

Speaker's Notes - Learning About Mission from the Poor but Expanding Church Overseas¹

Bob Mitchell, CEO, Anglican Overseas Aid

Introduction

Anglican Overseas Aid (AOA) was created by Archbishop of Melbourne David Penman thirty years ago. Part of its rationale was to build on relationships and connections that existed between the Anglican Church here, and the Anglican Church in developing countries. Ever since, AOA has had a strong preference for carrying out its work through Anglican Church partners.

It is important to understand that many NGOs choose **not** to work with churches. Professional international development, overall, has a strongly secular history and working with churches is perhaps more an exception than a standard practice. At AOA we think there are some compelling reasons for working with churches, and we're going to look at that today. Apart from any theological or missiological reasons, we think that working with and through churches can help produce great development outcomes.

Another overarching reason for working with churches in developing countries is that it can teach us and challenge us in so many ways. We are going to look at possible lessons that the experience of the church in the developing world may suggest for us. The plan is to use our work in Mozambique as one example to reflect on.

Some basic concepts

Before we get started it will be helpful to define what we mean when we talk about 'development'. Often we automatically think about GDP, and living on less than \$1.25 a day. However, 'development' as a term is notoriously difficult to define, but it's essentially about working with communities experiencing poverty and trying to achieve lasting improvements in both physical and social wellbeing. To borrow from the AOA logo, it's about seeking "Life. Abundantly. For All" – but on an ongoing basis.

In this regard, 'development' work is very different from charity or welfare. Charity is limited to addressing immediate needs. It is not concerned with long-term sustainable improvement in people's lives, so therefore it doesn't delve into longer-term solutions to poverty. There's nothing wrong with short-term charity, but development – on a more sustainable basis – is far more important. This may involve working for cultural and behavioural changes, and sometimes seeking to change government policy. At AOA, we think the church can be very powerful in all these areas.

Finally, every good development organisation will have an exit strategy from the community right from the start. They don't want communities to become dependent on them, and in the end, real change must be driven from within. As such, good exit strategies look to leave behind a transformed structure that is part of the community.

¹ Please note some of the information in this presentation is reproduced from my paper "The church and its shadow: the ambiguous role of church partnerships in World Vision's development practice" published in *Missiology: An International Review* 2017, Vol. 45(3) 283 –298.

Church involvement in development

Churches have always been very interested in the idea of development. There's many reasons for this. These include ideas about God's coming Kingdom (and working for it in the now); Liberation theology (poor communities getting together and mobilising themselves to overcome injustice); The understanding that salvation has also got something to do with *life before death*; the need for churches to live and act prophetically (especially in reflecting God's heart for the poor); Christian social ethics (the idea of carrying one another's burdens); Catholic Social Justice Teaching (God's 'preferential option for the poor' and the concept of the global human family); our understanding of biblical justice; the great command to love our neighbour, the implications of social Trinitarianism and so on. It is important not to be hamstrung by the often quoted "You always have the poor with you..." (John 12:8) when talking about poverty alleviation. Perhaps this verse really means that Christians will always be found among the poor since that is their natural constituency.

Interestingly, most developing countries have not drifted towards secularism. On the contrary, religious belief is growing and remains the primary lens through which people understand their world.

Introducing our work in Mozambique

Our partner in Mozambique is the Anglican Diocese of Niassa. Mozambique, located on the eastern coast of southern Africa, has a population of 25.2 million people. Niassa is in the northern part of the country spreading out across the poorest and most remote parts of the country. Overall, Mozambique is one of the poorest countries in the world; it is ranked 180/188 on the UN's Human Development Index. 54.7 percent of the people are living in poverty. Life expectancy is just 55 years.

In much of rural northern Mozambique the water and sanitation situation is pretty bad: there are few toilets or latrines and contamination of food and water is a serious problem. Some worrying social indicators include:

- Diarrheal diseases are one of the highest causes of death in children under 5.
- Over 10% percent of the population in Mozambique are living with HIV.
- Infants often fail to thrive because of poor nutrition.

Mozambique is an ex-Portuguese colony and the Anglican Church ('Igreja Anglicana') is Portuguese speaking. There is also an indigenous language called Makua, which is spoken widely.

The social history of Mozambique is bleak. It's been at war more often than not over the last 50 years. First a protracted war of independence with Portugal, then a civil war. In a sad commentary, the AK47 assault rifle features in the design of the Mozambique flag.

Mozambique has also experienced serious famines. When I was there last year I innocently commented on the distinct lack of wildlife, in stark contrast to many other parts of Africa where I've spent time. The sobering response was "anything that moves has already been eaten!"

The Good News is that God loves Mozambique and that the church there is growing at an unbelievably fast rate. The Anglican Church in Mozambique is 'high church' in its mode of worship. Its early missionaries were from Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA), associated with the Oxford movement, and one of its aims was to eradicate slavery. The main slave market was in Zanzibar, but slaves were brought from many places, down as far as the shore of Lake Nyasa.

In the Diocese of Niassa, over 200 new Anglican Churches have been built in the last 10 years, bringing the total of individual churches to 426. The Diocese is in the process of being split to accommodate its extraordinary growth. An assistant bishop has been appointed to manage the workload. There is a chronic shortage of priests, and catechists and evangelists are being trained up rapidly to help manage the growth. These new churches are not churches of the kind that you and I experience. They are very basic and rustic structures constructed from locally available materials.

AOA works with the Diocese of Niassa in responding to high levels of HIV infection, in water and sanitation, and in child health. Our work is carried out by teams of unpaid volunteers drawn from each church community – called ‘Equipas de Vida’ (literally, ‘Teams of Life’ in English). They are trained up and take responsibility for community education and action on HIV and AIDS, water and sanitation, child health and other relevant issues.

A key feature of the success of the program is its approach of going door-to-door, village-by-village to educate. For example, in relation to HIV these volunteers teach communities about how to prevent the spread of HIV, encourage people to be tested, talk about their HIV status and stress the importance of using antiretroviral medication. This approach also allows the teams to reach and identify especially vulnerable people, often the disabled and women, and sometimes child-headed households.

In the water and sanitation area results have been especially impressive. Evaluations have confirmed:

- 60,000 households in 258 communities in the last three years have gained a better understanding of health and hygiene.
- Using a network of volunteers and natural leaders, 97 percent of the targeted households have received hygiene messaging and 99 percent of those report a change in behaviour.
- The percentage of households with latrines has increased from 38 percent to 82 percent since households were targeted.
- There have been huge reductions in diarrhoeal illness, and major reductions in infant deaths.

Finally, I should add that there is basically no government social security and very limited government services in this part of Mozambique.

Methodology

With the benefit of this background briefing, I’m going to talk about why we prefer to work with church partners. During that process, I’m going to ask some key questions that may represent a challenge or opportunity. What can the church in Mozambique, for example, teach the church at large? I’m more than intrigued when I hear of 200 new churches popping up in any diocese. I’m sure their strong engagement with the local community has a lot to do with it. But first, why does an organisation like AOA particularly want to engage with churches in contrast to many development organisations? Let’s look at some of the main reasons.

1) Church as local and embedded

Churches are embedded, local, grassroots organisations. They have local knowledge and a permanent presence, even in very remote communities

Grassroots: Churches are grassroots organisations that can have a strong local presence. There is data which shows that communities can have a cynical view about city-based NGOs, for example, those that visit remote areas on an occasional basis. On the other hand, the church is conceived as

locally active, discerning needs and giving expression to them in its own community. With this comes an empathy and a sense of reciprocity that city-based NGOs just can't generate. It is a fact that every developing community will have a religious institution somewhere near its centre.

In the West, organised religion has largely dissipated between the search for 'universal values' and the post-modern penchant for a privatised spirituality. The latest Australian census is consistent with this. This is not the case in the developing world. The importance of organised religion has not diminished within these communities. It is growing and even intensifying.² A problem is that some Western NGOs think the rest of the world is like their own society when it comes to religion.

Local knowledge: The church will have an intimate knowledge about local needs and cultural sensibilities. It also has a commission to provide pastoral care and practical support to the community. These two features—its local knowledge and apostolic (or 'sent') character—mean it is well positioned to carry out many types of development programs. The language of the church, which is a shared point of reference in many communities, also helps. It has been observed that: 'the language of faith, the religious idiom, frequently better reflects the cultural norms in which the poor and marginalised operate. They are better able to draw such individuals and communities into global discourse of social justice, rights and development, without recourse to the often-distancing language of secular development discourse' (Clarke and Jennings, 2008: 16).

One reason why AOA's development program in Mozambique is so successful is that the church there knows its context, specific needs, and community intimately. Its door-to-door approach also means that it can identify and care for vulnerable people – for example, orphans, those living with HIV, and the disabled.

Permanent: Another feature is the church's permanent presence within developing communities. In contrast, even with an exit strategy in place, it may feel that many NGOs come and go, existing in a community only for the life of a program. When it is over, the NGO packs up and withdraws, which sometimes causes resentment. If the capacity of the church can be improved, particularly in its developmental understandings, then there may be a lasting and localised force for change.

Remote: Importantly, not only does religious infrastructure exist in many remote places, it is often the only functioning part of civil society. According to one World Bank commentator, 'faith organisations play major roles in communities and together constitute the world's largest distribution system' (Marshall, 2005: 8). The existence of vast networks means that it is possible for developmental messages or ideas to be disseminated to very remote locations through their extensive networks. The reason people gather in such places is not simply to worship, but specifically to receive instruction or guidance on matters pertaining to daily living. The dispersed nature of the church represents an unparalleled opportunity to socialise development concepts consistent with the church's own teachings.

Discussion 1: The Church as local

How is local knowledge used to shape your engagement with your local community? How is this reflected in your own church's ministry plans?

What are the most pressing social issues in your local area?

² 'Global data upend usual picture of Christianity trends', Anglican Communion News Service, 20 March 2013, online at <http://www.aco.org/acns/news.cfm/2013/3/19/ACNS5358>, citing the work of religious demographer Dr Todd M Johnson

How close (or distant) is your church to the local community in general? Is it getting closer or further away? How does your church present itself to the local community?

Do the public actions of your congregation authenticate what Christians believe?
How does your church express its 'sent' character as the people of God?

2) Church as volunteer and community-orientated

Churches can mobilise 'spiritual capital' within their community and draw on the resources of church-based volunteers.

Spiritual capital: The types of capital available to the poor are limited. Financial capital and intellectual capital are often greatly diminished by poverty. However, one type of capital readily available to the poor is spiritual capital. This is a subset of social capital: it comes from a community's religious beliefs which instil social resilience (in its broadest sense) including through participation in formal religious structures (Berger and Hefner, 3). The church is uniquely placed to harness spiritual capital. Spiritual capital may provide hope, resilience, and motivation to social action through religious conviction. Importantly, participation in worship and church life can provide important social networks and support. The church can help mobilise congregants in response to community needs and can provide a stable and existing organisational mechanism for doing so. Given the relative importance of spiritual capital to developing communities the question arises about how it can be harnessed more effectively by upskilling church leaders in development principles. The dissemination of development knowledge within religious networks is one way to spur on social transformation.

Volunteer and personal: When development programs are undertaken through local church partners this may help tap into the deepest personal motivations of congregants, church workers, and volunteers. The church context invites people to connect their faith and to bring their whole selves to the development task. This can be important in 'owning' and sustaining programs. It may also engage the disciplines of prayer, theological reflection, and personal service to the activities required. Working with churches also helps to substantially reduce program costs through volunteerism. The volunteer methodology used in Niassa is central to both the program's success and the enthusiastic acceptance of the Anglican Church within the broader society.

Church as civic-life: Building up the church can be a way of strengthening civic life in an overall sense. While the role of development is not to promote a particular religious position it can involve strengthening those institutions which help build a vibrant and well-functioning civil society. Churches themselves can be a meeting place, and provide a sense of purpose, belonging and mutual support. In Mozambique there is enormous pride in their humble and mainly first-generation churches. The congregations have made sacrifices out of their severe poverty to build them. There is a clear vision, both spiritual and social, attached to their churches. Working with churches helps build their administrative and organisational capacities in the longer-run.

The church in Niassa has a clear sense of local mission and a high degree of 'ownership' of its vision for change. This commitment is reflected in efforts made to build their churches in the midst of extreme poverty.

Gatekeepers: Church leaders can be gatekeepers, endorsers, and translators of development programs. Church leaders are also important community leaders. They are teachers, upholders of tradition, and pastoral carers. Their opinions matter. If development plans are resisted by church leaders it can be very difficult to gain any traction within devout settings. Conversely, church leaders can have a vital role in the legitimisation of new ideas. In Niassa, church leaders are strongly committed to act for the social good of the whole community, and are happy to embrace new ideas, including from the pulpit.

Church leaders are also translators of development concepts and principles within communities. A few years back an Anglican priest in rural Rwanda explained the process to me by way of an example. He relayed that a secular-based development agency had approached him about implementing a domestic savings program in his strongly Christian village. The social tradition among subsistence farmers was to live from day-to-day. Arguably, 'saving money' is more an individualistic and Western cultural practice than a biblical mandate—especially in the context of a communal society. Nonetheless, the priest thought that the program had value. However, he warned that it would not gain traction unless grounded in the community's religious values. Accordingly, the program was 'translated.' This meant that it was launched at the local Anglican Church, maximising attendance. It started with a one hour teaching session on biblical principles of stewardship, run by the priest, before it moved to the workshop based on secular principles of financial management. It then concluded with a time of public prayer in which the priest prayed for villagers to take greater personal responsibility.

Discussion 2: The Church as Volunteer

How does your church volunteer in the community?

Overall, do you see your church more a 'destination' or a 'stepping-off point' for people's mission and service?

Do you see your church as a repository of your community's spiritual capital? How is your church's spiritual capital invested? Internally or externally?

How do you build a sense of 'ownership' for the mission of the church?

Is this possible where the local church is long-established, aging, set in its ways, comfortable, and relatively-privileged? How can the church reimagine itself?

3) Church as Voice

Churches can access Christian theology as a development asset, challenge popular secular concepts about 'development' and use its voice for social good.

Persuasive: The church has a persuasive voice which can help change social or cultural practices. This is an important aspect of many development programs. It has been established that in developing countries religious leaders and their institutions are among the most trusted voices (Narayan, 2000). In Africa, another source claims that three-quarters of people trust their religious leaders (Widmer et al., 2011: 222). The reason for this high level of trust is that churches express values that are embraced by local communities. Churches and other religious institutions 'are perceived to work for the public good and, in comparison with government agencies, it is believed that they are more sensitive to people in times of catastrophe, chaos, or conflict, are responsive to

people's needs and flexible in their provision, act with honesty and take distribution seriously' (Lunn, 2009: 944). By contrast, government and NGO personnel may be labelled less empathetic when they engage in contracted service delivery. In short, churches are positively committed to the society of which they are a part.

In terms of our hygiene work in Mozambique part of the reason for its success is that the Anglican Church is trusted: "Through the relationships established with the Anglican Church in the communities, the people readily accepted the teaching on germs and the importance of sanitation. This was helped by the fact that the Anglican Church has long been established in Mozambique and is well trusted by the people." (Rebecca Vander Meulen, Diocese of Niassa, interview, 2017)

Churches espouse practical theology: The concept of asset-based community development is nothing new. It is about encouraging communities to help identify and leverage those assets which it already has. Considering theology as a development asset *is* new. Development goals need to be taught and understood through the language and worldview of the community. The church's natural use of the language of God, Jesus, the Bible and Christian teaching can help enhance people's understanding and acceptance. This is especially true when dealing with issues that have different levels of sensitivity around them, such as women's empowerment, disability inclusion, acceptance of minorities, justice and empowerment, and care for creation.

More generally, there are many resonances between development principles and Christian scripture. Without wishing to diminish the many hermeneutical issues in reconstructing the Jesus story, there are many points for reflection. Jesus is seen as challenging patriarchal norms, valuing children, affirming the humanity of the disabled, touching lepers, and befriending the marginalised. Strong communitarian values are illustrated, power structures are critiqued, and neighbourliness is radically reframed. There are stories of refugees and transmigration, and early examples of organised famine relief. Forgiveness is commanded, peace-building is lauded, and reconciliation is supremely exemplified. There are rich teachings about social ethics, justice and inclusion and a powerful vision of an alternate future in God's coming kingdom. It is easy to see how Christian notions of incarnation intersect with many aspects of development work.

A corrective to secular models: 'Development' is a contested notion. The church should have a voice in setting the priorities of its community, which may be reflective of faith concerns, a broader notion of personhood, and a less rationalistic view of the things that matter. Secular models of development, by definition, generally do not acknowledge the importance of the spiritual dimensions of community life. Working with churches offers a corrective to a modernity-inspired and sometimes soulless vision of development. One researcher argues that the question of aligning development activity with religion should be turned on its head: 'Rather than asking how religion may align with our (secular liberal) priorities, attention should be turned to the more interesting and important question as to how development came to be seen among mainstream actors as distinctly secular, universal and [a] virtually unquestionable moral good such that religious involvement could be imagined as an abnormal intrusion' (Fountain, 2013: 25). Working with and through church-based development partners helps to normalise spiritual life as an important feature of personhood and community. It also helps assuage the risk of development interventions as being seen as disembodied from, and alien to, the psyche of the community.

Discussion 3: The Church as voice

In both Australia and the Majority World, there are many topical issues that are debated, both within the church and outside it. Looking at the list below, how could scripture speak into these types of issues, and which have the most resonance within your church community?

Child rights
Affirming the humanity of the disabled
Caring for minorities
Gender-based violence
Speaking/acting prophetically
Caring for widows and orphans (or their modern-day equivalents)
The responsibility of the wealthy
Care for refugees
Peace and reconciliation
Concern for the environment

Does your church use its persuasive voice to seek justice, fairness or change? How?

Summary

Working through the church in developing countries offers some particular strengths that can lead to highly effective development programs. Those same strengths offer points for reflection for the church in developed countries. It is often lamented that the church in developed countries is in serious decline, while in many parts of the developing world the church is vibrant and growing. It is incumbent on the Western church to critically examine this state of affairs, and to consider what it may learn. Could some of the factors that make the church an effective development partner help reshape its sense of mission in more developed countries?

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