

Challenges of working with the local church and suggested responses

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.

Local churches may think that the government should do everything

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Source: *ROOTS 11: Partnering with the local church*, Tearfund 2007, pages 23-24