

Partnership and Letting Go

A theological rationale for the work of Christian World Service

"Partnership... is a relationship which lasts, which goes far beyond the exchange of money, which offers new learnings to both groups, which involves us in advocacy, consultation, the seeking and giving of advice; a relationship which is personal, human, respectful, engaged."

Elizabeth Mackie, Christian World Service

"As you come to know the seriousness of our situation - the war, the racism, the poverty in our world - you come to realise it is not going to be changed just by words or demonstrations. It's a question of living your life in drastically different ways."

Dorothy Day, Founder of the Catholic Worker Movement

I Working with an Ecumenical Vision

"The reasons for the biblical rejection of poverty have their roots here: to oppress the poor is to offend God; to know God is to work justice among humankind. We meet God in our encounter with human beings; what is done for others is done for the Lord. In a word, the existence of poverty represents a sundering both of solidarity among human beings and also of communion with God. Poverty is an expression of a sin, of a negation of love. It is therefore incompatible with the coming of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of love and justice."

Gustavo Gutierrez, Peruvian Liberation Theologian

Our starting point as a Christian agency is our faith in the God of Life. We believe the provision and enjoyment of the basic necessities for living a decent, just and humane life is the will of God for all humankind. We believe that a profession of faith in the God of Life, revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, requires the rejection of those conditions, structures and systems which perpetuate human hunger, poverty and injustice. All human beings have the right to a livelihood that ensures justice, human dignity and environmental integrity.

We believe our concern for a just social order is rooted in the biblical sources of the Christian faith and particularly in the witness of the Hebrew prophets and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Throughout the Christian scriptures the God of Life is revealed in those acts of creation and liberation which point to a new and just world order or *eschaton*. According to the prophet Micah, to know the God of Life is to do justice. We believe Micah's proclamation is critical to our understanding of the work of Christian World Service.

We recognise the fundamental biblical affirmation: the God revealed in the scriptures is the God of the poor and the oppressed, a God who sides with them, and identifies with them. Furthermore, we believe God became incarnate in Jesus, who belonged to the 'poor of the land', who cast his lot with people who faced poverty and suffered oppression

to such a consistent degree that the rich and powerful found it necessary to destroy him. Thus we believe God is at work and is found in the life and situation of the poor – those who are marginalised and excluded by unjust structures and systems. We need to listen to the voices of the poor to understand what is happening in the world.

We also recognise that the Christian faith has often been held captive by Western theological traditions and denominational priorities which have reinforced a long legacy of colonialism, militarism, racism and sexism. We acknowledge that our own particular theologies have been part of this history of oppression and we commit ourselves to liberating ourselves and our work from our own theological bondage. In dialogue with our partners in Aotearoa and overseas we will seek new ways of working consistent with the gospel values of unconditional love and justice.

Our affirmation of the God of Life is the ecumenical vision which undergirds Christian World Service and gives content and urgency to our work as a Christian aid and development agency. We believe our traditional theologies have tended to be naive about the structural and systemic injustices of our world. They have often reduced aid and development to works of charity and spiritualised the imperatives of the gospel. In some cases they have sanctioned and sanctified the status quo, thereby unconsciously supporting and abetting injustice. We believe theological and political neutrality is not an option. If we choose to stand alongside the poor, then we must also work to transform the present economic and political systems which exploit and oppress the poor. We believe this wider and more inclusive ecumenical vision transforms only when it comes in contact with the social realities of today's world. It is this ecumenical vision which gives the work of Christian World Service its meaning and direction.

II Working from a Global Analysis

"At the table of life we share most disproportionately indeed. Some go hungry. Others are besottedly full. The quality of rice we eat is according to the wealth or penury we bring with us to the table. And we eat only with people of our own kind. We do not, as Paul sorrowfully writes, have enough respect for the community of God. We embarrass the poor outrageously. This is our world. A world of poverty and want; of staggering riches and even more staggering poverty. And into this confused world comes a stranger seeking to pitch his tent among us."

Bishop Francisco Claver, Retired bishop of Bukidnon, Philippines

In listening to our partners in Aotearoa and overseas we have painfully come to the recognition that the daily reality of poverty and injustice in the world is systemic. The world's resources are distributed in such a way that four-fifths of the world's population struggle for life with one-fifth of all available resources. The unrelenting pressures of debt servicing and the daily siphoning off of financial and natural resources by the military industrial complex, transnational corporations and banking interests ensures that the world's resources continue to trickle upwards.

International aid is not the solution to this unequal distribution of resources. Nor do we think of aid and development as organised charity. Rather, we organise our work around the reality that God never intended the world to be the way it presently is. Our task is to work with our partners to change those structures and systems which imprison human beings in poverty and injustice. We cannot remain complacent in the face of such realities, nor can we presume to decide what our partners need.

We hold that underdevelopment is the end result of a process: it is the historical by-product of the development of other countries. The present global free-market is so structured that it inexorably leads to growing wealth and privilege for a few and grinding poverty for many. This situation of continuing economic dependence means that those people who are caught in such structures keep falling behind because the prevailing economic and political systems work against them and protect and assure the interests of the wealthy and privileged. Such a situation is contrary to the intentions of God for all people and violates the integrity of creation. As an ecumenical development agency we are not content to stay with responses which feed people but do not help to change their situation. To do so would be to act in a manner which denies the faith we profess.

We are prepared 'to walk in the wilderness' of continually seeking to understand together with our partners the reasons why things happen as they do. We are also seeking with our partners what we can do together to change those structures which imprison so many people in poverty and keep them and us from being everything God intended us to be. This critical perspective informs everything we do – from the way we 'market' our work, to the way we work and consult with our partners. It means we too must undergo a transformation in the way we think and act as a Christian aid and development agency.

Listening to our partners in Aotearoa and overseas, we recognise the inherent socio-economic reality of patriarchy. Patriarchy's foundation is built on male-dominated structures of power that consider women individually and collectively to have less value and dignity than men. These unjust power structures around the world determine the political and economic priorities which often exclude and oppress women and children. Christian World Service does not accept the basic assumptions of patriarchy, and it seeks to exercise 'critical suspicion' regarding the traditional and dominant interpretations of Scriptures and the tendency of church hierarchies to exclude others. We believe God is concerned with the liberation of all people. Such a spirituality weaves and spins threads that interconnect people. Feminist spirituality and theology inform the life and work of Christian World Service. Thus, Christian World Service seeks to be more inclusive in all aspects of its life and work giving preference to the perspectives and priorities of those who have been excluded.

Finally, we stand in solidarity with children and youth around the world who suffer because of poverty and hunger. We recognise that the present global economic system denies many children not only the basic necessities for a decent life but also the opportunities to develop and use their own unique and God-given potential for the betterment of the world. "We believe that all children should have first call on society's concerns, and children should be able to depend on that commitment in good times and in

bad, in normal times and in times of emergency, in times of peace and in times of war, in times of prosperity and in times of recession" (UNICEF). Christian World Service is committed to giving special attention and support to the struggles of children and young people. We believe failure to stand in solidarity with children and young people only perpetuates and compounds humanity's difficulties.

III Working for a Just Social Order

(a) In a Tradition of Service

"To those who have hunger, give bread. To those who have bread, give a hunger for justice."

Latin American Table Prayer

Christian World Service is part of a tradition of partnership and service and will continue to be committed to this evolving vision of common service. Our theology is shaped by the experience of very different church traditions struggling together for a century in movements for mission, unity, justice and liberation. Slowly and painfully, the division and competition, arrogance and exclusivism *are* being overcome. Our consensus owes much to the faithfulness and courage of many prophets and ecumenists in all our churches. Christian World Service is an inheritor and agent of an evolving vision of common service.

(b) Engaging with our Partners

We believe it is critical to our work:

- To listen carefully to our partners before undertaking any action or programme;
- To learn from the networks in which we are involved;
- To make the connections between the issues that emerge from our conversations with our partners and networks.

This means that the initiatives for projects come from our partners and the networks to which we relate. This web of interdependence enables us to hear and understand what our partners are saying to us before we plan our projects and programmes. Contact with partners encourages us to seek their advice and insights. This dialogical approach to our work grows out of the realisation that there is no true theology without engagement. We are committed to a Christian theology which issues from engagement and dialogue and which leads to renewed engagement and dialogue.

Thus, we are committed to constant and critical reflection on our work in conversation with our partners and networks. This is an ongoing process of working together to change our world. By taking this process seriously we recognise that truth is often understood differently and becomes clearer as we seek to make connections between our particular historical reality and the realities of our partners.

For Christian World Service this process of reflection and action is the means by which we seek to work with God and our partners in building a new society. This is the

theological precondition of our knowledge – that is, it leads to transforming action: action committed to those who are marginalised and to the world. In Acts 17:6 Christians are described as "those who have been turning the world upside down." Our work is not determined beforehand, but grows out of and is conditioned by the situation. We choose not to impose our particular agenda on our partners and we are committed to learning from them as God is committed to working with all those who care about justice in our world. Such a process of action and reflection leads us to see that if we are to make the changes needed ourselves, we need to understand who we are - that is, as Tauīwi Christians living in Aotearoa New Zealand.

(c) Responding to Emergencies

While committed to working for structural change and supporting long-term development programmes aimed at the eradication of poverty, Christian World Service also recognises the importance of responding to people's immediate needs during crises. In times of natural and human-made disasters Christian World Service seeks to facilitate the member churches of the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa New Zealand to respond with compassion and appropriate action, as Jesus Christ did. Emergency appeals and responses will be made in a way that upholds the dignity of those affected by the situation, maximises the strength of the affected community, and respects other cultures and faiths. Recognising the competitive environment in which emergency appeals are launched, Christian World Service will encourage cooperative rather than competitive ways of working. Prevention and capacity building are part of humanitarian assistance and we will support programmes that promote peace and reconciliation.

(d) Advocating Alongside the Excluded

"I discovered three things. I discovered that poverty was a destructive thing, something to be fought against and destroyed, not merely something which was the object of our charity. Secondly, I discovered that poverty was not accidental. The fact that these people are poor and not rich is not just a matter of chance, but the result of a structure. Thirdly, I discovered that poor people were a social class. When I discovered poverty was something to be fought against, that poverty was structural, that poor people were a class (and could organise), it became crystal clear that in order to serve the poor, one had to move into political action."

Gustavo Gutierrez, Peruvian Liberation Theologian

This evolving vision of common service has committed us to the work of advocacy. We believe that transformative change cannot occur unless we are prepared to stand alongside our partners and speak out on the issues and concerns that affect their lives. This work involves listening and responding to the stories of our partners, understanding the links between their situations and our own socio-economic contexts, and developing appropriate responses and educational programmes. By doing this, we hope to ease the burden of our partners and empower the people of the churches to address issues of poverty and injustice. Our commitment to advocacy is based on the conviction that every human being is entitled to life in all its fullness and on the Biblical tradition of advocacy which was articulated by the prophets and embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus.

(e) Fundraising for Change

The aid industry has increasingly looked to the practices of the market economy to raise funds. Competitiveness and coercive image-making are at the heart of such methods. Christian World Service cannot uncritically accept the prevailing market values as the basis for its work. In its fundraising Christian World Service avoids using images that exploit and demean people who are struggling against poverty and oppression. Our theological perspective and our ecumenical context require us to use fundraising methods which are appropriate to the struggles of people around the world to transform global economic inequalities. Gandhi reminds us that the means must be consistent with the ends.

IV Responding to Our Own Context

"If Christ came to Raglan he would see two classes of people - the rich and the powerful in the town and the disinherited Maori. He knows what it is to suffer, to be despised and rejected and pushed aside by the powerful and the rich. This is the side where I believe Jesus would stand - with those of us who are struggling to build community strength among a dispersed, disadvantaged people."

Tuaiwa (Eva) Rickard, Tainui Awhiro

In our own context we make a theological commitment to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi, which unites us in solidarity with the tangata whenua of Aotearoa New Zealand. Christian World Service is committed to working alongside Maori for a just and equitable society, which acknowledges in its laws, institutions and public life Maori self-determination. We believe that the way we work with and alongside Maori in Aotearoa is critical to the way we work with our partners overseas. We acknowledge our conscious and unconscious part in the suppression of Maori sovereignty and pakeha violation of the Treaty in the past. We are committed to the ongoing task of seeking a just new future for all peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand.

We are committed to discovering the meaning of Tino Rangatiratanga, to changing our thinking and the language we use accordingly, and to acting on the structural and personal implications of Maori sovereignty. Specifically, we will work towards the letting go of institutional resources so that Maori can take them up as they see fit. We will advocate for economic and political policies that are consistent with a Treaty-based society and which are founded on the sustainable use of resources and communal need, not individual profit and ownership.

We believe that working for justice and peace upholds the wholeness and spiritual integrity of creation. Justice has to do with the righting of relationships not only between human beings but also between humanity and the earth. We understand ourselves as an interdependent part of the wholeness of God's creation. Justice is essential to the integrity of creation. Only then can genuine peace become a reality. The present destructive exploitation of creation by economic, political and military interests, in the name of development and progress, is a global crucifixion. With our partners we are

committed to do everything in our power to prevent such development and to work towards development which is appropriate, sustainable and nurtures the integrity of creation. We recognise and affirm the wisdom of the indigenous peoples and acknowledge that there is much we need to learn from them. We shall seek to listen with respect and humility to what they, as tangata whenua, wish to teach us about development and preserving the spiritual and physical integrity of creation.

V Committing Ourselves to Work for Change

Christian World Service believes its theology grows out of reflection on what goes on in the world. We do not seek to impose a theory of change to which we expect our lives and our world to conform. We commit ourselves to be available to God and the world for the transformation of the world and we do so alongside those people who struggle against poverty and oppression. We believe this commitment affirms the dignity of our partners. We recognise that our partners make their lives and livelihoods in the context of struggle and under oppression. In the end they are the subjects of their own liberation.

We commit ourselves to undergo those changes God is calling us to make if we are going to stand alongside our partners in their particular struggles. We believe such changes are liberating and lifegiving for us. As we commit ourselves to our partners and to all who struggle for a just society, we believe we learn to understand anew who the God of Life is in our own particular historical context.

Therefore, we make a theological commitment to each other, to mutual listening, learning, working together and building consensus. This is a concrete expression of our commitment to the Christian faith and the revelation of God in Christ. We affirm that if we are seeking to work with our partners to change their world, then we too must work together to change our world.

VI Conclusion

"This is what Yahweh asks of you, to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God."

Micah 6:8

This is the theological working spirit which undergirds and directs Christian World Service. It informs and shapes everything we do: our relationships with tangata whenua, the people of this land; our work with project partners in their struggles; our interactions with our ecumenical and secular networks; our marketing strategies and public profile among those who support the work of Christian World Service; and how we work as Christian World Service staff and working groups.

"The spirit of God is upon me who has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God's favour."

Jesus, quoting the prophet Isaiah, Luke 4: 18-19