
More Than Partners: Christ-Centered Organizations and the Local Church

Katie Toop

Local churches have increasingly been called upon as local partners in development work, by faith-based and secular organizations alike, for their invaluable local history, knowledge, and connections. While acknowledging the value of these assets is important, the partnerships with local churches can easily fall into purely transactional relationships. At World Concern we care deeply how our identity as a Christ-centered organization impacts our relationship with the local church, how our calling intersects with that of the gathered fellowship of believers, and how we work to foster mutually life-giving partnerships with Christ's bride. This article reviews an exploratory exercise World Concern did together with partner churches in Africa in 2016. The goal was not to train or teach, but to think about the character of our partnership. The article provides a glimpse into some of World Concern's continuing field conversation around this critical topic.

At World Concern, our vision statement is “A world transformed from poverty to the abundance of life.” We take this vision from Jesus in John 10:10b, where he says, “I came so that they would have life, and have it abundantly” (NASB). But what is unique about the abundance Jesus promises and the abundance of the world? What does it look like? How do we pursue it? Is it discovered? Developed? Gifted? And what role do we play?

It was this last question, about the role we play—and more specifically, the role we play in relation to the local church—that led us to consider our approach to church partnership more intentionally. As a Christ-centered organization, we believe the gathered fellowship of believers is central to God's plan for this abundance and thus must also be central to our own. Jesus promised he would build his church (Matt. 16:18), not his international non-governmental organization (INGO), and while we acknowledge that the kingdom of God is not limited to the church, and we pray our own Christ-centered INGO will indeed bear fruit for the kingdom,¹ we also recognize that the abundance Jesus spoke of includes and finds unique expression in a growing and vibrant local church.

Why the Local Church?

There are myriad reasons to work in partnership with the local church. One does not have to be a person of faith to see the value local churches can bring to disaster response and community development work. Secular organizations, governmental donors, scholars, and practitioners from many walks of life have acknowledged the benefits of partnership with churches in communities. Local churches have relational networks of trust, local knowledge, an understanding of context, local language, and a sustainable presence, to name a few.

While it is important to acknowledge and celebrate these benefits, it is also possible to slip into a transactional relationship with the local church, where partnership is viewed as purely strategic, either solely or primarily from the perspective of meeting the targets of the INGO—be they community development milestones or numbers of lives impacted that need to go into a report—on INGO timelines, often dictated by donors whose priorities may or may not align with the church. In this case, the local church becomes, at best, one of several valued local partners without any special spiritual significance and, at worst, simply a means to an end.

Local partners are invaluable to our work as Christ-centered INGOs. Partnership, however, takes time,

¹ We acknowledge that God is at work outside the boundaries of those who are surrendered to him. The Spirit is not restricted or bound by the sacred/secular divides human beings have constructed; still, this article intends to consider what is done in the context of a Christ-centered organization, a group of people intentionally surrendered to the Lordship and leadership of Jesus.

energy, and resources, so organizations like World Concern must be strategic about those we partner with. For that reason, INGOs, formally or informally, often perform some version of a cost-benefit analysis in selecting and continuing with partners. If the local church is no more than another option for partnership, an organization's decision will also be based on such an analysis.

How does the response of a Christ-centered INGO change if we view the local church as somehow distinct from other local partners? If we believe the church is the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25-32) and the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23), surely our commitment to her must be of an entirely different nature than that of a partner that is merely "strategic." If the church is the beloved of the one at the very center of our identity, are we not compelled to remain faithful to her even when the cost-benefit analysis, financially, programmatically, or operationally, does not land in her favor?

For World Concern, the answer is a resounding yes. Therefore, we set out to explore how best to partner with her. This is a journey we are still on today.

Understanding our Role: A Conversation with Leaders

In order to partner well, one key question is how the calling of the local church and the calling of our INGO are related. What is unique about the local church, what is unique about World Concern, and what do we share?

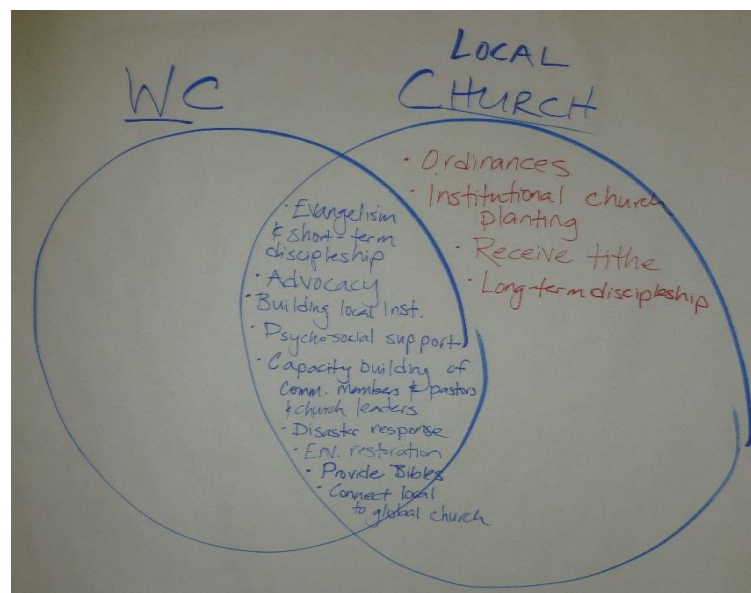
We asked this question during a 2016 meeting with our country leaders in Africa. Those gathered were

women and men from a handful of African countries who had been serving in the region doing disaster response and community development in a variety of spiritual contexts, from the wide open to highly restricted. Some had extensive experience working with the local church in programming, others were somewhat new to the concept.

We drew two overlapping circles on a piece of flipchart paper, as seen in the image below. The circle on the right represented the calling and mandate of the local church and the one on the left represented World Concern. The area of overlap was meant to capture the parts of our mandate that were held in common, roles that were shared. We had no preconceived notion of how the discussion would go, nor how the circles would look in the end. It was not meant to steer participants toward a predetermined solution; instead, it was truly a blank slate, open for any and all views and possibilities. The goal was not to be exhaustive but to provide ourselves an overview and general picture of where our callings were distinct and where they were shared.

We began by identifying what was unique to the local church. This was done relatively quickly. Participants identified four unique aspects of the local church's role: ordinances,² institutional church planting, receiving of the tithe, and long-term discipleship.

We then moved on to identifying what was unique to World Concern. What was it about our mandate and calling that was only ours to pursue? This is what our regional leaders came up with:



² While some use the term "ordinances and other sacraments," and the understanding of what the term encompasses varies, in this discussion, "ordinances" referred primarily to baptism, communion, and marriage.

Most of the items in the area of overlap landed there only after lengthy and active discussion. While the details of the discussion were not recorded, the essence of the conversation was fairly consistent. One participant, for example, felt that the building of local institutions should be considered unique to us as an INGO; just as the facilitator was going to write that in the “World Concern” circle, another participant spoke up to offer an example of the local church establishing local institutions (e.g., the organized feeding program in the early church, as described in Acts 6), so it ended up in the area of overlap. Another participant suggested that disaster response be put into the “World Concern” circle because that is an area of technical expertise we are uniquely equipped to offer, but just as that was about to be written, others argued that the local church is equally called to meet the urgent needs of the local community, as found in Titus 3:14. Thus, one by one, each suggestion for the left circle ended up in the shared category.

What Does this Mean?

At the end of the exercise, we asked ourselves what conclusions we might draw. If this was truly how we understood the relationship between our calling and that of the local church in the Africa region, how should it impact who we are, what we do, and how we do it? We were not under the impression that this simple drawing captured an entire model for church partnership—it was the initial exploration of one aspect of it—but the conversation was compelling and challenging. The leaders involved in the meeting left with a renewed sense of commitment to intentionally engage with, build the capacity of, serve, and serve with the local church in our areas of operation.

Beyond those present in the room, this conversation was catalytic for the organization. Over the next several years, leaders throughout World Concern continued to wrestle with our relationship to the local church. Echoes of this and similar exercises had implications for our philosophy of ministry, our strategy, and our programming.

1. **Philosophy:** Input like this from our global teams helped shape our philosophy of partnership with local churches. We acknowledged and articulated the following as part of our theory of change: *Our work in any one location is temporary and should contribute to the edification and equipping of the*

*local and global body of Christ to walk more fully in her identity as God’s beloved bride, ambassador, and agent of reconciliation.*³ As an INGO, do we have skills and resources that are not currently present in the local church? In most cases, yes, we do. And those should be used to build up, encourage, serve, and equip the body of Christ, even as we are encouraged, built up, and strengthened by her. If World Concern does its job well, when the left circle is removed from the flipchart, nothing is lost. The journey of holistic transformation continues, championed and led by the local church.

2. **Strategy:** When it came time for an organizational strategic planning process, the results of these kinds of conversations informed the expansion of church partnerships from a subset of partnership in general to a strategic⁴ focus all its own. We became more intentional about designing approaches to and opportunities for partnership globally, regionally, and locally with the fellowship of believers God has called together for the glory of his name and the good of those he loves.
3. **Program:** New programmatic initiatives were born out of conversations like this. Of note is a program called *Africans to Africa*, which, as internal program documents say, seeks to “...mobilize the whole African Church and the whole body of African believers to holistically reach the whole of Africa—because we can!” In this program, World Concern partners with churches in Nairobi, Kenya to reach unreached or least-reached parts of South Sudan, Kenya, and Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) with the Good News through the training up and support of local evangelists in holistic ministry. This program builds on one of the strengths of Christ-centered INGOs, which is our ability to offer a neutral but faith-aligned, non-denominational platform for churches to begin partnering with one another. In time, it is envisaged that this program will be fully run by the churches themselves in a way that testifies powerfully to the unity that is possible—and indeed commanded—in the body of Christ.

³ This statement is part of a larger whole theory of change and thus does not, on its own, capture adequately our commitment to mutuality, which is articulated separately but applies to all partnerships. This statement addresses what we bring to the partnership and how we view the local church. To outline how we learn from and are served by the local church would require another article altogether.

⁴ “Strategic” in this sense refers to strategic for the advancement of the kingdom of God, not merely program strategy.

What Does this NOT Mean?

While some helpful learning points came out of the diagram and associated discussion, it is also important to clarify what we did NOT conclude through the conversation.

1. **The local church is not our sole local partner.** This one exercise singled out World Concern and the local church, but if we were to zoom out, there would be many other circles. In 2021, in fact, we did another Venn diagram exercise that included the community itself, local government, the regional church, the global church, and other key stakeholders. No two drawings from any two countries were the same! And none was as simple as this. In terms of kingdom-aligned partners, in addition to institutions like the church, we also partner with Christian professionals and networks both locally and regionally. None of that is captured in this conversation—not because it is less important, but because, at the time, we were specifically considering the local church.
2. **The institution of the local church is not the sole vehicle for kingdom ministry.** While we firmly believe that the local church is critical to flourishing, we also believe in the priesthood of all believers and acknowledge that kingdom work happens seven days a week throughout community life as Christ-followers live into and out of their true identities as image-bearers of God. In fact, the diagram drawn by these leaders looks this way essentially *because* of our belief in the priesthood of all believers. The calling of World Concern overlaps the calling of the local church because, as Christ-followers, we are the church, and we are called to be the church in all we do.
3. **The local church is not meant to become the local NGO.** If you only look at this one diagram and the contents of this one conversation, it would be easy to conclude that the local church is simply being trained to take over the work of an NGO. The reality on the ground in many areas we serve is that

the local church is one of the few local institutions faithfully present to serve people in the community, and they *do* end up wearing many hats. Still, our intention is not to turn churches into NGOs. We do not expect local churches to become the administrative center for initiatives in every sector of community life. Should the church be starting up hospitals and nutrition centers? In some cases, yes, that may be very appropriate, but in most cases, no, that is not the role of the local church. Regardless, the local church is still the place where Christ-followers who serve in every arena of community life, are equipped to do so with a kingdom mindset. We expect to see local churches discipling women and men who go into community as priest-nurses and priest-lawyers and priest-blacksmiths, as we together pursue a holistic mandate and rediscover the abundance of life we are designed for.

4. **World Concern is not fully distinct from the church.**⁵ While we drew World Concern and the local church as two circles, this does not capture the fullness of reality. It is a flawed and limited picture. In truth, we are all (those of us who are Christ-followers in World Concern and those who are Christ-followers in the local church) part of the greater body of believers, the global Church. In most cases, our local staff are also part of the local church where we serve, so they very much live in the overlap. We represented the organizations distinctly because we are administratively separate, but we must keep in mind that the representation is limited and the conversation is not designed to introduce new boundaries, but to help us think about our partnership from one of many perspectives.

Concluding Thoughts

We have not sought to present a model for church partnership here—either for ourselves or for other organizations. We have simply invited you to listen in on some of our organizational conversation about a

⁵ A note of caution on this. In a Christ-centered INGO, we have the unique privilege of seeking the Lord together with our coworkers. We get to worship together, pray together, serve together, and live out our calling in rich community. Indeed, we are the church to one another and the world around us. At times, we may be tempted to replace the local church with the community of believers we find at work. The local church is, after all, another broken institution. Nevertheless, the local church is critical. It is the gathering place for all believers. Even in a Christ-centered organization, we are hired and fired from positions based on factors such as experience, training, job performance, and funding. But we are not hired or fired from the local church. We opt into or out of jobs based on factors like job satisfaction, compensation, career growth, or stage in life. We are not designed to opt into or out of the local church. We are exhorted not to give up meeting (Heb. 10:25). The local church, while messy and uncomfortable at times, and imperfect always, is a crucial steward of the ministry of reconciliation, a place of growth and discipleship, and a powerful testimony to the watching world.

critical and irreplaceable partner, the local church, and how our callings relate to one another. For us, this conversation has helped highlight aspects of our own identity as well as the critical role of the local church in community abundance and some of the opportunities to be part of edifying and building her up, even as she edifies and builds us up.

At World Concern, we still have a lot of work to do in defining and refining our philosophy of and approach to local church partnership, but we have reaffirmed our commitment to journeying together with the bride of the one in whom we find our very identity. We intend to continue learning and growing both from and with the uniquely beautiful expressions of the body of Christ in the places where he allows us to serve. Like the local church, we are messy and imperfect in our attempts to love and serve those around us. And, like her, we are fully dependent on connection to the vine if we are to bear any fruit at all (John 15:1-17). May we be found faithful.

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