

# INTEGRAL, INSPIRATIONAL AND INFLUENTIAL

The role of local churches in humanitarian  
and development responses



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and development responses**

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With special thanks to Joanna Watson, Charlotte Flowers, Timothy Ingram, Hannah Swithinbank, Helen Gaw, Caroline Maxwell, Stephanie Gill, Jané Mackenzie, Stephen German, Richard Lister and Edward Woods, for their insightful comments and suggestions that helped refine and strengthen this paper.

Design: Wingfinger Graphics

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Tearfund is a Christian relief and development agency building a global network of local churches to help eradicate poverty.

# INTEGRAL, INSPIRATIONAL AND INFLUENTIAL

## The role of local churches in humanitarian and development responses

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Tearfund's approach to humanitarian and development response is to work wherever possible with and through the local church. This is because, as a Christian NGO, Tearfund considers itself to have a specific calling to work alongside local communities of Christians to help bring transformation to the lives of those living in poverty. Whilst acknowledging that the church is a flawed human institution, and that no one is beyond reproach, Tearfund believes that, at its best, the church is an organisation with the potential to help reshape the lives of the communities it serves across the world.

This approach brings three key advantages to international development work, in that local churches are:



**1 INTEGRAL** – the situation of the church in local communities affords the benefits of:

- access
- immediacy
- sustainability



**2 INSPIRATIONAL** – the Christian identity of the church acts as an asset in:

- a whole-person approach
- a biblical mandate to help those in need
- the influence of church leaders



**3 INFLUENTIAL** – the reach of the church at all levels, from local communities to international organisations, gives it:

- the influence to shape attitudes and the ability to speak up on behalf of the poor and oppressed

This makes the church a highly distinctive and effective partner for this work, and brings value to humanitarian and development responses that is by no means commonplace in the sector.

# INTRODUCTION

The church occupies a distinct space in communities, nations and the world. It is privileged in its reach at all levels, connecting at the level of the individual right up to international organisations. This creates huge potential for its role in tackling poverty, in all its forms, across the globe. This paper focuses on the capacity of the church, when reaching its full potential and truly living out its calling, to bring lasting change. At the same time, it acknowledges that in many places this potential is as yet unrealised, and also that the church has played its part, like many organisations, in some very damaging development ideas and practices. However, it is the huge positive potential of the mobilised church that is prioritised in this particular paper, and the exciting opportunity that this presents for Tearfund.

For the reasons alluded to above, and more besides, Tearfund has chosen to work wherever possible with and through the local church, in both its development and humanitarian response work. Indeed, as an organisation, it has just come to the end of its 10-year vision to see 50 million people released from material and spiritual poverty through a worldwide network of 100,000 churches.

The nature of the partnership between Tearfund and local churches is based on

- a common language and understanding of poverty
- a culture of equality and mutual respect where both parties listen to each other
- a recognition that each brings different skills and has a distinct role to play within this collaboration

The practicalities of these partnerships vary according to the particular context and situation of the church within its community. This allows the partnership to best suit a community's specific needs, and allows the flexibility to adapt the approach to ensure it is appropriate to the local circumstances.

So, how does engaging in humanitarian and development work through local churches add value? It is because churches are **integral** in their communities, **inspirational** to their congregations, and **influential** through their networks. This gives churches a unique role to play in fighting poverty around the world.



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# 1 LOCAL CHURCHES ARE INTEGRAL

Local churches are, by definition, situated in and made up of local communities. They are often at the centre of the lives of those who attend them, and as such, can be found in most places where people are, even in countries where the majority of the population are of other faiths or no faith. This brings three crucial benefits to any humanitarian or development work that takes place - **access**, **immediacy** and **sustainability**.

## 1.1 Access

Access can often be a problem in humanitarian and development work, where the poorest communities in greatest need of assistance live in the most remote areas, particularly in the case of disasters. This poses problems both for physical relief and consultation of community members to assess their needs. However, when other organisations don't or can't go to these most remote areas, the church can be found 'filling the gaps'.<sup>1</sup>

**'INGOS CANNOT TRAVEL TO THAT AREA, BUT THE PRIESTS HAVE NO PROBLEM BECAUSE THEY CAN STAY WITH THE PEOPLE...'**

During the HIV crisis, health centres in the most isolated areas, missed by secular organisations and governments, were often run by faith-based organisations.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, where safety restrictions in dangerous situations (whether self- or government-imposed) mean that access is limited or removed for international organisations, faith leaders hold a

privileged position of being able to reach where others cannot go. When international actors in South Sudan during the conflict had to leave one state because of a security threat, a local church leader explained, 'INGOs cannot travel to that area, but the priests have no problem because they can stay with the people...'<sup>3</sup>

Placement within communities enables churches and church leaders to engage local people in discussions about their own needs. This means that communities' concerns and issues that matter to them are voiced, rather than those that may be popular in elite circles and governments.<sup>4</sup> It has significant benefits in reverse too. For example, in the midst of the Ebola crisis, critical behaviour change messages needed to be communicated quickly and effectively. The positions of faith leaders within local communities, and their two-way discussions with them, meant these messages could be contextualised to improve their efficacy.<sup>5</sup> This unique situation of being in the communities they are trying to help also means that church leaders are best placed to see who is being left out of relief responses and development initiatives, and that vulnerable people in need of assistance will turn to them when they have been missed by others.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2 Immediacy

Immediacy is another vital factor in humanitarian work. When a disaster strikes, response times can make all the difference in saving people's lives, and churches are often there as some of the first responders in a crisis.<sup>7</sup>

- 1 Seren Boyd, *In the thick of it: why the church is an essential partner for sustainable development in the world's poorest communities* (London: Tearfund, 2009), p 4
- 2 Nicola Ward, Jo Kaybryn and Kola Akinola, *Faith in the system: The impact of local HIV responses on strengthening health systems in Malawi and Chad* (London: Tearfund, 2010), p 3
- 3 Lydia Tanner and Leben Moro, *Missed Out: The role of local actors in the humanitarian response in the South Sudan conflict* (London: Christian Aid, 2016), p 19
- 4 Boyd, *In the thick of it*, p 22
- 5 Andy Featherstone, *Keeping the Faith: The Role of Faith Leaders in the Ebola Response* (London: CAFOD, 2015), p 10
- 6 Tanner and Moro, *Missed Out*, p 12
- 7 Tanner and Moro, *Missed Out*, p 10

For example, when Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, the church was ready and able to distribute aid in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, where the greatest areas of devastation were only reached by foreign aid workers several weeks later.<sup>8</sup> Local churches in South Sudan were able to offer the additional benefit to small faith-based and community-based organisations of immediate access to finances to enable activities to continue, while they waited for external funding during the conflict there.<sup>9</sup>

### 1.3 Sustainability

Sustainability is at the heart of good development work, to ensure real progress is being made. This means that the solutions must be locally-owned to maintain achievements after the organisations involved have moved on. Local churches act as an enduring hub in many communities where even the most committed relief agencies will eventually leave, and they provide ready volunteers who are motivated to help those in need in their localities.<sup>10</sup>

The long-term presence and lower turnover rate for church workers compared with NGO staff means churches hold relationships and credibility among the communities they are embedded in, because their staff are part of the community. They are subsequently able to use their influence to galvanise local resources when they are needed most.<sup>11</sup> Churches often share values with the communities they are part of, because their members are also members of the community. This means that churches, unlike outside agencies, have local knowledge and a long-term view of their communities to inform development and humanitarian work.<sup>12</sup> For example, they are better placed to ensure interventions are inclusive of all community members, where non-local actors might not be aware of the potential for a particular group to be left out.



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The church's central position in community life also has benefits for advocacy work. As a regional district councillor in Uganda said: 'We trust the church. We have so many organisations and individuals who

8 Boyd, *In the thick of it*, p 12

9 Tanner and Moro, *Missed Out*, p 17

10 Boyd, *In the thick of it*, p 4

11 Tanner and Moro, *Missed Out*, p 21. Charlotte Flowers, *Bridging the gap: The role of local churches in fostering local-level social accountability and governance* (London: Tearfund, 2016), p 13

12 Tanner and Moro, *Missed Out*, p 21. Featherstone, *Keeping the Faith*, p 10. Boyd, *In the thick of it*, p 5. Flowers, *Bridging the gap*, p 14

come but, at the end, they disappear. But the church is there permanently. Even when there are changes in leadership, the church remains.<sup>13</sup> This trust is a vital component in facilitating productive dialogue with government officials. It means that communities' engagement in lobbying activities, rather than being antagonistic, takes place in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding.

For humanitarian emergencies too, the long-term presence of the church is invaluable. One church pastor put it like this: 'We were here before the disaster, we were here during the disaster and we are here after the disaster. Agencies like yours will come and go, but the church will always be here.'<sup>14</sup> A key finding of the *Missed Out* report was that 'the permanent presence and country-wide networks of churches in particular brings significant benefits to the overall humanitarian response'.<sup>15</sup>

**'WE WERE HERE BEFORE  
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In this section we have seen that the church's situation as a part of the community means it can play an integral role, affording the benefits of access, immediacy and sustainability to humanitarian and development work. However, it is not only these practical considerations that make the church such an invaluable partner in this work. The role played by faith itself, and the inspiration that this provides, is another significant factor.



## 2 LOCAL CHURCHES ARE INSPIRATIONAL

Faith and church attendance remain key to the lives of people in many of the countries where significant humanitarian and development work is ongoing. The local church therefore has a central role in meeting the needs of the community, helping make sense of the situations people are in, and framing the conversation around development issues. The church brings three key benefits to this work through the inspiration of faith - a **whole-person approach**, a **biblical mandate to help those in need**, and the **influence of church leaders** and the church more generally.

### 2.1 Whole-person approach

A whole-person approach means addressing the mental and spiritual needs of those living in poverty or caught up in disasters, alongside their immediate physical problems. The worldview of Christians means that they understand their lives and problems in terms of their faith, and can more easily receive help from those who share this perspective.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the church is uniquely positioned to help Christians and also those of other faiths in these situations because it understands that 'faith is intricately linked with people's identity and sense of purpose [and] ... recognises that poverty has a spiritual dimension, that poverty lowers self-esteem, robs people of their dignity'.<sup>17</sup>

13 Flowers, *Bridging the gap*, p 14

14 Oenone Chadburn and Katie Ballin, 'We have faith in response', in Sean Nicklin and Ben Cornwell (eds), *Together We Stand* (UNOCHA, 2016), p 63

15 Tanner and Moro, *Missed Out*, p 19

16 Boyd, *In the thick of it*, p 13

17 Boyd, *In the thick of it*, p 14



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Tearfund has developed this 'whole-person approach' through partnering with local churches in the church and community mobilisation (CCM) process. CCM aims, through Bible studies and discussion, to empower individuals and communities to voice issues and consider solutions for themselves, and to emphasise their 'God-given' individual and collective resources. This in turn brings them new confidence and hope for their situations.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, a chairman at sub-county level government in Uganda commented that 'CCM has given people the imagination to believe that they have a role to play'.<sup>19</sup> This whole-person approach also has benefits in working alongside non-Christians, because it recognises that the problems those living in poverty face are not limited to the practical, immediate issues they are dealing with, and that many of the situations people experience also have implications for their mental and emotional wellbeing.

Moreover, it has been shown that contextualisation of messages for a Christian audience has proved a highly successful method for changing attitudes. For example, Bible studies and theology have been used to bring about transformation in the area of sexual violence, including breaking down barriers and stigma around these issues.<sup>20</sup> The *Keeping the Faith* report has even suggested that tackling Ebola would not have been possible through the secular humanitarian system alone, and that addressing the issues at hand had to be done through the lens of faith.<sup>21</sup>

The Ebola crisis also presented an opportunity for the church to engage with those of other faiths, through the shared understanding of a faith perspective. Tearfund supports churches engaging in this inter-faith dialogue, to promote the mutual understanding that people of different faiths share, that faith is a driver for action and social change.

The need to address issues from a faith perspective was also important for engaging communities in local-level advocacy in Uganda - people trust the church because of their shared values, and as one woman commented, '[The CCM advocacy training] would have not worked well with a secular NGO: the Bible has teachings, it encourages people to share, people fear God, they know it is God's language and know they should listen!'<sup>22</sup>

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18 Flowers, *Bridging the gap*, p 15

19 Flowers, *Bridging the gap*, p 15

20 Elisabet le Roux, *Silent No More: The untapped potential of the church in addressing sexual violence* (London: Tearfund, 2011), p 10. Chadburn and Ballin, 'We have faith in response', p 64

21 Featherstone, *Keeping the Faith*, p 10

22 Flowers, *Bridging the gap*, p 13



## 2.2 Biblical mandate to help those in need

Inherent to the Christian perspective is belief in the biblical mandate to help those in need. This means the church often provides ready volunteers for development and disaster work, delivering a response that is value for money.<sup>23</sup> In countries where faith remains at the centre of most people's lives and secular motivations are harder to comprehend, the church provides a religious explanation for caring for others to people of all faiths. This means the church is particularly positioned not only to offer support to Christians, but also to others of all faiths, because they are more likely to understand and trust the outworking of faith as a motivation to be involved in this type of work.

**IN COUNTRIES WHERE FAITH REMAINS AT THE CENTRE OF MOST PEOPLE'S LIVES, IT PROVIDES A RELIGIOUS EXPLANATION FOR CARING FOR OTHERS TO PEOPLE OF ALL FAITHS, IN CONTEXTS WHERE SECULAR MOTIVATIONS ARE HARDER TO COMPREHEND**

Christians see looking after the vulnerable as part of their faith, so are often inspired to offer help, frequently without payment or recognition. This means that the church supplies services and social infrastructure in much of the developing world – 'the weaker government structures are, the stronger the church's involvement tends to be'.<sup>24</sup> For example, up to 70% of health services in some African countries are delivered by faith groups.<sup>25</sup>

This role of the church is known amongst communities. An Irish Aid evaluation of HIV and AIDS work in Ethiopia and Malawi found that there was almost universal knowledge of church-based HIV and AIDS activities, demonstrating the far-reaching response of the church.<sup>26</sup> Even medical practitioners themselves have sought the help of the church due to a lack of services - the Ebola outbreak saw them turning to faith leaders to provide emotional support and counselling to those affected.<sup>27</sup> Churches are also used as 'safe havens' in times of conflict, where state security has broken down, for example during the violence in Juba, South Sudan.<sup>28</sup>



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23 Boyd, *In the thick of it*, p 13. Flowers, *Bridging the gap*, p 13

24 Boyd, *In the thick of it*, pp 8 and 9

25 Boyd, *In the thick of it*, p 9

26 Nigel Scott and Simon Batchelor, *Irish Aid Evaluation KAP Surveys (Ethiopia and Malawi)* (London: Tearfund, 2011), p 2

27 Featherstone, *Keeping the Faith*, p 9

28 Tanner and Moro, *Missed Out*, p 16

Moreover, the Bible not only encourages serving those in need, but also more generally building good relationships and flourishing communities through loving your neighbour, regardless of cultural, racial or religious differences. This has significant benefits for development work, as it creates a shared sense of belonging and togetherness, allowing for community-level, rather than individual, responses to issues. It also encourages long-term 'buy-in' to people and projects. Tearfund has formalised these benefits through the CCM process.

## 2.3 Influence of church leaders

Harnessing the influence of church leaders and the church more generally can be a huge advantage in humanitarian and development responses. Because the church is deeply embedded in society, with roots in the histories of communities, it holds the trust and respect of the people.<sup>29</sup> This allows church leaders to speak into traditions and values by contextualising development messages, with the potential to bring change to long-held attitudes.<sup>30</sup> The reach of the church and this ability to modify behaviour also allows it to engage with the underlying causes of risk and the impact of disasters, by helping people prepare better and mobilise faster when disaster strikes.<sup>31</sup>

**BECAUSE THE CHURCH IS DEEPLY EMBEDDED IN SOCIETY, WITH ROOTS IN THE HISTORIES OF COMMUNITIES, IT HOLDS THE TRUST AND RESPECT OF THE PEOPLE**

Particularly where changed behaviour is the aim of this type of work, either in an emergency context or over the long-term, the esteem in which church leaders are often held gives them a unique role in shaping opinion and behaviour in their congregations. In some contexts, this influence extends to their wider communities too, which, when used positively, can shift popular opinion to allow development gains.

The significance of faith-based leadership in response to the HIV and AIDS epidemic has been widely recognised.<sup>32</sup> The church played a key role in combatting stigma and changing attitudes (including around faithfulness and abstinence, women's rights, improving knowledge of HIV, and use of condoms), with many church leaders making official their commitment to the response by drafting guidelines on these issues.<sup>33</sup> The church has also been active in challenging the stigma associated with sexual violence, and in discouraging Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C).<sup>34</sup> For example, the Christian Council of Tanzania had significant impact in its sensitisation and advocacy work to attempt to stop the practice of FGM/C, with faith leaders playing a considerable role in various regions in providing education around the issue.<sup>35</sup>

**A UN STAFF MEMBER IN SIERRA LEONE COMMENTED THAT 'THE PARTICIPATION OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS WAS A GAME CHANGER'**

The Ebola response provides yet another key example where faith leaders have played a pivotal influencing role in a humanitarian context. Where the behaviour change required to prevent further spread of the disease was adopted too slowly, the crisis continued. However, once faith leaders became involved and gained a better understanding of the disease through

training, they had significant impact through using religious texts to promote changes in practices in affected communities, for example, safe burials.<sup>36</sup> They replaced a language of fear with one of hope, pairing technical and religious perspectives to allow 'changes in both the hearts and minds of

29 Boyd, *In the thick of it*, p 13

30 Boyd, *In the thick of it*, p 13. Featherstone, *Keeping the Faith*, p 9

31 Chadburn and Ballin, 'We have faith in response', p 63

32 Ward et al., *Faith in the system*, p 5

33 Scott and Batchelor, *Irish Aid Evaluation KAP Surveys*, pp 2-3

34 Le Roux, *Silent No More*, p 10

35 Johanna Waritay and Ann-Marie Wilson, *Working to end female genital mutilation and cutting in Tanzania: The role and response of the church* (London: Tearfund, 2014), p 21

36 Featherstone, *Keeping the Faith*, p 8

communities'.<sup>37</sup> Preaching an acceptance of Ebola aid workers and survivors also helped to mitigate against stigmatisation of these groups.<sup>38</sup> A UN staff member in Sierra Leone commented that 'the participation of religious leaders was a game changer'.<sup>39</sup>

The recognition of church leaders' role in influencing behaviour change also means that NGO staff working in these contexts increasingly need to understand the role of faith in humanitarian and development work. Indeed, priority recommendations of the *Keeping the Faith* report were to increase 'faith literacy' amongst humanitarian staff, who often have a narrow view of faith and faith leaders' potential, and to proactively include faith leaders in planning processes for emergencies from the beginning.<sup>40</sup> In this context, faith-based organisations have a unique role to play, as they are more able to mobilise faith leaders to talk about issues in their communities through the shared understanding they hold.<sup>41</sup>

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**FAITH-BASED ORGANISATIONS  
HAVE A UNIQUE ROLE TO PLAY,  
AS THEY ARE MORE ABLE TO  
MOBILISE FAITH LEADERS TO  
TALK ABOUT ISSUES IN THEIR  
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In this section we have explored the benefits of partnering with the local church associated with the inspirational role of faith. The care offered by the church addresses the whole person, including their spiritual needs; people are inspired through the Bible to think beyond themselves to others in need; and the trusted position of church leaders provides the opportunity to positively influence people, making humanitarian and development gains possible. In addition to this inspirational role, the church presents a further opportunity in its ability to be influential through its vast networks, as we will explore in the next section.



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37 Featherstone, *Keeping the Faith*, p 9

38 Featherstone, *Keeping the Faith*, p 9

39 Featherstone, *Keeping the Faith*, p 8

40 Featherstone, *Keeping the Faith*, p 10

41 Ward et al., *Faith in the system*, p 3



### 3 LOCAL CHURCHES ARE INFLUENTIAL



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Where people are living in poverty, either long-term or due to a recent disaster, this can not only strip them of the physical necessities for life, but also of their self-determination and their voices (whether because they feel unable to speak or because no one is listening). For this reason the church has a significant role to play in advocating for the vulnerable and oppressed.

**[THE CHURCH] IS ONE OF THE LARGEST CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORKS IN THE WORLD, AND ONE OF THE FEW MOVEMENTS THAT IS BOTH LOCAL AND GLOBAL IN ITS REACH AND INFLUENCE**

It is uniquely placed in the influence it has in powerful circles. It is one of the largest civil society networks in the world, and one of the few movements that is both local and global in its reach and influence, allowing replication of successful initiatives across its networks.<sup>42</sup> In many developing countries it is the only reliable social network, with inroads into different communities at all levels.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, 'the established relationships held by the church at national and international level, as well as its knowledge of the community context at

local level, means it occupies a rare position of influence and trust'.<sup>44</sup> For example, it was noted that, in South Sudan, the church was the only permanent, diverse institution able to lobby at the highest levels of government.<sup>45</sup>

The *Bridging the gap* report highlighted as a key finding this privileged position of the church with both community and government actors, and its 'unique ability to function as a "bridge", making decision-makers more accessible to the community'.<sup>46</sup> At the community level, it encouraged participation in the CCM advocacy process, inspiring people to believe that change was possible, despite pre-existing views of the government as unwilling to engage with the community.<sup>47</sup> From the other side, the church was trusted and viewed by government as an important influencer in keeping the peace and resolving

42 Chadburn and Ballin, 'We have faith in response', pp 63–64. Boyd, *In the thick of it*, p 4

43 Le Roux, *Silent No More*, pp 10 and 11

44 Chadburn and Ballin, 'We have faith in response' p 64

45 Tanner and Moro, *Missed Out*, p 21

46 Flowers, *Bridging the gap*, pp 5 and 7

47 Flowers, *Bridging the gap*, pp 13 and 4

community disputes, and as such was used as a means to disseminate information on, for example, government programmes like immunisation schemes.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, the respect with which church leaders were viewed meant they were able to form relationships with decision-makers at sub-county and district government levels, and used these connections to encourage mutual respect in place of suspicion between the community and government.<sup>49</sup> The report also highlighted the potential for the church to connect local issues across its national network, to facilitate collective working and greater leverage at the national level, or even to bring these issues to global-level initiatives.<sup>50</sup> Pairing its knowledge of situations on the ground with the respect and huge network it has created allows it to truly influence on issues affecting those it seeks to represent.

This final section has outlined the church's huge potential through its networks to connect the issues of ordinary people on the ground with decision-makers at all levels. With the authenticity of local voices on the one hand, and its size and influence with the powerful on the other, the church is able to use its voice to bring change through both humanitarian and development work to benefit those living in poverty.

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[THE CHURCH HAS A] 'UNIQUE ABILITY TO FUNCTION AS A "BRIDGE", MAKING DECISION-MAKERS MORE ACCESSIBLE TO THE COMMUNITY'

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## CONCLUSION

It is clear that the church occupies a unique place in the humanitarian and development sector. While it has not always lived up to its high calling, the potential it has is huge. At its best, it is able to bring a combination of benefits to humanitarian and development work that is found nowhere else. It is **integral** in communities, **inspirational** for their congregations, and **influential** through its networks at all levels. The church is a highly effective partner in the work of responding to those in desperate need, ultimately helping them to pull themselves from the clutches of poverty.



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48 Flowers, *Bridging the gap*, p 14

49 Flowers, *Bridging the gap*, p 17

50 Flowers, *Bridging the gap*, p 7

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