
The Unique Role of the Local Church in Developing a Flourishing Community

By Dwight Vogt

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This paper is addressed to those who have a heart to bring hope and healing to broken communities and believe that the local church has an important role to play in this endeavor. It is particularly aimed at those who work cross-culturally to alleviate chronic poverty and bring development change to communities.

This paper is written to encourage us to take a step back and ask, "What is the unique strength and role of the local church in helping its community to develop and flourish?" And also, "How can we best equip and support the local church in fulfilling its strategic role?"

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I recently saw a group of adults at the airport wearing matching t-shirts and carrying passports. From their look and demeanor, I surmised they were from a local church and were going to another country to serve for a week or two in some community. This is a growing occurrence as churches around the world are increasingly involved in cross-cultural ministry and endeavor to do this in partnership with the local church.

In addition to these church-to-church initiatives we see international Christian relief and development organizations working to help the poor. Some are small and relatively new. Others are large and well-established and see themselves as functioning within the professional norms and practices of the international development community. Some cover a wide range of development sectors, including health care, education and agriculture. Others specialize in a particular area such as clean water or micro-finance. Whether small and new or large and well-established, most of these Christian agencies would say that they endeavor to partner with the local church whenever possible.

There are also growing numbers of mission organizations who identify their work as wholistic ministry. They engage in evangelism, church planting and discipleship and also endeavor to

address the physical and development needs of the community.¹ Again, they emphasize doing this in partnership with the local church.

Finally, there is the Christian individual working with a secular development organization or government agency. She also has a heart to see the local church carry out its role in the development of the community and desires to support the church toward this end.

All of these examples have two common denominators: Their involvement in addressing the poverty and development needs in the community, and their belief that this should be done in partnership with the local church.

If we are a member of one of the aforementioned groups, as I have been for over 30 years, we obviously believe that there is a role for the global church in addressing the poverty and development needs of a community or we would not be engaged in this way. Our desire to partner with the local church makes it clear that we believe it, too, has a critical role to play. So what is this role and how do we best support the local church in this?

We understand the role of the local church in worship, the study of the word, evangelism and discipleship. But what is its role in addressing the poverty and development needs of its community? What is its role in helping its neighbors and community to thrive and flourish as God intends?

I would like to suggest that there are four ways the local church is able to facilitate this change in the community:

1. Carry Vision
2. Promote Truth (reverse lies)
3. Participate
4. Initiate

1. Carry Vision

When we think about a local church having a role in the development of its community we typically think in terms of it doing activities. Should it start a day-care program, fill potholes in the road, run an addiction recovery program, or launch a feeding ministry? Next we think about where to obtain the necessary resources for such, especially if the church is poor.

However, there is another critical aspect of development in which the church has an especially unique role to play. This is creating the conditions or climate that will enable the community and its people to thrive and flourish.

The reality is that God loves every community and member. God desires that each develops and flourishes as he intended. As the architect, engineer, giver and sustainer of all aspects of

¹ Albeit, the definition of wholistic ministry for many persons is much broader and deeper than this.

life, God knows exactly how a particular community and its people can best thrive and flourish. It is the local church—the local members of the body of Christ—that are best able to see and understand this reality. Through God’s Spirit, they can have the mind of Christ. They can know God’s vision and see his good purposes for their community and neighbors. At the Disciple Nations Alliance (DNA) we refer to this vision as having a *kingdom worldview* or *biblical worldview*.

In the field of international development people speak of having five necessary types of capital for development: Financial capital, natural capital or natural resources, productive capital such as tools and equipment, human capital or people with knowledge, skills, energy, and physical and mental health; and social capital. Social capital refers to the level of trust and good will between people that enables them to cooperate, help one another and engage in efforts that are mutually beneficial and do not just lead to individual gain—particularly individual gain at the expense of another. All of these types of capital are important. However, Darrow Miller in his books *LifeWork* and *Discipling the Nations* gives another form of capital that is critical for a community to develop as God intends. This is the “metaphysical capital” of underlying ideas or worldview assumptions. This capital ultimately underpins all of the other forms of capital. It is a society’s assumptions about the spiritual world, the nature of man, the nature of the physical world, good and evil, and the purpose and direction of life.

A healthy worldview—one based on biblical truth (or reality as it really is)—produces productive consequences. It creates the conditions for development. Whereas an unhealthy worldview—one based on a faulty understanding of life—produces destructive consequences and more problems.

In a spirit of humility and not triumphalism, it is the role of the body of Christ in a community to know and bring this vision—this understanding of reality and God’s vision to a community.

This is a unique strength and thus a critical and strategic role for the church.

The church is to carry a vision that champions development at three levels:

- The individual level—an understanding of each person as an image-bearer of God and yet also broken and in need of restoration, and all the implications of these truths. A vision for persons doing what is right and good, working together, living by the golden rule, developing their minds and abilities and using these to better their lives and communities, etc.²
- The physical level—an understanding of the first commandment given by God to all mankind in Genesis 1 and 2. This is the creation mandate or *development commandment*, the

² The list here could go on and on as God’s design for goodness, for thriving and flourishing touches every domain of human existence. As Abraham Kuyper said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”

command to develop and flourish, to rule over all the earth—all aspects of life.³ It is a vision to overcome the physical challenges of life, to improve, fix, organize, solve, and produce. A vision that ranges from providing food for children to improving healthcare, from making useful products to building roads. A vision to create beauty in all areas of life.

- The institutional level—a vision for fair and just laws and their enforcement, for well-functioning families, schools, businesses, and government. A vision to create a culture marked by goodness and justice where all persons can develop and contribute.

It is the local body of Christ—be they farmers, business persons, school teachers, day-laborers, pastors, or leaders in the community—that can best see their community through God’s lenses and purposes. They can understand that none of God’s commands are arbitrary but rather are rooted in his wisdom and desire that people flourish spiritually, physically, mentally, and socially. They can best see what it means for God’s kingdom to come, his will to be done, in their own lives and in their community. They are the trustees and stewards of God’s vision for the well-being of their community.

How does the local church carry this vision to their community? Through the lives and vocations of its members who know and experience it in their own lives. The school teacher carries it into the school and the classroom. The farmer carries it to his work in the field and into his conversations with other farmers. The mother carries it into her home and into the market. The artist carries it into the art gallery, the engineer to the drafting table, the architect to his drawing, the policeman to his patrol, and the pastor to his pulpit.

Part of a local church “carrying the vision” is recognizing that it is not to be an isolated or internally focused group of people. It is understanding, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “The church is only the church when it exists for others.” This understanding, as Pastor Gary Skinner of Watoto Church in Kampala, Uganda said, “The problems of the city are the problems of the church.”

Therefore, the task of the visiting church team or outside Christian mission or agency in helping the local church carry out its unique role in the development of the community is to help this church and its members to first understand and then carry God’s intentions—his vision—into the community through their daily lives and vocations.

2. Promote Truth (reverse lies)

Chris Ampadu of Ghana does training with churches across West Africa. He says that the one thing that most hinders development progress in West Africa is fatalism. Because of this, he focuses a key part of his training on helping the church promote truth that will overcome and reverse the lie of fatalism.

³ “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over (all the earth)” [Genesis 1:28 (26) ESV] “He put him (Adam) there (in the garden) to work its ground and to take care of it.” [Genesis 2:15 (NIRV)]

Darrow Miller says that if a community and its culture are being shaped by a mental stronghold rather than by Christ and the biblical worldview that comports with reality, we do well to help the local church break this stronghold in their own minds and in the mind of the community.

While other groups and agencies may bring greater knowledge and more expertise in, say, nutrition, or business development, etc., it is the pastor and members of the local church who can best be aware of the underlying ideas (the worldview level assumptions) at work in their community. Those that are true, that comport fully with reality and lead to flourishing as God designed—these, the church is to promote. For example, the idea that God gave us the responsibility to rule over all the earth (all aspects of life). Those ideas that are not true—that are distortions of the truth—are false worldviews that Satan uses to enslave and impoverish individuals and communities. These, the church is to recognize and counter.

Here, we are again speaking of creating the conditions for development—the metaphysical capital, the basic ideas about life on which people build their lives and community.

Every culture is embedded with lies. For example, consider the idea that “we are subject to the gods.” This is the belief that the earth god or mountain god controls everything. Under this belief, the people must appease this god, often and at great cost and sacrifice, including not adapting innovations or new technology that may offend this god.

Another example is the idea that “we are destined to poverty. We are born poor and will die poor. No effort on our part can change our future, so why try?” This makes any change for the better look completely out of reach.

A third example is “we have no resources and cannot do anything by ourselves. We need outsiders to help us.” People who believe this lie are not able to see the many resources God has given them, including their own creativity, resourcefulness, time and energy. Yet, when mobilized, each of these gifts can help them make significant differences in their own lives and communities.

An idea that continues to grow in the West is that all of life is material and natural. There is no actual spiritual realm, no God, no Creator. There is no immaterial soul. Our sense of being, our minds and personalities, are all products of our physical brains and environment. The essence of life is matter. This idea undermines the truth in many ways, especially the truth that all persons are made in the image of God—which is ultimately the basis for universal human dignity, the equal worth and sacredness of every person, and fundamental human rights.

These are just a few examples.

Worldview level truth is fundamental to the sustained and healthy development of an individual, a community, and a nation. *It creates the necessary conditions for development.* Yet, it is often unseen, overlooked, or dismissed by those who are actively working to address poverty and help a community develop and thrive.

The local church and its members need to grow and excel in knowing and sharing truth at the level of worldview—the level of core ideas about nature, about people, about work, about the

spiritual realm. In doing so they will foster development and counter the lies that lead to underdevelopment. Jesus said the truth will set us free (John 8:31-32). This includes setting communities and families free from poverty.

The local church and its members are uniquely qualified for this role because they live in the community and have the Spirit of Christ within them to enable them to clearly see and understand the underlying truth and deceptions that shape their community and society. They can promote what is true and counter what is deception.

They also understand that truth and knowledge are not enough, but that there is a need for a change in the heart or human spirit which comes through the Gospel of Christ.

The visiting church team or outside Christian mission or agency that wants to strengthen the local church in its role in the development of the community can do so by helping the church discern and promote truth and also counter destructive lies at this fundamental or worldview level.

3. Participate

God's clear call to the local church is to love and bless others, starting with their neighbors and community. Jesus set the example by serving others. For the local church this means it will not only carry vision and promote worldview level truth for the development of its community—it will also actively participate in this development. Members will not just participate when they are leading but will join and support the good work initiated by others. If the community leaders call for a clean-up day, the church is the first to show up, knowing that God has called them to have dominion over trash in their community and to love and serve their neighbor. If an outside agency offers nutrition training, the church members join in, knowing that God has called them to care for their children and steward their health.

If the visiting church team or outside Christian mission or agency wants to strengthen the local church in its role of helping the community flourish, it can encourage the church to participate in the good work being done by others. An outside group can also model this by participating in and supporting the work of others.

4. Initiate

It is important that the church participate in development efforts initiated by community leaders or others, but there is something particularly energizing and impactful when followers of Christ *initiate* actions on their own with their own resources to help their neighbors and community develop and flourish.

For one Christian husband and wife in northern Uganda, this meant committing on their own to pay the school fees for the daughter of a nearby widow so she could go to school and develop her mind and gifts.

No change occurs without someone initiating or taking action. But to initiate means to take a risk—it takes courage. This is why God told Joshua several times to be strong and courageous as he led the people of Israel into the promised land. This command applies to all those who

follow Christ. God calls the church and its members to initiate acts of love and activities that will help develop their community. This does not mean the pastor or a church member needs to be the community leader. Often, you can initiate by being the first to support a good idea and the first to offer to carry it out.

However, not everything is done through a community effort. One of the best-known stories Jesus ever told was that of the Good Samaritan. It is the story of a man who sees the need of another and acts on it. As followers of Christ and members of the local church, we are called as individuals and collectively to *initiate* a response with our own time and resources to help others overcome difficulties and develop.

How can the outside visiting church team, Christian development organization or wholistic mission help a local church to *initiate*? Too often this partnership is characterized by the outside group doing something for the local church or having the local church participate in and support efforts designed or developed by the outsider. Careful thought needs to be given as to how to help the local church take the risk to obey God's call and initiate a response of their own design, with their own resources, on their own time, and in their own way to help others and promote development in their own community.⁴

When the local church is engaged in the development of its community in these four ways, surprising things can happen!

Recently, I visited some churches and communities in Africa where no development agency or mission was involved. The only outside influence was several months of training for some of the local churches in the four areas mentioned above, delivered by trainers who lived in the area themselves. Church members told me about their activities in the community. One church had launched a new savings and credit scheme. Another member started a small business. A group of women rented land and collectively farmed it to provide a widow's fund. Another church built a home for a widow and started a new poultry project.

On their own initiative, they had envisioned these activities, planned and organized them, found the technical resources, and identified and applied the expertise. Not surprisingly, they were doing all these activities with no outside financial resources.

They clearly had a new vision for their role in the development of the community. They were participating in its development by promoting truth and new ideas that fostered development, taking risks, and initiating with their own resources and time.

⁴ God calls the church and its members to initiate activities that will bring healing and restoration to their community. There are many books and articles on how to best do this, but a good starting point for principles is a list of ten characteristics Bob Moffitt gives for "Seed Projects." You can find these principles on line at <http://www.disciplenations.org/media/Seed-Projects-Overview-and-Planning-Guide.pdf> More on Seed Projects can be found in *If Jesus Were Mayor* by Bob Moffitt (2006, Monarch Books), chapter 13: "Seed Projects."

Interestingly, the result they talked most about was a new sense of unity as churches and members of the community worked together and shared in the training.

These were all things they could have done five years ago. Why not then? Why now? From what they shared it was because they had a new understanding of God's purposes for the life of their community and their own lives. They also had a new understanding of their role as a church. These new understandings made the difference. To use a previous term, they had new metaphysical capital on which to build and act.

Will this new way of thinking and living last? Is such change sustainable? In the case of the Watoto Church of Kampala, Uganda, it has lasted. The nature and function of this church is still impacted by training received 12 years ago. The result then was a changed paradigm—and changed paradigms last as they are a change in worldview and all the implications that flow from it.

What are we to do?

If this is the unique role of the local church in helping its community to develop and flourish, then what are we to do to help them? How can we best equip and support the local church in fulfilling each of these four critical roles?

What are we doing to help the local church and its members to:

- **Carry vision?** To understand and bring God's vision for development to the community and its people; to discern what it means for God's kingdom to come, his will to be done, in their personal lives and in their community; to see their community through God's lenses and purposes; to be the stewards of God's vision for the thriving and flourishing of their community? How are we helping the church members know and carry this vision through their personal lives and daily work into every sphere of community life?
- Promote **truth and confront lies?** To see and understand the underlying worldview-level truth that creates the conditions for flourishing lives and communities and to counter the underlying worldview-level deceptions that lead to brokenness, suffering, and all forms of poverty. How are we helping the church members promote truth and confront lies?
- **Participate with others?** To be the first to join and support the good ideas and good work initiated by others that contribute to the development of the community and its people. How are we helping the church members participate with others in the development of their community?
- **Initiate?** To see an unmet need or opportunity and initiate a response with their own resources, in their own way, on their own time-frame that will help others flourish as God intends and bring positive change to their community. How are we helping the church members initiate in this way?

May God help us in these amazing and challenging times to continue to think critically about how we can best serve him for the benefit of those he loves.

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