

ENGAGING THE CHURCH IN TRANSFORMATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

How the church can have lasting influence on society

By Rev. Jose "Joey" C. Umali, Jr.

"Many of our churches are engaged in suicidal transformation, rather than societal transformation." After that introduction to my speech at an ecumenical congress, the crowd, composed mostly of pastors from different denominations, bursts into laughter. However, as I started enumerating the reasons many churches are committing organizational suicide through non-engagement in society, the initial laughter turned into a pall of gloom.

As a church, we have to ask the following serious questions: Are we actively engaged in the difficult task of transformation that embraces the social, the economic and the spiritual? Are we making a lasting influence on the society? What is the score of the Evangelical/Protestant Church in this whole issue of spiritual and social transformation?

In a research conducted by the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches in 2000, respondents to the survey were asked the following questions: "In the *barangays* where there is a local church, how is the community? How is the crime situation? Are the people economically better? Are they more empowered to participate in the local affairs? How are the children, the women and the elderly? Are the environment clean and its ecology protected? What is the local church's impact on the community?"

Close to 88% of the respondents strongly agree to the following statement: "We have multiplied the number of churches, but the Philippines is far from being transformed and impacted with God's kingdom. We need an emphasis on wholistic ministries and societal transformation."

In summary, despite the presence of churches in 36% of the *barangays* in the Philippines, there remains little impact on the community where these churches are. Small wonder why the Philippines, the only Christian country in Asia, is the most corrupt country in this part of the world.

To determine where the church is right now in terms of transformational development or societal engagement, World Vision, an international Christian organization engaged in wholistic ministry to the poor, and the PCEC undertook a joint research on the matter. The research documents the experiences, values and hopes of leaders and workers from different Evangelical churches and community residents in five research areas: Rizal, Isabela, Misamis Occidental, Palawan and Cebu. Specialist on transformational development and people who have commendable engagement in society were also interviewed.

The Acts 2:42-47 Model

This research has taken as a model of a transforming church the early church as recorded in Acts 2:42-47. Based on this Biblical passage, a church is truly engaged in transformational development work if it has the following characteristics: Connected with the wider church/Body of Christ; conduct small group study of the Word and worship; involved in wholistic service; and works within its immediate community/neighborhood.

The following are the results of the research finding and what I believe are its implications to our present church work:

Connectedness with the wider church/body of Christ

The Biblical framework of this research upholds that an important characteristic of a church engaged in transformational development is unity among believers. "And all who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44). A church engages not only with its community or its members, but also with the wider church or body of Christ as well. This is necessary because transformational development is so gigantic a task that no single church can do it alone.

Implication: There is a need for the strengthening of ecumenical relations first among Evangelical/Protestant churches and second between these churches and the Roman Catholic Church. The regime of proselytism and sheep-stealing is now passé and belongs to the Stone Age.

The community residents who were surveyed recognize the value of unity and respect among churches. They voice their frustration at the continuous discord among churches in their area. The community appeals for purposive harmony among churches. They also want to see more respect for other religions. The community residents express readiness to work with churches for community transformation.

Implication: This is a clarion call for all Christian churches. We must not engage in attacking other churches. We must involve non-members in the community if we want our social programs to succeed.

Conducts small group study of the Word and worship

Aside from connectedness with the wider church or body of Christ, a church engaged in transformational development also conducts small group study of the Word and worship.

The community residents recognize the church's role and contribution in bringing about transformation through their Word ministries. They value the changes that the church has brought in through improved lives and moral behavior among the residents. They view the church as a symbol of God's presence and its members as good models in the community. They acknowledge the influence the church has on children, youth and families.

The Word of God is highly regarded in transformational development work. A genuine understanding of the Word will move the church to go out and engage in the community. Practitioners of transformational development share how they were personally called to the ministry through God's Word. They point out the importance of small groups in stirring one another to love and good works, to propagate transformational development spirit and to reach out to members in the community.

Implication: This finding seriously challenges us to breakdown denominational walls by organizing small groups composed of both members and non-members of the church to bring about transformation in the community. By doing so, we become Kingdom workers instead of just church workers. Like John Wesley of old, the world becomes our parish. Here, we are concerned not about church membership, but about relationships with God and with one another.

Involve in wholistic service

Transformational development is reaching the community with the whole gospel for the whole person through whole churches. Social action and evangelism go hand in hand.

The findings reveal that churches have had involvements in wholistic ministry in the past. But these are random activities that do not really have long-term impact on the community.

The community recognizes that the churches' role is not only to teach and preach the Word of God, but also to be involved in transformational development.

Implication: We must preach the gospel through words and deeds. We must not dichotomize evangelism and social activism – they always go together. We must practice both personal and social holiness.

Works within its immediate community/neighborhood

Acts 2 narrates the effect of the believers' unity, devotion to the Word, fellowship and wholistic service to the people around them – *"...praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved"* (Acts 2:47)

The community residents call on the church to be involved in community affairs and be grounded in its realities. They entreat the church leaders to encourage their members to go out to the community and participate.

Transformational Development practitioners do wholistic ministry without bringing methods with them. They start their engagement by establishing relationship with the people in the community to better understand their needs. They did not immediately implement. They talked with the people, ate with them, lived with them. In this way, their service becomes more relevant and effective.

In their engagement in the community, they acknowledge that vast resources in the community no matter how economically poor it is. This kind of ministry engages the residents not as recipients but as partners in bringing about transformation. Through the people's participation, they realize their ability to contribute to the community. This partnership with the people also transforms the person/church engaged.

Implication: We must make community engagement an integral part of our church life. It must not just be a seasonal event in the life of the church. As proven in this research, a transforming church should have all the following characteristics: connects with the wider Church/body of Christ, conducts small group study of the Word and worship, gets involved in wholistic service, and works within immediate neighborhood/community.

The results show a need to strengthen connectedness with the wider Church through collaboration and respect. There is also a need to increase relationship with the churches' immediate community/neighborhood. Nevertheless, the churches have commendable devotion to sharing the Word of God in all their activities and strong desire to render social services to the people.

All these should be done as a reflection of the Kingdom of God, wherein, as stated by Elaine Wagenaar, "through the work of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, God's reign is experienced in the present...Evidences of God's reign are seen wherever people show compassion to those who suffer, relationships are reconciled and people live with dignity, justice, peace and hope..."

Transforming churches are led by transforming leaders who have the vision, the character, the commitment, the competence and the consistency in doing the Great Commission. We need leaders whose loyalty belongs to Christ and His bride – the church. We can no longer tolerate mediocrity if we want Christianity to be able to effectively respond to its calling of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

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