

Title: Intentionally and Effectively Integrating Faith in Microfinance Institutions: Moving from Theory to Reality

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Abstract:

Social entrepreneurship, business as mission, faith at work and other variations are gaining momentum and are being increasingly recognized. With rock stars like Bono calling the church to be more meaningfully engaged with the poor, the eradication of poverty through business strategies has been called “sexy” by some observers. Despite the growing attention to this area, much work needs to be done to construct a solid theoretical foundation that reflects the robustness necessary for integrating faith and micro-enterprise development in areas of poverty around the world. In addition to the theoretical foundation, significant attention needs to be paid to the actual on the ground results and overall impact of such efforts.

In this paper/presentation, I will brief address some of the views of the relationship between word and deed found in contemporary missiology. Then I will present a theoretical framework for the integration of faith and work/business for holistic kingdom impact. This framework is built off of seven principles: 1) Spiritual: Life, work and business are spiritual activities. 2) Scriptural: Our lives and organizations should be formed, informed and transformed by Holy Scripture. 3) Salvation: We are saved and want others to be saved, yet we must acknowledge the fullness of salvation which has both present and future life implications. 4) Serve: We have come to serve and not to be served. 5) Solidarity: We should work in solidarity with the poor, local churches, and other ministry organizations. 6) Sustainable: Our passion must be high, but our engagement must be realistic. 7) Situational: There is not universal one size fits all strategy, but we should have strategies and plans that fit the unique local context.

After moving through this theoretical material, I will then present findings of how this looks in reality. As of October 2008, I will have conducted “spiritual integration assessments” in at least six microfinance programs in five or six different countries. As of the writing of this proposal on March 31, 2008, I have been to three countries in the last four months. This research is still in process so I cannot currently say what the findings are. However, the challenges and difficulties will be analyzed along with the potential and positive results.

To do this analysis we will again go through the aforementioned theoretical framework. For example, under the category of sustainable, I will share the complexity of faith integration. There are two options for communicating faith-based messages to clients of microfinance operations: 1) We can assign this task to the loan officer who travels by herself to the loan clients (called unified service delivery) or 2) we can assign this task to another person, say local pastor (called parallel service delivery) who accompanies the loan officer and delivers a faith-based message. However, assigning extra tasks to loan officers may not be sustainable as burn out can (and does) increase. But sending two people to client meetings is an extra expense that may not be financially sustainable. This is just one example of how findings will be reviewed. The point is to go beyond simple platitudes to real-life applications in complex circumstances.

The goal of this paper/presentation is not to provide a “here’s how to do it” answer. Rather the goal is to set up a clear and concise theoretical framework that can help us engage the real-life challenges of serving the kingdom for maximum impact through faith-based, micro-enterprise development. The intent is to have a presentation that bridges the gap between practitioners and academicians and opens up a meaningful and significant conversation between the various parties.

Presentation Outline

I. Introduction

- a. Hope International is a faith-based micro enterprise development organization with 200,000 clients in 13 countries.
- b. Mark L. Russell has the Ph.D. in Intercultural Studies from Asbury Theological Seminary (Dissertation: The Use of Business in Missions in Chiang Mai, Thailand). He works as Director of Spiritual Integration at Hope, evaluating, and assessing the effectiveness of faith integration in Hope’s MED operations.

II. Theory

- a. Integrating faith in microfinance necessitates a strong view of holistic mission and the relationship of word and deed in Christian ministry.
- b. 7 Principles for Integrating Faith in Microfinance Operations.
 - i. Spiritual: Life, Work and Business are spiritual activities.
 - ii. Scriptural: Our lives and organizations should be formed, informed and transformed by Holy Scripture.
 - iii. Salvation: We are saved and want others to be saved, yet we acknowledge the fullness of salvation which has both present and future life implications.
 - iv. Serve: We have come to serve and not to be served.
 - v. Solidarity: We should work in solidarity with the poor, local churches, and other ministry organizations.
 - vi. Sustainable: Our passion must be high but our engagement must be realistic.
 - vii. Situational: There is not universal one size fits all strategy, but we should have strategies and plans that fit the unique local context.

III. Reality

- a. Mark Russell has traveled to six to seven countries in the last year analyzing and

evaluating faith related activities in microfinance operations.

- b. Case studies and unique contexts will be shared demonstrating the power, the potential, and the challenges of faith integration in MED.

IV. Conclusion and Q&A