

Praxis Note No. 47

Faith-Based Organisational Development (OD) with Churches in Malawi

by Rick James with CABUNGO staff

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Church-based development organisations are distinct from secular NGOs. They have particular organisational features. These are the source of their potential value added, but also their major challenges. Good organisation development (OD) needs to be tailored to these specific contextual characteristics. But faith-based OD goes even further. It integrates the faith of the client and in some cases the consultant to promote change.

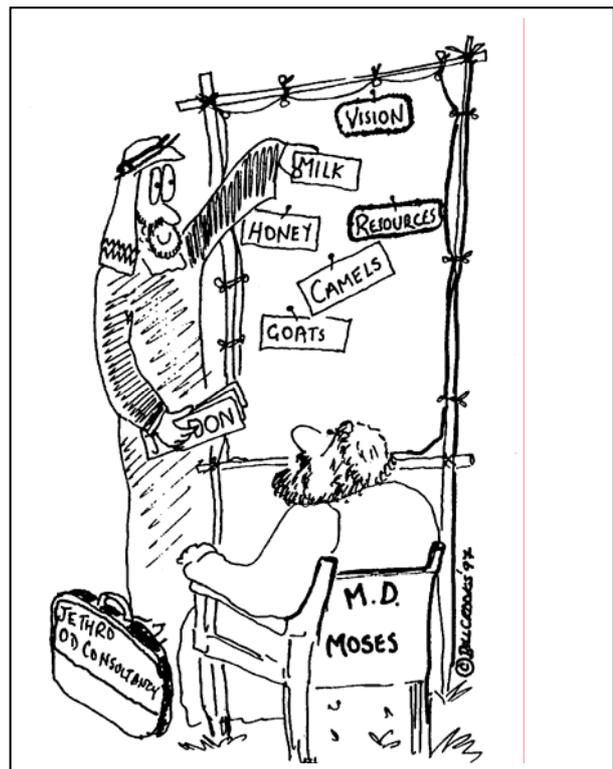
This paper is based on practical OD consultancy experiences of CABUNGO and INTRAC with more than 20 church-based organisations in Malawi between 2000 and 2006. It analyses the common and particular organisational challenges that church-based organisations face and explores what should be different about OD with such organisations. Complementary research was carried out with Islamic FBOs (faith-based organisations) in Malawi, published as Praxis Note 48 'Capacity building with Islamic FBOs'.

Particular features of church-based organisations

Our OD experience with Malawian church-based agencies demonstrates that most exhibit specific organisational features. While these characteristics may not be wholly exclusive to church-based organisations, they do imply that any OD

work with church-based organisations needs to take them into account to be effective. They include:

- Formal governance
- Informal relationship with religious institution
- Beliefs and development strategy
- Leadership and culture
- Staffing and recruitment
- Systems



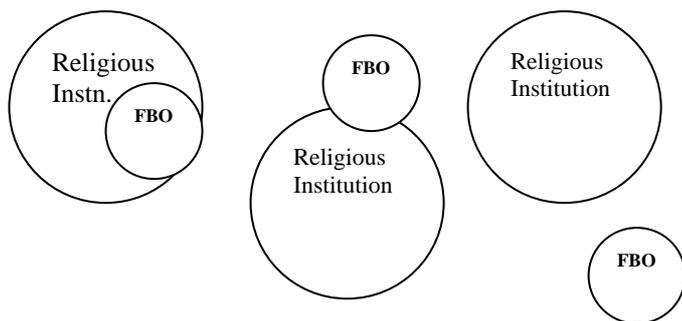
How do these characteristics resonate with your own experiences of working with churches in different contexts?

Formal relationship – Identity and governance

The relationship between a church development agency¹ and its religious institution is critical. Being part of a wider faith structure gives church agencies vital comparative advantages in development work. These include an extensive community reach and influence on peoples’ behaviour through their legitimacy and constituency. But it also brings disadvantages, as we shall see.

The formal aspect of this relationship is articulated in the legal governance structure but is also informally enacted through interactions between the church leaders and the development agency staff.

Three common models for relating are illustrated below:



Development work within the religious institution.

No separate legal registration operating as a development department.

Development work partially within religious institution.

Some level of independence of governance. May have own legal registration under religious institution.

Development work outside of religious institution .

Registered as an independent legal entity, like an NGO. It may be linked to a number of religious institutions.

In reality there is a more nuanced spectrum of relationships, with some church-based organisations a hybrid of different models. Our experience suggests there is no one

¹ Called ‘agency’ for purposes of simplification though it could be a department, programme, project, office or organisation.

right answer as to the appropriate relationship. There are costs and benefits to all models. It depends on factors such as the: theological understanding of development and the role of the church; age, size, phase of growth of FBO; the structure of the church; denominational tradition; personalities and behaviour of leadership; type of work; and source of funding.

Ultimately, however, whether the formal relationship is effective depends largely on the informal enactment of this relationship.

Informal relationship with the religious institution

The Christian faith (like others) teaches explicitly about the importance service to others, self-sacrifice, integrity, trust and forgiveness. This Biblical teaching provides strong guidelines a mutually supportive relationship between the church development organisation and its religious mother body. In reality there are powerful, inherent tensions that need to be acknowledged and consciously worked through if the relationship is to be productive. Any organisation, however faith-based, is still staffed by people with human tendencies towards jealousy, greed, fear and pride. Our experience revealed common tensions in the areas of:

- resources
- power
- recognition.

Resources:

In most of the church-based organisations we have worked with there are tensions between the church and the development office over resources. This may be worse in resource-poor settings. At an individual level there are significant salary differentials between clergy and development workers. The development agency has greater access to vehicles and other assets. It is not uncommon for the Bishop, the leader of the whole church, to have no transport to visit

a congregation, while vehicles stand 'idle' at the development office.



These common scenarios raise real tensions over the direction that resources should flow – should the development agency pay an overhead to the mother church body? Or should the church give to the poor by supporting the development agency? Many donors want to see the church institution contributing financially, but easily overlook the significant contributions they make in kind: through use of buildings; land; time and tax-free status for example. While the clergy argue for greater flexibility in the use of its development office assets, such as ‘borrowing’ funds and vehicles, the development departments strongly states the need for accountability to donors and to the beneficiaries.

Power and control

There are also often related tensions over power to make strategic decisions, such as appointing the director of the development office, developing a new programme or even controlling the finances. Even in

Malawian church development agency with legally constituted boards, there is a tendency for them to be treated by the church leadership at best as advisory and at worst as rubber stamps.

Recognition with communities

Who gets the credit for the development work is also sometimes an issue. Some churches want to be seen to be active in relief and development. This makes them appear relevant and dynamic and therefore more attractive to new members. For example, one lengthy OD process stalled when the clergy decided that they would lose their identity as ‘a church meeting the needs of the poor’ if they let the development office become more independent. On the other hand, tensions can also arise the other way, when the behaviour of the development agency’s staff does not live up to the standards set by the religious institution.

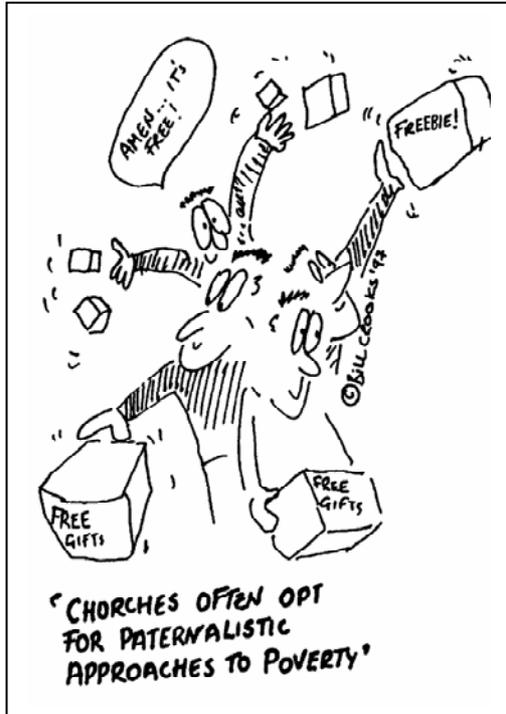
Beliefs and development strategy

One factor that sets church development agencies apart from other NGOs is their faith and the links between their beliefs and the development work. Historically, faith has been the motivation behind much relief and development work amongst the poor. Faith can also influence the methods used to implement the development work, such as the use of prayer.

As well as affecting the ‘means’, faith also affects the ‘end’ of development. Many church-based agencies may include spiritual development as a key element of holistic development – raising the thorny question of where spiritual development stops and proselytising begins. Many church agencies do not have conscious, coherent and shared answers to such questions.

Church-based agencies face particular challenges in strategy. Although this challenge is not unique to churches, it is often exaggerated by the faith base. Many

religions encourage helping the poor, but without detailing how. In consequence, many church-based agencies have not rigorously thought through how change occurs. By default they have taken a



paternalistic and welfarist approach to development.

Furthermore, church-based organisations face particular challenges of strategic choice. Their compassion makes it very difficult for them to say ‘no’ when presented with an obvious need. This can easily result in the development office becoming acutely over-stretched and ineffective.

Church-based organisations also need to answer the thorny strategic question of whether they work **through** the local church or implement **on behalf of** the religious institution?

By mobilising and working through local faith structures there is greater potential for impact, but such an approach also has drawbacks. There are often problems with capacity at local level to implement professionally and accountably. Local structures may deliberately or inadvertently discriminate. For example in one Catholic diocese the development agency’s staff

observed that by using church structures they were missing out some of the non-Catholics. By simply making announcements in church services, church members were benefiting more.

Leadership and culture

Leadership in church-based organisations can have an even greater influence due to the extra dimension of spiritual authority that is often vested in religious leaders. This gives leaders greater opportunity to effect or block change, both positively and negatively. There is common perception that: ‘religious leaders are closer to God than we are. If we question this person we are questioning God.’ There are cases where disagreements with leaders are harder to resolve because of deeply held religious views on leadership authority from God.

The particular personality of the religious leader is therefore vital, as this extra power can easily be abused. This is even more of a challenge in a country like Malawi where culturally, power is highly concentrated. Leaders are put on a pedestal by followers and expected to behave like a ‘big man’. The hierarchical structures and cultures of some religious institutions can further exacerbate these tensions.

The resulting culture of the organisation is inextricably linked with leadership. In some cases, OD practitioners in Malawi found that it was more difficult to surface the underlying issues in church-based agencies because such issues were private, in some cases deemed ‘sacrosanct’. Church-based organisations in Malawi tend not to be very open as they do not want to wash their dirty linen in public. Airing organisational issues to outsiders may be interpreted as gossip and criticism, which are not deemed ‘Christian’ behaviour. This was particularly true for smaller church-based organisations where the church leader was also the leader of the development office.

Staffing and recruitment

Church-based organisations have the potential advantage of people's faith giving them a sense of calling and vocation to the work. This can generate extraordinary commitment and acceptance of below-market salaries by staff. But having a faith-base also raises specific and distinct challenges in recruitment. Church-based organisations constantly grapple with difficult questions such as: If we are faith-based does this mean that we need to hire people belonging to our faith? Would this be discrimination? But if we hire people with no faith or a different faith will this inherently undermine our faith-base? There are often no clear cut answers to these questions.

Ensuring that the senior leadership of the development agency are practicing members of the faith helps preserve the identity of the agency and maintain good relations with the religious 'mother' body. Conversely, examples abound, particularly in smaller church-based organisations in Malawi, of people with limited competence being hired, as the recruitment process paid undue attention to the need for the person to be a loyal member of the church.

Remuneration in church-based organisations tends to be lower than in NGOs, undermining professionalism. Church-based organisations can find their salary structures limited by a board, who want to preserve the sense of work as a vocational calling from God as well as maintain parity with clergy income.

Staff behaviour outside of work is another challenge specific to church-based agencies. As representatives of a religious institution, development agency staff are expected to set an example to the communities they work in. The private life of an employee is therefore often not deemed private by the church agency. Contracts may address drinking and sexual behaviour.

Systems

There is a considerable religious teaching on themes such as planning, accountability honesty, and stewardship. These emphasise the value of church-based organisations developing good systems. But the reality in Malawi is that many churches have undeveloped financial and human resource systems, adversely influencing church-based organisations. While many NGOs in Malawi also face such issues, church organisations can be worse because:

- Systems often require professional input to set up and maintain, which many religious institutions cannot afford.
- Powerful religious leaders often resist the development of systems which may curtail their power with unwanted checks and balances on leaders.
- Accountability is seen primarily as being to God, not man.
- Management systems are sometimes seen as 'secularising' and things that quench the power of the divine.
- Teaching about stewardship and accountability is not common in Malawian churches.
- Donor-imposed systems that church-based organisations use are often cumbersome and not fully understood.

OD with churches in Malawi

OD with churches builds on good OD practice. It is fully professional in applying the considerable mainstream learning about what works and what does not in facilitating organisational change. But there are also some important differences both in terms of OD content and process that make faith-based OD distinct. Failure to apply these distinctive features to our OD work in the past may have severely constrained the effectiveness of OD interventions. The experiences of working with OD and churches in Malawi indicate that taking a faith-based approach to OD involves:

1. Understanding the church development agency as being an integral part of a wider religious institution and the particular implications that has for its identity, governance and relationships.
2. Including the wider religious institution within the development agency change process.
3. Addressing common church agency issues of strategy, leadership, culture and management systems.
4. Exploring the meaning of what its faith-base means to the church development agency and the implications this has for its approach and its staffing.
5. Integrating the OD process with the faith of the client.
6. Applying the OD practitioner's own faith into the change process.

1. Understanding the FBO in the context of the religious institution

One of the distinctive features of many church-based organisations is that they are an integral part of a wider religious institution. It is important to analyse the nature of the relationship between the agency and the religious institution(s) in any initial organisational assessment process. The complexity and sensitivity of this relationship must make us wary of jumping to quick conclusions about how it should be. Many assessments highlight the obvious inherent tensions and immediately conclude that there should be greater separation between the agency and the religious institution. In the long run, however, such a course of action may lead to the church agency losing its faith identity (in all but name) and may mean that the impact, scale and sustainability of working through grassroots faith structures are not realised.

A faith-based approach to OD therefore deals with the church agency as part of this greater whole. It is often valuable for faith-based OD to help institutions establish appropriate boundaries and clarify roles and responsibilities, while maintaining as much

integration and holism as possible. The necessary **ownership** of the development work by the church leadership needs to be differentiated from **control** by the religious institution.

The less formal relationship issues can also have a profound impact on the effectiveness of the agency in achieving its mission. The opportunities and inherent tensions mean that the relationship has to be actively managed to ensure these tensions are mitigated (particularly in a context of declining foreign support for churches). Issues will continually arise. What is important is to deal with them in an open and forgiving way.

In a faith-based OD process it is therefore often (though not always) necessary to specifically address the relationship between the church development agency and the religious institution. Whether this is possible depends on if the religious institution and the development agency are committed to addressing the issues. In one church development agency we worked with, some leaders felt it was easier to live with the 'uneasy truce' – the pain they knew – rather than 'lifting their heads over the parapet'. If there is commitment, then it may be valuable to jointly clarify and communicate the different roles and responsibilities of the religious leadership, pastors, trustees, boards, and development agency managers. This process can produce a 'Terms of Reference' or 'Social Action Policy' that serves as a reference document when key people in the organisations change.

2. Including the wider religious institution within FBO OD process

Although many international NGOs prefer only to deal with the development offices and avoid relating to the wider church, to be effective change processes also need to actively engage the wider religious institution. Even though this makes the change process slower and often messier,

this wider involvement is critical for implementation. The religious leadership are often imbued with considerable power from their spiritual authority, often far beyond their formal mandate. Private discussions with these religious leaders can be pivotal in gaining their support for the development agency's change process and channelling their leadership power in a positive direction. Church development agency change processes appear to work better when the change is directly linked to the vision of the religious institution and ensuring that the development work fits the overall vision. It is also necessary to link with the plans and strategies of the religious institution. For example, CABUNGO found with one agency they worked with, the strategic shift towards mainstreaming gender was later overturned because it was not in the published regional plans of the international church.

Engaging the wider church with OD

- discussing the initial terms of reference with the church leadership
- interviewing most Synod leadership during the data-gathering
- having church representatives present at the FBO Board/Senior management Vision, Values and Strategy workshop
- discussing the Strategy Concept Note first with the Synod management board, even before the FBO's staff
- supporting the development of a Terms of Reference between the Synod and FBO as part of the change process.

3. Addressing common church OD Issues

Faith-based OD will analyse the common organisational issues of church-based organisations. It will ask questions about:

Strategy:

- How are they making strategic choices in the face of extreme needs?
- Are they working through local congregations or on their behalf?
- How are they addressing issues of professionalism and accountability?

- Are they networking closely with existing community organisations to avoid inadvertent discrimination?
- If they have chosen to work on behalf of congregations, how are they ensuring that the comparative advantages of grassroots reach and sustainability are not lost?

Leadership

- Who are religious leaders and FBO leaders accountable to? What structures do they report to?
- What is their view on and vision for development work?
- To whom do they delegate power?
- How are they developing future leaders? Do they see a future for themselves beyond leading that organisation?

Structures and systems

- How do these function?
- Do they fit with the strategy, phase of growth and size of the FBO?
- Are there established human resource management systems with job descriptions and appraisal processes?
- Are adequate financial systems in place to provide management with information for decision-making and donors with accountability?

Staffing

- What is the policy on recruitment?
- What is staff turnover like?
- What do terms and conditions say about expected behaviour?
- What motivates staff to stay?
- What induction and training processes are in place?

4. Exploring the meaning and implications of its faith identity

A faith-based approach to OD entails actively exploring what its faith identity means to the church development agency. Faith is a vital source of motivation for change (as well as resistance sometimes). OD practitioners therefore need to actively seek to understand the faith of the client, especially if it is a different faith-base or even denominational flavour from their own. Without this understanding, it is difficult to discern the real needs of the

client and decide when and how to challenge the client. For example, a Christian, female OD practitioner found herself unable to challenge an FBO client on their leadership and gender issues, whereas with secular NGOs, she had less compunction.

Asking about the faith-base is more than an initial cursory question, it is a theme to explore from different angles with different stakeholders trying to find out what makes the organisation unique. It involves asking questions such as:

What makes you faith-based? What does faith-based mean to you? What have you faith in and to do what in development? How does this affect decision-making? How does this faith affect your development work in practice? How should it?

5. Integrating the OD process with the faith of the client

Having better understood the faith of the client, a faith-based approach to OD then intentionally integrates the client's religious practices, language and stories into the OD process to release more energy for the change process. It involves:

- using the faith practices of client
- speaking in a language and with images understood by that faith
- respecting the behaviour expected by the faith.

Using the faith practices of client often means including time for prayers. It is appropriate and expected in many FBOs, whether Christian or Muslim, to start each meeting with prayers and in some cases pray at the beginning and end of every session. It is important to find out what the client expectations are in this regard and factor this into the programme design.

Faith-based OD is helped by using images, stories, verses and language that the client will readily understand and relate to from their faith tradition. For example, in many

OD processes with church-based organisations we have used the Exodus story to illustrate elements in any organisational change process. Using such imagery can energise the process. Using such stories can go further to seek Biblical support and theological justification for changes being proposed. Yet there is a real danger of manipulation in this, that spiritual authority will be claimed for human opinion.

Respecting the faith of the church development agency means that the OD practitioner's behaviour must be appropriate to the norms of that faith. This behaviour may relate to a number of issues such as drinking, eating, dressing, or male/female interactions. For example one Synod specifically wanted facilitators who would not go 'drinking in seedy bars at night' as previous consultants had done.

6. Using your own faith in OD

Arguably authentically faith-based OD goes one important, but contentious and risky, step further. Faith-based OD may involve the OD practitioner articulating and applying their own faith to the OD process in an extremely sensitive and respectful way. It must only be done in ways that maintain professional boundaries with organisations of different faiths.

OD practitioners are not there to argue matters of faith with FBOs, but to help them integrate their faith in their development work.

Our beliefs influence how we behave, think and practice OD. An atheist's strong faith in no God may affect how they work with FBOs from a completely different worldview and spiritual frame of reference. We all need to explore and question our own faith to see how it influences our OD practice.

If we are not highly self-aware in this area, there is a possibility of inflicting our beliefs on others, especially when working with

groups of other faiths or of mixed faiths. We need to ask ourselves: How does my faith enhance my values that I can be of better use to the client? How might it adversely affect my work with the client?

The authors have found many church development agencies are keen for us to integrate our Christian faith in our OD work with them. Some ways in which we have done this include:

Applying our faith in OD

- Believing that God can change the organisation and create order out of the chaos – trusting in a power greater than ourselves to effect change.
- Praying and listening to God to try and discern God's will and way forward in the organisation's situation.
- Creating time and space in the OD processes for FBO staff to try and listen to God individually. During workshops we have given participants time to pray and listen to God before discussing questions of direction.
- Following faith-based principles in the process of change, such as emphasising the importance of vision and values, surfacing fears and giving time for repentance and forgiveness.

Concluding thoughts

Our experiences have demonstrated that there are important differences between OD with church development agencies and NGOs. Church-based organisations exhibit specific features including the:

- formal and informal relationship between the FBO and the religious institution
- advantage of being motivated by their faith, though this often means church development agencies have more difficulties in saying 'no'
- extra dimension of spiritual authority ascribed to religious leaders means they have greater power to drive or block change

- staffing dilemmas –recruitment, outside hours behaviour, remuneration packages
- tendency to have weak financial and human resource management systems.

Our experience indicates that specific organisational challenges also require distinct approaches to OD to be effective. A faith-based approach to OD remains professionally excellent, but situates the change process within the context of the wider religious institution; addresses the common FBO issues; explores how faith influences the FBO; integrates the change processes with the languages, stories and faith practices of the client; and involves the OD practitioner consciously, sensitively and respectfully applying their own faith to the OD process.

What does your experience tell you? Are these findings unique to churches in Malawi?

People have been reluctant to explore the capacity building dimension of being **faith-based**. This may be because faith is a very personal, sensitive and often contentious issue. There is a fear that faith-based capacity building will somehow slip into supporting the promulgation of those faiths. Many stakeholders would like to draw a neat line between the 'faith' and the 'faith-based' development work.

This is clearly an area that needs further work and understanding in order to avoid knee-jerk and divisive reactions. We need to deepen these reflections with more rigorous research and broaden the reflective practice to include other faiths and continents. Faith is certainly very personal, but it is far too important to human change and development to remain private. In any discussion of faith and organisation, a difference of opinion and interpretation is guaranteed, but these very differences may uncover new understanding about our capacity building work and can be seen as opportunities for new learning.