The relationship between Christian organisations and local churches

As discussed in Section 1, local churches have a role in proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel. However, very often, the role of the church is limited to proclaiming the gospel. This could be because:

■ the church leadership believes that the main role of the church is to proclaim the gospel and may not have heard of, or believe in, integral mission

■ some Christian organisations do not recognise the role of the local church in demonstrating the gospel. Instead, they work directly with the community. As a result, the local church does not take on its responsibility to care for people because it sees Christian organisations doing it instead. The local church may even see itself as a beneficiary.

2.1 The need for both Christian organisations and churches

In many places, there is no relationship at all between Christian organisations and local churches. This is particularly the case for Christian NGOs as opposed to other types of Christian organisation. There is a role for Christian organisations, but their work should not be done in isolation from the local church. They should work together and each should work to their strengths.

Strengths of the local church

GOD'S PRIMARY AGENT OF TRANSFORMATION   The local church is an outpost of God's kingdom and is used by God to transform communities.

CLOSE TO POOR PEOPLE   The local church exists at the grassroots of a community. It is present among poor people and often consists of poor people. The local church is therefore in close contact with local knowledge. It also benefits from relationships with other people and organisations in the community because the membership of the local church usually represents a cross-section of the community. The local church is part of the community, while a Christian organisation may be viewed as an 'outsider'.

PERMANENT PRESENCE   While a Christian organisation may leave a community, the church exists for the people in the community and is likely to be there for much longer than a Christian organisation.

SUSTAINABLE CHRISTIAN WORK   If Christian work is to be sustainable, there is a need for a permanent Christian presence. This is what the local church provides. Without this, when a Christian organisation moves on, the work left behind may start to lose its Christian distinctiveness.

NATURAL CONTEXT IN WHICH FAITH CAN BE EXPLORED   Christian organisations are focused on relief, development and advocacy work, while the local church has a wider agenda, including providing space for those investigating the Christian faith.

NETWORKS   The local church is often a member of a number of networks. There are links with other grassroots groups in the community through church members, and through working with other groups in carrying out community initiatives. There are also links with the wider church through denominations and Christian alliances. Membership of networks facilitates learning.

RESOURCES   The local church contains many members who can be mobilised. This is particularly useful for labour-intensive initiatives. Also, some local churches have buildings which provide a place for community members to meet to discuss local issues. In times of crisis, church buildings can provide safe refuge.

Strengths of Christian organisations

TECHNICAL EXPERTISE   Christian organisations have staff with a good understanding of poverty issues and methodologies. They may have specialist knowledge that no-one in a community possesses, such as knowledge of water engineering or nutrition.

EQUIPMENT   Some organisations may possess technology which is not usually present within a community, such as well-drilling equipment or medical equipment and supplies.

EXPERIENCE   Christian organisations may work in a number of communities, and over time, gain an overview of local, regional and national issues. They also learn about what works and what does not work in the local area and culture.

THE STAFF of Christian organisations are dedicated to relief, development and advocacy work, without competing priorities which staff of local churches may face.

ACCESS TO, **AND ABILITY TO HANDLE, FUNDING**   While local churches and communities should be encouraged to use their own resources to support their initiatives, there will be some initiatives that require external funding, such as borehole drilling and constructing community buildings that are resistant to natural hazards. Christian organisations may have access to funding that cannot be accessed directly by a local church. For example, an NGO or a development department of a denomination is more likely to be successful than a local church in applying for funding from an institutional donor. This is because they are usually registered as organisations and have the expertise to develop proposals, manage funding and write reports.
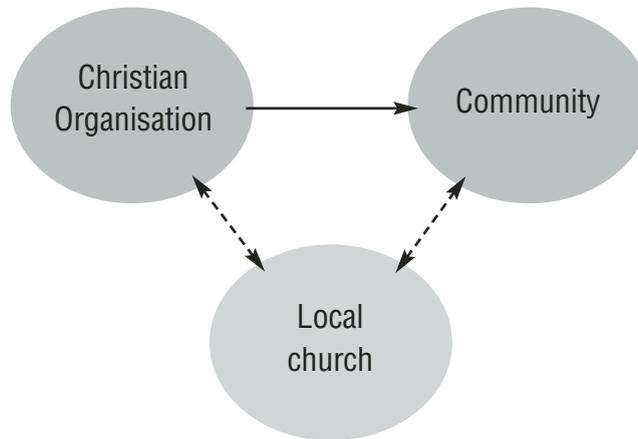
Both Christian organisations and local churches have a lot to offer and could benefit greatly from working together. There are many different ways in which they can interact as the diagrams opposite show.

Isolation model

Christian Organisation → Community
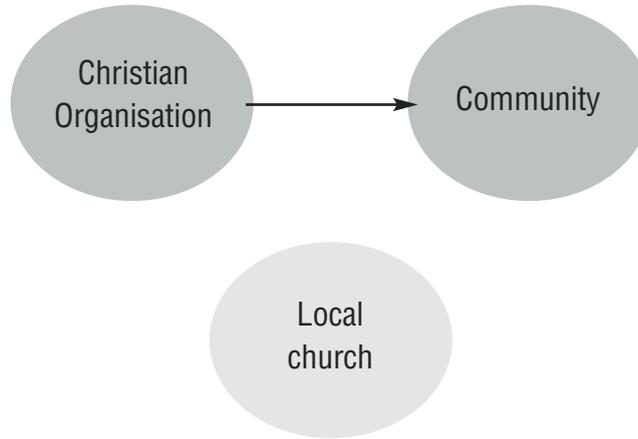
Local church

A Christian organisation works directly with the community. No linkage with local church. The local church may or may not be doing social action in the community.
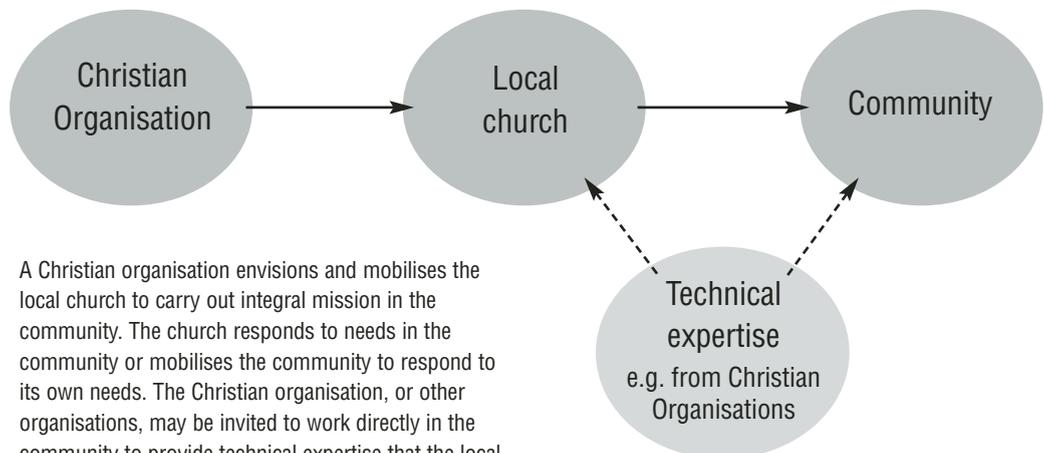
Involvement model

Christian Organisation → Community

Local church

→ Direct project implementation

◄- - -► Support relationship

A Christian organisation works directly in the community but involves the local church in its work by encouraging prayer. It may consult with the local church, since it usually represents a cross-section of the community. The local church may provide volunteers to take part in projects carried out by the Christian organisation. These projects may be relief or development projects. The Christian organisation may encourage church members to take part in advocacy campaigns.

The community makes a connection between the work of the Christian organisation and the witness of the local church.

Empowerment model

Christian Organisation → Local church → Community

Technical expertise
e.g. from Christian Organisations

A Christian organisation envisions and mobilises the local church to carry out integral mission in the community. The church responds to needs in the community or mobilises the community to respond to its own needs. The Christian organisation, or other organisations, may be invited to work directly in the community to provide technical expertise that the local church or community lack.

Case study

Example relating to the involvement model

In 2005, the city of Mumbai in India was affected by serious flooding. The relief and development agency EFICOR provided the Christian organisation ACT (Association of Christian Thoughtfulness) with money to respond.

ACT brought together members from different churches in the local area and provided them with around three hours of training. This enabled the local churches to carry out a needs assessment in their communities. Vouchers were given out to households that qualified for aid. The following day, church members took part in the aid distribution and ensured that only those with vouchers received aid.

A month later, the local churches conducted follow-up visits to the households that had received aid. Many of the people were impressed by how the church had responded to their needs with love and compassion in that time of crisis. As a result of the follow-up visits, a new Hindi-speaking local church has been established.

REFLECTION

- **Do we agree with the strengths of Christian organisations and local churches set out in this section? Can we think of any more strengths?**
- **What weaknesses of Christian organisations or local churches may hinder their work together?**
- **Do we know of any other models of interaction between Christian organisations and local churches that are not mentioned on page 19? If so, what are they?**
- **Which model is most like our own way of working?**
- **What are the advantages and disadvantages of each model?**
- **Which model would we like to reflect?**

Thoughts on the empowerment model

The empowerment model is quite radical and usually requires a change in both the Christian organisation and the local church:

A change in thinking may be needed.

- For the local church, this means understanding the importance of integral mission and recognising the experience and expertise of the Christian organisation.

- The Christian organisation may need to understand the value of work in the community being carried out and facilitated by local churches.

A change in roles is often needed.

- The church needs to become a primary agent of transformation, carrying out initiatives in or with the community.

■ The Christian organisation's role needs to change from being primarily an implementer of projects to being a supporter of the local church as it carries out integral mission. This may involve some implementation at grassroots level by the Christian organisation, but it is requested by the local church, which owns the process.

Potential new roles

> **Role of local church** – to carry out integral mission in the community
>
> **Role of Christian organisation** – to encourage, support and enhance the work of the local church as it carries out integral mission.

Experience has shown that the local church needs to be willing to:

■ be open to learning about integral mission

■ encourage members to discover or rediscover their gifts and resources, and to use them

■ be bold as it goes out to serve the community, particularly if the church is usually inward-looking

■ recognise that it is not a relief, development and advocacy specialist, and therefore be willing to ask Christian organisations for support when necessary.

Experience shows that the empowerment model works best if a Christian organisation:

■ acts as a catalyst where the local church needs envisioning

■ acts as a facilitator to enable the local church to carry out integral mission

■ stands back from the community and allows the local church to do, and be seen to do, the work at community level. The focus should be on the local church. The local church should own the development process, rather than the Christian organisation

■ provides advice, training and support when required by the local church to develop its capacity

■ acts as a pioneer to establish new local churches where there is no local church to work with. Not all Christian organisations have the experience and expertise to do this, but all should at least consider working alongside other organisations that have a focus on establishing churches, where no local church exists. Christian organisations should consider how their work can best provide the environment within which churches can be established and grow.

The table on page 22 shows different types of Christian organisations and how their specific roles may need to change if local churches are to be empowered to carry out integral mission.

Different types of Christian organisation and specific role change if they follow the empowerment model

TYPE OF ORGANISATION	CHALLENGES OF TRADITIONAL APPROACH	POTENTIAL NEW ROLES
Development department of denomination	Temptation to implement projects with little or no contact with, or involvement by, local churches	• Envisioning and training pastors and church members in integral mission • Training pastors in leadership development • Providing advice on design and implementation of community initiatives • Facilitating learning between local churches and between local churches and other development actors • Assisting with funding for large community initiatives. This may involve facilitating transfer of funds from wealthy churches to poor churches, or from donors in the North • Using networks to provide advocacy support to local churches
Evangelical Alliance or Fellowship	Implementing projects, often without the involvement of members	• Envisioning and training pastors and church members in integral mission • Co-ordinating communication between member churches on key themes and issues related to integral mission • Facilitating learning between local churches • Training pastors in leadership development • Advising on where resources (expertise and skills) are available, such as linking local churches to Christian NGOs • Using networks to provide advocacy support to local churches
Theological college	Theoretical rather than practical. Training in using the Bible, but not necessarily in how biblical teaching relates to poverty reduction	• Training students in integral mission • Training students in leadership development • Providing opportunities for students to be placed with local Christian NGOs or churches involved in integral mission as part of the course
Christian NGO	Tendency to implement projects with little or no contact with local churches	• Training local church leaders and members to act as facilitators of change • Training church pastors in leadership development • Providing advice and expertise in support of church initiatives at the request of the church and community, including needs assessments and specific technical advice and good practice • Providing placements for theological students
TYPE OF ORGANISATION	CHALLENGES OF TRADITIONAL APPROACH	POTENTIAL NEW ROLES

2.2 Establishing good relationships

Some organisations may want to pilot working with just one or two local churches to start with. However, it is worth considering the impact that this might have on relationships between those and other churches in the community. Try to avoid causing friction between local churches. As much as possible, try to engage with all of the churches from the start, even if one or two churches are selected as pilot churches for more focused work.

It is not always easy for Christian organisations to find local churches to work with successfully. The following gives examples of common problems that Christian organisations may face. We suggest some responses that can help them to overcome these problems.

CHALLENGE **The local church may not understand integral mission** Many churches separate the spiritual and physical aspects of life. This may partly be due to the influence of missionaries from the North, who many years ago, often adopted a dualistic view of life. Few theological colleges teach integral mission. Many pastors therefore lack the theological framework or practical knowledge to respond effectively to the needs of the poor in their communities.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE Invest time in envisioning local church leaders about integral mission. Use Bible studies, and find local examples of integral mission in practice that can be visited.

CHALLENGE **Local churches may think that the government should do everything** and that the church has no role in addressing social or political issues.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE Invest time in envisioning local church leaders about integral mission and showing that the church should try to influence the powerful. The *Advocacy toolkit* (ROOTS 1 and 2) may be helpful.

CHALLENGE **Discipleship may be weak** Social involvement is important because it shows that the gospel is worthwhile. However, if church members are not trying to live distinctive lives, the impact of the church's work can be weakened.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE Identify other organisations that can support local churches in discipleship of members.

CHALLENGE **Many local churches that do respond to needs in the community use a welfare approach** This can often be paternalistic and done in a way that causes people to depend on the church for hand-outs. A welfare approach can be useful in addressing immediate and short-term practical needs, especially in times of crisis. However, approaches that address longer term development and empowerment issues are preferable because welfare approaches eventually create dependency.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE Invest time in envisioning pastors and local church members about the benefits of empowering the community to respond to its own problems. Provide training in using participatory tools.

CHALLENGE

Some churches may misuse aid by trying to coerce people to convert to Christianity
For example, they may only include people as beneficiaries of an initiative if they attend church services regularly.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

Challenge local churches about this issue, or do not work with them.

CHALLENGE

Church leadership styles can restrict integral mission If church leadership does not follow Christ's example of servant leadership, the success of integral mission can be limited. For example, some leaders think they alone have a direct link to God and therefore believe that they must make every decision related to the local church. This has many consequences:

• It can slow down the implementation of initiatives, and even stop some initiatives happening at all. The pastor becomes a bottleneck in all decisions.

• Decisions may be made by a leader without any appropriate training or knowledge. Church initiatives may therefore be irrelevant or unsuccessful.

• There is limited accountability, because all decisions are made by one person who is not interested in being accountable to anyone else. If the leader controls funds, they may be tempted to use them for their own benefit and to increase their power.

• The leader believes their role is to be in control, rather than to empower others. This can make them less open to sustainable approaches that emphasise participation and empowerment.

• Some church members may become frustrated, leading to tension and disunity.

• Such leadership can negatively impact the spiritual maturity of church members because they may never be given a chance to use their gifts.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

Provide teaching about good leadership. Since good leadership is more about the heart and character than skills, the teaching should focus on God's grace and the model of the cross.

CHALLENGE

Churches may lack capacity to engage with integral mission For example:

• They may lack skilled personnel, or find it challenging to train their members due to poor literacy or lack of education.

• They may have poor financial systems and ineffective governance. This impacts the church's ability to effectively use, account for and report on external funding.

• Churches are not relief and development agencies. Relief and development work is just one aspect of their wider ministry and therefore may not always be a priority.

• Where Christians are in the minority in a country, they may lack connection with the wider community. Persecution and fear of violence may discourage some churches from raising their profile within the community.

SUGGESTED RESPONSE

Provide training to develop their capacity and confidence. For example, Section 4.6 in this book about using local resources may help to address funding issues.

Christian organisations should be aware that their ways of working may not be appropriate for working with local churches. These include:

- seeking to be professional

- short time frames for projects

- inflexible structures and processes

- tendency to impose their own agendas or donors' agendas

- requirements for excessive reporting or unrealistic accountability mechanisms

- staff who may not have commitment to the local church.

Christian organisations should address these issues to ensure that their engagement with local churches is effective. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 provide more insight into how these issues might be addressed.

Some Christian organisations may decide to stop working directly in the community and instead make mobilising churches the focus of their role. These organisations follow the empowerment model outlined on page 19. However, it can be difficult for Christian organisations to find donor funding for such work. It can take time to build relationships with local churches and mobilise them before any action is taken in the community. Christian organisations that want to encourage local churches to mobilise communities to respond to their own problems can find it difficult to obtain funding because outcomes are unknown at the proposal stage.

It is important that Christian organisations do not exploit local churches. For example, Christian organisations may find it attractive that churches can easily mobilise volunteers. It may become a temptation to see the local church only as a source of a free workforce. Any relationship with the local church should be seen within the context of the local church and its mission, and not just in meeting the objectives of the Christian organisation.

REFLECTION

- **Which of these challenges apply to our local situation?**
- **How might they be overcome?**

Summary

- We have looked at the strengths of Christian organisations and local churches.

- We have considered different models of relationship between Christian organisations, local churches and the community.

- We have explored barriers to relationships between Christian organisations and local churches, and how these might be overcome.