

## **'Faith-Based Development: How Christian Organizations Can Make a Difference'**

**by Bob Mitchell, Orbis Books, New York 2017**

Book Launch by Bishop John Harrower, Melbourne 6 April 2017

Questions, there are many when Christians get together to discuss Faith-Based Organizations involved in aid and development.

Over the last year, I have heard;

When a Christian organization sends out Christmas cards with 'Season's Greetings' rather than Christmas greetings, has it lost its way?

When a Christian organization employs non-Christians to drive trucks to deliver emergency supplies has it lost its way?

When a Christian organization dispenses with Church volunteers in order to increase 'efficiency' has it lost its way?

Bob Mitchell has some questions of his own as he brings theology, governance and development practice together in his compelling, *'Faith-Based Development: How Christian Organizations Can Make a Difference'*

In an age of 'Fake News', Bob's data based research using interviews and focus groups from diverse geographical and cultural communities is a gift to truth-telling! Bob, we thank you! Your data based research strengthens your engagement with critical issues.

By way of example, while engaging with the vexed issue of a Christian aid and development organisation working in a Muslim context the research data allows us to hear Muslim and Christian voices. In Senegal, an open theistic society, it is said that it is "*easier to speak to people of faith if you have a faith, even if it is different.*" ( p. 48) and "once a Muslim sees that the development organisation is about prayer and spirituality, then a Muslim will say, "*Now we can do business together.*" (p.48)

Mitchell draws the conclusion that communities within theistic societies may have stronger resonance with an organisation from another faith when compared to secular agencies." (p. 48)

Of course there are other contexts where a more closed and militant faith may work against cooperation in development.

The book is scholarly in its approach and wise in its reasoning as it draws conclusions on the nature of faith motivation, and the delivery and effectiveness of development.

### **The book is controversial**

Yet, Bob is not afraid of controversy. In addressing the secular nature of the development profession's marginalization of religion, he argues strongly for the value of spiritual capital.

Hence,

*"It is not necessarily the case that a rise in material standards of living will lead to an abandonment of God. For this reason I do not accept that utilizing spiritual capital to achieve development goals is ultimately self-defeating on the part of religion. This is because when it is authentically deployed spiritual capital will always entail a broader non-material vision of "development" consistent with its underlying ethos."* (p.53)

And strongly concludes the book's Part 2, 'Christian Motifs and their impact on development', with the statement,

*"Historically, the (development) literature indicates that systematic anti-religious bias in development has operated to the detriment of world's poor."* (p.130)

### **Staffing**

In an interesting section the role of staff is examined. What is the role of volunteers? Is it simply the supply of cheap labour? Or alternatively, is a development organisation better off without volunteers: their attendance not as 'reliable' as they take time off for family and travel. A terrible thing to do! What is the organization to do? Should the organisation weigh up the trade-off between cheap labour and the increased efficiency of paid staff? Or is there another factor?

Bob argues that the 'other factor' is the volunteer as *culture bearer* of the organisation. In other words, the volunteers are there because they are motivated by the deep values of the faith. Their faith is a vital contributor to nurturing the organisation's faith culture.

### **How to encourage social transformation without an evangelistic agenda?**

The role of religion in development is essential to good outcomes. Bob argues that the development profession, influenced as it is by modernity, needs to engage communities who gain their sense of meaning from religion. This is a matter of respect. Secular models may not intuitively frame respectful engagement of religious beliefs and practices.

How to address this issue of inner transformation without setting out the explicit agenda to convert people?

The application of 'values' derived from the local contexts is a place to start. Hence in the Balkans and Eurasia in the post-Soviet era *"corruption, cynicism, disillusionment and fatalism were the main impediments to community development."* (p. 93) In contrast, in East Africa, a conservative social agenda that was *"out of step with Western ideas that elevate personal freedoms"* was necessary to address social issues. (p.93)

Prayer and spiritual disciplines are important in themselves and importantly they can win credibility in particular contexts. (p. 106)

Bob looks at data from Rwanda, Romania and Georgia and notes a Zone manager's comment, *"it is simply a fact that religion generates networks of participation that are far stronger, more lasting, and more committed than secular civic organizations are capable of"*. (p.109)

## **Affirmations**

Bob is an encourager and there is encouragement to positive engagement.

In discussing accountability, Bob emphasises the need to be held accountable to listen. As disciples of Christ, are called to learners on the Way. Jesus was the master of the question and we do well to listen and deepen our listening and learning through considered and careful questions.

## **Phenomenon of 'organizational drift'**

Sadly, we are all too familiar with Christian organisations that have drifted, moved away, from their faith foundations. (p.120)

Case study from PNG of an Australian funded program that respected religious beliefs and this reinforced the government's own development goals. (p.125)

But, what are the factors that contribute to the marginalization of Christian faith within faith-based development organizations?

Significantly, Bob issues the challenge to not bemoan the loss of Christian culture but rather to identify and understand the factors that work against the founding culture and what can be done about them.

Bob argues for speaking of being a "faithfully based organization" rather a "faith-based organization". Why? Because being dedicated and intentional in bringing faith to bear on organizational life brings a shared sense of purpose. This among employees and stakeholders builds a sense of organizational cohesion. (p.156)

## **Conclusion – final words of the book:**

*"It is important the Faith-Based Organizations do not lose their distinctiveness. They have something special to offer and are meant to be a source of light, not a paler reflection or imitation of others. While Christians are commanded to love God with their whole mind, they should take all that is good and helpful and noble and refract that knowledge in their own authentic way. When this happens there will be a renewed confidence, a greater appreciation, and a better understanding of how the light of Faith-Based Organizations can be made stronger still."* (p.179)

The Right Revd John Harrower OAM  
Bishop Assisting the Primate