

## Integral mission in a large city church: Gateway Ministries International and Sahaara Charitable Society, Mumbai, India



Mike Webb/Tearfund

The following case study highlights how a large city centre church with numerous satellite congregations was able to encourage each of its local congregations to develop social action initiatives on behalf of the poor. It also shows how the church was able to create a structure to provide the technical support, funding and co-ordination to these initiatives whilst retaining the centrality of local congregation ownership.

### Beginnings

Bombay Baptist Church (BBC) was founded in 1869 as an independent Baptist church in Bombay (now known as Mumbai), India. In the 1970s-80s, through new leadership, it became more evangelistic and was influenced by the charismatic movement. This led to significant church growth.

The church was effective in reaching out to young adults. During the 1980s, many of these young adults found they could not afford to buy houses near the church so they were encouraged by BBC to move to other parts of Mumbai and begin new churches

connected to BBC. Other couples were encouraged to go and join them. There are now 40 churches in Mumbai, and more elsewhere. They are now part of Gateway Ministries International (GMI). The churches that were planted reflected the nature of those setting them up - mainly young professionals. They were effective at reaching similar types of people, but ineffective at reaching the poor who lived in the locality. The annual evaluation by the pastors of the GMI churches highlighted this issue. The evaluation showed that although individuals in the churches may be passionate about poor people and were volunteering their time in working independently in service of the poor, few poor people were coming into the churches. Lack of evangelism to poor people was a key concern, as traditional methods of evangelism were ineffective. What was needed was a more holistic approach to address the physical and economic needs of those they were seeking to reach. This evaluation coincided with several visiting international speakers who were also encouraging the church to reach out in love to the marginalised.

All local churches were encouraged to minister to poor people. Church leaders were encouraged to identify within their congregation people who had a strong vision and passion for work with marginalised people in their community. These individuals were then encouraged to think about how their church could respond to the needs in the community and to mobilise a group of volunteers from within the church to work with them. Each church set itself goals for the initiatives it intended to begin as service to the poor, and it was then held accountable to these goals.

This decision led to a significant growth in the number of church-run social action projects. Many of the 40 GMI churches carried out initiatives for the first time. Initiatives started include work with street children, prisoners, commercial sex workers, and children in slum communities.

### The role of Sahaara Charitable Society

As the number and size of these projects grew, the GMI network found that these church initiatives could benefit from more specialist support. In 1994, Sahaara Charitable Society was formed to act as a catalyst and focus group for all these initiatives.

Sahaara is a legally recognised non-governmental organisation (NGO), which is closely linked to the GMI church network. Its trustees are church members, who, in turn, are directly accountable to the church elders for their role as trustees. In addition, the chair of GMI is also the vice-chair of Sahaara, and the chair of Sahaara is the vice-chair of GMI. This ensures that there is a very close connection between Sahaara and the churches.

### **Its role is:**

- To act as a catalyst, encouraging the establishment of church projects. Sahaara staff visit GMI churches to preach and make presentations on the need for Christians to engage in social action. They also provide input into the GMI Bible School (a one-year course in theology for 10-12 students) and provide each student with a placement of "working with the poor" in one of the local church projects.
- To provide training and support to church projects. Sahaara provides training and support to local churches in a range of specialist areas such as running pre-schools, coaching children in school, and carrying out quality audits.
- To provide a structure to co-ordinate similar projects of GMI churches across the city. As more GMI churches began to develop initiatives, common themes began to emerge. For example, many churches have identified the need for pre-schools ("balwadis") in the local slum communities. Sahaara provides co-ordination of these pre-schools, providing training for all the teachers and helping to ensure that all apply good practice in their work. Sahaara also provides the central voice to advocate on behalf of these pre-schools to local government structures.
- To manage projects that have grown beyond the capacity of the local church to manage. Sahaara helps to provide the management expertise to ensure that as projects grow, the projects do not end up overwhelming the local church.
- To gain tax concessions and funding opportunities that are unavailable to local churches. Sahaara has both the eligibility through being a registered NGO and the expertise to obtain larger levels of institutional and external donor funding for the church-run projects.

### **Retaining local church ownership**

- Sahaara is keen to see itself as supporting the initiatives of the local churches, rather than running itself as an independent NGO. In addition to the composition of its trustees, it does this in a number of ways:
- Whilst Sahaara will provide mentoring and training to churches from the planning stage of an initiative onwards, it will not provide any financial support for the first one or two years. During this time, the initiative's funding must come from the local church itself. This helps to ensure that the church is really committed to the initiative and creates ownership.
- Once a church initiative has grown enough to benefit from a full-time worker, (usually after the first or second year), Sahaara will employ and manage a worker for the initiative. On almost all occasions, Sahaara will look to employ a member of the local church who has been closely involved in the development of the project as a volunteer. Sahaara will also encourage the main source of volunteers for the project to continue to be members of the local church.
- Sahaara will provide support and management to the church initiative, but project staff and volunteers will always remain ultimately accountable to the church leaders, and connection between the local church and the initiative remains, regardless of how large the initiative becomes.
- All projects are started and owned by local churches. The staff of Sahaara pray regularly for marginalised groups in the city where there is little or no Christian presence, but Sahaara does not initiate new projects itself.
- The GMI churches are encouraged to recognise the role of Sahaara. In church prayer meetings, Sahaara is regularly prayed for alongside the church's initiatives, and church members are encouraged to give 3% of their income to Sahaara in addition to their church tithe.

### **An overview of GMI social action projects**

Fifteen GMI churches run over 40 projects throughout Mumbai, supported by Sahaara.

### **Some of the initiatives include:**

- A primary school for 390 students that generates significant funds for other Sahaara activities
- 13 pre-schools (Balwadis), where children receive basic education, food and healthcare, and help in getting into municipal schools. These pre-schools also provide after-school clubs to coach older children in their studies.
- A children's home for 12 orphaned children, with the aim that this should grow to a full capacity of caring for 20 children.
- 2 Street Children's Ministries, working in 2 locations in Mumbai, meeting every Sunday to teach basic hygiene, prayers, and songs, and provide food and regular health check-ups.
- Ministry to those affected by leprosy, providing shelter material, basic medication, bandaging of wounds, and inputs on cleanliness to over 50 people with leprosy. In addition, a church service is held for them.
- Work among the visually challenged helping them to read and respond to letters they receive, and teaching

moral and spiritual values. They are encouraged to attend church, and 37 of them did so on Christmas day 2006!

- Work among Commercial Sex Workers in 3 locations in Mumbai providing friendship, healthcare, and, in two locations, a drop-in centre for prayer and counselling. Also, one location has a regular pre-school and Sunday school for the children of the commercial sex workers.
- Ministry to Eunuchs, involving relationship building, counselling and healthcare
- Work in 7 remand homes, providing values education, computer training, coaching in studies, health check-ups and counselling
- Work in 4 prisons, providing literacy classes, computer training, and prayer and counselling, and providing assistance in obtaining jobs on release
- 2 Teachers Training Centres, providing training to all GMI's education-based social action programmes (Alpha Academy, balwadis and children's home).

## One example in more depth: Project AZAAD

Project AZAAD (Azaad means "being free") began with a core group of about six volunteers who were passionate about reaching and helping people in prisons in Mumbai. With the encouragement of their local church leadership, they set up a project carrying out moral teaching once a month in a high security prison. After working in the prison for about five years, Sahaara wanted to expand the work into other prisons in Mumbai. Having demonstrated potential, passion and ability through their initial work, Sahaara took on one of the volunteers as a paid co-ordinator. As a result, they were able to develop the work done within the church and envision other GMI churches. They now help to facilitate six local churches to work in prisons and a number of staff are employed to support this work.

The work in prisons is linked with the local churches in the following ways:

**Tracking** Four "trackers" (three men and one woman) keep in touch with prisoners when they leave prison, helping them to find jobs and providing support. They also make a connection for them with the local church in the community to which they are returning. Despite huge pressures when they are released from prison (from crime networks, family, etc), 40-50 prisoners have attended the churches on their release, and 10 attend regularly.

**Computerising input data** There is significant corruption among prison officers. It is very expensive for relatives to get in touch with prisoners, due to the need to bribe the officers. Project Azaad is therefore working with the prison authorities to provide a computerised system which lists all inmates and enables meetings to be set up easily. This will be of great help to poor families without means to bribe prison officials. One local church would have little influence with the prison authorities or have the capacity to develop such a technically demanding initiative, so Sahaara's co-ordination and specialist input is vital.

## Key lessons identified by Sahaara staff for those organisations and churches wishing to adopt a similar model

- Develop projects that will serve as models and inspire others. People will do things and catch the vision when they see examples in practice. This can be much more effective than just trying to convince people with theory.
- Do not force people into a certain approach. Offer models, but encourage them to adapt it for their own context. Ownership is crucial.
- Develop projects in areas where inspired individuals have a significant vision and commitment already.
- Respect and build the ownership of the local church. Their involvement retains the spiritual integrity and dynamism of the work.

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