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Understanding the mission and development nexus

Views of those in missionary training

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Matthew Clarke has been involved in the development sector for nearly 20 years. His research interests include how religion and development interconnect. He is currently writing a book on how the world's major religions both understand and practice development. He is also researching the historical and contemporary role of missionaries in nation-building in the Pacific.

Darwin Loro is currently living in an Divine Word Mission Society parish community in Godoy Cruz, Mendoza, Argentina. He is actively involved in pastoral health care and charitable works under the parish Caritas organisation. His tasks are to strengthen programmes available and to encourage more community volunteers. There is a concerted inter-organisational cooperation to address poverty in poorer areas; and a locally based social network of organisations actively involved in addressing the needs of children and women. The goal is geared towards the promotion of human and community development, thereby alleviating social marginalisation through participatory activities and the provision of specific services that are beneficial for the people.

Non-government Organisations (NGOs) are often viewed as participatory, democratic and cost effective organisations that work directly with the poor. In addition to secular NGOs, a number of NGOs are faith-based, Church-related organisations, including Catholic religious congregations that are mandated to undertake missionary work with the poor. Whilst these religious congregations work with the poor as missionaries, their activities are often difficult to differentiate from secular development interventions. This paper considers the nexus between missionary service and development within one such organisation—the Societas Verbi Divini (SVD) or Divine Word Mission Society.

Introduction

The desire to improve the lives of the poor has motivated the establishment of many thousands of nongovernmental organisations (NGO) operating in developing countries. Indeed, the number of NGOs is increasing rapidly. There were 9,000 international NGOs registered in 1990, increasing to nearly 12,000 in 1999 (Anheier et al, 2001). Growth has continued into the 21st century with now over 13,600 registered international NGOs in existence (UIA, 2007)²

The interventions implemented by these organisations range from development and advocacy programs in various sectors, including agricultural, water and sanitation, health, etc., to relief and rehabilitation activities in environments of conflict, and natural and human-made disasters.

NGOs are often defined as having four main characteristics:

- independence;
- not-for-profit;
- voluntary;
- and not for the immediate benefit of its members (or altruism) (Bail and Dunn, 1996).

They are also often seen as participatory, democratic and cost-effective organisations that work directly with the poor. Arguably, they can be effective at a number of activities, including strengthening civil society, improving democracy, and strengthening governance. In addition to the secular-based organisations that display these general characteristics, there are also a number of faith-
DECEMBER 2009

based, Church-related organisations, including Catholic religious congregations, which can also possess these NGO characteristics.

These organisations (or societies) are independent of the state, not profit-driven, based on voluntary membership, and not motivated by self-interest. Their work with the poor is understood in terms of mission and is mandated by Christian compassion and justice.

Whilst many religious congregations work with the poor as missionaries, their activities are often difficult to differentiate from development interventions of secular NGOs.

This paper considers the nexus between missionary service and development within one such organisation—the Societas Verbi Divini (SVD), or the Divine Word Missionary Society. More specifically, this paper is interested in the views of how young men, currently training to be SVD missionaries, understand mission and development. Fifteen men in temporary vows were surveyed as to their understanding of mission and development and their experience of pastoral work.

Based upon this small sample, this paper concludes that while the practical expression of mission is often indistinguishable from secular NGOs activities, it is the intrinsic motivation for this work that is the major point of distinction for these men. Indeed, this motivation allows the missionary devotes more time to accompanying communities on their development journey. It is this desire to be with the poor, live among them and share their experiences that results in a mission and or development nexus.

A brief history of the SVD

The Divine Word Mission Society is an international and multicultural religious missionary organisation. It is one of the largest missionary congregations within the Catholic Church, with a presence in more than 60 countries and a current membership of over 6,000 brothers and priests (SVD Catalogus, 2007). The majority of SVD members come from former mission lands (Pernia 2002).

There are different ministries that the SVDs are involved in throughout the world. The SVD undertake traditional mission activities, such as working in parishes and running schools, as well as and training future religious missionaries.

However, much of their work is also indistinguishable from development activities, usually associated with secular NGOs. They have radio stations in different countries and have their own printing presses for publication of mission magazines and books. They also work in response to the needs of the refugees and migrant groups. They involve themselves in housing projects for the poor, in farmers' cooperatives and in community organisations among the urban poor. They run centres for street children, hospices for orphans with HIV/AIDS and health care clinics for the poor.

Wherever an SVD works, the commitment to accompany and live among communities indicates an acceptance by everyone, regardless of faith belief, colour, race or language. And so, once they are part of a community, it is natural that promoting the value of human dignity, tackling issues of poverty and inequality becomes a major concern of their work, especially in the developing world. Faithfulness to the call of service for an SVD reminds one to retrace the source of the Christian tradition in Jesus, who has been a model of genuine love for humanity, respect and acceptance for others.

Identifying the mission / development nexus

Mission, as understood in the Catholic Church, is a continuation of Jesus' mission of service rooted in love, which itself was entrusted to his disciples whom he sent out (Luke 24:36-48; John 20:19-29; Acts 1:6-11). Missionary endeavour promotes human dignity, initiating dialogue and equality as a way of relating with other people (Ascheman 2002).

The Second Vatican Council brought about the emergence of the radical interpretation of the gospel, advocating a preferential option for the poor and the quest for justice (Gonzalez 1985, Gutierrez 1973). The focus of Catholic missionary work is no longer proselytising. For Nemer (2001), missionaries today, to some extent, have to live their commitment of serving the poor and the marginalised without preaching or being vocal in their faith.

Being silent has far greater benefit and consequence as they work and serve the people of various backgrounds and faith beliefs (Nemer 2001). Without doing this, the love of Christ and the commitment to follow him may not be seen by certain people. Miranda (2002) uses Cragg's words to challenge missionaries:

Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on another's dream. More serious still, we may forget... that God was there before our arrival (Bishop Kenneth Cragg in Miranda 2002, p38).

Missionary work and dialogue in developing countries, therefore requires living amongst the poor. The lives of the poor are characterised by premature death, preventable illnesses, limited access to clean water and sanitation, economic insecurity and often illiteracy. Like many NGOs, missionaries are therefore involved in community development work...
as they seek to work with those confronting these harsh realities.

Understanding development

Improving the lives of the poor is a complex undertaking for organisations working at the local level. Both poverty and development are contested terms (McGillivray and Clarke 2006), yet they are intrinsically linked. Indeed they can be considered two sides of the same coin. Those who have not experienced development, experience poverty, because it is through the process of development that poverty is reduced.

Development seeks to improve the lives of the poor. But this relationship is clearly not linear, and both terms—poverty and development—are often ambiguous. Poverty can be considered simply in a monetary sense, but also a lack of what Sen (1985) calls capabilities (the ability to use a commodity well), or social exclusion, or even non-participation. The Catholic Church's teaching on development highlights a faith-based view in which spiritual aspects of an individual's fulfilment are addressed alongside economic and social improvements (Alkire 2006, Populorum Progressio 1967, Reed 2001).

It is unsurprising that approaches to development vary greatly between different organisations seeking to improve the lives of the poor; it is therefore inappropriate to speak of only one approach to development. However, whilst being cautious of overstatement, there is value in seeking some loose classification of different approaches. Korten (1990) has suggested that there are four typologies of development assistance implemented by community-based organisations:

- relief and welfare;
- community development;
- sustainable systems development;
- and people's movements (De Senillosa 1998 adds a fifth classification of 'domestic change agents').

An important development concept relevant across these typologies is empowerment (Ife 1995). The structure of power and domination is overturned when community activities are strengthened and people themselves are allowed to run and take control of these development interventions. Their sense of self-worth is restored when they are able to sustain these interventions through their own efforts (Kirk 2000). They are more encouraged as they see themselves partaking and contributing as members owning their projects.

However, empowering communities does not happen immediately and it takes a great deal of struggle, time and effort among people who are committed to genuine community development (Liffman 1978). Further, co-operation in the community, as well as participation, inclusiveness and consensus are among the different facets of community development that also need to be taken into consideration.

Seigel (1999) and Santamaria (2000) both highlight solidarity in enhancing development. They agree that everyone should have access to ownership of world resources and that there be support for each other—a responsibility that all people be included and participate. Therefore, a message of solidarity is being envisioned by actively involving the community in the quest for change, to free the majority of people from misery (Uffing 2002).

Development occurs when there is a conscious awareness of taking responsibility in helping alleviate the sufferings of others. Catholic social teaching has given the emphasis of the right to use material goods over the right of ownership. This must be a priority over economic structure or rights of ownership (Seigel 1999, Kirk 2000). Without this occurring, the absence of a concerted effort among people and nations impedes real development from happening (Santamaria 2000). Self-interest and individualistic attitudes create gaps and misery for many who are deprived and are suffering. Without concern and empathy, authentic development will be elusive.

Survey results and analysis

When understood in the above terms, mission and development naturally coalesce and form a nexus. Therefore, addressing the development needs of the poor is a concern and a priority for missionaries. This development-orientated approach to mission within the SVD is clearly articulated. The survey of 15 temporary professed SVs explores the views of the next generation of SVD missionaries and their understanding of mission and development.

Methodology

The survey questionnaire was divided into two parts (see Appendix A). The first part dealt more on general information and background of the respondents such as nationality, age, education level, language spoken, number of years in the SVD and questions regarding their pastoral work.

The second part required a response to aspects of SVD missionary life. The questions covered areas of development, missionary work and religion. The respondents were also encouraged to write additional comments at the end of the questionnaire and the survey provided ample space for lengthy responses.

The questionnaire was distributed to 19 temporary professed men undertaking their SVD studies in Melbourne, Australia. Fifteen responses were received from those ranging between the ages of 25

CLARKE & LORO
and 48 from the following countries: Angola, Australia, China, Indonesia, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, The Philippines, South Korea, Vanuatu and Vietnam.

Analysis

When asked to define missionary work, eight respondents identified it as following the Christian way of life, with Jesus as a model, through dialogue with all people regardless of religion or culture. Another six respondents answered that missionary work meant an offering of oneself when needed and being with the people, doing something beneficial in the different aspects of their lives. As expected, these responses are aligned with the SVD approach to mission.

In linking mission to religious life, eight respondents considered religious life as a commitment to missionary work, following the mandates of Christian living and in keeping the promise to live out their vows. Seven mentioned religious life as a form of sacrifice dedicating their lives to the service of God and all people.

Christian values and the love of one’s neighbour motivate them. Genuine missionaries come from a conviction that the love they receive ought to be shared as they serve their neighbours.

The motivation for mission and religious life as being able to share one’s talents in the service of people in need was the most rewarding contribution they could give, according to 12 respondents. One mentioned that the rewarding contribution he could give was to share God with others. Another specifically indicated that promoting justice and hope in life was a very rewarding contribution.

Responses around the link between mission and religious faith differed. Six respondents indicated that as a Christian witness, an effective missionary means someone who is open to learn and adapt to other people’s cultures and could start from where the people were.

Three mentioned that sharing God’s love with all could make an effective missionary. Two described an effective missionary as those who were committed to live out their vows, while another two indicated effective missionaries as being able to speak up in advocacy for peace and justice.

Successful missionary work requires particular skills: eight respondents mentioned that openness and respect for other cultures and their people were essential in living as a missionary, while three respondents focussed on commitment to missionary living. Despite the challenges in mission, two mentioned the need for balance life, and one indicated that living a life as a missionary entailed a love for the mission. One respondent did not answer.

The type of work they envisaged undertaking as missionaries varied from respondent to respondent. Five thought they would likely work as teachers, while four want to become chaplains or work in a parish in a developing country. Another two stated they would like to become development workers. Others wish to become nurses, an advocate for justice or be part of formation staff (training postulants, novices or the temporary professed SVDs).

Respondents were then asked to consider the concept of development in order to determine their understanding of how this is linked with missionary work. When asked to define a developing country, seven spoke of poverty and the need for increased financial assistance. Four talked about the struggle and suffering of developing countries as they were dominated or manipulated by powerful countries and organisations. Two identified developing countries as being a priority in today’s world. One described developing countries as the future for vocation to the priesthood and the religious life.

When asked what was involved in working in developing countries, seven of the respondents mentioned commitment among people willing to share with courage and to be at the side of the oppressed. Four indicated helping the poor face their difficulties and move forward. Two respondents indicated respect and openness toward other cultures. One indicated attention to the needs of the people and another one pointed out the need for specialised skills in working in developing countries.

When asked to define the process of development, nine respondents indicated the need to improve the delivery of social services (health, education and building economic structure) and addressed issues that are hampering real development.

Three respondents focussed their attention on the people being empowered through participation, in order to sustain the processes of development. Two respondents had no answers. One identified development as catching up with the developed countries.

Collaboration is seen in the formation and establishment of VIVAT International (VI) (organised network of the Divine Word Mission Society and the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit or SSpS). As a joint NGO comprised of the two religious congregations, VI facilitates networking among members and in promoting collaboration with other agencies, NGOs, and with the United Nations in achieving its goals (VI Charter and Statutes, 2002).
There are four main issues of focus on as priorities for VIVAT International: poverty eradication, gender, sustainable development and peace. These concerns are classified together under the theme of Human Rights (Pernia et al. 2002). The VI issues of focus are in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). At the United Nations (UN) Millennium Summit in September 2000, UN member states committed themselves to achieving the MDGs. All 191 members of the UN have now pledged to meet the MDGs by 2015.

The MDGs are a set of eight internationally agreed goals to improve the wellbeing of the poor in developing countries. They include:

- eradicating extreme poverty and hunger;
- achieving universal primary education;
- promoting gender equality;
- reducing child mortality;
- improving maternal health;
- combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases;
- ensuring environmental sustainability;
- and developing a global partnership for development.

The MDGs emanated from a number of development-related conferences during the 1990s.

In addition to the eight goals, there are 18 targets and 48 indicators. Wherever SVD members are in the world these important issues of concern will guide them. Grassroots experiences in the mission areas will be brought to the UN through VIVAT.

Motivation

The work described by those interviewed as missionary work is closely aligned with the interventions required in achieving development. What did separate the two concepts of mission and development though, was the motivation for that work.

Respondents identified the need to live alongside and become one with the community in being effective missionaries. However, development, simply required partnership and service delivery. Development was therefore more functional, whilst mission involved an expression of love, even though the actual tasks in both mission and development were largely similar.

The commitment of the SVD to tackle, first, poverty eradication as its main mission priority, has long been advocated as it lives and learns with the people its members work with on the mission field. Second, addressing VI support for women’s empowerment is being realised in the members’ various ministries. Both SSPS and SVD can make a difference when working together, consciously aware that empowering women as a second issue of focus is a must in today’s age.

Third, sustainable development for VI, does not only speak about ecology, but also includes concern for the economy, culture and education among other things. Lastly, in promoting the culture of peace as a fourth issue of focus, VI is supporting the message of the UN Charter and the church in its message against the culture of violence and death. While these issues represent the priorities of the SVD as a whole, other particular important issues undertaken by the members in every country continue.

Conclusion

SVD missionary work is often indistinguishable from the work of secular non-government organisations that are known for their development activities. However, within this mission and development nexus, a distinguishing point does exist. SVD dedication to missionary commitment allows its members to devote a longer time to accompany communities and learn from them.

Learning the languages and culture of the places they go to affirms their interest and genuine desire to be with the people, live among them and dialogue with them. Their commitment to the poor, participation in issues of justice and peace, interfaith dialogue and inculturation are signs of hope for the world—inseparable from their religious missionary calling. Therefore, today’s missionary must seek equal partnership and initiate openness to dialogue.

In this research, it can be seen that the development-orientated mission espoused by the SVD and based on understanding of and participation in the activities of communities in which they work, is largely understood as significant by the young men aspiring to be future SVD missionaries.

So whilst practical expression of mission is often indistinguishable from secular NGO activities, it is the intrinsic motivation for this work that allows the missionary to devote a longer time to accompany communities on their development journey. It is this desire to be with the poor, live among them and share their experience that brings mission and development together.
DECEMBER 2009

END NOTES

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2) It is noted the UIA registration of international NGOs is voluntary and so that data collected likely underestimates actual numbers.

3) It is also a complex undertaking for those working at the macro level, with little agreement on how to best improve the lives of the poor – see for instance Sachs 2005, Stiglitz 2007 and Easterly 2007 for divergent overviews of past failures and future approaches to development at the macro level.

4) Empowerment within welfare interventions is less likely to occur due to the nature of the interventions, thought it is possible to empower communities during relief activities. Indeed, one of the weaknesses of the major relief effort that followed the 2004 Asian Tsunami was the failure of international NGOs to empower local communities in planning and implementing the relief activities (see Telford et al. 2006).

5) Both organisations (SSPs and SVD) have the same founder and have the same missionary orientation.

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Website: www.missionstudies.org/au
ISSN 1834-4682
GST-free

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Editorial
Wendy Snook
1
Missiology outside the Latin captivity of the church
3
Discipleship and citizenship in the public theology of Asian Christianity
James Haire
Australian religious women on mission in Papua New Guinea
13
Sisters of Mercy called to change in church and nation (1956-1981)
Teresa Flaherty
Sharia law
Frank Purcell
22
Missiological approaches to Islam
Confrontational versus rational
Martin Jackson
The scroll thus far unrolled
Kenneth Scott Latourette's model for a Christian historiography
Denise Austin
Public theology after Christ and Culture
Moving beyond Niebuhr's typology towards a post-Christendom trajectory
Douglas Hynd
Understanding the mission and development nexus
Views of those in missionary training
Matthew Clarke & Darwin Loro

BOOK REVIEWS
Metavista
63
Innovation in Mission
64
What is the Mission of the Church?
65
Sacred Australia
67
Decolonizing God
68

Details of book reviews on page 12

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