
Christian Ideas of Development: Understanding the current theories, networks, and priorities of Accord Organizations

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We examine the ways that Accord organizations cultivate their identities and engage as Christian development actors. Based on a survey of leaders in forty-four Accord organizations and interviews with leaders in twenty-one, we find that leaders claim the faith identities of their organizations as central. At a theoretical level, most organizations generally rely on evangelical thought and practice in thinking about poverty and development, even as they also consult mainstream understandings of development. There are still some questions and tensions surrounding transformational development that confront many of these organizations in practice. At the network level, we find that church partnerships are the most central partnerships for many organizations, and we propose a typology for how such partnerships are employed, arguing that simply noting the shared vision of church partnerships might ignore important differences among strategies. Finally, we argue that at the organizational level, more attention should be paid to power dynamics and training, because a focus on external programming often may not reflect internal decisions within an organization.

The Accord Network is a faith-based umbrella group. Its “Principles of Excellence” state that “Our Christian faith is at the center of our identity, motive and manner of being” (Principles..., n.d.). There are many umbrella groups for international development actors: Accord’s distinctive is based on the level of intentionality with which it pursues its faith commitment and the particular type of faith to which it adheres.

This should mean that faith matters in the way Accord member organizations work. But how, exactly? We focus on three research questions within this broad area of inquiry: First, how do Accord members conceptualize development? Second, how do religious commitments shape the partnerships (and tensions in partnerships) that Accord members have? Third, how do faith identity and a focus on transformation impact organizational priorities and power dynamics within and among organizations?

We argue that Accord member organizations articulate a bricolage of ideas, beliefs, and priorities. They are strongly influenced by Christian development ideas and partners, but they also draw on intellectual resources and participate in networks from the broader international development community. The integration of these ideas is not always seamless, leading to tensions and contradictions that require further research and discussion. In each of our research areas we thus

describe the ways Christian development leaders currently talk about these themes and then provide questions around which further research and discussion would be helpful.

Short History of the Christian Development Sector

Religious actors have long been an integral part of the development sector. Evangelicals helped create U.S. international humanitarianism at the turn of the 20th century (Curtis 2018). They were also early adapters to the new way that the relief and development sector was organized in the post-World War II Bretton Woods era. A new organizational form emerged at this time: the non-government organization (NGO). World Relief, founded in 1944, and World Vision, founded in 1950, were early examples of what has become one of the most prolific organizational forms in history (Reynolds and Offutt 2014, McCleary 2009). Since the emergence of the development NGO sector, faith-based (mostly Christian) actors have represented between one-third to one-half of the sector (McCleary 2009).

A distinctively evangelical approach to development slowly began to emerge in the 1970s. The

integral mission paradigm that was developing in Latin America served in many ways to help shape the conversation from which the transformation paradigm would emerge. Key moments in this global conversation included the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization and the 1983 conference at Wheaton convened by the World Evangelical Fellowship. Authors like David Bosch, Bryant Myers, Rene Padilla, Vinay Samuel, John Stott, and Chris Sugden were influential in its development (Tizon 2008).

It was Bryant Myers who most completely articulated the transformation paradigm used by development agencies in his seminal work, *Walking with the Poor* (1999). The paradigm asserts that poverty is not primarily material, but rather relational. In other words, broken relationships constitute poverty. Relationships are broken in four different areas: between God and humans, between people or groups of people, between the person and the perception the person has of him or herself, and between people and God's creation. Because poverty is understood in this way, Myers defines development as those activities that restore such relationships and help communities move toward a state of shalom. One aspect of this relational perspective on poverty and development is the importance of working with local churches to implement development activities. Together, these components make up the core of the transformation paradigm.

A more recent and different discourse about religion and development has emerged in the secular or mainstream academy. In 2000, Kurt VerBeek argued that "development literature and development practices have systematically avoided the topic of spirituality" (VerBeek 2000, 31). Ideals such as the separation of church and state and the assumption that religion was on the wane in modern and modernizing societies caused many to assume religion was simply not relevant to poverty alleviation initiatives, and thus not worthy of scholarly attention.

But these views have given way to the empirical reality that religion keeps showing up in development contexts. Researchers have noticed, and they are producing a new wave of scholarship that engages theoretical questions of how Christianity intersects with modernity in Africa (Gifford 2016), practical questions about religion's role in specific development interventions such as microfinance (Manzur, Meisami, and Roayaee 2013), and political questions about power dynamics between donors in the North and program implementers in the South (Burchardt 2013). Researchers have also focused attention on what aspects of religion to consider, with studies examining how everyday religious practices like sexual ethics (Trinitapoli and Wienreb 2012) and prayer (Probasco

2016) aid or constrain human flourishing initiatives. In the midst of such a dynamic and growing discourse, DeTemple's (2013) call to think about development as a religious project itself is particularly prescient.

Alongside the academic research, the international development sector has also engaged religious actors more seriously in the 21st century. One approach has been to create offices dedicated to religion within government and multilateral organizations, such as USAID's Center for Faith and Opportunity Initiatives, the World Bank's Faith Initiative, and the UN's Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development (Offutt, Probasco and Vaidyanathan 2016). Another approach has been to commission large studies on religion. DFID, the UK's official agency for international development, issued a major grant for a multi-year study on religion and sustainable development. They partnered with leading universities and scholars (see Rakodi 2011 as an example of scholarship produced). The World Bank has hired scholars to write books on religion and development in-house (for example: Marshall and Keough 2004; Marshall and van Saanenn 2007). These initiatives have helped change institutional thinking about religion within development circles.

Organizational Realities

A subset of scholarship on religion and development has engaged the questions that are most relevant to our study. How, for example, does faith shape an organization's identity? How does faith shape its networks? In what sense is faith present in an organization's values and mission? Scholarship around such questions indicates a wide range of what it means for development actors to be faith-based. Some scholarship has highlighted the ways that faith-based and non-sectarian development NGOs operate in similar ways, noting how programming may be similar (Jeavons 2004) or the ways religion is embedded in both (Schnable 2016). Other scholarship has shown that explicitly faith-based organizations differ from each other in very important ways. Reynolds and Winship (2005), for example, argue that there is a critical difference between *faith-based* programs and *faith-infused* programs, while Clarke (2007) lays out a five-fold classification of FBOs. Straightforward inquiries have thus unveiled the complexity and variation in the ways that faith shows up in development organizations and initiatives.

Case studies of Christian development actors have provided further insights into how organizations manage their faith identity. Based on her in-depth look at Tearfund UK, Freeman (2018) argues that there is a difference between "Christians doing development" and "doing Christian development." She shows that in

the 1970s Tearfund was motivated by faith to address poverty, but used secular approaches in their work. But over the course of two decades, Tearfund began to base their programs, strategies, and goals on the emerging transformation paradigm. Such changes created greater distinctions between Tearfund UK and its secular counterparts. In another case study, King (2019) examines the ways that World Vision International (WVI) has played a key role in shaping the field of Christian development and even the evangelical movement around the world. Although internal discussions about strategies and implementation are constant, a synthesis of poverty alleviation and local church strengthening is central to the group's identity.

Behind such organizational analyses are more philosophical questions about how faith and development are connected. Erica Bornstein (2005) argues that "faith becomes the conceptual fuel for the prospect of change," and "inspires a specific form of charitable giving with the promise of generating lasting material improvements in people's lives" (2005, 7-8). Deneulin and Bano argue further that religion not only gives meaning to development, but actually defines what development means for people of faith. They state that

development is what adherents to a religion do because of who they are and what they believe in. The engagement of religious communities in development activities derives from their core beliefs and teachings. It is not easy to separate the development activities (schools, hospitals, political protests, and so on) from the religious activities (such as prayer and worship) (2009, 5).

In sum, religion and development organically inhabit the same spaces, and are constituted in part by the same activities.

Taken as a whole, the current literature has made significant inroads into understanding the intersections and overlapping nature of faith and development. But important questions remain. Little is known about how communities of FBOs share beliefs, values, and resources. Nor has much been written on the decisions FBOs make and the resources they use to sustain their faith identity. We contribute to this literature by analyzing the Accord Network, which currently has a membership of one hundred Christian (mostly

evangelical) organizations. We find (1) that their Christian identities are central to these actors, even as several points of tension and questions remain, and (2) that more work needs to be done to fully understand what this all means and how to integrate it into the daily work of these organizations.

Methodology

Defining Accord

This study focuses on organizations that are members of Accord or who participate in Accord Research Network meetings. The Accord Network, according to its website (www.accordnetwork.org), intends to "create a community of Christ-centered organizations." It requires members to accept either the Apostle's Creed or the statement of faith of the National Association of Evangelicals, both of which are comprised of basic beliefs in Christian orthodoxy. Accord also asks members to affirm the eight "Principles of Excellence in Integral Mission," which were developed within Accord ("Principles ..." n.d.).¹

At the time of this survey (2017), Accord had about 85 member and associate member organizations. As of July 2019, Accord had 100 member and associate members.² The network began in the 1970s with just a dozen partner agencies. Current membership includes non-profit development organizations as well as other types of ministries, institutes of higher education, and research groups. Accord's membership remains open and fluid, and many members are those who have joined in the past decade.

Survey Methods

This study emerged from conversations in the Accord Research Alliance. We recognized that we did not have data about the research needs of Accord member organizations or how academics and other researchers could best serve them. To our knowledge, no previous study of this sort existed. We knew that organizations chose to become members of the Accord Network because of its Christ-centered orientation, and we suspected that faith would have a role in defining the nature and type of research needed. But beyond our own personal observations, we knew little else.

We decided on a mixed methods approach, beginning with a survey, which was followed by open

¹ The eight principles are summarized as follows: (1) Our Christian faith is at the center of our identity, motive and manner of being. (2) We acknowledge the reality and significance of the spiritual realm. (3) The Church is central. (4) Transformational practices start with us. (5) We recognize the whole system of poverty. (6) In our relationship journey with the church our local partners, and the community, we enter as guests, co-labor as partners, and continue as friends. (7) We support local communities and churches in measuring all that matters. (8) We tell the story with integrity.

² The Accord Network's membership list can be found here: <https://www.accordnetwork.org/member-list>

ended phone interviews. To determine what topics were most worth pursuing, Offutt conducted a series of conference calls with leaders from Accord member organizations. With the themes that emerged from these calls, a team of Accord Research Network actors crafted survey questions. The survey was housed at Wheaton College and administered through Qualtrics; responses were recorded between July and September 2017.

The survey had five major sections. The first section asked for details on the organization; where they worked, the types of programs they did, the size of their budget, and their denominational identity. The second section asked about non-sectarian partnerships and program databases that might be of use to members. The third and fourth sections, not discussed in this paper, dealt with monitoring and evaluation and other research practices. The fifth section inquired about development theories, the integration of faith and development, work with churches, and measuring spiritual metrics. The final section requested information about organizational priorities and programs for training personnel.

The survey targeted leaders in organizations and/or people who served in research departments. The survey went out to all members of the Accord Network in 2017. Eight organizations that were not Accord members at that time, but that had participated in the Accord Research Alliance between 2015-2017, were also invited to participate. Fifty-five people responded to our survey. We dropped four cases because they were incomplete entries. This left us with fifty-one cases to analyze, representing forty-four distinct organizations, thirty-nine of which were Accord members; five of these came from the pool of eight Accord participant organizations. Sixteen respondents reported being the CEO or President of their organization. Ten respondents reported being either a Vice President or on the senior leadership team. Eleven respondents reported that they were either the leader of the organization's research team or a research analyst. Seven respondents fell into other categories, including being managers or directors of other departments. We used responses of the person with the highest position in the organization for analysis when more than one respondent existed for an organization. The data was uploaded to STATA and SPSS, where it was cleaned, coded, and analyzed.

At the end of the survey we asked respondents if they would be open to a follow-up phone interview. Twenty-seven people agreed to do this. We were able to contact and interview twenty-one. The themes of the phone interview were the same as those on the survey,

but we used this opportunity to ask some exploratory questions as well.

Phone interviews were conducted from September-December 2017. Interviews usually ran 45-60 minutes, although a few were roughly thirty minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. They were then uploaded to Atlas.ti, a qualitative data software package, where they were coded and analyzed.

Data

Those who responded to the Accord Research Network survey appear similar to the larger Accord sample. Table 1 compares the budget of our respondents to those who are currently (as of 2019) members of the Accord organization. In both our sample and the larger Accord membership, there is a lot of variation in budget. Our sample is nonetheless comparable to the broader Accord membership in this regard.

	Accord - current members ³	Accord study sample
<i>Expenses/Budgets</i>		
Under \$1 million	24.2%	18.2%
\$1 million-\$5 million	31.6%	31.8%
\$5 million-\$25 million	13.7%	13.6%
Over \$25 million	15.8%	18.2%
Part of denomination or parent organization	7.4%	9.8%
Not reported	7.4%	2.3%
<i>Total N</i>	95	44

Table 1: Budget Size of Accord Members and Survey Participants

Table 2 presents an overview of the types of development programming in which survey respondents are engaged. About half of the organizations are involved in church empowerment/biblical training, economic development and microfinance, medical/health issues, disaster response, agriculture, and sanitation. By contrast, advocacy work stands out as something in which only a *small fraction* (or less than 20%) of organizations engage. Many are engaged in multiple types of activity. Organizations also operate in countries around the world, with most of their activity occurring in the minority world/Global South.

³ This set of ninety-five organizations are the current Accord members absent the colleges/universities that are members of Accord. It also does not include our sample of invited organizations.

<i>Areas of Activity</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Economic development	56.8%
Medical/Health	54.5%
Church empowerment	52.3%
Education	50%
Agriculture	45.5%
WASH	45.5%
Relief/Disaster	43.2%
Child Development	43.2%
Biblical training	31.8%
Political Advocacy	18.2%
Immigration/Refugees	11.4%
<i>Regional Engagement</i>	
Sub Saharan Africa	86%
Asia	68%
Latin America	59%
North America	52%
North Africa/Middle East	41%
Europe	32%
<i>Non-denominational Identity</i>	75%
Total N	44

Table 2: Programming/Activity of Accord Members

Conceptualizing Development

The Dominance of the Transformation Paradigm

A foundational question of this study was: How do Accord members think about and define development? The transformation paradigm is certainly relevant, but no study has been done that shows how widespread these ideas have become within Accord or among evangelical development organizations more generally. Nor is any research available, outside a few well-chronicled organizations, regarding how seriously the paradigm is taken by those who do know about it.

We thus began our study by asking: “*How important is the integration of faith and development to your organization?*” All respondents indicated it was important, with 78% saying it was very important (or evaluating it as a five out of five). Similarly, when respondents were asked if program efforts related to faith enhance or detract from efforts to reach poverty related outcomes, 80% of organizations indicated efforts were generally positive, and the remaining 20% said they were both positive and negative. This suggests that there are high levels of agreement that faith is important to what Accord organizations do, and that without faith integration, they would be less effective at fighting poverty.

Survey respondents think that what they do is different than what mainstream development

organizations do. They conscientiously rely on Christian resources – particularly the transformation paradigm – to formulate their development approach. This became clear when 68% of respondents listed either *Walking with the Poor* or Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert’s book, *When Helping Hurts* (2009), as two books that influenced their own views on development. *When Helping Hurts* summarizes the transformational development paradigm articulated in *Walking with the Poor*, makes it accessible to a wider audience, and provides new ideas for its application. For comparison, we analyzed combinations of all other authors that were mentioned, secular or Christian. No other combination of authors could be created that was cited by more than 18% of respondents. The transformational paradigm is the unrivaled framing of Christian development for NGO leaders participating in this survey. One typical respondent noted, “We look at [poverty] from a pretty relational aspect... disconnects in relationships with God, with self, with others, with the community.” Myers’ work was the only theologically driven definition of poverty referenced in our data.

But our respondents did reference economic and other non-theological definitions of poverty. They often paired such mainstream ideas with the poverty-as-broken relationships concept. Some articulated poverty as lack of access to education or job opportunities. Others articulated a structural understanding of poverty, arguing that people are poor because they are oppressed by the powerful. Some respondents with medical backgrounds argued that diseases are both causes and consequences of poverty. Respondents who used these kinds of definitions never explicitly rejected Myers’ poverty-as-broken-relationships position. Nor did respondents try to synthesize these mainstream ideas with Myers’ thesis. Rather, respondents tended to move fluidly in and out of these different ideas of poverty.

These same organizations noted too that they often implement technical program components in the same way that non-Christian organizations implement them. Respondents of the survey and interviews reported trying to follow sector-wide best practices in medical interventions, WASH programs, MFI initiatives, and educational components. Sometimes respondents suggested they might even improve on industry wide best practices. As one interview respondent stated, “...as for the methodology [that we use]... it is very transferable to somebody who would not profess faith, or would profess a different faith. We’d gladly train a non-Christian organization in the use of our tools.” There was a strong sense that faith-based organizations benefited from information-sharing in technical areas with mainstream organizations, and that faith-based organizations should share as well as receive learnings in these areas.

Connecting Spiritual and Material Poverty

Nearly every author who has contributed to the transformation paradigm, both in Christian development and in mission circles, assumes that spiritual and material development can and should happen together. But other streams of literature assume an inverse relationship between the two. To find out how our respondents perceived this relationship, we asked a series of questions about this theme. Respondents were first asked, “*Do you think that those who have a conversion experience will be more likely to see improvement in poverty or development indicators as well?*”

We received a wide variety of answers. One leader responded simply and affirmatively: “Absolutely. Yes.” Another responded almost as strongly in the negative: “Not particularly.” Most, though, wanted to nuance their answers. One respondent stated that “I can answer it only in a sense of forty years of ministry in seeing very often how as people move towards Christ in relationship with him. I just notice, but I don't know statistically what it means, but it does seem like people's lives improve in significant ways...” This response was counterbalanced by a fourth respondent who said, “I believe that spiritual experiences do [help alleviate poverty, but] conversion specifically -- to an understanding of Christian doctrine and acknowledgement of a Christian doctrine-- no.” In this the respondent affirmed the power of religion generally to improve material well-being, but did not want to single out Christianity as having a unique impact in this regard.

To pursue this line of thought beyond the point of conversion, we asked: “*Do you have the sense that over time the Christians in a given community will come to experience less poverty on average than non-Christians in a given community?*” This hypothesis has backing from social science theory and research. Scholars as far back as Max Weber and H. Richard Niebuhr note that “ascetic sects” move up the social ladder over the course of time. More recent scholarship argues that this dynamic holds for evangelical communities in Latin America and elsewhere. We wanted to know whether our respondents perceived this to be a dynamic in their development initiatives.

The leaders we talked with held different perspectives on these issues. Some responded negatively or seemed to be agnostic. As one respondent put it, “what is amazing about grace is that God works through all people. All of his creatures are created in his image. God created them as creative and talented. All of them. So I don't see that distinction.” Other respondents were reluctant to take a position on this question, as one said, “Aaaahhh, that's a really good

question... I don't think I could actually say definitively one way or the other.” It is nonetheless worth noting that none who shared these sentiments opposed a faith-based approach to development. They simply understood its effects differently.

Respondents who said that Christians *were* likely to experience less poverty over time often provided qualifications. One respondent stated that “I think... having a relationship with God... can unlock so many doors of poverty that are holding people back. But yeah, I think poverty is so multidimensional, I think that's hard to say.” Another responded with “Okay, defining poverty ... so typically income, education, those are some of the outcomes we're talking about. So just a conversion experience maybe not, but churches that understand integral mission and are carrying that out, then I would say yes.” This respondent believed that a spiritually mature and properly functioning community might experience this kind of uplift, while people who make an initial commitment to Christ, but whose lives do not subsequently change, would not likely be affected in the same way.

Some respondents perceived a diffusion effect in Christianity's positive impact on poverty. One respondent said that “it's likely [that over time Christians will experience less poverty], but I also think that changes in attitudes are in some ways getting caught by the whole community.” Another respondent sounded a similar sentiment, saying that “in our experience... the level of poverty of the whole community changes together,” an idea that has support from the work on religion in the 1960s by Talcott Parsons, as well as from the growing body of literature about diffusion theory.

The final question we posed in this series addressed a commonly held belief that as people become less poor, they also become less religious. We wondered if leaders of Accord held this perspective, and if so, whether this created any tension with regard to how they viewed the long-term spiritual impact of successful poverty alleviation programs.

The responses we received to this question tilted strongly in the direction of believing that there *is* an inverse relationship between material wealth and spiritual dynamism. The observations were provided at different levels. One respondent said that “I just have a notion from history that as societies gain economically they become more secular.” Corresponding observations about what happens at a local and individual level included the comment that “sometimes the more resources somebody has, the lower their connection [to God] and spiritual development is.” A third respondent saw the tension in the question for the transformation paradigm: “I want to say maybe [people become] more religious [when they become less poor],

but I don't believe that. Poverty has been alleviated in some of the places we worked specifically and religiosity has actually gone down."

A few respondents expressed a minority view on this question, believing either that spiritual depth could increase as material wealth increases or, more modestly, that increased poverty does not mean increased spiritual health. One person who saw spiritual and material advance moving together referred to it as "a chicken and egg type of thing." Another said, "I could see both. I can see in a more western environment, as prosperity goes up, perhaps attributing it to some sort of spiritual influence." Others focused on the implications of saying poverty improves our spiritual lives. One said flatly that "if people are living in need and missing out on an education, there's no romantic spiritual wonder in that," while another said, "I don't think the idea is that we need to live in poverty in order to experience God more." Poverty in this perspective, is certainly not necessary, and may even hinder, spiritual growth.

Poverty and Systemic Change

The international development community is increasingly aware that systemic change and political advocacy are needed to deal with the complex roots of poverty. Christian development organizations are part of this broader awareness (Reynolds and Offutt 2014), but this new emphasis on advocacy emerged after the transformation paradigm had already become established. Recent efforts to help Christian development organizations think about advocacy in the context of transformational development exist (Offutt et al. 2016), but the most recognized components of Christian development theory still do not emphasize faith-based political advocacy as an effective tool.

Advocacy is interestingly situated within Accord. Less than 20% of Accord organizations indicate that they do advocacy—by far the lowest type of programming that we asked about, and this in spite of the fact that Accord highlights advocacy work in its fifth Principle of Excellence. This may be because organizations, especially the smaller ones, do not feel sufficiently empowered to do effective advocacy. One of the most effective ways to increase leverage in advocacy is to partner with others. In the interviews, we asked leaders whose organizations are not currently involved in advocacy if they would participate in collaborative advocacy efforts in which other Christian organizations are taking the lead. Some expressed concern about unduly stretching resources or personnel and others qualified their answers by saying it was contingent on the issue, but all of them answered affirmatively. Some did so enthusiastically, such as one respondent who said, "Oh, absolutely!"

Questions for further discussion and research

- A: The connections between reducing poverty and increasing spiritual well-being are messy and poorly understood, in spite of the many claims of transformational development scholars and practitioners that they complement each other. How should Christian development take account of this reality?
- B: While transformational development is a central paradigm used to combat poverty, what theories are employed to make sense of wealth? That is, while poverty is viewed as a hindrance to flourishing, how might Christian organizations more adequately theorize about wealth and abundance?
- C: We note that none of our discussions with leaders surfaced issues of inequality. We also did not directly ask about this issue. But if relationships are central to understandings of development, how might organizations think about the problem of inequality (and not just the problem of poverty)? How might this be captured in program evaluations and designs, for example?
- D: What role does advocacy play in theories of development change? How do organizations think about systemic and structural issues surrounding poverty and exclusion, and how do they respond?

The Partners and Collaborators of Christian Development Actors

Creating community and facilitating networks has always been the central purpose of the Accord Network. But we know of no formal studies with respect to how and with whom Accord members make connections. A deeper understanding of Accord member networks is important because faith plays a role in building bridges and boundaries within and around communities.

This study shows that Accord member organizations' partners are many and diverse. Some partner with Christian organizations; others with state or non-sectarian actors. By far the most common partnership for Accord members is with churches. We thus pay special attention to them in this report. Many Accord members also choose to present themselves as faith-based actors within the larger international development sector. This sometimes requires them to position their faith differently than they do in explicitly Christian networks. Both types of networks carry

implications for the kind of research Accord members need.

Networks In and Beyond Christian Development

Figure 1 highlights some of the more common places where Accord members find partners in the development sector and highlights their diversity.⁴ About two thirds of survey respondents reported coordinating or collaborating with Accord sometimes, usually, or always. The United Nations has been a partner to over half of the organizations.⁵ Further, one third of all organizations report coordinating activities with the Joint Learning Initiative for Faith and Local Communities (JLI) at least sometimes, which on its website describes itself as an “international collaboration on evidence for faith groups’ role and contributions to local community health and wellbeing and ending poverty” (<https://jliiflc.com>).

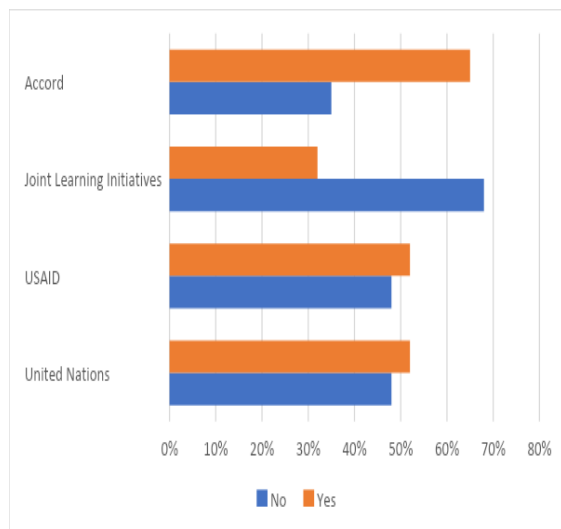


Figure 1: Organizations with which Members Coordinate or Have Coordinated

Most, but not all, leaders of Accord organizations appear willing to enter interfaith settings, though some organizations do not see the point of interfaith partnerships. As one leader said, “...because we have such a holistic approach, it would make that type of partnership rather difficult.” Other leaders did not report having any interfaith partners, but were not

against it. Said one respondent: “So I think we wouldn't be against doing that. I'm not sure that it has occurred.” Some of those that do have interfaith interactions referred to interfaith tables they participated in, which were often set up by local or national governments. One leader put it this way: “some officials might have an interfaith commission or interfaith leaders come together. Regularly those are things that we try to get engaged with.” Finally, some organizations reported integrating people of other faiths into their programming. As one leader said, “if the faith leader is engaged and can be an influencer of thinking, then why not engage the faith leader that community is most likely to listen to, which will be a leader of whatever religion the community is?” In all of the responses we received, it was clear that national or cultural context was one of the determining factors in how programs approached this issue.

In terms of work with secular or non-faith actors, as Figure 1 reveals, at least half of the respondents noted that they have worked with USAID and the UN. Still, only 18% reported being members of InterAction, which is the largest US-based mainstream umbrella organization for international development nonprofits. More discussion might help ascertain why this is the case - for example, InterAction does have steep dues. In spite of this, interviews suggest there are benefits to being part of this network. As one leader said: “I am going to learn from some of the best non-faith-based orgs out there who are doing amazing work... So I have no problem whatsoever learning from the amazing work they have done outside of faith-based orgs.” In sum, non-faith-based agencies appear to have legitimacy among many Accord member organizations. Learning about best practices and funding opportunities were cited as the most frequent motivations for partnerships with such entities.

Connecting with Churches in Development

Leaders of Accord organizations clearly indicated that local churches are important players in community transformation. Our survey asked whether working with local churches adds value to or detracts from anti-poverty efforts. Only two organizations recorded efforts as non-positive (one as neither positive nor negative, and one as slightly negative). 89% of all responding

⁴ NGOs that responded as having coordinated their activities with an organization sometimes, usually, or always are contrasted here with those reporting never having coordinated with one of these four groups.

⁵ Evangelicals in other parts of society often report feeling embattled or marginalized by mainstream society. But our respondents reported the opposite, as was summed up by this colorful comment: “I am not super aware of any people honestly that pooh pooh Christian development. I know there are skeptics, but I am trying to think of any who are actually against integrating religion into development. I don't know of anyone.” If organizations do not perceive themselves to be marginalized, diverse partnerships can be more easily established.

organizations suggested that local churches help poverty efforts at levels between 5/10 and 10/10. These responses indicate a strong belief and adherence to the transformational development message that good development is church-centered development.

But there is great diversity among Accord organizations with respect to *how* to partner with local congregations. There are even different approaches within some organizations that vary strategies based on the context and capacity of local congregations. Data from our research uncovered five church partnership models; 1) church as sole implementer, 2) church as primary partner, 3) community as primary partner with the church in the mix, 4) partnerships with denominations or national church networks, and 5) church can be substituted by organizations of other religions. We discuss each of these below.

Church as sole implementer: For some leaders, it was the church, not their organizations, that was the primary stakeholder and implementer of given projects. In these cases, the organization operated like a funding organization and a capacity building agency. To the extent that they are able, such organizations responded to churches and their plans rather than initiate project ideas. Said one respondent: “They are the ones who come up with the plan, they are the ones who submit the application.” A leader from another organization with a similar partnership strategy stated that “We don’t do much implementation. The local church has full ownership of programs and we support them through raising their capacity for funding, doing strategic planning with them and connecting them to other [strategic partners].” A third leader stated that “we regard [the local church] as the implementer and we wouldn’t do anything that is not with them or through them.” In some of these cases, for example, if a church wants to do a health-related or microfinance project, the organization provides technical support, but they make clear that they want to remain in that supporting role; they do not wish to drive the project. This approach to church partnership perhaps best embodies the ideals that many in the transformational development movement have, and which are consistent with the asset-based community development ideas that are increasingly prominent in international community development.

Church as primary partner: Not all organizations take such a hands-off approach. A second partnership model was one where the organization feels responsible for at least part of the project implementation. Some such models leaned in the direction of still working through the church, but with a stronger role for the organization. As one leader put it, “there is definitely a laying out of what each party is bringing to the table and

the role of each of the partners in the partnership... [but] the goal is to make the Bride of Christ beautiful through the partnership to empower the local church.” Other such models leaned in the direction of the organization doing the project, but trying hard to allow local churches to influence the process, even from the very beginning. For example, one leader explained their entry into communities in this way: “We meet with [local churches] before we start to actually mobilize a community around a project... and try to align our mission with what the church is already doing in that place.” A third partnership model was to have the organization empower churches to run parallel programs. Said one respondent: “Usually we implement our things, we help equip churches to implement things... similar goals, but it wouldn’t be like they’re implementing our projects on our behalf.” In these examples, both the church and the organization play major roles in project implementation, even as roles, responsibilities, and decision-making power shift between actors from case to case.

Community as primary partner with the church in the mix: A third type of collaboration was one in which organizations partnered with congregations, but only inasmuch as congregations participated in the organization’s broader process of engagement with the community. For example, an organization may form a community board and invite a local pastor or pastors to sit on the board. But the board, not the church, is viewed as the primary point of community interface for the organization. In other cases, organizations ask local churches to serve as advisors to projects that the organization runs in and with the community. A third approach along these lines is to encourage churches and their members to simply participate in development projects. One leader stated that “Our staff will typically do most of the training in the community and the local church will just be part of those trainings, so it won’t be exclusively the church body.” This general approach might best be summed up as community-based development as opposed to church-based development, but with resources dedicated to ensuring that local churches are on board.

Partnerships with denominations or church networks: Some organizations chose to connect with church bodies at regional or national levels. For example, one respondent said that his organization spends a lot of time “connecting with networks at the national level. [This is with either] evangelical alliances or council of churches or things like that, or sometimes a denomination.” This respondent also said that while his organization doesn’t always have a local congregational partner in a specific community, they will connect at a district level with inter-denominational groups. A

second leader said his organization is able to scale up more effectively if the partnership is at the denominational level. His organization looks for denominations with a track record for addressing the types of issues that align with their programs. They then come alongside the denomination and provide financial support, expertise, and capacity building to accomplish specific shared objectives. Some organizations even create new multi-denominational church networks specifically for the purpose of partnering with clusters of churches rather than individual churches. The desire from organizations to sign MOUs or LOUs with larger entities often has to do with economies of scale; sometimes it also allows organizations to be free from the responsibility of nurturing congregational partnerships for specific local-level initiatives.

Church can be substituted by organizations of other religions: Organizations that work where Christians are in a pluralistic context, or one where no Christian presence exists, reported working with organizations and leaders of other religions. This can look very different based on the different programs that organizations run. One leader explained that in majority Muslim contexts, their organization relies on Muslim leaders to distribute relief supplies. Another leader explained that they seek out representation from mosques when they put together a community committee for their projects. A third organization recognized the importance of religion in programming. They talked about spiritual nurture programs that are suited to the religious makeup of the communities in which they serve—in other words, they nurture the spiritual lives of people within the context of their own religions—they don’t try to make them Christians. The leader explained that “in [the] interfaith context [and in the] non-Christian context it might be a more general sense of spiritual nurture. And very often the best partners for that would be [non-Christian] religious communities.”

To summarize, Accord members have a vast and diverse array of partners. Churches are by far the most common of these. Our sense is that the church partnership models currently in use make pragmatic sense, but we are not aware of any careful theological or missiological work that has been done to guide these ideas. We also see other important networks at play, and our survey shows them to be important sources of knowledge and best practices. In discussions of partnerships among Accord organizations, the following additional questions need more attention.

Questions for further discussion and research

- A: Are church partnerships being used to reach program goals? If so, are those goals consistent with theories of change within organizations?
- B: What are the most relevant missiological and theological principles that relate to church partnerships?
- C: What kinds of best practices exist for working with interfaith and non-sectarian actors? In what circumstances might Accord organizations benefit most from the wisdom of such actors, or from coordinated action with them?

The Organizational Priorities of the Christian Development Sector

Research on nonprofits and effectiveness has found that a greater focus on diversity and staff care are important for missional success. But we know little about how Christian development organizations think about their own personnel structures and demographics.

We asked respondents to rate on a scale of 1-10 how much effort their organization focuses on a series of issues: racial inequality, cross-cultural training, empowering local and indigenous leadership, gender inequality, psychosocial care (e.g. trauma), religious conflict/diversity, and staff self-care. Of these, empowering local leaders was by far the highest value, with roughly 75% stating that it was very important (score of 8-10). The mean for empowering local leaders was 8.1. The next highest value was staff self-care, with 30% of organizations rating it between an 8-10, and with a mean of 6.2.

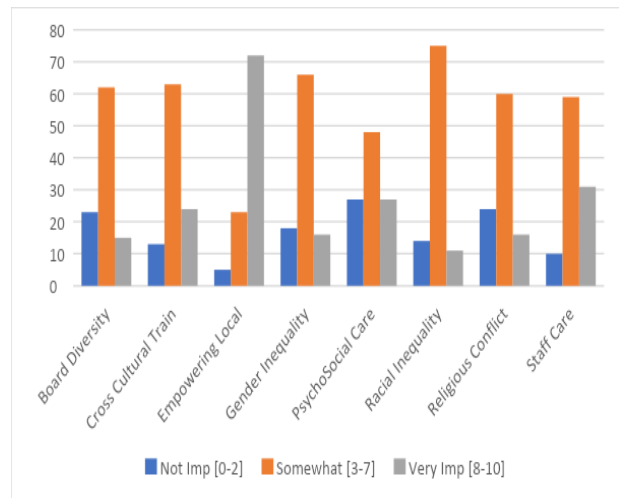


Figure 2: Different Organizational Priorities and Issues

The mean scores for the other six priorities ranges from 4.7 to 5.6, which is over a full standard deviation below the mean score of empowering leaders. These include diversity markers (board diversity, gender inequality, racial inequality, religious conflict and cross-cultural training), as well as psychosocial care.

Previous research has found that Christian nonprofits struggle more than other peer organizations with having a diversity of leadership, and differences in gender equity are striking. Women's representation within Accord NGOs worsens as budgets increase. Recent analysis of 2014-16 tax records for over fifty Christian development actors shows that board leadership is a particularly weak area for Christian organizations, with over half of organizations having boards with fewer than 20% women (and 11% with no women serving on the board). Further, this research also found that while 40% of InterAction members have women leading their organizations, it was 13% for Accord members. Previous research has shown that evangelical development actors, like most evangelical nonprofits, do about half as well as peer groups in the area of gender diversity (Reynolds 2014).

Interview data from this study show a slightly different picture than the survey data. In the survey, board diversity, gender diversity, and racial/ethnic diversity were generally valued, but did not rise as important shared priorities for all Accord members. In the interviews, many respondents acknowledged problems created by gender inequality, noting that issues of gender and leadership can be magnified on the field and within church partnerships. A common problem on the field is that men in a community will not get involved in projects if the staff member leading it is a woman or if the community representative is a woman. This can aggravate an initial tendency, which several respondents noted, that in general it is more difficult to get men to participate in the first place. One respondent related that

it has to be acknowledged that there are differences in the way that cultures perceive leadership and sometimes it's proven difficult for certain individuals to step in to do a project and maintain a sense of leadership and have that be fully supported and respected by the local church; particularly in my thinking of places I've worked in Central Africa where there is this barrier to get over about how they perceive women in leadership.

Another respondent told a story of how some years ago her organization hired only women to lead a program under the auspices of a large local church, and then handed the program over to the church. Over the next

several years, all of those originally-hired personnel were replaced by men.

Some respondents saw pathways for women to participate in leadership. One noted that some African nations have national policies on gender balances for community-based organizations, and that this has helped a lot. Another respondent observed that although the church leaders they work with are male in one region, they have a strong female staff member there, and she seems to be highly respected and the leaders are responsive to her initiatives. Two other respondents reported that although in the minority, they have worked with pastors who are women in the field, and those have been fruitful partnerships. Challenges related to gender are thus reflected both in the home office and on the field. They are navigated with varying levels of success.

Addressing psychosocial care and religious conflict received the most "not important" votes. This seems to imply that few organizations work in war torn regions, and especially those regions where war is created by religious conflict. We did not pursue these issues in our follow-up interviews. Why this is so and what it means for Christian development work could be important areas for future research, especially given the increasing concentration of poverty within fragile states.

Need for faith-based training: We also asked a series of questions about personnel issues. Given the priority of Christian identity for these organizations, we asked survey respondents if their organizations provide personnel training in explicitly Christian development. 62% of the organizations stated that they provide such training. Interview respondents helped us to see what that looked like. One respondent explained that in their orientation for new personnel, "Bryant Myers and others are introduced." Another leader said that they have a book list for new employees, and conduct a weekly book study with titles such as *Walking with the Poor*, *When Helping Hurts*, and *Mission Drift* by Greer, Horst, and Haggard (2014). A third leader explained that while their trainings include Christian authors, they want their employees to read more broadly. As this leader said, "We also don't want to be insulated from the world and what is happening around us."

For some smaller and younger organizations that did not provide training in Christian development, this is an aspiration for the future. The leader of one such NGO stated that

we're getting our heads around making sure our staff remains healthy first, and then I think being able to make sure your staff is more educated. Each of these things for staff care... are capacity issues, you need to have enough money to have

enough staff, that your staff can stay healthy. And then you have to have enough more money to hire enough staff so people can take the time that they need to take on necessary learning. So, it's a growth and capacity thing for small organizations like ours.

The survey also noted that many organizations made use of resources to assist with training in Christian development. Over 84% said that a certificate from a Christian college or seminary would be (or has been) useful in this regard—with an equal divide among those who have used such programs and who would use such programs. Likewise, conferences (like Accord) and Christian education in Christian colleges are two resources that a majority of organizations reported as being useful for them in their training to date.

Questions for further discussion and research

- A: What hinders organizations from truly empowering local leaders (and how might power be adjusted, shared, or handed over)? This a priority for many Accord organizations, but it does not always happen on the ground as desired.
- B: Is enough attention given to organizational structures and organizational dynamics? Are the same standards in their work regarding attention to power dynamics (gender, racial, national) and good governance also at play within the organization? In what ways might care for employees, attention to flourishing, and right relationship be strengthened within the organization at all levels?
- C: If Christian development is different from other development efforts, how do Christian organizations manifest and reflect this in their training?

Discussion and Conclusions

Members of Accord organizations identify with faith on a variety of levels, including how they think about development and change, poverty, collaborations, relationships, and program implementation. The transformational development model (and especially *Walking with the Poor*) is still central to the ways actors think about Christian development, although new questions are also arising.

How do Christian development actors think about poverty and development? How are anti-poverty efforts connected (or not connected) to addressing inequality? What does development or modernity look like? How do theories of development that are very relational connect with program implementation and research on

the ground? There are debates within the development community about how important addressing inequality and extreme wealth is for poverty-reduction, and relational theories of development seem relevant to such debates. A number of different tools are available in the social sciences for measuring poverty, inequality, and development (such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the Multi-dimensional poverty index, or the Human Development Index). More research might also examine how theories of development are connected to the definitions of poverty used in program implementation and monitoring and evaluation. This paper has not addressed the different programs that exist, nor has it addressed the way faith impacts monitoring, evaluation, and research. More attention is needed in these areas because measurement and budgets reflect priorities and ultimate values of organizations.

In the three areas of Christian development that we have addressed, we have posed in each section a number of questions that Accord and its members might consider. Most, if not all, are connected to the ways that development is a religious project, as DeTemple (2013) argues. We add that the lack of clarity among organizational leaders regarding the link between poverty and spiritual well-being might be addressed by further research on the religious aspect of development itself.

Connected to this issue is a need for increased attention to the wide range of spiritual, biblical, and ecclesiological issues that are not directly related to broken relationships, but are nonetheless relevant to transformational development. Within Accord, Myers' work is the primary framing device for understanding spiritual poverty, even when other biblical ideas about spiritual poverty are available. Respondents, for example, did not reference witchcraft, demon possession, evil spirits, curses, juju, or other forms of spiritual attacks. They also did not discuss lack of biblical knowledge, bad doctrine or heresy, the relative absence of local churches in some regions, or the need for spiritual revival. None of these are part of the main discourse surrounding spiritual metrics.

Finally, and connected to this, we note that while Christian organizations are involved in a wide range of development efforts, some key strategies are noticeably lacking. How, for example, can and should development work be complemented and informed by advocacy and/or attention to policy? And how do Accord organizations measure and engage the complex causes of poverty that are beyond the reach of community-level development projects, including systemic realities and public policies? Like the themes of Christian development theory and church partnership theology, research into these areas could

significantly improve the way Accord members approach their work in development.

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