Accord Research Alliance Intensives and Sessions 2020 and 2021: A Synopsis

CRDA Editors

A brief overview of the "intensive" meetings held in conjunction with the Accord Network's annual summits. This synopsis highlights the intensives from 2020 and 2021, the former on learning how to listen effectively, and the latter on the special place of evidence in Christ-centered organizations.

Introduction

This journal, *Christian Relief, Development, and Advocacy,* is the official journal of the Accord Network, which was born in 1978 out of a need among Christian NGOs to do a better job of practicing holistic ministry and to increase their effectiveness by learning and working together. For more than forty years, Accord has held annual conferences to connect, raise issues, share ideas, and learn from each other. One outcome of these annual summits has been to bring academics and practitioners into the same space to cultivate and benefit from the synergy that comes from working together. That synergy has spawned several research and learning alliances that seek to provide a venue for the ongoing conversation necessary for continued growth.

One of those alliances is the Accord Research Alliance (ARA), created in 2012 under the leadership of Beth Birmingham. Its specific mission is to "facilitate a professional community that collectively improves how to measure what matters in Christ-centered relief, development and advocacy through platforms for idea sharing that encourage, connect, equip and inspire" (Accord Research Alliance, n.d.). Since 2013, it has carried out day-long intensive workshops in coordination with Accord Network annual Summits. To that end, the ARA has created forty-three podcast episodes and has spawned three articles published in the *CRDA* journal. It has just over 500 subscribers by e-mail and over 300 subscribers in its LinkedIn group. All of these resources and connections, as well as the presentations described below, can be accessed through the ARA's website at https://accordnetwork.org/ara/.

What follows is a brief synopsis of the highlights of the ARA's 2020 and 2021 intensives and sessions. This provides an overview of the themes that run through the

intensives, as well as a record of the rich conversation enjoyed by the participants.

Themes and Overview of the 2020 and 2021 Accord Research Alliance Intensives

The main topic of the completely online ARA intensive of 2020 was "Cultivating a Christ-Centered, Data-Informed, and Responsive Organization: Listening in Your M&E Practice." There were four sub-topics, one for each of its days' virtual presentations and asynchronous discussions; these were "Listening as a discipline: foundational concepts for your listening practice;" "Listening first during COVID-19: why listening is now more important;" "Listening to community stakeholders: equity in listening;" and "Listening at your organization: creating a responsive M&E practice." The 2021 ARA addressed the question "How should Christ-followers think about evidence?" The ARA also facilitated two workshop sessions during the 2021 Accord Network Summit, one on "Christ-Centered Monitoring and Evaluation" and the other on "Spiritual Metrics: Practices for Christ-Centered Planning, Monitoring, & Evaluation." In both 2020 and 2021 there were a total of twenty presentations, with 381 people representing over 140 groups and some fifty countries registering for the virtual 2020 ARA intensive, and a little over fifty people attending the 2021 intensive in person.

Cross-Cutting Themes

The three main cross-cutting themes throughout these two intensives were theological foundations, power sharing, and concrete methods, each of which engaged and sometimes challenged participants at the heart of their faith-based convictions.

Theological foundations

What is it that distinguishes Christ-centered development organizations (CCOs) from their secular counterparts? Much of the answer to this core question is found in the emphasis on the theological foundations that inform CCO praxis. Toward that end, these two intensives were underpinned by theologies of listening and evidence-building that provided guidelines and challenged participants to discern how they might apply them in their own work. These theologies stressed the following:

1. If the persons of the Trinity listen to each other, then the act of listening is both relational and holy, for we are all made in the image of God, and listening involves not only hearing what is said, but understanding the intended meaning of the communication and its significance. Moreover, with scripture showing that God speaks through all kinds of people, we must listen to all, and especially those we initially think might not have much to say, like the poor, women, children, migrants, people from the "wrong" ethnic group, and anyone marginalized by those holding power. Scripture also shows that we are to listen prayerfully, intentionally, lovingly, and with wonder; that we should listen at all times; and that God commands us to listen. Because listening is a key source of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, it helps build up the kingdom of God, grow in our processes of discipleship, be witnesses, and live life abundantly. In monitoring and evaluation activities, listening well is thus a central concern.

2. Listening is a ministry that should be more relational than transactional, rooted in humility, and in which we should seek to honor those with whom we work by considering the types of questions we ask and how much time we are asking of them. A critical element in this ministry is the dimension of power. We must be intentional about whose voice is heard, which voices are elevated over others, and always working to ensure that we steward our influence and power to create inclusive listening systems and processes that reflect the fullness of our God, his kingdom, and his people. This involves sharing any knowledge gleaned with all participants. All stories and perspectives need to be respected and stewarded with utmost care and consideration, as well as with conscious awareness of opportunities for collaboration and co-creation.

3. As raw data are processed into information, it is key to listen with discernment based on the Word and to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit to knowledge that is actionable in terms of decisions.

It is important to be on guard against the well-crafted arguments and customs of the world (Col. 2:2-8, Romans 12:2).

4. Finally, the process of listening and generating evidence during impact evaluation efforts must be based on what scripture says about evidence and why it matters in the kingdom. Any evidence collected should be about the kingdom and building the kingdom. Evidence gathering should also comprehend the reality of sin. This means planning for and measuring what delights God, like healing the marred image of the poor, dealing with the God-complexes that ensnare poor and non-poor alike, counteracting deceptions by principalities and powers, overcoming inadequacies in worldviews, restoring just and peaceful relationships, using Christian missional practices, and forming agents of transformation. We need to assess whether and how our desire to be in control reflects rebellion against instead of submission to God's unfolding plan for redemption and what other aspects of sin keep us and others in bondage. The very generation of evidence, then, enables confession and repentance as well as kingdom visioning. The generation of data and evidence thus becomes an instrument of spiritual discernment about what God is doing in and through us and those we work with. Through it all, we witness God in action.

Power Sharing

The second major cross-cutting theme was the question of sharing power in research, monitoring, and evaluation efforts. As seen above, this is specifically a part of the theology of listening. The word most commonly used in conjunction with this theme was "equity." There is no disagreement that power should be equitably shared. What is harder is to identify strategies for learning how to share power and then actually doing it. One approach is to challenge the audience with generative questions about their work and then to allow them to find power sharing strategies in their own contexts: Such generative questions include the following:

1. If we are trying to listen...who gets the chance to speak?
2. Who is listening to the data, and how is that listening transformed into action?
3. Who decides what counts as action and what actions to take?
4. Who decides what counts as valid and reliable evidence?
5. Who decides whose and what benefits and costs should be considered?

6. Who decides whose and what knowledge and learning counts most?
7. Who decides whose and what theory of change is emphasized?

Another strategy is to offer answers to these and other questions of power, and then allow people to reflect on the proposed answers. Here is a sample of such answers:

1. Genuine listening is about one's attitude and how to let go of power, which of course takes courage.

2. The key is to regard participants as experts, to see their inherent dignity, and to learn from them. If we are curious about each other, we can create spaces where people can unfold who they are.

3. Stakeholders represent different cultures and thus bring different perspectives on context, feedback, principles, applications, relationships, trust, confrontation, and more. Navigating and managing power dynamics thus require attentiveness and intentionality in meetings, including intentionally handing over power. This may include praying in native tongues, asking for the opinion of those on the margins, and ensuring that the right people are invited to a seat at the table.

4. While staff and researchers may be posited as the primary listeners, the community leaders have to be co-listeners, which means that they must be listened to in the creation of data collection tools, be provided listening roles during the data collection process, and be invited to participate in the making plans that use the data.

Concrete Methods
The third cross-cutting theme in ARA intensives was the practical, or concrete, methods for implementing such basic principles as listening and power sharing. These included the following ideas, as shared by both presenters and participants:

1. Apply design and improvisational (improv) tools to break down and understand problems, create openness to new possibilities and information, and thus equip and empower stakeholders.

2. Design surveys and create protocols that ensure all voices are heard, not just the loudest, with sample requirements for age, gender, geography, and leadership roles. Also, audio-record the surveys in the local language and administer it on screens so that the data can be aggregated and analyzed immediately, with the results printed out and discussed and interpreted the same day with the community.

3. Conduct regular organizational audits of the team's data listening habits to ensure the development of organizational listening habits.

4. Create systems so that local leaders have access to data from their communities and can help the organization listen to the data.

5. Clarify intentions and biases and make sure to talk with people who are different in order to create spaces to genuinely listen to the community.

6. Adopt research perspectives that are not extractive and that create joint spaces where participants talk, interpret, and make decisions throughout the project so that their practice-based knowledge provides the key evidence.

7. Develop an intentional focus on spiritual aspects of programs, including how to measure them, in conjunction with partners.

8. Develop a visual conceptual and practical planning, monitoring, and evaluation framework with indicators. One such example is Tearfund's Light Wheel, summarized visually in an image of a wheel with nine spokes that represent total well-being: social connections, personal relationships, emotional and mental well-being, physical health, participation & influence, environmental stewardship, material assets and resources, capabilities, living faith. Use community focus groups to self-assess their own situation, priorities and vision for the future based on levels of accomplishment of the indicators.

9. Shoot for "Right-Fit Evidence," so that the right amount and type of impact evaluation evidence is collected based on the organizational and situational context in which it is occurring. A useful way of doing this is to create a strategy based on three questions: how to measure impact, what evidence is there for impact and learning, and how to center equity in this process, and focus on collecting evidence that is credible, actionable, responsible, and transportable (CART), cross-cutting this with an eye towards equity.

10. Employ pragmatic mixed methods approaches as opposed to simply quantitative ones such as Randomized Control Trials (RCTs). RCTs are useful, but have limitations in that they do not help identify what parts of the program to improve.

11. Consider and understand six foundational layers: the M&E profession, the kingdom of God, the Christ-centered organization, M&E in Christ-centered organizations, Christ-centered M&E within the wider M&E landscape, and a resulting framework for Christ-centered M&E. Focus on discerning what God is already doing in the community, and acquire evidence for how the organization is being used to contribute to the growth of the kingdom, and be faithful to your calling even in the midst of a lack of such evidence, because at times that evidence is hard to detect.

12. Follow a three-step process in measuring spiritual impact, always in dialogue with the people with whom you are working: ask yourselves, and ensure clarity on, what the spiritual impact is that you are all trying to achieve; then ensure that relevant activities are specifically designed to achieve that spiritual impact; and finally carry out a process of discernment about the best way to go about assessing whether and to what extent that spiritual impact is being achieved.

Again, the presentations and comments that contain all that is in this synopsis are available through the ARA's website at https://accordnetwork.org/ara. A continued discussion and deepening of these points and examples of practices will continue in the next ARA intensive under the theme of "Nothing About Us Without Us: A Kingdom Perspective for Sharing Love & Power in Evaluation and Research Practice," taking place on Tuesday, October 11, starting at 9 am, just before the start of the Accord Network Summit.

References

Accord Research Alliance.
https://accordnetwork.org/ara/