

# **Good People, Good Work, and Good Will – The Role of Faith-based Groups in Foreign Assistance**

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Good afternoon, and thank you for coming. I must admit that I accepted the invitation to speak at this CSIS gathering with a fair amount of trepidation. You see I am not a think tank kind of guy nor am I a Washington insider in any way. Basically, I am a former corporate CEO who left the corporate world ten years ago because my faith values compelled me to respond to an opportunity to make a difference for the world's poor.

I suspect I am representative of a great number of people who work in the humanitarian space - whether in secular or faith-based organizations - who see their work as a way of putting their faith values into action. In fact, the title of my talk today: *Good People, Good Work and Good Will: The Role of Faith-based Groups in Foreign Assistance*, provides a framework for what I'd like to say today. Let me begin with Good People.

## **Good People**

Research indicates that Americans tend to be a religious people. In fact, according to a Pew Survey, about 92 percent of Americans believe in God and an ABC Beliefnet poll indicated that 83 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christian. Moreover, we live in a profoundly religious world. Only 2.5 percent of the world's people say that they are atheists. (*Center for World Missions*) What this means is that the overwhelming majority of the world's people have a religious

worldview shaped by faith. The corollary to this is that the overwhelming majority of the world's people DO NOT hold a secular worldview.

And yet, the very idea that our government - or any government - partners with faith-based organizations in the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the poor is sometimes considered controversial - and by some, inappropriate. The concern is that faith-based organizations (FBOs) might inappropriately inject a religious worldview into their work, or use the humanitarian platform for proselytism. But, given the religious character of so many developing world contexts, I want to argue that, while most FBOs don't inject proselytism into their work, their religious identity actually turns out to be a great advantage. Because they intuitively understand the role and importance of religion in community life, FBOs are better equipped to navigate religious landscapes and use religious principles to enhance the effectiveness of their development work. The corollary here is that organizations with a predominantly secular worldview may be at a disadvantage.

Let's examine one of the possible concerns around partnering with FBOs. Proselytism - which is defined as 'using inducements to cause someone to convert to one's own religious faith' - is something that is inappropriate, unethical and potentially dangerous in a world where religious extremism is sometimes violent. The Red Cross defines this as requiring recipients to listen to a religious message, or requiring conversion as a condition of receiving assistance. World Vision does not do this, and we have a strict policy against this practice. Most professional faith-based groups have similar policies regardless of whether their funding is from a government source or private source. That doesn't mean that faith is never discussed in the course of the work - just that faith is never used as a club or an inducement. I'll talk about this a bit later.

Well, then what is unique about faith-based organizations - what makes them different and how does their faith factor into their work? Let me read you World Vision's mission statement:

**WORLD VISION is an international partnership of Christians whose mission is to follow our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in working with the poor and oppressed to promote human transformation, seek justice and bear witness to the good news of the Kingdom of God.**

In this statement you can discern several things that are true of many FBOs. First, you can see that our motivation is to follow Jesus Christ in his concern for the poor. The Christian faith, like most world religions, has a commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves - the golden rule - which Jesus called the second greatest commandment - just after the commandment to love God with all of our hearts, mind and strength.

So, we are motivated to care about poverty and justice because Jesus cared about poverty and justice and called his followers to do the same.

Here is that notion of 'good people' or people of 'good will,' wanting to help the poor for a very simple reason: our faith tells us it's the right thing - the good and decent thing - to do. We believe that God loves and values all people and wants us to love and value them, as well.

Indeed, the values that we promote include caring, compassion, justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and the equality of all people regardless of ethnicity, religion, nationality or gender - not exactly an agenda that should set off any alarms in Washington.

The second thing you can see in our mission statement is that we are called to work with the poor to promote human transformation and seek justice - goals very much in alignment with US Foreign Assistance goals. Our foreign assistance

seeks to demonstrate the essential goodness of the American people to the world. Why else would we respond to natural disasters or to poverty in countries with little strategic significance to our national interests? The answer? Because our national values compel us to save lives and assist the poor.

It has been said that: *America is great because she is good. -and that - If America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.*

Finally, in our mission statement you find the words 'bear witness to the good news of the Kingdom of God.' I suppose that this is the uniquely religious part of our mission, but it does not involve proselytism. 'Bearing witness' simply means that we want our words, our deeds and the character of our lives to be good ambassadors for the God we serve and the faith we embrace.

Let me make one final point here. I was once interviewed by a representative of the media who was trying to build a case that it was highly inappropriate for a Christian organization to be sent into countries predominantly Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist funded by US government grants. What gave us the right, he reasoned, to impose our religious views on another culture?

After pointing out that we don't impose religious views on anyone, I turned the question around and pointed it back at him. 'Are you suggesting that freedom of speech is a right that only Americans should have - that people in Indonesia or Cambodia should not have the same rights? And are you saying that our freedom to choose whatever religion we desire should not be available to the people in other countries? You can't be suggesting that ideas should never be censored in the United States but that they must be censored in places like Indonesia or Cambodia.' My questions back to him had an effect I'd never before seen - a representative of the media who was speechless.

You see, America is nothing if it is not a wonderful and noisy marketplace of ideas. Our sacred values of freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of religion make for an amazing patchwork quilt of diverse ideas, opinions and worldviews. This is foundational to our greatness as a nation. When faith-based organizations serve in other countries and cultures they do practical things like feeding children, building houses and schools, drilling wells and setting up microfinance loan banks.

But they also bring with them values and ideas that may differ from those of the people they serve - values that must also compete in the broader marketplace of ideas. But isn't the same true of so-called secular organizations? What about organizations that promote gender equality and women's rights in traditional cultures where such ideas are heretical? Isn't the same true of organizations that promote family planning to reduce family size - even when their views fly in the face of local values and traditions? Indeed, isn't the same also true for organizations that promote democracy itself?

Every organization (and person) working in international assistance brings their values to their work. If the US Government were to censor the ideas and worldviews held by each and every NGO and contractor with whom they partner internationally, there would be no one left to partner with.

It seems like the key principle is not to censor the ideas and worldviews of humanitarian workers, but rather to ensure that partners of the US Government spend their grant funds only on the things approved by the government in the grant itself and certainly not to establish any particular religion or value system. And no partner of the US Government should act using inappropriate coercion whether offering birth control resources, teaching new ideas about gender equality or in expressing their religious or secular worldviews.

## **Good Work**

The second thing I want to speak about is good work. It should go without saying that faith-based organizations, as US Government partners, should be held to the exact same professional standards as secular organizations. Grants should be awarded competitively and without bias whether the prospective grantees are faith based or otherwise. And World Vision and other FBOs have been trusted and able partners.

Contrary to popular belief, during the years of the President Bush's faith-based initiative, while many new FBOs received USAID grants for the first time, the share of NGO eligible grants awarded to FBOs actually decreased from 14.2% to 13.5% between 2004 to 2007. So according to these official statistics, there has been no dramatic shift toward FBOs with regard to US Foreign Assistance. All that FBOs ask for is that they not be excluded and that they be allowed to compete for foreign assistance grants on equal terms - a level playing field.

Since 1995 World Vision has received more than \$2 billion (\$2,110,280,000) in US Government grant funds. Those funds have come from USAID, the US Department of Agriculture, and the Departments of State, Labor and Justice. We also receive funding from the governments of Australia, Canada, the UK, Japan, Germany, Austria, Netherlands and Sweden, as well as the Global Fund, the Inter-American Development bank, the World Bank and multiple UN agencies including UNICEF, UNHCR, UNDP and the World Food Program. In fact, we are the World Food Program's largest global NGO partner, helping millions of people on the brink of starvation. Clearly, FBOs have and continue to make extraordinary contributions to the humanitarian imperative with both private and public funding.

But I'd like to suggest that there is one unique dimension to faith-based organizations that has great leverage in relief and development work around the

world – the ability to partner with and mobilize the faith communities that exist in virtually all of the project communities abroad. In a world where 97.5 percent of the population believe in God, FBOs are uniquely suited to speak to faith leaders and institutions in a language they respect and understand.

And faith leaders in churches, mosques and temples have great influence and moral authority in their communities. In other words, if you want to bring about changes of any kind in a community you will improve your likelihood of success if you intentionally engage and involve the faith leaders of that community – something that FBOs understand and are uniquely qualified to do.

Let me give you an example from World Vision's work with HIV and AIDS in Zambia. Zambia is a majority Christian country with a population of about 12 million and has an adult infection rate of 17 percent with 1,200,000 orphans. There are 14,000 churches in Zambia. But just a few years ago most of those churches were doing nothing to address the social issues caused by AIDS. Not only were they not doing much to help those living with HIV/AIDS, or the widows and orphans left behind, many of them were part of the problem, believing that those with AIDS were being judged by God and were getting what they deserved.

World Vision convened a conference in 2003 in Lusaka for church leaders across all denominations. We confronted the leaders with the facts about AIDS and the stigma in their culture against those living with or affected by the disease. We then showed them what the Bible said about compassion for the sick and not judging others. We exhorted them to assert their moral authority to change attitudes toward AIDS in their communities and to use their churches to deliver care for widows and orphans. We encouraged them to preach and teach about sexual fidelity to one partner and abstinence before marriage – teachings that would prevent the spread of the disease.

The leaders responded to our messages and the result was the formation of a multi-denominational group called the Expanded Church Response Committee - formed with the purpose of training and equipping churches to respond positively to the AIDS pandemic. Bishop Banda, who met with me in 2004, said that World Vision had 'defrosted the church in Zambia with regard to HIV/AIDS.'

In Africa, our outreach program is called Channels of Hope. The Hope project was begun to combat the stigma and turn the situation around so that churches in communities could become the primary source of counseling and care for those living with HIV and AIDS. To do this, we needed to support (rather than blame) pastors by addressing attitudes and providing correct information.

Consider this actual quote from an African Pastor: "Before the Channels of Hope training, I would preach against those with HIV. I would call them sinners, and say they must repent. I would tell them they could come back to church when it was time for me to conduct their funeral. After going through Channels of Hope, I realized that I was the one that needed to repent."

Pastors have unique moral authority and influence in their communities. Thousands have become change agents through interactive encounters with people living with HIV and AIDS (PLWHA) as well as widows, orphans and vulnerable children (OVC).

To date, nearly 200,000 pastors and church leaders have participated in World Vision Hope workshops, and begun a process of changing their churches and communities through preaching, prayer, and unconditional love to PLWHA. Key members of congregations are then selected to form congregational HIV and AIDS taskforces. Each congregation develops a strategic plan to focus on care for PLWHA as well as OVCs, and to instruct children about prevention through life skills education.



Churches then train members to join Community Care Coalitions which link volunteers from all churches in the community to serve as home visitors - so this is seen as a community ministry, not the ministry of one single church. These coalitions take responsibility to provide home visits and care for the sick as well as OVCs in their community.

In Zambia, World Vision has helped get a quarter million orphaned children under care. About 18,500 caregivers take responsibility for approximately five households each. Many of these caregivers are themselves former "clients" of the World Vision RAPIDS program, which is supported by USAID with significant corporate, foundation and American church resources leveraged by World Vision. The U.S. Government has showcased our caregiver model. Why? Because our 96 percent retention rate of caregivers in Zambia is almost unprecedented among USAID programs.

World Vision can present these impressive numbers because we are, globally, a \$2.6 billion organization. But I assure you that smaller FBOs have similar accomplishments at their own scale. The Association of Evangelical Relief and Development Organizations - or AERDO - has an operational HIV/AIDS alliance implementing both care and prevention grants for USAID. Its members, such as Food for the Hungry and World Relief, have long been US Government partners. They are entrusted with responsibility for US Foreign Assistance because they are effective and professional. But their added value - or irreplaceable value - is that their faith commitment enables transformational development led by faith communities abroad.

I might add that World Vision has labored tirelessly right here in the United States with the general public and especially the Christian community - to change negative attitudes and stereotypes toward those living with AIDS and to mobilize

American churches to respond financially and with their own prevention and care programs. Our interactive exhibit called 'Step into Africa,' which powerfully communicates the human toll taken by AIDS has been to more than 80 cities in the past two years and has been seen by tens of thousands of people, each of whom has been challenged to respond. In fact, back in 2003, World Vision staff even assisted Congress in drafting the original PEPFAR legislation ensuring that 10 percent of the resources were directed to caring for orphans and vulnerable children.

World Vision, as a Christian organization, has also been effective in interfaith work. Let me cite a few examples:

In the Philippines' conflict-ridden island region of Mindanao, we support an inter-faith religious leaders network that advises on transformational development programs at both local and island-wide levels.

World Vision Indonesia has developed an innovative training program to equip inter-faith religious leaders in North Maluku with basic skills in trauma healing.

World Vision Cambodia has facilitated the launch of an inter-faith peacebuilding initiative for youth, which is co-led by representatives of Buddhism, Islam and Christianity.

World Vision Kosovo facilitated the development of a strong multi-faith and multiethnic Community Council of Peace and Tolerance in the divided city of Mitrovica. Additionally, World Vision is facilitating an interfaith religious leaders consultation process in other parts of Kosovo, and has helped create a *Kids for Peace* program that brings together children and youth from Muslim and Christian communities.

World Vision Jerusalem-West Bank-Gaza is a mixture at both staffing and community programming levels of Muslim and Christian Palestinians.

After the 2004 Tsunami, World Vision Indonesia built new schools in Aceh together with Indonesia's second largest Muslim organization, extending its ability to provide social welfare programs in health and education across the nation through its more than 5,000 schools, several large universities and orphanages.

Beyond establishing our interfaith way of working, we have even helped build capacity in Muslim organizations.

In Somaliland, where the majority are Muslim, the mosques and other faith-based organizations are central in HIV/AIDS response and care for orphans and vulnerable children. However, as it often is with Christian pastors and priests, sheiks and imams also sometimes fail to respond appropriately due to fear, lack of essential information and inappropriate attitudes. World Vision trains and mobilizes them for response and care for OVC because of their unique moral authority, mission and influence within the community. The sheiks and imams are now pledged to work to "defrost" their congregations to HIV/AIDS-related issues through preaching, prayer, forgiveness and compassion.

You get the idea. Faith-based organizations not only do good work, they do it in ways that uniquely leverage their understanding of the role of faith and faith-based institutions in civil society. And, they can absolutely do it across faith boundaries. A colleague of mine who worked with World Vision for years in Mauritania, an Islamic Republic, told me of a celebratory public ceremony with government officials and Muslim religious leaders where World Vision received praise and recognition for our work. A Muslim government official said to us: " We appreciate what you have done for us and we understand you, because like us, you are people of the Book - and you are welcome in our country."

## **Good Will**

And this brings me to my last point, good will. This compassionate service we provide unconditionally to those we serve makes us ambassadors of good will. We are ambassadors for the American people and their values and also ambassadors for the Christian faith - both of which could use a little positive PR in places like Pakistan and Indonesia.

Consider the statement of a Muslim television producer in a predominantly Muslim area of Malawi: "The people here have told me that the compassion and love the World Vision staff are showing them quickly removed their initial fear that the organization might have had a hidden agenda to provide services only if the people converted to Christianity. It is pleasing to note that the people here enjoy religious harmony, apart from the development transformation taking place."

In Pakistan, World Vision received the State's highest award - quote - "from a grateful nation" - unquote - for our 2005 Pakistan earthquake relief efforts. Survivors of the 2004 tsunami themselves cited World Vision as a top provider of aid in Islamic Indonesia and largely Hindu India.

In some Buddhist majority areas, World Vision has achieved this trifecta: maintained our Christian identity, established a predominantly Buddhist financial donor base, and through its support helped Muslims.

World Vision Malaysia for example, in a country that is only ten percent Christian, has a donor base of child sponsors that is 40 percent Buddhist. The WV Malaysia team of Christians, Muslims and Buddhists assists Muslim areas of China, Thailand and Indonesia.

Professional FBOs can and do serve as the very best America has to offer as partners in US Foreign Assistance. We are able ambassadors for the great values of the American people.

In the past ten years, I have traveled more than a million miles to more than forty countries and I have seen amazing things.

I have witnessed the faith of hundreds of anonymous 'Mother Teresas,' who serve in the garbage dumps and slums, the brothels and the refugee camps, tirelessly and sacrificially serving the poorest of the poor.

I have seen the hungry fed and people taught to fish and farm. I've seen wells drilled and cisterns built - the thirsty given water. I have seen the sick healed, the lame walk, and the blind given back their sight. I have met refugees who have been resettled, disaster victims who have been restored, and captives who have been released. I've seen widows comforted, orphans cared for, children freed from slavery and abuse - schools built, clinics opened, babies vaccinated, loans lifting the poor out of poverty.

Yes, I have seen the impact of these incredible ambassadors - good people doing good work - transforming people's lives in the most difficult places - and creating good will toward the great values of freedom, equality, democracy, and compassion held so deeply by the American people - a people whose values flow so naturally from their faith.

In closing, let me quote de Tocqueville, who seemed so instinctively to understand this:

*Americans combine the notions of religion and liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to make them conceive of one without the other.*

[Alexis de Tocqueville](#)