeds to engage that world with the aid of a real-world person, Sancho Panza. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, incident after incident, provide a metaphor of relief and development. Don Quixote and his companion march across the countryside like relief and development, spearing windmills and occasionally noting their inability to see anything of major consequence resulting from their valiant efforts. Much relief and development work is characterized by the tendency to attack problems that are most familiar, to which we apply hand-me-down solutions, based on habit, tradition, and the misguided confidence that what worked before will again suffice. Like Don Quixote, we bring our view of the world as we have known it, confident that our experiences of the past will accommodate the future. Our viewpoints, our judgments, and our actions too commonly are based on the way we want to view the world. But this does not fit well with reality. We face new realities and we must approach the tasks with humility and caution.

Christian involvement in relief and development activity has established a rather positive reputation. Familiarity with some of the dilemmas that we confront and observations of the attempts to deal with them tends to cause at least mild alarm. It is so easy to do damage while attempting to do good.

Following is one person's attempt to engage a series of problems beginning with the technical issue raised by your organization's name: Association of Evangelical Relief and Development. Linking *relief* with *development* is problematic. Many of our secular colleagues have recognized that inadvertent tying of *relief* to *development* leads to confusion. At first thought, the connection seems obvious and intends no harm. But whenever the word *development* is preceded by any other word, the two tend to blend together. *Relief and development* tends to become one long polysyllabic word, just as surely as *growth and development* or *research and development*. None of these pairs is clarified by the combination. The word *development* tends to slip in as a second thought after several other starting points, and it tends not to get the careful attention it deserves. Relief describes one purpose, motive, and procedure; development connotes a very different purpose, motive, and procedure. Neither is a product of the other. While the intent may be to retrieve a sinking boat, two very different procedures are required: *bailing* or pumping to reverse the sinking and *repairing* or rebuilding to restore the boat's integrity as a boat. Two different functions rarely performed simultaneously.

Protestant missions have been strong in reference to relief-type medical and famine operations. We also have a great track record meeting physical needs in periods of calamity. But when it comes to the needs that are rooted in social and economic malfunctions, Christian efforts have rarely led to effective development, with the notable exception of Wilberforce's leadership in the anti-slavery movement and after almost 150 years, Martin Luther King's valiant continuation of the same pursuit. Christians are more comfortable dealing with first-level needs; there is a strong avoidance of the arduous and often ambiguous

tasks of helping people engage in their own social improvement. Perhaps as an outgrowth of the twentieth century view of conversion as a *moment of decision*; development is assumed to follow. In the real world, this is rarely the case. When relief and development are viewed as the same process, the impression is created that development, in and of itself, is not an answer, but is simply part of the solution to emergencies.

This presents a serious dilemma because *the logic of relief and the logic of development are essentially contradictory*. The modus or motives may be similar but the logic of approach is fundamentally different. Relief activity is essentially counter-developmental.

This does not mean that relief activity is wrong or to be avoided; but we should understand that relief activity has the potential for creating an even greater development problem. When the same organization engages in both activities, that engagement will be at cross-purposes. This realization is critical for organizational effectiveness.

It is not unusual for organizations to plan as if relief and development can be hooked together, i.e., where relief leaves off development picks up. That looks good on a flow chart, but in the field it does not work out that way. Generally speaking the logic of relief is “short-term intensive, adequate, and then leave” whereas development is “long-term, minimal (not maximal) interference, and minimal dependence on outside resources.”

Relief is addictive, and this realization should affect the way we look at our medical services, food relief ministries, refugee accommodation programs, and so on.

The second dilemma is *gaps in evangelical theology*. For many people there is a kind of human reaction to suffering and need that says, “Somehow we *ought* to do something about that,” but the dogmas that guide Christians just do not justify it. The North American orientation to biblical Christianity seems to condone manipulative uses of benevolence. In fact, good works are easier to “sell” if they can be put into a legitimizing package where they are “justified by evangelistic outcomes. To put it in simplest words, we engage in good works or acts of kindness which can open doors for preaching and dogmatic pronouncements.

Evangelical relief and development organizations confront criticism when they appear to be concerned more with relief or development than evangelism. The criticism tends to create defensiveness in the organization which can lead to ineffectiveness in relief and development assistance. The wholeness of the Gospel is what we need to strive for in our theology and practice.

There are vast sections of the teachings of our Lord that are virtually lost in today’s sermonizing in many of the churches that are key supporting churches in evangelicalism—especially the teachings that are set aside because of certain eschatological propositions and dispensational theology. Many of those teachings excised from the Scripture and laid aside are crucial to the comprehension of the ethical frame of reference of the redeemed community in a lost world.

Matthew 5, for example, presents an ethical frame of reference that is often contrary to the values of our society. Perhaps nothing speaks more bluntly to American notions of power, authority, and leadership than does the Beatitudes. Matthew 25 is surely another basic text for those in the business of meeting human needs.

Regardless of one’s position on the eschatological issues, the ethical teachings are crucial and unequivocal. On the day of judgment the Lord will say to the “sheep” and “goats”, “When I was thirsty, you

gave me drink,” “When I was hungry, you fed me,” “When I was in prison, you visited me,” and so forth. The reaction of the sheep is not, “Yes we did, and we are so glad you noticed!” Instead, their reaction is, “Are you sure you meant to put us on the right side?” Because in effect that’s what they are asking the moment they say, “When did we see you in that condition? When did we fulfill those criteria?”

Then the Judge, our Lord, says, “When you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me.” And the goats say, “How come then we’re over here?” So our Lord responds, “When I was hungry, you did not feed me. When I was thirsty, you did not give me something to drink” and so on. Let me paraphrase their reaction: “We would have if we had known it was you!” When did we see You hungry?” I submit that this response is uncomfortably close to the reaction in many evangelical Christian circles when people say, “Well, we’re perfectly willing to do all these things *if we’re doing it for Jesus!*”

God is working in the lives of His people to transform their consciousness and their ethical system so that in the engagement with people’s needs, they are not preoccupied about doing it *for* Jesus; they are doing it *because* of Jesus. Significantly, in Matthew 10:42 Jesus says, “And whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward; and Mark 9:41 “For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.”

Noting these passages is not an apologetic for separating those things that we do in the realm of good works from those things that we do verbally in evangelical propagation. It is not a question of A or B or B over A, the meeting of physical needs or the meeting of spiritual needs as an artificial A versus B, but it is a concern as was our Lord’s in His incarnation for the wholeness of human need.

The assumption that human beings have a spiritual aspect separate from the other aspects of development seems misguided. Spirituality is not an aspect; it is the essence of the nature of human personhood, and while all the classified aspects of development (physical, intellectual, emotional, social) are separable aspects and approachable in differential ways; the spiritual soul of the person cannot be compartmentalized as a “part” of the whole person. Nor is it reasonable to assume that it is approachable in some separate way. The spirit is the core of human personhood.

Another basic reality is that relief activity is appropriate as a Christian response and needs no justification. It was in our Lord’s nature to respond to people who presented needs to him. He did not on any occasion strategize how that approach of a physical sort could be converted to a focus on the spiritual nature or evangelism. In fact, as He healed people, often He would heal and move on as if the whole person had been addressed.

Our Lord was somewhat less crisis-oriented than much of evangelical teaching and preaching today, which pushes people to a decision, as if making an intellectual decision is the major issue. Our Lord seemed quite aware of the nature of human development as a function of discovery, of wrestling with issues, and of coming to new resolutions in time. Our Lord let rich young rulers and others walk out in the middle of the night with their questions still unresolved. Our Lord was broad in His approach to the needs of people, without needing to justify why He was engaged in the meeting of human need.

Three deeply held myths are evident. These myths can be traced to the North American individualistic gain ethic, and to the economics of the competitive marketplace. The first of these is the myth that *people get what they deserve*.

Quite often people justify this particular myth by such reasoning as, “Oh well, they’ve mismanaged all these years so now they’re getting what’s coming to them. Serves them right.” The same reasoning applies to other cultures: “They’ve squandered their resources; they spend every nickel; they’ve been careless, so now they’re paying a price for it.” We tend to generalize from assumptions that are based on our own society and cultural experiences. Regardless of narrowness or evident misfitting, we cast the judgments all over the world!

The second myth is the contention that *poverty is the consequence of poor management, laziness*, or some other flaw that is the fault of the poor person. The stock reasons given are that “they” drink too much, or don’t manage their money, or are just plain lazy or worse. They just don’t know any better. In this particular myth lies a very deep racism.

The third myth, perhaps more a product of poor theological reasoning, is the assertion that *only what can be done in the overt name of Christ is appropriate*. Considering the increased awareness of Islam as a world-wide reality we hear more concern for Christian distinctiveness. The fault in this myth is in its distortion of Jesus’ teaching. The “cup of water given in my name” was not intended to criticize thirstiness. Nor is it appropriate to argue that the compassionate act is nullified unless the authority of Christ is explicitly declared in that moment. Americans assume they alone have the right to determine the conditions under which they will send relief and assistance funds, missionaries, health workers, or teachers anyplace in the world. If anyone threatens to curtail that in any way, it is treated as a violation of an American right. After all, if we are putting up the money, we ought to decide what sort of label gets fastened on the side of the truck.

Following three deeply held myths lead to problematic habits in the culture of North American evangelicalism. The first is the *tendency to dichotomize* or to draw sharp lines of separation. Separatism leads people to *classify* things and other people, to create categories, and to think and behave in mechanistic way. Once again, something of the spiritual wholeness of the situations is lost.

Second is the tendency to spiritualize—to take a passage such as “the poor you’ll always have with you” and make it an alibi, to say, “You just have to pray for them because they’ll always be there. There’s nothing else you can do.”

Third is the tendency to legalize, to resort to proof texts, to use the Bible as law rather than as basis of principle. In legalism, the whole liberating work of Christ is missed.

Restoring the social consciousness of Christians is a worthy goal of evangelical relief and development. We are facing a time when the church will be divided, not on arbitrary grounds of separatism, but in terms of actions and behavior, those who are committed to a spiritual discipleship and those who are not. Those who are faithful in the grace of God will become a much stronger and more visible church, though perhaps a smaller church.

The developed nations tend to institutionalize human effort. Quite often even before the worth of a given effort is well demonstrated, somebody has built an organization around it! This really creates a problem, because though there are advantages in getting one’s act together to raise funds and mobilize efforts, there are costs. For example, bigness usually produces serious costs in communication. The larger an organization becomes, the greater its communication problems. Efficiency is another cost. It can lead to inflexibility. Another result is *tunnel vision*, the notion that it is possible to anticipate things that are going to occur in the future, and to mobilize appropriately for these. Effectiveness has been described as the art of doing the right things, whereas efficiency is described as the art of doing things right. Sometimes in our

fetish for doing things right we do not ask carefully enough the question, “What are the right things?” In relief, and even development activities, flexibility is an essential. The capacity to get into action quickly and the capacity to get out of situations promptly are essential.

But moving too quickly in organizational management tends to cost dearly in terms of human sensitivity. We have all known people who have been hurt because of insensitive personnel policies and a management scheme that looks good on paper and impresses the “home office;” but the human consequences on the field can be debilitating.

Certainly by now we are accustomed to thinking in terms of *appropriate technology*. We know, for example, that drilling a well and putting a diesel pump at the top of it will likely not have long-term value to nomadic people since 1) they will not be encamped at this location very long, 2) they have few people among them with mechanical skills, especially in diesel engine and pump maintenance, 3) the closest fuel supply source is two days away, and 4) they do not like the idea.

Appropriate technology is more a matter of finding simple solutions than it is of finding clever and abstract strategies. Americans are more inclined to use machines, computers, and other high-cost components, and they tend to be less clever in the use of rudimentary gimmicks. Developing the habit of *thinking simple* and *thinking “cheap”* will help a person gain these skills. A local person often turns out to be the best exemplar of this contrast. Finding and encouraging such a person will likely be more valuable than all the materials, pictures, tapes, slides and clever suggestions that the consultant can bring to the discussion.

These very real matters are some of the reasons that development specialists have such intriguing work! And the competent ones learn several important principles rather soon: 1. Face the facts *with* people. Argument is sometimes necessary but always keep it short and carefully avoid anger. 2. The barriers and hindrances are very real to people who lack experience in searching for alternatives. Accept this fact and work around it. 3. Skills can be learned; identify and start teaching the persons who show interest in discovering new ideas. 4. Demonstrate alternatives, do not assert contrary positions until you can show or illustrate them. Use concrete (real) objects and take learners into contact with actual operational contact with reality. 5. Do not rely too much on verbal communication, especially when there are language differences.

Appropriate Institutions

Schools as we know them in the western world, are a relatively recent institutional form. In the Old Testament “schools of the prophets” appear, and in our minds the chalkboard, rows of benches and tables, teacher up front, learners taking notes, waiting for the bell, and the whole picture takes shape. Schools as most of the western world has shaped them are not the only way to organize and deliver learning experiences. New forms and approaches are being organized in many places. Not only is this bringing changes in the technologies of teaching and learning, but it is also stimulating changes in the institutional forms. The search is now underway for *appropriate institutions*. The task is to find, identify, describe, and assess what configurations of people and physical resources can be put together to produce the most effective and applicable learning outcomes. It is a “work in progress,” but it will likely affect the multi-cultural educational situations first. Is there such a thing, then, as an appropriate form of an institution? It is a difficult question because our organizations have come out of a tradition in missions that depends heavily on transported, transplanted, North American and European-style institutions. Approaches to medical services, education, and leadership borrow extensively from models that are appropriate in a complex and relatively affluent society; they tend to be inappropriate for societies that are unable to sustain them, and

these imported schemes will increase long-term dependency. In the names of relief and development we must be extremely careful about the tendency to transplant institutional forms that function rather well *here* but *over there* will likely not facilitate development.

Relief and development agencies should resist the temptation to centralize. Much of our organizational logic is a centralizing kind of logic and the issue may be better solved not by arguing against organization but against centralization. The issue is not that we should do away with organization but that we should keep it well-disciplined making sure that it's appropriate to the situation.

Here are four principles relevant to organizations: First, keep decision-making close to the action level. Acting on this principle has caused some multi-national organizations to set up regional centers. Second, keep capital investments to a minimum. Big properties demand upkeep. Third, make few long-term commitments, especially in the area of relief. Whenever possible, use local resources and local facilities. And fourth, leaders must pour themselves willingly and knowledgeably into responsible dialogue with other Christians wherever there are contacts.

In conclusion, it is important to distinguish between the various activities of helping agencies: *Relief* is concerned with saving lives, basic and urgent. *Rehabilitation* is helping to put the human infrastructure back together. People with earth-moving machinery helping to clear out streets is rehabilitation not relief. Rehabilitation functions like convalescence whereas relief functions more like trauma treatment. *Development*, however, is participation in the normal processes of a human group toward the integrated functioning and activating of that society.

Once we understand the nature of these activities, we can then create appropriate technologies, integrated with appropriate institutional change.