

Organising social development work – thoughts from a church leader

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Involving the church in social development

The church is both a spiritual and a social organisation and therefore it cannot afford to hide its head in the sand ignoring its social developmental involvement. There is overwhelming evidence in the Bible where God was involved in providing for the social requirements of the communities. In Egypt, God warned the King in a dream of the seven years of plenty and seven years of starvation. The dream needed Joseph to interpret, and the king appointed Joseph to be in charge of gathering food for the seven years of plenty. In this instance, Joseph represents God's people, the church today. During the ministry of Jesus Christ he had compassion on the hungry and the sick. He also challenged leaders and social structures and norms. We need to do the same during our day because the same challenges still exist today.

Division of labour

In the Bible, God identifies himself with the widows, orphans and the oppressed or underprivileged. The early church learnt social responsibility directly from Christ and while they were having their meals together, they realised that there was need to separate roles.

“Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, it is not desirable that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministering of the Word.” Acts 6:2 – 4.

It is clear that the apostles did not rule out the serving of tables as something outside their jurisdiction, but rather assigned this role to qualified individuals as they went ahead preaching and dealing with other spiritual roles. This we can safely call division of labour in the church.

As individuals members of the church, there are limits to which our capacities can reach, hence the need for complimentary roles in preaching the word of God. A church should be recognised by the positive effects it has in the communities in which it operates. A whole individual is one whose spirit, soul and physical body are sound.

Organising social development work in the church

In the church where I work there has been a gradual awakening as to our calling to minister to the needs of spirit, soul as well as body of individuals and in society. We have increased our social development work and have given much thought to how we best can organise this work. Hosea 4:6 states that "My people perish because of lack of knowledge." It is against this background that we, as a church, think setting up a separate NGO to look at social development work would enhance the relevance of our church in areas that we operate. Pastors as spiritual leaders might not have the technical skills and knowledge required in managing social development work, hence division of responsibility is necessary to carry God's work forward.

There are certain skills and competences that will be called into place when dealing with social development work, hence the need to employ technically qualified personnel. With this in mind most of our pastors lack the requisite skills required in administration and operationalisation of this work. The NGO will be an extension of the church, reporting directly to the National Executive. This leaves pastors with ample time to carry out their spiritual work. Another reason for setting up a separate NGO is that it is also difficult to source sponsorship from other funding organisations if you do not operate as a registered NGO.

Challenges in setting up a separate development NGO

If there are advantages in setting up a separate NGO when it comes to optimising the skills and callings of individuals through a wise division of labour, there are also some major challenges that we need to be aware and try to manage. Some challenges emanate from strict government regulations and policies. NGOs can be viewed with suspicion hence their operations are curtailed by the need to satisfy government policies. There is a lot of political interventions in development work

hence the beneficiaries are sometimes prejudiced. These activities compromise the integrity of most organisations.

There are also challenges that emanate from perceptions and attitudes both internal and external to the church. Taken negatively, the nobility of setting up the organisation will have disastrous consequences. The complimentary role required for the organisation to operate smoothly will be compromised if attitudes and perceptions of the pastors, church leaders and the general congregants are not managed well, especially if some feel the organisation will benefit others more than themselves. This will be pronounced if there are insinuations of favouritism and regionalism in terms of selection of staff and other activities. This will stifle the positive impact of the organisation's work.

Finding legitimacy

First and foremost there is need for wide consultations in and outside the church to determine the relevance of the intended action of setting up the developmental organisation, so that negative perceptions and attitudes are circumvented from the onset.

There has to be a composite organisational structure that enhances professionalism and good corporate governance. Employees of the organisation should be selected according to qualifications and experiences so that we do not compromise efficiency and effectiveness. People should work according to their abilities and competences. Too many responsibilities on one person compromise efficiency.

We need to work on a paradigm shift within the church as well as in the communities in terms of attitudes towards going into society and making an impact. We have been a closed up church for a very long time and we need to find our space in the communities. The communities need to know what to expect from us, and we need to work on developing trust from the communities. Capacity building workshops on change effects should be carried out and reach out to all members of the church for them to appreciate the change to take place, because their input is critical in the continued survival of the organisation. As alluded in Hosea 4:6, there is need for clarity of purpose in terms of goals and objectives to capture the interest of all involved.

Even Lao Tzu put it correctly that, "When the best leader's work is done, the people say we did ourselves!"