

Towards an Integral Mission

Community Development and the Formation of Vibrant Communities of Jesus Followers: Shared Principles of Excellence

by *Andrea C. Waldorf*

Ten principles are developed in the book *Undivided Witness*, exploring the themes captured in its subtitle. In her chapter, Waldorf explores the ninth principle, which states that:

There is significant overlap between the principles of excellence in community development and the formation of vibrant communities of Jesus followers including:

- Commitment to serve the least reached*
- Working collaboratively*
- Adopting locally reproducible approaches*
- Living incarnationally*
- Solidarity with those who suffer*
- Benefiting the whole community and sowing the seeds of the gospel widely*
- Focus on teamwork*
- Focus on groups and the existing community*
- Empowering people and making disciples, not "converts"*
- Local leadership and local ownership*

Further, the community development sector offers familiar and accepted strategies involving a mix of international and local experts who work together in partnership with local civil society organizations. This increasingly includes partnering with churches and other faith communities. (p. 18, Undivided Witness)

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Andrea C. Waldorf (MSc Global Health) has been involved in community development work in Central Asia since 1996. In 2008 she became country director for her organization and since 2019 has served as its international director.

One Christmas Eve in a small city in Central Asia, we cooked something not too strange for our local friends: grilled chicken, boiled rice, and vegetables. Sitting around the *dasdihon* (a tablecloth spread on the floor) a few hours later, our friends diligently moved the food around on their plates; some ate the chicken, but few touched the rest. Losing my patience, I asked, "Why don't you eat this? It has the same ingredients as a chicken pilau!" Astonished, my friends looked at me and said, "Yes, but if you knew that, then why did you cook everything separately when it is so much tastier blended together?"

Why indeed? Many of us like to take things apart in our research and analysis. Wanting all the details, we divide our lives and ministries into the secular and the sacred, our work-life balance, word and deed, community development, and church planting. But is the secular not sacred in our hands, our work not part of life? Is not the gospel only whole when heard, seen, and tasted? Is not ministry only whole when we include and integrate all we know, do, and believe?

Our ministry and lives could be tastier to those around us when we live as whole people presenting a whole gospel. A key part of that is to recognize the great compatibility of community development and church planting principles as described in the last two decades.

Active Participation

One of the most important principles in community development today is the active participation of the community in finding solutions and setting the agenda and direction for any development process. This goes back to initial work on participatory rural appraisals (PRA) described by Robert Chambers in his 1983 writings aptly titled *Rural Development: Putting the Last First*.¹

Chambers' writing on community development issues parallels some of the best thinking in missiology of the time, including the emphases on educational theory and spiritual formation by Ted Ward.² Both drew on the pedagogical thinking of Brazilian Paulo Freire,³ who stressed the importance of the contribution of the local population who can and should be able to analyze their own reality. This concept overlaps with a key principle of Paul Hiebert's description of "critical contextualization"⁴ and many of the principles discussed in the "vulnerable missions" movement today.⁵

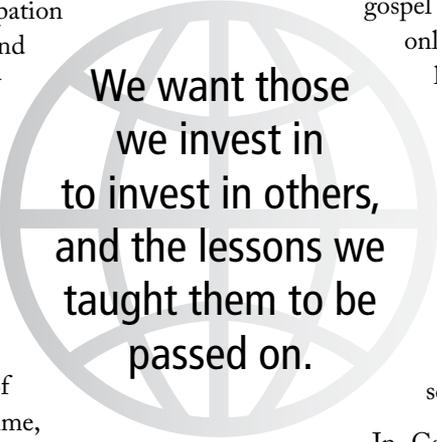
This principle of a deep level of connection to local language and culture has also been discovered in church planting movements (CPM). David Garrison and others emphasize the importance of contextualization, indigenization, and evangelism in the heart language of the community as key principles in seeing a CPM happening among those we desire to reach.⁶

Integration into the community in all aspects of life is clearly described in Luke 10, the account of Jesus sending out the seventy-two. He instructs them to stay in the community, live with the people, become part of their life, their joys, their sorrows, their fears and pains, to know what makes them cry or laugh. In other words, he tells his disciples to become neighbors.

Bryant Myers reminds us that to share *our* story, we need to also listen to *their* story. He says,

...we face a challenge. How do we merge these stories so that they enhance each other, and everyone learns and grows? The key is becoming community to each other... Building community is what good neighbors do.⁷

Next, Jesus tells the disciples to deal with the different aspects of life that enable the Kingdom to break into the community through healing the sick (demonstration in the physical realm), proclaiming that the Kingdom is near (proclamation in the intellectual realm), and freeing from demonic oppression (freedom in the unseen spiritual realm). Only in the experience of healing, knowledge, and freedom as a whole can the community understand the fullness of the gospel and embrace it fully. But it is also true that only when the church touches all these areas of life can it be truly vibrant.



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Reproducibility and Scalability

Another key principle in community development is reproducibility and scalability. Will your intervention be picked up by the local community and reproduced locally? Is it simple enough, using locally available resources? Can someone reproduce what you are modelling?

In Central Asia, we designed and locally built assistive devices for children with disabilities, using plastic pipe, wood, and other materials available in the bazaar to build walkers, corner chairs, and other devices. Fathers, grandfathers, and local craftsmen soon came to copy and build their own simple and inexpensive versions for their children or to sell on the local market.

It is the same principle we see in reproducibility and disciple making: We want those we invest in to invest in others and the lessons we taught them to be passed on to others. We want others to look at our friends and say, "I want what they have: hope for a future, joy in a relationship with God and neighbors, a new center in life that is infectious." We want the idea of meeting with others to read God's word to spread from neighbor to neighbor. In a best-case scenario, passing on simple, appropriate technology and sharing the good news go hand-in-hand, truly integral by nature.

In an agriculture project carried out in another community, we provided individual families with a way to grow produce and increase their food security; now the local government has asked us to scale it up for every school in the district. We did not have resources to provide the same technology for all schools, but the project caught others' attention, became a vision that spread and an effective strategy to be adapted and applied elsewhere.

Just as these ideas have been adopted and spread, we want to see groups of people experiencing the vibrancy of a new community of Jesus followers. They in turn will intentionally want to take this to villages and towns that have not yet tasted these good fruits.

Community-Based Services

Further, we should consider the nature of community-based services and how that translates to local churches.

A backbone of community development is the idea that health, rehabilitation, education, and self-help groups (SHGs) are located in direct proximity to the people in need of such services. In this, we speak of primary health versus larger polyclinics in the closest city, village schools established even in remote or nomadic settings, inclusive education for children with disabilities rather than boarding and special education options, and access to legal and peer support through local women's self-help groups rather than isolation.

I sometimes hear the challenge of “a church in reach of every person”—a community-based church. Johannes Reimer writes that our place of living, our community, is where “neighboring” happens and where social networks are formed and maintained. If we want churches to be a transformational power in these networks and communities, they must be part of the community to be “local.”⁸ Yet too many of our churches in the West have become anything but community-based. The idea of a village church—a locally accessible parish—is a dying concept in Europe where many people commute long distances to the church of their flavor. Consequently, the church is no longer physically and socially at the center of community life or the marketplace. Sad to say, I have seen this as well in some post-Soviet republics, with “old” churches in the cities expecting believers in the villages to travel to the city, rather than to see a small church planted in the villages.

Although we do not promote this model of large churches, common in our home countries and often featuring “performance style” worship and “professional preachers,” it is present in the media and accessible to new believers far away. A Central Asian colleague belongs to a small, community-based house church. A year ago, she participated in a financial management course in Germany. While there, she attended a German church with some former colleagues. I picked her up when she returned home. Talking about her trip, she said, “Finally, I was in a real church; it was like the ones on TV with the music and the preaching.” This broke my heart. I tried to explain that her little group in Asia is also “real church” and is even more like what the first disciples experienced. She seemed to agree, but I cannot forget that initial heartfelt emotion she showed over attending “real church.”

As we engage with least-reached communities, let us seek a community-based church model and not repeat the mistakes of the decline of Christianity in our home countries: a church within walking distance, a church for all, a church accessible without a car or funds for local transport, a church where you meet people facing the same struggles as yourself, a

church where fellowship continues throughout the week as neighbors interact. Reimer says a missional—we would say a vibrant reproducing—church has an external focus:⁹ It looks like its local community; its programs do not attract into a church building but happen among the people and with the highest level of participation possible.

This church will be a highly participatory and reproducible house church. Apart from such issues as legal registration and buildings, let us consider a *med punkt* (small primary health care building) model from the former Soviet Union that was staffed by local communities, within walking distance of the community, and supervised and trained by a regional healthcare worker. Can we imagine churches being at the heart of the village, the marketplace of life, again? Can we imagine our SHGs, farmers' clubs, and parent support groups leading to or becoming vibrant communities of Jesus followers? Can we have spiritual health points overseen by regional apostles in every community?

Focus on Groups and the Existing Community—Community Formation and Transformation

What comes first in the formation of a vibrant community of Jesus followers, the community or the Jesus follower? Community development is based in the community for development of the community. People with a common felt need come together in peer support and problem solving, initially with outside support but focusing on utilizing local assets. They form communities to impact their own community. Dave Andrews challenges us as Christian community development workers to practice the principle of community formation since “Jesus developed an alternative model of community in contrast with the dominant model in the society that he denounced.” Rather than just criticizing the injustice of the existing systems, Jesus developed new models. Andrews continues,

Then Jesus encouraged a movement of people in society who would take the alternatives he had developed with his disciples and implement these principles, practices and processes in their lives individually and collectively.¹⁰

Forming a community of new believers from different classes, families, and networks is difficult and often unsuccessful. Community development focuses on key values of community formation, creating networks of trust around common purposes of health, education, agricultural models, non-hierarchical servant leadership, and participatory decision-making that recognizes that all are gifted and can contribute. This fresh approach helps us to see biblical aspects of group focus and formation that are not rigidly defined by ethnicity or class—concepts that are important to consider as new communities of believers form.

I was once involved in the set-up of a cooperative for artisans. Our initial employees were widows and other marginalized women of the community. Within a relatively short time, they became a community that looked out for and supported each other, gaining standing in the community both by earning income and enriching their community through tourism.

In a short time, these widows and marginalized women became a community that supported each other and gained standing by earning income.

We prayed for their needs and the business, and we shared our lives. A combination of seeing faith in action, dreams not of Jesus but pointing to “fruit” in her workplace, and the witness of a local believer led to the first woman coming to faith. Within six months, a large cohort of the workshop had become a community of Jesus followers, reading his word, praying, and supporting each other. It started with community formation, followed by a discipleship of values, integrity, proclamation of the word, and witness falling on fruitful ground where weeds and stones had already been removed by the community itself.

Impacting the Whole Community

This new community is also the place where wide and relevant seed sowing happens, another principle often quoted in the church planting movement context. Too often when hearing of wide seed sowing, we fall back upon stereotypes of literature and media distribution. These have their place—what is happening these days through social media is amazing—but in our context, the key work is relevant seed sowing into a wide network.

Secular development work often focuses on practical, technical and knowledge solutions. However, in most cultures the underlying question in relation to the development need is often relational and spiritual. As Christians, we can answer the underlying spiritual question of “[w]ho sinned: this man or his parents?” (John 9:2). Sharing development and worldview-relevant good news in community groups and networks helps to identify those who are earnestly seeking God and truth. By sowing relevantly into a wide network of women, farmers, and parents along with the continued watering of these seeds through engagement with the group, those ready for the next step of regularly reading God’s word emerge. Interacting with God’s word brings a change of worldview and, for some, a change in allegiance and lordship. These changes lead to changed behavior and lasting transformation in the whole community as a result of obedience to God’s word.

Solidarity with Those Who Suffer

“Walking with the poor” and “putting the last first” are key phrases in the titles of Bryant Myers’ and Robert Chambers’ great works on community development referenced earlier. There is anecdotal evidence from the recent refugee crises and conflicts in the Middle East that often the forgotten who live in suffering are those responding rapidly to the gospel. At the same time, David Garrison has found a correlation between CPMs and the experience of personal suffering in the workers involved.¹¹

Living incarnationally in proximity with the poor and suffering is best demonstrated in Jesus Christ, who was born in poverty, ate and drank with “untouchables,” and was angry with those supporting unjust systems and exploitation. Having an answer—a theology of suffering that holds up not only as we face their suffering but even in our own—is something unique that especially touches the hearts of those who feel forsaken by their god and their own religious brethren.

At the 2018 gathering hosted by the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies giving rise to the book from which this article is taken, we discussed a concept since then affirmed by Warrick Farah: Many of the newly emerging church movements have been holistic in nature and naturally contribute to the common good of the community.¹² This seems to be linked at least partly to the more integrated worldview of the national worker and disciple-maker compared to our Western platonic tradition of a divided worldview. Suffering paired with an incarnational, integral mission response through community development and simple acts of mercy is indeed fruitful ground for the emergence of a vibrant church.

In addition, Garrison mentions in his latest book that “ignored injustices” are a barrier to a church planting movement and conversion. Taking Micah 6:8 seriously to “act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God” is good advice for all of us wanting to reach the least reached.¹³

Focus on Teamwork

Finally, the role of intercultural teams is a point of synergy between principles of excellence in community development and the formation of vibrant communities of Jesus followers. More than a decade ago, the development sector addressed what equal participation and inclusion means, both for local community members and Global South staff of NGOs and humanitarian agencies. In the early 2000s, half of my fellow country directors of international NGOs in an Asian network were from the Global South. Between 2010 and 2015, we saw local leadership at the highest national levels in international organizations like Save the Children and Caritas, but many mission organizations lagged behind. Faith-based agencies,

once primarily Western in makeup, are finally giving room to our local and Global South brothers and sisters. Some Christian agencies have embraced them for decades but are only now coming to grips with what equal participation and inclusion really mean.

Why is it that those engaged with international development efforts already model some values that the church and those involved in mission among the least reached should deeply believe and readily adopt? These include being diverse and international, giving room to local believers to grow, and as they gain experience, space and opportunity to serve internationally. If mission organizations and churches can become more diverse and empowering—seeing those we disciple as fellow workers in the harvest and as future leaders of communities and organizations—we will have come a long way.

Comparing Principles

Recently, Operation Mobilization identified ten principles that would help guide us towards fulfilment of our vision “to see vibrant communities of Jesus followers among the least reached (VCJF).” In the table below, I compare a brief statement of these principles with its corresponding practice in community development, highlighting how these can reinforce and complement each other.

All that we have talked about is more clearly defined and distilled in Micah Global’s statement on integral mission:

Integral mission or holistic transformation is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and

Table 1: VCJF Principles and Community Development Practices

<i>VCIF principle</i>	<i>Transformational community development context and parallel principle</i>
1. Prayer and fasting	We care for widows and orphans, described as true fasting in Isaiah, and as we engage in transformational development, we need to be aware of the spiritual worldview and powers in the community.
2. Collaboration	We collaborate with the community and all stakeholders. Development should always be an inclusive process.
3. Prepared to suffer	We live among those who suffer and mourn with the mourning, even if this creates risk for us. We seek a theological perspective on suffering together.
4. Do what is easily reproducible	Our development projects are based on local assets and appropriate technology that is reproducible and scalable.
5. Our wide sowing is relevant, contextual, and seeks to elicit a next step	We insert relevant and contextually appropriate spiritual truth in a wide network built through our community involvement.
6. We are in and engaged with the least-reached communities	The least reached are often also least reached in development, education, and economics. Especially in the poorest areas of the world, living in a community as development workers gives us an authentic presence.
7. Form and utilize teams appropriately	Community development is teamwork and already is often multi-cultural and interagency teamwork.
8. Focus on groups	We practice community formation and model healthy communities of peer support and peer learning in our projects.
9. Make disciples, not converts	Community development always views the participants as agents of change, people who hold the potential to change and transform their communities and societies.
10. Local leadership and ownership	Community development is temporary assistance. We model, assist, and lead from the beginning to develop community leaders. As Christian development organizations, we model and teach servant and shepherd leadership to all levels of society.

repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.

If we ignore the world we betray the word of God, which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God we have nothing to bring to the world. Justice and justification by faith, worship and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and structural change belong together. As in the life of Jesus, being, doing and saying are at the heart of our integral task.¹⁴

A Banquet of Flavors

A few months ago, I visited a refugee family in a Middle Eastern city, together with a team of our organization consisting of a Western pediatrician and a Middle Eastern pharmacist. Both spoke Arabic and English well and deeply loved the people they were serving. We visited a family living in utter poverty: the woman was facing difficulties in her marriage and four of

her six children had a disability or stigmatizing features like albinism. While I observed, the team listened and comforted, gave quality medical advice and referral, and helped the illiterate woman to read medical papers. They shared a lot of smiles and the two sang a few songs with the children and gave exercises for the girl suspected to have cerebral palsy. Toward the end of our visit, a neighbor came over. My Arab colleague told a story of Jesus, answered more questions, and prayed a blessing on the family. Then we left.

Seldom have I seen all that I have written above lived out in such a small space and time—integral mission lived out and visible in a sixty-minute visit, a banquet of flavors and tastes well blended and pleasing to man and God.

Let us keep together what belongs together; things are tastier when thoroughly blended! **IJFM**

Endnotes

- ¹ Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (Burnt Mill, England: Longman Scientific & Technical, 1983).
- ² Duane Elmer, Lois McKinney, and Muriel Elmer (eds), *With an Eye on the Future: Development and Mission in the 21st Century: Essays in Honor of Ted W. Ward* (Monrovia: MARC, 1996).
- ³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1986).
- ⁴ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 171–92.
- ⁵ Alliance for Vulnerable Mission, accessed 19 February 2020, <http://www.vulnerablemission.org/>.
- ⁶ V. David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake, 2004), secs 2736, 2756.
- ⁷ Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, Rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 218.
- ⁸ Johannes Reimer, *Die Welt Umarmen: Theologie des Gesellschaftsrelevanten Gemeindebaus, Transformationsstudien*, Bd. 1 (Marburg an der Lahn: Francke, 2009), 253, 254.
- ⁹ Reimer, *Die Welt Umarmen*, 2009, 254.
- ¹⁰ Dave Andrews, *Compassionate Community Work: An Introductory Course for Christians* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2006), 42.
- ¹¹ Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, 2004, sec. 3784.
- ¹² Warrick Farah, “Motus Dei: Disciple-Making Movements and the Mission of God,” *Global Missiology* 2, no. 17 (23 January 2020), <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/2309>.
- ¹³ V. David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God Is Drawing Muslims around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (Monument, CO: WIGTake, 2014), sec. 3810.
- ¹⁴ Micah Network, “Integral Mission,” accessed 25 March 2020, <https://www.micahnetwork.org/integral-mission>.