

Conference on “Ethical Quality of Humanitarian Aid”
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The special responsibility for and tasks of the churches in Humanitarian Aid

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I bring you greetings from the Emergency Committee and the staff of Action by Churches Together (ACT). ACT is a global alliance of Protestant and Orthodox churches and related aid agencies, working to save lives and support communities in emergencies worldwide.

I also use this opportunity to bring special greetings from my organization, Lutheran World Relief (LWR). Participating in the 50th anniversary celebrations of Diakonie Emergency Aid has a special significance for LWR. I would like to briefly take us back to those early days of cooperation, as this history is quite relevant to the focus of this session.

Lutheran World Relief was established in 1945, in response to the terrible destruction and suffering of World War II. Several decisions, based on theological understandings and ethical choices, shaped principles and actions that remain relevant today. These principles included:

1. Non-discrimination and helping all in need. Given that one in seven Lutherans was a refugee after World War II, it would have been easy to focus our aid ‘on our own’. Instead, LWR’s founders agreed that the Christian imperative was to serve all based on need alone – regardless of religious affiliation or other distinctions such as national origin, ethnic identity. It was not a popular decision with some of our constituency because of strong kinship ties and the animosity of the war.
2. Independence from political agendas and the right of access to humanitarian aid. Initially, LWR was prohibited by U.S. law from providing aid to Germany, basically withholding access to aid as form of punishment. LWR and other Christian organizations were tireless in their advocacy for the right to provide humanitarian aid and the right of people in need to have access to such aid despite political agendas – convinced by this advocacy, the U.S. government changed its policy.
3. Working with and through local church and other partners. I read a quote from LWR’s early history: “In the midst of such prevailing devastation, it was amazing to see how much aid was undertaken by the Germans themselves Organized from within, Evangelisches Hilfswerk was ready to assist LWR and other agencies when channels from abroad were opened... It represented not only Lutherans but all Protestants and worked in close cooperation with the Roman Catholic agency, Caritas.” (Together in Hope, p. 29). As we learned so long ago, local capacity exists; ignoring it is neither right nor smart. And, as we see, German churches have a long and rich history of Protestant and Catholic cooperation in service.

The church leaders of that post war effort – in both our countries – were prophetic for their day. It is my hope and prayer that conferences like this will enable our generation to provide equally prophetic leadership today. Much has changed in the world since our respective

organizations were founded. But, our core values – because they are so deeply rooted in the Gospel – continue to provide a strong and steady moral compass.

Diaconia is central to the Gospel message. We often turn to the Good Samaritan story to illustrate this. In the story, we see the man lying in the road and his need for a tangible expression of compassion and care. He clearly has a need for aid.....but, does he have a moral right to aid? I believe the teaching of Jesus is clear that the poor and marginalized have a right of solidarity and that those with the power and resources have a corresponding responsibility to respond. Solidarity combines the spirit of selflessness and love that characterizes charity, and combines this with a commitment to forging just relationships that uphold dignity and the God-given rights of all.

The special role and responsibility of the churches in humanitarian aid has to reflect a solidarity that contains a spirit of charity and a commitment to just relationships.

Action by Churches Together has adopted a set of 11 values that guide our work. I would like to comment on several of them in the opening comments.

Non-Discrimination

“We believe the church is called to manifest God’s gracious love for all people in a wounded world. Therefore, we will respond to human suffering based on need, without discrimination based on the race, religion or nationality of recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind.”

The commitment to non-discrimination, including a commitment to not give preference to one’s own religious community, gives credibility and authenticity to the humanitarian motives of those who provide the assistance. That is distinct from religious organizations that do serve for their “own” first or exclusively. By and large, I think there is broad commitment to these principles in our network. However, the question does arise both from within and from the constituency of our members. ‘Why shouldn’t we help our own first when they live in situations of chronic poverty and neglect?’

ACT also rejects the use of aid as a means to the end of proselytization and conversion. No strings attached. It is in treating with dignity and respect those whom we serve and assist that we most clearly witness to the unconditional love of God.

The issue has a new edge and a new urgency in the current context of the so-called ‘war on terrorism.’ More than ever, it is critical that church agencies engaged in humanitarian aid resist the sinful temptation to join the societal forces that demonize the ‘enemy’ and stereotype entire populations, and more specifically, Moslems. Our action needs to provide a consistent and clear alternative to sectarianism and fundamentalism.

Holistic Approach

“We believe that God’s will is a restored and reconciled human community. Therefore, we will include components of spiritual accompaniment and psycho-social assistance, advocacy and peace building that contribute to this vision, and guard against any actions that would do further harm to communities.”

We are committed to responding to the spiritual as well as the material needs and aspirations of persons living in crisis. And, we recognize that churches rooted in particular communities and contexts are especially able to respond to this need for consolation and healing. That is quite distinct from organizations that only attend to material needs. When you put a

commitment to non-discrimination together with attention to both spiritual and material needs, it is a powerful witness to the nature of the Christ who suffered on the cross.

Within our network, there are concerns that our approach and actions sometimes seem no different than that of secular organizations – that we get too focused on the mechanics of aid delivery and forget the spiritual component. I describe this creative tension within ACT using terms ‘faithfulness’ and ‘effectiveness.’ Our faithfulness is about the centrality of ethical principles rooted in the Gospel and about witnessing authentically to God’s love in the midst of tragedy.

It is about the gift of the universality of the church and its rootedness in particular local contexts. Effectiveness is about translating those faith-filled values in real-world situations where we must hold ourselves accountable to do the right thing and to do the thing right, i.e. to act with competence, expertise and appropriate skills. Unfortunately, we sometimes fall into a trap of “either ... or” thinking, when the synergy of these two aspects should provide our most distinctive attribute and contribution to humanitarian action.

Independent Action and Voice

“We believe that the church is called to be prophetic as well as to be a presence of consolation and healing. Therefore, we shall endeavor not to act as an instrument of any particular government’s policy nor accept conditions on funding that would compromise our ability to speak and act independently.”

The system and machinery of organized humanitarian assistance is heavily rooted in and financed by Western societies and their governments. ACT speaks constantly about the need to preserve the independence of humanitarian action from political and military agendas. But, as an Alliance, we leave it to each member to determine where to draw the line and that line seems today to be in shifting sand.