

Proselytisation and Poverty

Christian churches understand their purpose to involve participation in bringing wholeness and fullness of life, as embodied in Jesus Christ, to individuals, communities and the earth. This means they seek to move people towards right relationships with God, with one another and with the earth.

Denominational aid and development agencies have tasked responsibility for helping communities overcome poverty. We do this as an expression of our Churches' commitment to work towards wholeness and fullness of life among communities where people live in poverty. As we do so we are aware that the incorporation of proselytisation activities into poverty focused development programs can undermine rather than serve our calling to assist communities to overcome poverty faithful to the way of Jesus Christ.

The ACFID Code of Conduct, which church agencies helped develop, defines proselytisation as "Activities undertaken with the intention of converting individuals or groups from one faith and/or denominational affiliation to another" (ACFID Code of Conduct Section F).

There are at least three grounds upon which this is inappropriate:

- 1 When it is suggested participants in a development program might participate in activities that seek to change their religious adherence, their vulnerability is exploited. That is, the power dynamics involved mean they do not have the opportunity to respond freely to the invitation to participate in religious activities but may feel constrained to participate in order to address their vulnerability. This means it is inappropriate for an aid and development agency to require or suggest that beneficiaries of programs focused on addressing poverty and vulnerability to participate in religious activities that run counter to their existing religious adherence or aim at changing their religious adherence;
- 2 We believe that love, as embodied in Jesus and which is the motive for our work, is unconditional. People have inherent dignity and basic rights and so they should be supported without an eye for their potential for conversion. The distinction of proselytising and development helps us as churches to be more true to God's unconditional love embodied in Jesus. Our action is meaningful in itself as service to our neighbour. It doesn't need to be justified by other reasons, and must never be reduced to becoming an instrument for other purposes.
- 3 Australia, whatever its history, is a secular country. This does not mean religion has no place in the public square, but that the government will not actively promote or favour any particular religion. In some interpretations of secularism this is taken to mean government funding should never be used in any way associated with religion. Others interpret this to mean governments may support religious activities as long as such support is offered to all religions without discrimination. On either interpretation it is inappropriate for government funds to be used to persuade a person to adopt or change a particular religious adherence.

For these reasons the church agencies network strongly supports the non-proselytisation requirements of the ACFID code and accreditation with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

We recognise that development work and proclamation belong together in the life of the churches. The challenge is to ensure these dimensions are held together in a way that acknowledges their distinctiveness, and by not inappropriately mixing them.

What they must not do is:

- 1 Incorporate proselytising activities into programs designed to address poverty, for this would exploit the vulnerability of the very people we seek to serve, an action that runs counter to the values of the Christian faith;
- 2 Use government funds for proselytising activities, as this would violate the secular mandate of the government;
- 3 Carry out their work in a manner that is inconsistent with good development principles and professional practice. Our understanding that all people have been created in God's image with inherent dignity requires no less. If it is seen that we aren't striving to do our best by those we seek to assist because of compromises in the pursuit of other objectives, then that diminishes our witness to the world.

For this reason we strongly support the ACFID code requirement that, if agencies seek to engage in evangelistic type activities, these are clearly separated from poverty focused development activities.

In any event, as we honour the above principles and function in the field of aid and development, working with people suffering poverty and marginalisation across the world regardless of their personal beliefs, we also understand that we are honouring God's call to us as Christians: To show compassion to the poor, and through these actions set an example as followers of Christ in our behaviour and actions.

We often do see people come to faith in Christ in areas where we and / or our field partners work, not through proselytisation, but through their exposure to our actions and trust in our motives, which we consider to be an entirely reasonable outcome. We believe this to be consistent with the principles outlined above, as it occurs out of people initiating their own enquiry and make such a decision exercising their personal free will.

Prepared for and on behalf of the Australian Church Agencies Network.