

ACCOMPANYING CHURCHES IN POST CONFLICT SITUATIONS

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War is the most extreme context to operate in. Even in the aftermath, everything is different. So what then is different about OD with churches in post-conflict situations? Over the past few years, CORAT Africa, has had the privilege of accompanying two major church organizations in South Sudan and DR Congo, through a challenging and uncertain situation. Our experiences highlight five responses to this question, though these are by no means the last word on the subject. But our experience leads us to believe that if you are working in post-conflict contexts, you should appreciate the importance of:

1. Counselling before consultancy
2. The power of prayer
3. Forgiveness and a fresh start
4. Facilitation, not handouts
5. Confidence building to address fear

1. Counselling before consultancy

We have just returned from South Sudan where a short 30 minute interview with a Bishop (who was actively engaged in the process leading to the signing of Comprehensive Peace Agreement) turned into a four hour counselling process. At one stage, the conversation became so intense that it looked like the Bishop would break down. In such a situation, we did find it useful to engage the leadership in a process of self reflection of the journey he had been through. We had to exercise patience and allow him to open up and bring out some of the painful experiences he had been through. As we asked sensitive, but probing questions and listened actively to his answers, the Bishop gradually opened up his heart. He found the process so therapeutic that he asked us to write up the story of what they had gone through.

We realized that people coming out of a war zone, need time and space to unload. Before they can begin to think about change and take on the new, they have to put down their considerable burdens. They need debriefing. They slowly realize that while they are no longer at war, they have not disengaged from the war in their hearts and minds. They need to be liberated to feel safe that there is a fresh start. Such a process needs time and space.

2. The power of prayer

Last year the leader of one of the main churches in DR Congo visited us at CORAT. It was meant to be just a progress update on an ongoing capacity building assignment. We asked him to give the staff a Christmas message. After he spoke to us, he asked us to pray for him in his very difficult task. We joined hands with him in prayer. We prayed fervently for his people going through a traumatic post war situation.

Prayer needs to be central for church leaders, particularly in such difficult situations, when their emotional and physical energies are so stretched. Praying for leaders helps them feel supported. They are reminded of the power of God to transform situations. Three years ago, we were involved in “Healing of Healers” program targeting church leaders from Sudan who had been accompanying their people through very difficult situations. The place of prayer remains central in the lives of those in such situations.

3. Forgiveness and fresh start

In South Sudan recently, a Member of Parliament was telling us about how many of her colleagues were struggling with inner feelings of hatred and bitterness. They felt that forgiveness was not possible. But she also related how one of the key political leaders decided to visit one of his sworn opponents. This was wholly unexpected. He was not meant to stoop so low. As soon as he entered the room, everyone was quiet and confused. It was really tense. But when he was given time to greet people, he stood and asked forgiveness for what had happened. Suddenly the room was filled with ululation. A fresh start was possible.

In such situations the presence of church leadership can be really important - not only as a way of demonstrating solidarity but also affirming the actions. When we open doors to forgiveness, there can be real and lasting reconciliation in the most difficult situations.

4. Facilitation, not handouts

The most challenging aspect of our work with PEAC in Congo was that a culture of handouts dominated the thinking of the church and other development agencies. In emergency situations, many relief efforts turn the church into a dependent church, indeed a begging church, one without the belief or capacity to do things for themselves. In this context, the focus of our efforts was to enable the development department of the church to mobilise the members to take charge of their development work – not rely on handouts from outside.

5. Building confidence to overcome fear

I remember towards the end of a workshop, the senior church leader admitted privately that he was too afraid to continue working in his present location. He had always stood up to the rights of the poor people. But the authorities were not impressed. He felt threatened and at rock-bottom.

Church leaders, even post-conflict, have lots to be afraid of. But fear should not drive our actions. We realise that leaders need comfort, encouragement and wisdom in how to be an advocate for issues that safeguard human dignity. We realised it is our role to accompany them. So CORAT now runs visits/workshops/encounters to encourage fearful church leadership.

Discernment – the final word

In conclusion, accompanying church leaders in a post conflict environment calls for discernment - an inner discernment of what is needed in what situations. There will be moments when all that is needed (or even possible) is prayer and prayer and prayer.... there will be moments it is about building up someone's confidence again. There are other times it is important to bring assurance that the journey that we are in has a wonderful destination and that we must not give up despite everything. Such discernment requires wisdom. It is a spiritual gift.