
Asking Tough Questions About Transformational Development

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The disaffection of young adults from traditional religious beliefs and institutions challenges Christian relief, development, and advocacy agencies to re-evaluate long-held assumptions on at least three topics: how the Christian faith informs development work, how it interprets the dominant political-economic model, and how it structures partnerships with other development actors. The essay underscores the importance of making conversation on consequential issues across generational, gender, racial, socioeconomic, religious, and political differences. Three sets of “tough questions” are offered to facilitate open and respectful dialogue, potentially leading to more inclusive and collaborative models of faith-inspired community development work.

“...I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to *love the questions* themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live the questions* now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.” [italics added] (Originally written in 1903) by Rainer Maria Rilke (2004).

Christian relief and development agencies have long played a significant role in improving human well-being worldwide. As a response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the second world war, and ones that followed, hundreds of Christian relief, development, and advocacy (RDA) organizations were founded to discharge the Christian community's errand to the world. Some of the largest were Catholic Relief Services (1943), Christian Aid (1945), Lutheran World Relief (1945), Compassion (1952), World Vision (1950), Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (1962), and Tearfund (1968). Their provision of aid and support to communities affected by natural disasters, conflict, poverty, and disease has been truly extraordinary. In addition to providing emergency relief, Christian agencies have also been at the forefront of campaigns to address human rights issues ranging from child labor and gender inequality to religious

persecution and the use of torture. The Christian development community has also played a crucial role in promoting community-based and church-driven empowerment aligned with their broader spiritual mission and values.

This essay explores how the changing landscape of religion and spirituality among young adults calls for a re-examination of some fundamental assumptions and biases that have historically helped define the identity and mission of evangelical relief, development, and advocacy organizations. A series of tough, intentionally provocative questions on three familiar topics invite members of the Accord Network and Christians everywhere to take a hard look at some of the theological and ideological underpinnings of their work. Our discussion of fundamental issues is considered in view of the waning of evangelicalism¹ within the Global North.

¹British historian David Bebbington, in his classic 1989 book *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, put forth four descriptive qualities of evangelicalism popularly referred to as the Bebbington Quadrilateral: (1) *biblicism* (a focus on the Bible as the sole and supreme rule of faith and practice), (2) *conversionism* (an emphasis on the necessity of the new birth by the Holy Spirit), (3) *crucicentrism* (stressing the centrality of Christ's death for human salvation), and (4) *activism* (the responsibility to share the Christian faith with others). These four interlocking traits distinguish evangelicals from mainline Protestants, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians.

Examining cherished ideas with a critical eye can be a demanding task. We often form our beliefs and biases based on our personal experiences, values, and emotional attachments, which can be reinforced by our religious community. Dissenting opinions and doubts may be met with resistance or rejection. When asked to re-evaluate longstanding assumptions, it can feel like a personal attack, triggering defensive reactions. And yet, holding on to comfortable ways of thinking *no matter what* runs the risk of hardening ourselves, and our organizations, to new learning and improved approaches to development.

Conversations of this kind are especially important, albeit more difficult, across racial, ethnic, gender, ideological, and theological differences. Over the last few years, social justice activism has pressed US organizations of all types—corporations, the military, the CIA, universities, media conglomerates, political parties, and philanthropic foundations—to expand their racial and gender diversity. In Hollywood, for example, there is more diverse casting, more minority-led projects, and a certain premium on nonwhite and female-centric narratives. This is a positive development, long overdue.

And yet *demographic* diversity, however desirable, is no guarantee of perspectival diversity. The lives of Native Americans did not improve when Charles Curtis, the US's first Native American Vice President, pushed through legislation mandating assimilation and revoking tribal land titles. The fact that the five officers who stopped 29-year-old Tyre Nichols in Memphis on January 7, 2023, were Black, and the city's police department was headed by Cerelyn Davis, a Black woman, did not prevent another modern-day police lynching. The perpetuation of a permanent war economy has not been checked by having Lloyd Austin, an African American, as Secretary of Defense. Nor has the weapons industry become more transparent and accountable in the manufacturing and sale of weapons because Kathy J. Warden, a woman, is the CEO of Northrop Grumman. An exclusive focus on proportionate representation can easily leave core organizational culture intact.

Evangelical organizations struggle to create a workforce that reflects the society they operate in, much less to effectively incorporate diverse viewpoints. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), for example, was founded in 1942 as an umbrella organization to represent a broad cross-section of evangelical theological and sociopolitical views. Yet

major African American denominations and churches continue to be conspicuously absent. Black evangelicals exist, but ideologically and sociologically they have never fit a white evangelical box that has consistently ignored linkages between Christianity, racism, wealth inequality, and imperial expansion. All to say, lacking representational *and* viewpoint diversity, organizations risk becoming insular and stagnant, limiting their ability to address complex development challenges in a swiftly transforming world.

Leaving the Fold

Christian RDA organizations encounter the same obstacles to effectiveness that hamper non-religious organizations: a focus on short-term thinking and funding, limited local ownership of projects, a lack of transparency and accountability, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and destructive competition (vs. collaboration) with other NGOs and government agencies. As a result, they can find it difficult to demonstrate measurable, long-term improvements in the quality of local community life, compromising their witness for Christ.

But one challenge is unique to Christian development agencies: the growing disengagement of the younger generation from traditional Christian beliefs and affiliations. Since the early 2000s, Barna Research and the Pew Research Center have regularly tracked the declining interest of young people in institutional Christianity.² The reasons are complex and multi-faceted. Some of the disaffection, to be sure, is due to liberalizing cultural norms and lifestyles, which can lead to a decreased interest in organized religion. Science has also eroded confidence in spiritual or supernatural explanations for everything from the origins of the universe to sexual orientation. Moreover, being exposed to people of different faiths and cultures has made it difficult for young adults to view their inherited faith as the sole path to truth or salvation.

I have taught for over thirty years at an evangelical Christian college. Over time, an increasing number of students have expressed their belief that religion in general, and evangelical Christianity in particular, appears obsolete and superfluous, largely out of touch with the realities of the modern world. These are not twenty-somethings in youthful rebellion against moral responsibilities. Most have clear spiritual yearnings and hungry minds. What they find maddening is the avoidant silence they experience within churches on

² Barna Research (Kinnaman 2011) reports that nearly two-thirds of 18–29-year-olds who grew up in the U.S. going to church have dropped out, citing boredom and a feeling that God is “missing.” Pew Research Center (2019) notes that more than one-third (34 percent) of Generation Z are religiously unaffiliated, a significantly larger proportion than among millennials (29 percent) and Generation X (25 percent). Eighteen percent of Gen Z affirmatively identify as either atheist (9 percent) or agnostic (9 percent).

issues of greatest consequence to the planet's future. I find myself largely sympathetic to their complaint. In my fifty years of attending evangelical churches and hearing more than two thousand messages, I cannot recall a single sermon that tackled the topics of climate change, biodiversity loss, artificial intelligence, the legacy of white supremacy, wealth inequality, and the costs and consequences of US America(n) militarism.

Moreover, a growing number of earnest and fair-minded young adults increasingly regard many of the teachings identified with evangelical faith to be archaic, if not offensive. They find some especially difficult to accept: An inerrant Bible or infallible papacy. Young earth creationism. Sin transmitted from the first parents to the rest of humanity through DNA. Rigid gender roles. Gay sexuality as essentially a perverse lifestyle choice. Racial inequality as primarily resulting from defects of personal character and culture. Non-Christian religions as "prisons of disobedience" that are corrupted in their inner heart. An unmistakable born-again experience as the indispensable evidence of being "saved." The natural world as a dead "resource" that humans are superior to and have the right to dominate. Hell as a literal chamber of eternal fire and torment awaiting all who fail to confess Jesus as Lord before they die. That the true Church will be "raptured" once the gospel is proclaimed throughout the whole world. And that the modern state of Israel deserves unconditional military support because the Jews are God's chosen people.

There are others. Many others. Suffice to say that a complex matrix of cultural, ideological, and theological factors has caused a considerable number of emerging adults from evangelical backgrounds (and even some of their elders) to reject many of the theological tenets and church affiliations of their parents and grandparents. When they go looking for Christian spirituality, they don't go to the Church. They may embrace the core of Jesus' teachings, but then opt to describe themselves as ecumenical Christians, progressive Christians, Christian humanists, ex-evangelicals, or post-evangelicals. Their aspiration appears to be for a Christ-centered faith that transcends the highly masculine rigidity of traditional evangelicalism *and* the relativism of a postmodern culture—one that is intellectually honest, spiritually

meaningful, and socially engaged with issues vital to planetary flourishing.³

Christian RDA agencies could be significantly impacted by the rising generation's search for a more relevant Christian faith.⁴ As Millennials and Gen Zs become less religious in the traditional sense, they may also be less likely to support organizations typically associated with white male leaders, conservative political views, and exclusionary beliefs and practices. This could lead to a decline in volunteers, funding, and advocacy activities within Christian RDA organizations, impacting their ability to carry out their mission. Moreover, as younger generations come to view religion as peripheral to their lives, they may be *more* likely to support non-religious organizations and social movements—like Oxfam, Doctors Without Borders, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and Sunrise Movement — that more closely align with their commitment to women's rights, marriage equality, anti-racism, environment protection, and non-interventionist foreign policy. The possibility of unfavorable outcomes compels Christian RDA agencies to reexamine their theological and strategic assumptions, as well as the development models that arise from them.

Conversations About Hard Things

The process of deconstructing traditional evangelical beliefs and assumptions brings to the fore a whole new set of intricate and weighty questions on issues that once were considered settled. The focus of our present conversation will be on posing tough questions surrounding three controversial topics, inviting us to consider these issues in fresh and nuanced ways. In turn, we will probe (1) the role Christian faith plays in development work, (2) how Christian faith relates to the operating system and effects of the modern political economy, and (3) how faith-based development NGOs relate to local churches and other development actors—specifically governments and social movements. Following brief subject introductions, a set of evocative questions will be posed. Our aim is to kindle meaningful and intellectually invigorating discussion that embraces diverse viewpoints. While Christian RDA organizations are hardly uniform in their theological orientation, organizational structure, or development strategy, they do share a common agreement: "Our Christian faith is

³ Numerous theological and literary figures have been particularly influential among "post-evangelical" leaders. They include Anne Lamott, Walter Brueggemann, Lesslie Newbigin, C.S. Lewis, Wendell Berry, bell hooks, Jürgen Moltmann, Howard Thurman, Marcus Borg, N. T. Wright, Diana Butler Bass, Richard Rohr, Frederick Buechner, Cornel West, Miroslav Volf, and Stanley Hauerwas.

⁴ Development agencies with well-established affiliations with white evangelicalism include World Vision, Samaritan's Purse, Compassion International, Food for the Hungry, Tearfund, World Concern, and Christian Aid, and various members of the Accord Network.

at the center of our identity, motive, and manner of being” (Hammond 2018). In other words, “faith integration” in the context of international development is seen as much more than a dispassionate, intellectual exercise. Rather, grounded in an imitation of Christ, it indicates a moral imperative to use resources and relationships to prevent or alleviate the suffering of others and to declare, in both word and deed, the gospel message. The critical questions become: What faith are we integrating? What is its vision for the world? And how does it empower transformational development?

Faith and Development

One of the most recurrent debates within the Christian relief and development community has to do with the role of faith in development work. Some argue that bringing people to life-changing faith in Jesus Christ through evangelism, baptism, and the process of discipleship ought to be at the forefront of their work. Others insist that priority should be given to poverty alleviation, social development, and justice-seeking. At present, the Christian RDA community lacks definitive agreement on what, if anything, should differentiate expressly “Christian” relief and development work from the work of non-religious development organizations.

Members of the Accord Network endorse either the Apostles’ Creed or the NAE Statement of Faith, along with the integral/ transformational model of mission based on the work of John Stott, Lesslie Newbigin, René Padilla, Orlando Costas, and Bryant Myers, among others. Terms like *holistic*, *integral*, and *transformational* aim to resolve the stubborn division between soul-saving evangelism (the primary focus of evangelical mission agencies) and society-improving development (the focus of Christian social action and community development agencies).

Several Christian theologians and philosophers have elaborated upon the Hebrew concept of *shalom* to envision a response to Jesus’ prayer: “Your kingdom come, your will be done, as in heaven, so on earth.”⁵ As a social imaginary, *shalom* conceives “development” as the restoration of right relationships—with God, with self, with fellow human beings (especially “strangers” and “enemies”), with the various community institutions (“powers”) that fix social existence, and with the natural world that sustains all life. *Shalom* indicates a vision of earthly justice and joy, cooperation and

harmony, prosperity and hope standing against a social order based on hyper-individualism, labor and sexual exploitation, extreme wealth inequality, and the glorification of military power and profit-making over the needs of people and planet. In short, it is the world as it *ought* to be.

Some evangelical development thinkers, concerned that the inward and theocentric dimensions of *shalom* might suffer from the concept’s expansiveness, have sought to preserve an emphasis on personal conversion through an encounter with the gospel. A generation of evangelical missionaries and development workers has been influenced by missiologist Donald McGavran’s famous assertion that when individual persons are transformed, society will be transformed also (1980, 240). By this he means that when people become disciples of Jesus and undergo moral and spiritual transformation, their changed attitudes, behaviors, and values naturally influence their families, communities, and ultimately, the society they live in. In *Walking with the Poor*, Bryant Myers (2011) also stresses the indispensable role of evangelism—declaring the good news—in holistic development:

For the Christian development worker ... there can be no practice of transformational development that is Christian unless somewhere, in some form, people are hearing the good news of the gospel and being given a chance to respond... If this news is not accepted, there is a sense in which those who refuse sit wrapped in chains of self-imposed limitations. (145)

The evangelical framing of integral or transformational development overlaps, to a large extent, with the Capabilities Approach set forth by Martha Nussbaum in *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (2011). Both development models focus on the importance of empowering individuals with the capability to pursue goals and lead lives they value and choose. Both insist that a high quality of life is more than increasing one’s income and standard of living, as Jesus taught (Luke 12:15). Where the two approaches diverge is in their religious assumptions (or lack thereof). Whereas integral or transformational development may prioritize spiritual growth and the spread of Christian faith over other aspects of development, Nussbaum proposes ten irreducible and universal human capabilities.⁶

⁵ Key authors include E. Stanley Jones (1972), Nicholas Wolterstorff (1983), Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton (1984), Cornelius Plantinga Jr. (1995), Miroslav Volf (2011), and Bryant Myers (2011).

⁶ Nussbaum’s list of ten central human capabilities, presented on pages 33-34 in *Creating Capabilities*, are as follows:

1. *Life*: Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely.

Grounded in a purely secular understanding of human nature (i.e., the power of moral choice within people), they are not contingent on the acceptance of any religious doctrine or conversion experience. Any human being with developed “practical reason” (capability #6) can step back from their actions, reflect upon their reasons for doing things, evaluate their behaviors (whether it conforms to standards they willingly endorse), and determine whether there are legitimate reasons for acting the way they do. Religious faith can be an important source of meaning, value, and fulfillment for some individuals. But it is not a requisite pathway for everyone to achieve a high level of flourishing.⁷

This leads to our first set of difficult questions.

Tough questions

1. How important is a Christian conversion experience to the formation of deep morality and optimal human development?

Religious conservatives often claim that a society without a strong foundation of faith would necessarily be one bereft of ethics, values, and transcendent meaning. In *Society Without God* (2020), sociologist Phil Zuckerman challenges these claims. Zuckerman’s fieldwork with residents of Nordic countries reveals that they generally enjoy strong economies, low crime rates,

high standards of living and social equality, and the highest levels of subjective happiness in the world. And yet they remain largely unconcerned and even incurious about questions of faith, God, and life’s ultimate meaning. They no longer have an active concept of sin, do not particularly fear death, and believe that science has convincingly disproved the case for religion. Most declare themselves atheists or agnostics. Furthermore, many of the world cities boasting the highest quality-of-life are among the least religious in the western world. These include Tokyo, Taipei, Auckland, Melbourne, Copenhagen, Zurich, and Vancouver. Conversely, many of the world’s most “Christianized” countries, including the US, Brazil, the Philippines, Mexico, Russia, Haiti, and South Africa, continue to be riddled by systemic racism, extreme wealth inequality, gang wars, corruption, and violence against women and LGBTQ+ people. ***Considering these realities, how valid is McGavran’s claim that “transformed persons inevitably transform society?”***

2. The “capabilities” approach asserts an alternative moral basis for human development than that typically associated with the “transformational” paradigm. In what ways do they contradict, complete, or even correct each other?

3. Why should religion be taken seriously by secular development practitioners?

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2. ***Bodily health:*** Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.
 3. ***Bodily integrity:*** Being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; to have opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.
 4. ***Senses, imagination and thought:*** Being able to use the senses, to imagine, to think, and to use one’s mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of conscience, expression and religious observance.
 5. ***Emotions:*** Being able to love, to grieve, and to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger; to not have one’s emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety.
 6. ***Practical reason:*** Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life.
 7. ***Affiliation:*** Being able to live with and toward others; to freely engage in various forms of social interaction; to imagine the situation and show concern for other human beings; to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others (this includes non-discrimination).
 8. ***Other species:*** Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature.
 9. ***Play:*** Being able to laugh, to play, and to enjoy recreational activities.
 10. ***Control over one’s environment:*** Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one’s life (e.g., protections of free speech and association); having the right to hold both land and movable goods (property) on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others.

⁷ Human flourishing is understood as the sum of the conditions of social life which allow people, whether as groups or individuals, to achieve the life that they value and choose. This ideal state of life, whether one uses religious terms like *shalom* or *kingdom of God*, or non-religious terms like *development*, *wellbeing*, *happiness*, *capabilities*, or *sustainability*, is accessible to individuals of all faiths or no faith at all.

The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to some extent, encourage cooperation at the level of service delivery. Still, many mainstream development workers maintain deep ambivalence toward the clannishness that is apparent within close-knit religious communities. They suspect religious leaders involved in community development will favor their own beliefs, their own believers, and their own projects instead of working for universal benefit. Are their suspicions well-founded?

Faith & Political Economy

Over the last 75 years, US American evangelicals have shown themselves particularly enthusiastic about the prospects for Christian faith in the context of US-directed globalization and militarism. Economic globalization and military power are viewed as two sides of a single coin. Globalization promotes the conditions that lead to profit maximization and capital accumulation for global corporations, while militarism avails its considerable resources to assert geopolitical dominance, stabilize energy markets, and suppress anti-capitalist movements (see Chomsky 1993 and Kinzer 2006).

Washington currently maintains roughly 800 overseas military bases spread over 150 countries and territories. And since its founding, the US has launched over 400 foreign military interventions.⁸ The \$858 billion US defense budget for 2023, forty percent of the

world's total, is not for defense, per se. The US military is the *de facto* guarantor of oil and natural gas shipments from US partners in the Persian Gulf to China, the offshore factory for corporate US America. The United States Department of Defense (2000) frankly states its strategic goal: "full spectrum dominance" over all land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace, with "overwhelming precision firepower" and "pervasive surveillance."

This appears to be US America's New Manifest Destiny, one that Christian ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr warned against in *Moral Man in Immoral Society* (1932). Niebuhr argued that empires and nations have the tendency to fight wars, not for altruistic reasons (i.e., to defend the innocent or promote democracy), but to secure their own national (economic, geopolitical, and cultural) interests. To oppose war, then, is to oppose the very instrument by which nations secure imperial rule and become an object of self-worship. Although "self-interest and the interest of others are inextricably intertwined in all human relations" (3), making it difficult to distinguish between the two, the "collective egoism" of the nation is capable of far greater evil than that of the individual. "The nation is always endowed with an aura of the sacred, which is one reason why religions, which claim universality, are so easily captured and tamed by national sentiment, religion, and patriotism merging in the process" (96-97).

Some evangelical mission and development leaders may find the record of US military interventionism ethically disquieting. But for the

⁸ These interventions include drone strikes, coups, political assassinations, brutal counter-insurgency campaigns, and US-sanctioned massacres. Since it gained independence in 1776, the US has relentlessly sought expansion by force: it slaughtered native peoples and expropriated their lands (1834-1934), waged war against Mexico (1846), attempted the annexation of the Dominican Republic (1870), annexed Guam (1898) and Puerto Rico (1898) and Hawai'i (1900), took possession of the Philippines (1899-1902), engineered the overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran (1953), and occupied Haiti (1915-1934). During the Cold War period, the US bolstered friendly regimes through military aid and trade agreements, and opposed or toppled regimes through military confrontation, covert actions, regime change, assassination, trade, and economic sanctions. The record includes the murderous overthrow of the Guatemalan government in 1954; the Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba enacted by the Kennedy administration in 1961; Lyndon Johnson's orchestration of the 1965 military invasion of the Dominican Republic, and then South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from 1961-1974. Richard Nixon installed Pinochet in Chile in 1973, while Ronald Reagan armed the Contras in Nicaragua in the 1980s. The CIA and US military replaced oppositional leaders and installed receptive political leaders in Iran and Guatemala, but also in Congo (1960), Brazil (1964), Chile (1973), and Lebanon (1982). In response to the 9/11 suicide attacks, the US launched a global war on terror (GWOT), invading Iraq and Afghanistan on the pretense of neutralizing Saddam Hussein's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), dismantling Al Qaeda, and bringing Osama bin Laden to justice. The Costs of War project at Brown University calculates that the Pentagon and the Department of Defense spent an almost unimaginable \$14 trillion on the GWOT during the period 2001-2021. As much as 50 percent of that amount went directly to major weapons manufacturers and other defense contractors like General Dynamics, Lockheed-Martin, McDonnell Douglas, Raytheon Technologies, Halliburton, and Blackwater. Today, Washington appears intent on waging a cautious proxy war in the Ukraine aimed at degrading the Russian military and driving Vladimir Putin from power. Meanwhile, the US "pivot to Asia" announced by former President Obama, has expanded the reach of the US military in the Asia-Pacific to 400 military bases, all of which are meant to contain China and ultimately cripple it to the point where it is no longer capable of regional dominance. In short, the US has demonstrated throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and now into the twenty-first centuries its determination to remain the world's sole global superpower.

majority, militarized capitalism⁹ and Christian orthodoxy are favorably conjoined: the US American *imperium* being reflexively celebrated as the highest earthly *and* heavenly good. To live in the US is to be steeped in the belief that US Americans are an exceptional people, living in an exceptional country, at an exceptional time, fighting an exceptional enemies in exceptional wars, requiring the use of exceptional tactics. This has been the rationale for state violence from the days of “felling Indians,” only now the “fierce savages” and “untamed wilderness” of old have been replaced with low wage producers and foreign energy and mineral deposits. Global military and diplomatic dominance keep profits and stock prices high, while suppressing popular movements for justice.

Toward the end of his life, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke out fearlessly about the indivisible links between the “three evils” of white supremacy (racism), the growing divide between rich and poor (poverty), and the use of state violence (war) to secure US economic interests. In his famous “A Time to Break the Silence” speech in 1967, given exactly a year before he was assassinated, King connected the dots:

Capitalism was built on the exploitation and suffering of black slaves and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor—both black and white, both here and abroad... The evils of capitalism are as real as the evils of militarism and racism. The problems of racial injustice and economic injustice cannot be solved without a radical redistribution of political and economic power.

King explicitly condemned what he called “the madness of militarism.” He knew that US America’s permanent war economy not only robbed the country of financial resources to fight poverty within our own hemisphere; it also perpetuated a system that disrespected, dehumanized, and brutalized brown, yellow, and black people throughout the world. By any reasonable standard, that madness can be diagnosed as pervading US foreign policy in 2023.

If King were alive today, I am quite certain he would have added a fourth evil: *ecocide*. The term describes the criminal destruction of the biosphere, and

how low-income communities of color are forced to bear the disproportionate harms. Notwithstanding all the hoopla about the “greening” of corporate capitalism, the growing consensus among both economists *and* ecologists is that the global political economy is unsustainable by its very nature. Predicated on over-production, infinitely expanding markets, and growing levels of consumption among privileged portions of humanity—all on a finite planet—perpetual economic growth has brought us to the threshold of abundance and the brink of ruination. Ice sheets are melting. Crop yields are diminishing. “Strange” weather events are increasing. Ninety-seven percent of the world’s native forests and 90 percent of large fish in the oceans are now gone. Permanently gone. Meanwhile, deserts are expanding, and sea levels are rising. Water in much of the world is in short supply while the era of cheap oil is gradually coming to an end.

Elites continue to debate possible remedies *within* the current system, like a mandatory carbon tax, green market incentives and subsidies, alternative technologies, and stricter environmental rules. But it is unlikely that such “fixes” will take root with sufficient speed and sufficient spread to keep the world’s most vulnerable populations safe. The most optimistic scenario is for average temperatures to rise by between two and two and a half degrees by 2100 (IPCC 2022). While that is a level that most nations of the Global North might endure, although with great disruption, it will cause great misery for peoples of the Global South. In the context of international development, this means slow and agonizing suffering or death for hundreds of millions of people.¹⁰ The health of the planet and the health of humanity are inextricably linked, and neglecting the former will ultimately compromise the latter.

The profound changes needed to sustain human and earth communities in the future will require not just new machines and regulations, but a new consciousness. “For some,” says Yale professor James Speth in *Bridge at the Edge of the World* (2008), “it is a spiritual awakening—a transformation of the human heart. For others it is a more intellectual process of coming to see the world anew” (4). Many other writers and thinkers, notably Pope Francis (2015) and David Korten (2006), argue that without some moral,

⁹ In his 2003 book *Incoherent Empire*, British sociologist and historian Michael Mann uses the term “militarized capitalism” to refer to a system in which military power is used to promote and protect capitalist economic interests. In this system, states invest heavily in military power to secure access to resources, markets, and labor, and to protect their economic interests from potential rivals.

¹⁰ Among the most definitive descriptions of the current crisis of capitalism is David Harvey’s *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (2014). For a description of the environmental and climate crisis resulting from the expanding demands of humankind in a finite world, see Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (2014) and David Wallace-Wells’ *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (2019).

religious, or spiritual imperative, the kinds of changes required to solve the questions cannot be addressed with any sort of urgency, if at all.

Unfortunately, the possibility of a broad spiritual transformation faces off with what economic historians and political scientists call “path dependence” (see North, 1990). Once a specific economic and political path is taken, it can be difficult or impossible to reverse course, leading to the creation of self-reinforcing patterns and lock-in to certain outcomes. Capitalism is not just a mode of production, but what ethicist Daniel M. Bell, Jr. (2012) calls an “economy of desire.” Few people today desire to minimize, much less relinquish, what they have come to regard as “the good life.” Once our bodies and psyches are habituated to a way of life based on overproduction and overconsumption, it is hard for us to imagine an alternative. It is simply easier, cheaper, more convenient, and more comfort-producing to do the wrong thing: to drive private cars and trucks, to travel the world in airplanes or on cruise ships, to eat fast food, to build and furnish large houses, to spend hours on end in front of screens, and to buy loads of non-essential goods from Amazon or Walmart. Moreover, most people in poor countries want all the stuff that defines “normal” and “success” in rich, industrialized nations. No one seems to know how to turn the system off, or even down, without economic collapse. If it goes well for the world’s poor, it is going to go very badly for the planet. “Our economic system and our planetary system are now at war” (Klein 2014, 17). That, in short, is the ultimate conundrum facing the international development community.

Our excursus on militarized economic power is intended to emphasize the urgency of systemic reforms in the global political economy, a largely neglected dimension of advocacy for Christian development organizations. In his day, Jesus stood with the poor and marginalized against political and economic interests that privileged the wealthy and powerful. Additionally, Christian teaching on stewardship of the earth challenges the notion that the natural world exists solely for human exploitation and economic gain. Providing aid and assistance to those most in need is certainly important, but they are not sufficient to address the root causes of poverty and environmental damage bound up with an economy at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life.¹¹

Tough questions

1. *In what ways has your family background, theological education, and ideological leanings shaped your perspectives on US foreign policy and the global US American military ‘footprint’?*

2. *Are policy advocacy, community organizing, and other actions that prioritize economic justice, environmental sustainability, and human rights legitimate areas of public engagement for Christian NGOs?*

3. *What does our theology say about the importance of environmental responsibility? Why must the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor be heard together? What keeps Christian organizations from tackling big environmental issues like climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and resource (oil, gas, and mineral) depletion? What goals might Christian NGOs set for themselves in these areas?*

Although the integral mission/transformational paradigm seeks to reconcile soul and body, the spiritual and the social, personal salvation and community development, the “ecological” and “geopolitical” have been woefully under-theorized. The most popular sources of Christian development theory—books like *Walking with the Poor*, *When Helping Hurts*, *Toxic Charity*, and *The Shrewd Samaritan*—are strikingly silent about the ecological crisis, militarized globalism, and how the dominant extractivist worldview has led to the destruction of ecosystems, the displacement of communities, and the exacerbation of climate change.

4. *Given the realities of global poverty, increasing income/wealth inequality, and excessive levels of consumption and material waste in the Global North, what is expected of Christian organizations committed to the welfare of the poor and dispossessed?*

5. *Our current economic system works to create immense wealth and to grow economies, but morally, how does it work? What does it do to people and planet, not just for them? Do the internal mechanisms of capitalism act to preserve and protect the earth’s ecological processes and biodiversity? Do they enable people to live in caring relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature? Do they encourage people to*

¹¹ Theologians that include Walter Brueggeman, Walter Wink, Daniel M. Bell, Kathryn Tanner, and Ched Myers have written extensively on the intersection of faith and politics, and the prophetic role of the Church in critiquing shalom-betraying political and economic systems. Myers’ book *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (2008) offers a trenchant critique of US foreign policy and predatory forms of capitalism, along with a theological framework for resistance to these systems.

desire and delight in God? Do they strengthen the world's cultural and religious traditions and identities that provide meaning, direction, and joy in life? In other words, in what ways does advanced capitalism nurture and/or hinder transformational development?

Faith and Field Partnerships

Within evangelical circles, one of the rarely disputed principles of community change is “the centrality of the church.” Appeal is made to Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: “that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms....” (3:10-12; see also Matthew 13:31-33). What interpreters of Paul typically have in view is the church as a social institution, constituted by collective worship, the reading of Scripture, preaching and sacraments, its care for the afflicted, and its embodiment of the character of Jesus. In other words, it is a visible, organic, organized *local church*. Such location-specific congregations are regarded by many as the primary, if not exclusive, agent of the kingdom of God on earth, and central to an evangelical understanding of transformational development. This position is concisely conveyed by Lesslie Newbigin in *The Gospel in Pluralist Society* (1989): “The primary reality of which we have to take into account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation... The only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live it” (227).

One strength of Newbigin’s argument is its emphasis on living out the gospel in community. The Church is not just a repository for ancient beliefs and rituals; it exists to form Christ-like people who manifest, in deed and word, the healing of creation (the kingdom of God). At its best, the local church is an incubator for growing sinners into saints. “Saints cannot exist without a community,” insists Stanley Hauerwas. “They require, like all of us, nurturance by a people who, while often unfaithful, preserve the habits necessary to learn the story of God” (1981, 89-90). At the level of *human association*, then, churches (and other communities of religious conviction) share a belief in the dignity and freedom of persons. They represent one of the few sanctuaries, especially in poor communities, where human care, kindness, forgiveness, hope, sharing, healing, and character formation can be witnessed. Their focus is on what is good for human beings as such, and not on what is good exclusively for a nation state, much less an empire. This moral and political autonomy enables them to concentrate on shaping honest, trust-worthy, and compassionate people.

The question remains of precisely *how* local churches can and should be involved in community transformation efforts. Tim Keller, in *Generous Justice* (2010), calls upon Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper

to provide an answer. Kuyper’s conviction is that local churches are designed to support the physical, spiritual, psychological, and social welfare of congregants. But Kuyper thinks that robust community development and social reform are best left to specialized agencies. He refers to this differentiation of tasks as “sphere sovereignty.” While he believes “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign overall, does not cry: ‘Mine!’,” sociologically he recognizes that local churches are not designed to directly impact all spheres of society.

Kuyper distinguishes, helpfully, between the *institutional* church (believers gathered in worship, instruction, sacraments, and service) and the *organic* Church (believers scattered to live out their faith in various spheres of society). The institutional (local) church has a particular “sphere” of responsibility: to assemble believers and form disciples, who will then take their faith into their own family and community spheres of influence. While the institutional church could be expected to *nurture* and *support* congregants as godly city planners, physicians, agronomists, and filmmakers, these persons would not be expected to impact the community *through* the local church. Their primary social influence and development impact would take place through the private enterprises, government agencies, and specialized NGOs in which they serve. Keller reminds us that the local congregation, like any voluntary organization, cannot do all things well.

In *When Helping Hurts*, Corbett and Fikkert (2012) offer an intervention framework for Christian agencies working in disadvantaged communities. At one stage of aid there is *relief*—the provision of immediate, temporary assistance to people affected by crises, such as natural disasters, conflicts, or epidemics. Relief may include emergency food and water, medical care, and search-and-rescue operations. Then there is *rehabilitation*, which focuses on rebuilding critical infrastructure (e.g., homes, hospitals, electrical and water supply systems) and bringing persons or communities to self-sufficiency through agriculture, education, job creation/training, and the like. Finally, there is *development*, which aims to support long-term community wellbeing through activities that may include improving access to education and healthcare services, promoting economic growth by giving micro-loans to low-income individuals or groups, and community-based conservation initiatives.

Unsurprisingly, community interventions undertaken by local churches in urban and rural poor communities tend to cluster around relief (charity) efforts rather than rehabilitation and development initiatives. Most congregations in disadvantaged communities simply lack the resources and technical

expertise needed to undertake long-term development programs that require sustained investment, planning, and coordination. Moreover, relief activities often provide more immediate and visible benefits to local communities as faith-based organizations use their grassroots reach and highly motivated volunteers to provide practical assistance to those in need.

Local churches tend to excel in three dimensions—the *spiritual* (self ↔ God), the *psychological* (self ↔ self), and the *interpersonal* (self ↔ others). It is when they attempt to act *outside* these three capacities that they face severe limitations. Again, this is especially true within resource-poor areas of the world. But even within the US, with approximately 385,000 religious congregations and an abundance of assets, the worlds of business, law, politics, higher education, and popular entertainment remain intensely materialistic and secular.

Furthermore, although hundreds of thousands of Christian congregations and denominations are involved in innumerable community betterment projects, I am not aware of any that have catalyzed community transformation with scale and impacts comparable to specialized NGOs like Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and Grameen Bank in Bangladesh; the Edhi Foundation and Orangi Pilot Project in Pakistan; and organizations like Partners in Health, the Fistula Foundation, Amref Health Africa, and Slum Dwellers International (SDI), which work in multiple countries.

This may indicate two things. First, that God’s gifts of wisdom and service can, and often are, exercised in ways consistent with God’s design for creation largely apart from the institutional church and oftentimes without leaders from the organic church. “Common grace” teaches that God’s goodness is the “light that lightens everyone coming into the world” (John 1:9). The operations of the Holy Spirit, “poured out upon all flesh,” act to both restrain evil in the world and to enable unbelievers to do good works (see also Rom. 2:15; Acts 17:22; Luke 6:33). Secondly, the institutional church shines brightest when it cultivates among members a vital spirituality that can then drive and sustain them as they deploy their hope, passion, and talent in non-churchly structures whose sphere it is to understand technically complex things like how to lay sewage lines, establish high-quality schools and health clinics, and administer savings co-ops.

This does not mean that non-churchly structures don’t have their own challenges, especially when it comes to forging truly authentic partnerships between Northern and Southern/Eastern organizations. Mission

agencies and development NGOs are often touted as the perfect non-church solution to the world’s development challenges. Aren’t they altruistic, nimble, and flexible, involving highly trained and highly committed workers? Haven’t they proven their capacity to mobilize funds and people to address community problems? While careful distinctions must be made among the astonishing number of NGOs (in Uganda alone there are an estimated one thousand registered foreign and indigenous NGOs), we should not assume, *a priori*, that they are more grassroots, more participatory, more responsive, more credible, and hence more effective than local churches. To be sure, many do inspired work, making a concrete difference in impossible places. But NGOs are also businesses—some of them *big* businesses—that aim to maximize clients, market share, donor funds, and political influence. In many parts of the world, NGOs have also become the latest vehicle for upward mobility among gifted national leaders who often learn from their foreign counterparts how to pose children for photographs, handle donors, create websites and brochures... and make a good living.¹²

If productive collaborations between NGOs are challenging on many levels, partnering with local or national government agencies adds even more complexity to the development mix. Although contracts between governments and development NGOs are increasing, both parties may not be sure that the potential benefits outweigh the risks. Evangelical churches and parachurch agencies legitimately wonder: Will the opportunity for increased scale and state financing come with the imposition of regulations and restrictions on our religious activities? Government agencies, too, have good reason to ask: Will faith-based NGOs prioritize the spread of their religious over official development goals? And will they threaten the government’s authority and legitimacy in places where religion and politics are tightly intertwined? Suspicion can run in both directions.

My own experience suggests that governments everywhere are generally supportive when community-based organizations or federations substitute state services like education, safe drinking water, electrification, housing, health care, education, and job training. Their discomfort grows in proportion to NGO success in empowering people to demand (or resist) changes in the structure of society. Government’s first concern is almost always to retain power and defend the status quo. Consequently, few political officials will lend their support to independent, protest-oriented grassroots movements that seek to raise public

¹² Exposés like Michael Maren’s *The Road to Hell* (1997), Dambisa Moyo’s *Dead Aid* (2009), and William Easterly’s *The White Man’s Burden* (2006) argue that NGOs often sustain a system of dependency and self-perpetuation that undermine local initiatives for self-reliant development.

awareness about a particular issue. At that point, they may appear more of a threat than an ally. This suggests that people-centered, self-reliant development, if successful, will inevitably experience an ebb and flow of cooperation and tension within the high politics of state relations with civil society. Like all development, self-help is inherently political: it is the struggle to control the future.

Advocacy work that addresses the root causes of poverty, injustice, and inequality necessarily involves political action. This may help to explain why evangelical Christian churches and development agencies have historically shied away from direct involvement with social movements. The majority were absent from, or even opposed to, the Trade Union Movement, the Suffragette Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the Nuclear Disarmament Movement, the United Farmworkers Movement, the Disability Rights Movement, the Animal Rights Movement and, more recently, the Occupy, Black Lives Matter, and Climate Action movements.¹³ The same was true with evangelical support for Brazil's land equity movement, the German peace movement, the mobilization against apartheid in South Africa, the campaign against blood diamonds in Sierra Leone, the women's movement in Liberia, and the "food riots" in Burkina Faso and Cameroon.

The reasons are no doubt complex and may depend on a variety of factors, including political conservatism, an emphasis on personal piety over structural change, concerns over political correctness, and historical-cultural context. But it is noteworthy that these movements all envisioned some form of "transformational development," i.e., a fundamental change in the nature, values, internal relationships, and social functions of institutions. They also echo the kind of non-compliance with ruling authorities and their false values that is illustrated throughout the New Testament (see Acts 4: 18-20; Acts 5:29; Rev. 13).

To sum up: One of the most significant opportunities for churches and other faith-based organizations in development contexts is to forge strategic linkages with *non-churchly* NGOs, government agencies, civic elites, and social movements to influence public policy and pressure decision-makers to act consonant with kingdom goals. On several occasions Jesus eagerly welcomed signs of faith among women and men *outside* the house of Israel and urged Jews to learn from their example (Lk. 4:14-30; Lk. 7:1-10; Mt. 15:21-8; Lk. 10:25-37; Lk. 17:18). Not only does this reveal a witness of common grace in the heart,

conscience, and reason of every creature, regardless of culture and creed; it also provides the common ground needed to labor side-by-side with allies (other believers) *and* co-belligerents (sympathetic non-believers) on behalf of community *shalom*. Newbigin underscores the necessity of engaging every sector of society in the work of creational healing:

The Christian will be eager to cooperate with people of all faiths and ideologies in all projects which are in line with the Christian's understanding of God's purpose in history... Every day of our lives we have to make decisions that we cannot take without regard to the others who share the story. They may be Christians, Muslims, Hindus, secular humanists, Marxists, or some other persuasion. They will have different understandings of the meaning and end of the story, but along the way there will be many issues in which we can agree about what should be done. There are struggles for justice and freedom in which we can and should join hands with those of other faiths and ideologies to achieve specific goals, even though we know that the ultimate goal is Christ and his coming in glory and not what our collaborators imagine (1989, 221).

Tough questions

Danladi Musa (2012), a Regional Advisor for Tearfund Nigeria, complicates the idea of "the local church as primary development agent" in an article published by the Micah Network:

What usually happens is that development departments are set up at the church denominational levels and are given the responsibility to carry out development programs at the community level. In other cases, para-church organizations employ staff to carry out development programs through local churches to reach the broader community. Typically, local churches see themselves as beneficiaries of development programs, not instigators of them. The local church supports the efforts of the development department or the para-church organization. Most local churches see their ministry as limited to evangelism, teaching,

¹³ This has begun to change in recent years. Numerous faith-based relief and development organizations are now involved in social and environmental justice activism. These include the Mennonite Central Committee, Tearfund, Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services, Christian Aid, International Justice Mission, the National Council of Churches, and Interfaith Power and Light.

and discipleship. Social work is often limited to financial and material assistance to the needy. Little or no efforts are made to mobilize communities to take action to solve common problems that affect the community.

1. Does Musa accurately portray typical NGO-local church relations? How should Christian NGOs from the Global North relate to local churches in the Global South? What are the best ways to approach such partnerships? What are the major pitfalls?

2. Why do many Christian congregations and development agencies tend to shy away from partnerships with non-Christian faith communities, non-sectarian grassroots NGOs, municipal government agencies, and non-violent protest movements? How accurately does James Davison Hunter diagnose the problem, and what implications might it have for the work of Christian NGOs?

Christians tend to believe that cultures are shaped from the cumulative values and beliefs that reside in the hearts and minds of ordinary people... This is why Christians often pursue social change through evangelism and conversion... But the hearts and minds of ordinary people are relatively insignificant if the goal is to change cultures at their deepest levels... Cultural change at its most profound level occurs through dense networks of elites operating in common purpose within institutions at high-prestige centers of cultural production... Thus, for all the talk of world changing and all the good intentions that motivate it, the Christian community is not, on the whole, remotely close to a position where it could actually change the world in any significant way (2010, 234-235).

3. What missiological, theological, sociological principles (“theory of change”) are implicit within your organization’s external relationships (partnerships, networks, alliances, etc.)?

Conclusion

Christian RDA agencies are, among other things, learning organizations. As such, they depend on constructive discussions on sensitive issues, representing differing perspectives, to continuously refine their approach to addressing global problems. A younger, more racially diverse generation of Christian workers is preparing to assume leadership positions within our organizations. Many have distanced themselves from evangelicalism as a “theo-political brand” and now identify as “evangelical-adjacent,” “post-evangelical” or “ecumenical.” This broader ecclesiological and theological shift prompts Christian RDA organizations to re-evaluate their internal culture

and operational strategy in accordance with the eschatological vision of “a new heavens and a new earth” (Isa. 65, Rev. 21). The “tough questions” posed in this essay only begin to tap the conceptual and strategic complexities involved in world betterment on a Christian basis. Our hope is that organizations will give them sufficient airtime in honest conversations around conference tables or virtual tables to build more nuanced understandings, strengthen relational bonds, and ultimately help shape more thoughtful, inclusive, collaborative, dynamic, and impactful organizations.

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