Relief and Development: Challenges to Mission Today

James A. Cogswell

Relief and development are critically important aspects of Christian mission today. Yet concepts of these tasks are being pressed upon us by forces outside the church. The church in mission must take care lest consciously or unconsciously we adopt criteria regarding relief and development that are alien or antithetical to the church’s mission. Indeed, we must reexamine the faith dynamic for Christian mission in order to fill these concepts with that distinctive content which will more adequately express why and how we engage in relief and development as aspects of mission.

The year 1945 punctuated the history of the world, bringing World War II to a screeching halt and initiating the nuclear age. The end of the war found many nations prostrate in devastation. The United States stood almost alone in having been spared the destruction of its own land and resources, though the loss of hundreds of thousands of its sons and daughters in armed service left lasting scars. But in the aftermath of war, the United States undertook a task unprecedented in human history: to rebuild not only those nations with which it had been allied during the war, but also those nations that had been its enemies. Going beyond relief, the United States took on a massive and dramatic effort for the reconstruction of postwar Western Europe under the Marshall Plan. At its height, the United States directed almost 3 percent of its Gross National Product to meet human need and to rebuild the badly damaged European economies. The plan was highly successful, at the same time that it opened the way for United States investments and provided a check on the advance of communism.

With the beginning of the recovery of Europe, the focus began to shift to other areas of the world, which had suffered equal devastation. With President Truman’s Point IV Program introduced in 1949, emphasis increasingly was placed on technical and capital assistance to strengthen the economies of other war-torn nations in Asia and Africa.

With the coming of the 1960s, the vision expanded. The United Nations called for the 1960s to be “the development decade.” The logic of the Marshall Plan appeared impregnable: if Europe, then why not the newly emerging poor nations of the so-called third world? This time around, not only the United States but the recently recovered Western nations also could pitch in. The goals set were much the same as those that had emerged for the Marshall Plan, but with some new twists: (1) to move economically weak countries toward development (without a very clear idea as to what that word meant); (2) to open new sales and investment markets for Western industry; (3) to secure access to strategic raw materials and natural resources within the third world; (4) to bring greater well-being for the poor in the third world. While Western nations now recognized that their days of political control in the third world were rapidly coming to an end, there was keen competition to carve out areas of influence that would provide both resources and markets for Western corporate interests, as well as to undercut any drift in political sympathies to the left. Thus began the “development era” in the relationship between so-called developed and developing nations.

Meanwhile, much was happening in the thinking and planning of the churches. The aftermath of World War II found much of prewar mission structure in shambles. Many Christian communities around the world had suffered severely during the war. Old mission comity agreements had been disrupted, many beyond repair. European mission agencies at first were totally bereft of resources to engage in mission in those nations where they had been involved. It was a time of chaotic but creative confusion.

In that context, the churches caught a vision of Christian mission that somehow had been submerged to low priority in the past. They sensed the clarion call to bind up the wounds of a badly broken world. On the global scale, the recently formed World Council of Churches initiated its program of Interchurch Aid, Refugee and World Service. On the national scale, in the United States, Protestant churches determined to work together in meeting critical human need. Church World Service came into being, joining the service efforts of those churches that later would bring other ecumenical efforts together in the National Council of Churches. “Doctrine divides, but service unites” became the guiding theme. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the overwhelming task was that of refugee resettlement for the victims of war and binding up the wounds in the worst war-torn areas. Soon it became evident that the mandate must be expanded, for human need could not be limited to the effects of “the war,” as great a catastrophe as that had been. Natural catastrophes called for relief efforts. And each disaster opened up situations where hunger and poverty were endemic, and called for more long-range sustained efforts.

Little wonder that, as the United Nations in the 1960s began to talk in terms of “development” as the critical need in the third world, the churches also picked up that term as an integrating concept for their service ministries. “Development is the new word for peace,” said Pope Paul VI in his classic encyclical “On the Development of Peoples” (Populorum Progressio). Churches of all types echoed his words. Every ministry to human need now was conceptualized in terms of where it would lead in relation to development. The “project” mentality emerged, identifying a particular problem in a specific place and developing

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a specific strategy for responding to it. Churches and church agencies often found themselves on the cutting edge of development, because of their partnership with grassroots churches and Christian agencies in the third world.

The vision and commitment of Christian churches and agencies often provided the model for what government and international agencies would do in development. Working in the same areas, the question inevitably would arise, What is the role of the church in relation to the role of government and international agencies in development? Alliances, sometimes rather uneasy, were worked out between church and government, and between United States Christian service agencies and the United States Agency for International Development in accomplishing particular tasks and objectives. Development seemed to provide a context within which church and government could work together to meet overwhelming human need, and to open the way for long-range solutions.

Well, what has gone wrong? Why is it that, after over thirty years and billions of dollars of development aid, third-world nations and peoples are immersed even more deeply in the cauldron of poverty and hunger? What has brought about a crisis of confidence in development, in both donor and receiving nations and churches? Is there anything that the churches can do to turn the situation around? What does all this have to do with our planning, participating in, and promoting Christian mission in the world?

The first thing we need to do, I believe, is to look critically at the terms that we are using and ask what they have come to mean. "Relief" is one such term. The miracle of the media has put the starving of the world in our living rooms—boated-bellied children, mothers with dry breasts holding starving infants, skeletal figures lying on pallets, too weak to eat, waiting to die. The specter of famine that hangs over some half-billion people in the world today has finally broken into the consciousness of the average American, and has triggered sporadic outpouring of compassion. When we see famine in all its grim reality, we want to get food from here to there cling to life by a thread.

But questions about relief have begun to bother us:

a. Getting food from here to there is a far more complicated process than appears on the surface. Actually, food aid is far more difficult than development. There are innumerable complexities: the shipping, the storing, the transporting, the delivering, the distributing. Relief basically goes against the natural flow of the necessities of life emerging from the land where people live.

b. What is the role of government and what is the role of private voluntary agencies in relief efforts? All the efforts of voluntary agencies combined provide only a small fraction of what is needed. Government and international agency response is basic, and yet is often controlled by narrow political interests.

c. Regarding the private voluntary agency response, there is the fierce competition of the "compassion marketplace." Relief agencies contend with one another for the compassion dollar: Who can tell the saddest stories, who can show the most pathetic pictures? Agencies are lured into measuring success in terms of the dollars raised rather than the actual meeting of needs, let alone the long-range addressing of underlying causes of hunger.

d. Who actually sets the agenda for where relief is needed? Those engaged in relief ministries have come to realize that their ministry is at the mercy of the media. When a disaster hits the headlines and gains TV visibility, comparatively large resources may be raised for that particular place, at the same time that there may be very minimal resources for equally great needs in other less visible places. Most relief agencies now find themselves swamped with funds for Ethiopia, but scratching to find resources for the desperate needs in such countries as Angola, Mozambique, and the other seriously affected countries of southern Africa.

e. Those who think seriously about the matter begin to ask the question. After relief, what? Relief in the form of food aid can create a dependence mentality, competing with and undercutting agricultural development, especially when those who have come close to starvation consider the prospect of returning to the harsh environment that they recently had fled.

f. Most serious of all, relief can actually be a Band-Aid covering a cancer. Public attention may jump from headline to headline, while deep underlying causes of poverty and hunger continue to fester and spread and deepen. Further, the givers of relief unwittingly or unwillingly can become the arbiters as to who will live and who will die. The infamous reference of former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz to "food aid as a weapon" is not soon forgotten in the third world.

Relief, then, as an aspect of Christian mission, must not become a hiding-place for those who do not wish to face the grim realities of underlying hunger and poverty. Paulo Freire puts it starkly in Pedagogy of the Oppressed:

... deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity, indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this. In order to have the continued opportunity to express their "generosity," the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this "generosity," which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source.

What then of "development"? Those who see beyond disaster and famine penetrate to a deeper level and see the problems of the poor emerging from underdevelopment. The pictures that come into focus at this level are depleted soil and inadequate water resources; farmers using agricultural methods unchanged for hundreds of years; mothers with too many children, needing help in understanding basic nutrition; families too large for the limited land on which they live; isolated rural communities lacking adequate roads, schools, clinics and all the rest that make basic livelihood possible. The response that such pictures call forth is the determination to share technical assistance, in agriculture, nutrition, family planning, community development, in order that people may be able to provide for themselves.

Many American Christians are learning to think beyond relief to development. "Let's share our know-how with them. They've got the problems, we've got the answers. It's just a matter of
helping them develop along the lines on which we have developed." And to a certain extent, that is a good response.

And yet, this word "development" is more and more suspect in the third world. "Development is not our word," says the Christian Conference of Asia. It is fraught with deep-seated problems: the Western model of development tends to be capital-intensive rather than labor-intensive, focusing on production rather than on people; the further it moves, the more it creates unemployment. The Western model of development tends toward the pollution of the environment and exhaustion of the world's limited natural resources. The Western model of development tends to erode traditional cultural values and to replace them with the dull sameness of a faceless technological society.

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Most serious of all, the Western model of development tends to trap the poorer nations and peoples into a macro-system that makes them pawns of the superpowers and victims of an unbalanced global economic system.

Allan Boesak, well-known church leader of South Africa, said in an address to a consultation of the Ecumenical Development Cooperative Society, "Development has almost totally failed, for it has created a dependency which opens the way to exploitation."²

I well remember the experience of attending the United Nations World Food Conference in 1974, when the world hunger situation had reached such a critical stage. Some of the world's outstanding political leaders and scientific experts were gathered. Great plans were devised for responding to humankind's basic need for food, all the way from a global food security system to strengthening food production in the neediest developing nations. The conference closed with a grand resolution, echoing words from the address of then United States Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, to the effect that by the end of a decade no child would go to bed hungry, no family would need to worry about food for the next day, no nation would be unable to provide for the basic needs of its people.

That decade is now past. Hunger is more widespread and poverty is far deeper than a decade ago. A staggering debt weighs upon the sloping shoulders of the world's developing nations. So-called development aid from rich nations has been sharply curtailed and tied ever more closely to political objectives, while military aid and security assistance have been greatly increased. The world's investment in arms has soared, bringing about a permanent state of war in much of the third world. Are these the fruits of "development"?

Hear me clearly. I am not saying that "relief" and "development" are bad words. Rather, they are inadequate words, for they do not penetrate to the deeper level of reality that underlies the hunger and poverty of the third world—the level of systemic injustice. They are chameleon words that take on the color of their context. As Christians, we must not let the world define those terms for us. Rather, we must fill them with the meaning that grows out of the basic convictions of our Christian faith.

So where is the handle? Where do we turn to find those integrating biblical concepts needed to help us define relief and development from a Christian perspective?

While there are many places where we might begin, let us look to the earliest days of the Christian church as recorded in the first chapters of Acts. True, that was a very different day from ours. The twenty centuries that have passed have totally changed the context. Yet, if we stop and think about it, that part of the world in which so much of the church's effort in relief and development is carried out is probably much closer to that first-century context than to ours: surrounded by a predominantly non-Christian culture; made up primarily of the poor and oppressed; living their Christian lives with very limited resources but with deep faith commitment. Possibly that third-world church can help us to understand the dynamic of that early Christian community.

In looking at those early chapters of Acts, certain words and concepts begin to emerge and become part of a whole: *marturia* (witness) and *kerygma* (proclamation); *koinonia* (community); *dia­konia* (ministry or service); *dikaiosune* (righteousness or justice); *metamorphosis* (transformation). There is a wonderful flow and blend of these words and concepts in the early chapters of Acts. They are not separated from one another. They depend upon one another. One leads to and blossoms in the other, and the latter flows from and grows out of the former. Our modern tendency is to set these terms over against one another—evangelism vs. social action, service vs. justice. The challenge is to recover that dynamic harmony, that creative tension which is found in the first-century church.

1. *Marturia*: The early chapters of Acts are shot through with the word. "You shall be my witnesses," says the risen Christ, "when the Spirit comes upon you, beginning where you are, then in all the surrounding region, then to the ends of the earth." The word "witness" is often attached to the word "resurrection." The apostles, including Judas' successor, are to be "witnesses to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus." They are witnesses that it happened; they themselves are evidence that it happened.

Bishop Joseph Delaney of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Fort Worth, Texas, in his message to the Governing Board of the National Council of Churches at its meeting in November 1985 made a telling point: Jesus sent out witnesses not only to tell the good news of what *had* happened, but to make that good news happen. The risen Christ is made evident both in the message at Pentecost and in the making whole of the poor beggar at the temple gate.

Gustavo Gutiérrez in his inspiring book *We Drink from Our Own Wells* writes:

A follower of Jesus is a witness to life. This statement takes on a special meaning in Latin America where the forces of death have created a social system that marginalizes the very poor who have a privileged place in the kingdom of life. . . . The experience of martyrdom lived in Latin America heightens and sharpens this meaning. . . . There are many who have devoted their lives, to the point of suffering death, in order to bear witness to the presence of the poor in the Latin American world and to the preferential love that God has for them.³

The *kerygma* (proclamation), then, is not some antiseptic telling of the story of the cross and the resurrection. It is the man-
ifestation of the conviction that no cross shall kill this Christ, that the power of his resurrection is loose in the world. Any kind of relief and development that deserves the name of Christian will bear that mark. It costs something. It represents an investment of life, not just dollars. It is a witness to life, that others may have life.

2. Koinonia: There is no easy English equivalent. “Fellowship” is too light a word. “Community” comes close, but has too many possible meanings. The passages where the word appears in the early chapters of Acts (2:43-47; 4:32-35) obviously tie the word koinonia to the word koina, referring to the fact that those early believers had “all things in common.”

There is no way to separate the witness from the creation of community. As soon as the gospel is proclaimed it acts like a magnet, drawing people into community. It is potentially a community that reaches beyond all barriers of race, tribe, and tongue—that obviously is the meaning of Acts 2:8-11.

It is a community in which the needs of all are taken seriously, in light of what all possess. There is a lot of futile debate about the “communism” of the early church, superimposing modern political concepts upon that fresh vital experience of the first Christian community. The important point is that basic human needs were met, because there was that sense of community.

What does this say to us about development? Concern for development must grow out of a sense of the community of humankind—not one nation doing for another, but all inextricably bound together. For the church, it must be an expression of the depth of community rooted in our fellowship around the person of Christ, a projecting of that koinonia into the world.

The emergence of Christian base communities in Latin America and elsewhere in the third world is a frontline of development from the perspective of Christian mission. The spirit of the risen Christ breaks out through the cloistered walls of the church and draws together those with a common commitment for fullness of life for all. It is out of such community that the powerless are empowered both to envision and to determine their own destinies.

3. Diakonia: Here is a word that we easily translate as “service.” We speak of the “diaconal ministries” of the church as virtually equivalent to relief and development. Yet in the New Testament the word does not lend itself to so easy an identification. In the early chapters of Acts, diakonia refers first to “the ministry of the word” (Acts 1:17, 25), and only afterward to the work of the first “deacons” in distribution of resources to those neglected within the Christian community (Acts 6:1ff.)

The message is clear—witness and service cannot be separated. Both are inextricably a part of the diakonia of the church. But another fact is also clear—diakonia originated out of controversy over the implications of koinonia. In Acts 6–7, one of the first deacons, Stephen, becomes the first martyr as he contends for the wider inclusiveness of the Christian community.

The effort to make Christian service a noncontroversial activity is not consistent with the church’s own early history. Diakonia cannot be simply a humanitarian activity that lacks the guts to stand up to opposition, to deal with tough questions. Far more than charity, it is an expression of the creative tension brought about by the experience of life in the new community.

The World Council of Churches is struggling now with the concept of “the ecumenical sharing of resources.” It has arisen out of the concern that, in the thinking of most church people, there is a constant one-way flow of resources from the materially rich churches of the northern part of the globe to the materially poor churches in the South. One party is always the giver and the other always the receiver. And so the challenge is posed: Can we make the qualitative step from giving and receiving to sharing?

Can rich churches in the North learn that they have much to receive, and poor churches in the South learn that they have much to give?

For sharing, you see, requires that we look at each other as equals. What we are called to in Christian diakonia is sharing in the self-emptying love of Christ, participating with the total body of Christ in releasing God’s power of love and justice into the world. Certainly that must be the spirit of the church in relief and development.

4. Dikaiosune: Most frequently translated in the New Testament as “righteousness,” the word carries with it the freight of the Old Testament theme of “justice.” The word itself does not appear in the early chapters of Acts, and yet the concept certainly is there. The story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 in evidence of the stern dimension of this good news in Christ, for those who in greed and deceit are unwilling to share in the spirit of the new community.

Certainly the sense of justice, which thunders out of the prophetic message of the Old Testament, found expression as the early church proclaimed the life and ministry of Jesus—his declaration of purpose in Nazareth, his alliance with the poor, his clash with the religious elite of his day. “Seek first God’s kingdom and his justice” is a call to discipleship for the church in every age.

The cry for justice out of the third world has its roots in the gospel. It calls us to go beyond the easy expression of compassion, to stand with, struggle with those who are oppressed by the world’s systems of injustice. The strong biblical sense of justice is desperately needed in all we do in relief and development. Certainly it must not be a spirit of vengeance or of class struggle but, rather, a deep commitment and identification with those whose lives and whose potential as children of God are stunted and thwarted and cut short by those who use them for their own profit. We must be willing to accompany them on their passage through what Gutiérrez calls “the dark night of injustice.”

5. Metamorphosis: “Transformation.” If there is one New Testament word that, for us, might replace “development” as an integrating concept, it is this one. Though it is not found in Acts, its use in other parts of the New Testament is fascinating; it is used of Jesus’ transfiguration (Mk. 9:2), of the transformation into the image of Christ for those who behold the glory of the Lord (2 Cor. 3:18). And of course it is the keynote of that great chapter, Romans 12, which speaks of not being conformed to this world but being transformed by a complete change of mind that works itself out in the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Rom. 12:2).

Is this not what was happening in that early church, the transformation of human minds? That must be an integral part of all that we do in development if it is to work toward lasting good—not simply the teaching of techniques, but the building up of a sense of self-worth, of trustful cooperation with one’s neighbor, of working together for the common good. That transformation has to take place among both the haves and the have-nots of the world, but probably most particularly among the

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haves. "Transformation" recognizes that there is need for basic structural change, changing the forms within which rich and poor relate to one another. Yet it connotes that happening, not primarily through violent upheaval but, rather, through changing the way that people think of themselves and relate to one another.

In summary, then, what are some of the challenges to mission today as we rethink the tasks of relief and development in light of our Christian faith? Let me mention but three:

1. **In planning for mission**, we must abandon empire-building and emphasize kingdom-planting. It is remarkable that Jesus' parables of the kingdom are not about building but about planting. The power is not in our hands but in the seed that is sown. The tendency toward empire-building, which once characterized the missionary enterprise, is now all too apparent in the work of development agencies. Somehow, in relief and development, as in other aspects of mission, there must be a readiness to let go, to stop counting souls or projects like scalps for our belts, to let the seed fall into the ground and seemingly die, that it may bear much fruit. At the same time, there must be a readiness to wrestle with principalities and powers. While working on micro-structures through development programs, we must address the macro-structures which perpetuate and deepen human poverty and misery, and which undercut all the good intentions of relief and development.

2. **In participating in mission**, there needs to be less promotion of projects, more partnership with people. How poignant the words of a visiting Niger church delegation: "American church visitors come to see projects, but not to visit us." The ultimate hope is not in projects but in people. Projects may come and go. Some may succeed, others fail. The task is to empower the caring community. It will mean responding to the efforts of partner churches and Christians to deal with justice issues, and not wash our hands by saying that we don't want to interfere in internal politics. It will mean seeking to build bridges to authentic people's movements that are seeking justice for the poor. It will mean moving from a "doing for" to a "working with" approach in all that is undertaken.

It will also mean a readiness to respond to the unpredictable leading of the Spirit. The book of Acts has been described as the story of the early church running breathlessly to catch up with the Spirit. That is what is happening in the church today in many places of great human crisis and need. We shall not determine the outcome through our development planning. If we are sensitive to the Spirit, we may have the privilege of being present as the Spirit moves people to struggle for justice and social change that is in keeping with the demands of the gospel.

3. **In interpreting and promoting mission**, we shall recognize that there is a massive educational task to be done, within the American church and reaching out to the American public as a whole. American Christians must be enabled to see that hunger is more than merely the lack of food, that its roots go deeply into politics and economics, that hunger decisions are made not only by peasants in India, but by bureaucrats in Washington, by corporate board members in Kansas City, by every American in his or her daily style of life.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire has coined the term "conscientization," referring to awakening the conscience of the dispossessed to an awareness of their situation. The term might well be used for the educational task to be done in the life of the church in the United States. The conscience of the church must be awakened to the kind of world, which we have helped to create, in which hundreds of millions go hungry. It is a long-term task, yet it must be undertaken with a sense of desperate urgency.

A church leader from India is reported to have said to a United States church audience: "You are great in a crisis, but poor in a struggle." Possibly what the church needs most to learn about participating in relief and development is that we are not dealing with a crisis or an endless series of crises; if we follow the risen Christ, we are engaged with him in the struggle for the transformation of the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of our Lord.

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