

Strengths of the local church in disaster management

There are a number of strengths that the local church has that makes it a potentially significant contributor to the work of disaster risk reduction:

1. Local presence

The local church is present in communities before, during and in the aftermath of disasters, and will continue to be so long after NGOs have moved on.

2. Organisational capacity

The local church gathers people together for a shared purpose on a regular basis, is able to raise internal resources, and can initiate joint action. In many communities, it may be the only functioning institution.

3. Local knowledge

The local church is a local institution, speaking the local language, with first-hand knowledge and experience of the issues through members who all are part of the community.

4. Relationships and a relational approach

The local church is a network of relationships, both within its congregation, and with the wider community. Such relationships are important for trust, mutual sharing and joint action, as well as for encouraging compassion, solidarity and forgiveness. The church values relationships, and gives time for respecting people's needs.

5. Spiritual focus

The local church acknowledges the spiritual dynamic of life, and places importance on praying with and for those who are vulnerable or suffering.

6. Links with the wider world

Whilst some local churches are entirely independent and unconnected to the wider world, most local churches are connected to a larger co-ordinating body at a district, national, or even international level, from whom they receive support and a wider perspective.

7. Ethos of compassion and concern for others

The underlying values base of the local church is grounded in love for God and love for one's neighbour, with a very strong ethic of sacrificial love and compassionate service of others. Admittedly there are some contexts of oppression where the local church may fail to live out such an ethic.

Recent research¹ into the role of the local church in responding to the HIV and AIDS pandemic has affirmed all the above generic strengths of the local church, and would add a few more:

8. Number of volunteers

Much of the response to HIV and AIDS has to be labour intensive (investing deeply enough in people's lives to encourage behaviour change; doing the basic chores of farming, cooking, cleaning for the infected and affected; handling funeral arrangements; fostering children) and yet to pay for this would be astronomical. In many countries the churches provide the largest pool of potential volunteers (Zambia: 85% Christian; Kenya 79%). In Zimbabwe, over 20,000 local churches run at least one HIV and AIDS related programme.

9. A grassroots institution committed to positive values and lifestyle change, and therefore with significant opportunities to influence

The local church has experience of wrestling with values, behaviour and world-view issues, and of seeing transformation in these areas. This is familiar territory for the local church.

¹The Contribution of Christian Congregations to the Battle with HIV/ AIDS at the Community Level (OCMS); The Church and HIV and AIDS (Andy Bowerman)

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10. A face to face community of peer support and positive peer pressure

An accepting and caring community and church congregations are mandated to be such, are the safest places for people living with HIV to make their status known. People are more likely to be tested and face the consequences if there is a visible group within the community who are publicly accepting and including people living with HIV all the time. The church is often the group who provides such a community.

11. High touch style of ministry

Of all social institutions, local churches are probably the ones most accessible to the poor. A high touch style of ministry is what is often most needed and yet what is most difficult for secular or government agencies to provide. Congregations do not have to find ways to go out and create connections with the poor; they often are the poor.

12. A ministry marked by joy and resilience

The local church provides the message, context and community within which people can provide care and tackle the problems without despairing or giving up. Church programmes tend to be marked by their dedication, persistence, loyalty and compassion

13. A communicator of a message of hope beyond death

The local church communicates messages of hope and meaning within contexts of overwhelming despair. By doing so it gives people a reason to live, a factor that makes a huge contribution to their welfare physically and emotionally, and it helps people prepare for a 'good death' with dignity and worth.

14. An initiator of responses that tend to be creative, flexible, and responsive to felt needs in the community.

Congregation members usually initiate activities without significant external facilitation or financial support, depending instead on resources raised from within local communities. They are less tied to the agenda or outcomes required by an external donor, or to the latest policy requirements of international NGOs or experts.

15. Pastoral support

The local church provides a listening ear, a shoulder to cry on and the bereavement support for many within communities.

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