

Title: Effective Church-Business Collaborations in the Developing World

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Abstract:

The role of business and business people in addressing the needs of the world's poor has attracted much attention in recent years. "Social entrepreneurship" is the term most often used, although within Christian circles the term "business as mission" is often used instead. A survey of the literature reveals a great deal of diversity under these umbrella terms. Some emphasize the role of micro-enterprise in bringing about economic and social change (see, for example, Smith and Thurman, 2007; Yunus, 2008 and 2003), others highlight the innovative work being done through collaborations between for-profit and nonprofit corporations (Bornstein, 2004; Dees, Emerson and Economy, 2001) and still others promote the poverty-reducing potential of multinational corporations (Lodge and Wilson, 2006; Prahalad, 2004). This diversity is also evident in the Christian literature. (See for example, Eldred, 2005; Rundle and Steffen, 2003; Bussau and Mask, 2003; and Befus, 2005.)

The most significant and perhaps only difference between "social entrepreneurship" and "business as mission" is that the latter adds spiritual transformation to the list of objectives. By this they typically mean an increase in spiritual (that is, Christian) commitment, as evidenced by outward measures such as increases in the number of personal conversions to Jesus Christ and increases in the number of Christian churches. There is widespread belief that economic and social transformation is not sustainable unless there is authentic and widespread spiritual change among individuals.

Because of the central importance of spiritual transformation in Christian circles, there is increasing debate about the effectiveness of business as mission (BAM). For example, an empirical study by Lai (2007) purportedly shows that business people are generally not effective in bringing about spiritual change. In sharp contrast, a recent empirical study by Russell (2008) finds that business and spiritual transformation are not only compatible, but even symbiotic. Rundle and Steffen (2003) and Eldred (2005) reach similar conclusions, though based more on anecdotal evidence.

Drawing on my own observations over the last 12 years as researcher and consultant, this paper will explain the different findings. (Hint: Much hinges on one's definition of "effective.") More importantly, the paper will identify the signs of an effective church-business partnership, and the most fruitful ways churches and businesses can collaborate for the benefit of the world's poor.

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