

Title: Willow Creek Community Church's strategy to address global poverty

Author: Warren Beach

“ When the church is working right, as God intended it, it is the hope of the world.”

-Bill Hybels, senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church

“ If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always: he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame... “ (Isaiah 58:14)

As Willow Creek Community Church looked at addressing the issue of global poverty including HIV/AIDS, it focused on identifying local churches and church networks in areas of distress that grasped the vision of the holistic gospel. We asked some basic questions. Where were local churches located in areas of sparse material resources already using whatever assets God had placed in their body to address community needs? Were these churches open to a relationship with another church to walk alongside them and learn what God was doing in their midst as well as share resources? Were they willing to share their learnings with their peers? We found that many local congregations had their sleeves rolled up and were tackling tough problems as they attempted to transform their communities in all areas of life. We found a place to engage in the battle!

For the past 12 years, Willow has been connecting with church communities in Latin America. These partnerships have been mutually empowering and strong relationships have developed over time. Church networks in the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica occupied most of our focus but others in Brazil and Chile are beginning to emerge. In Africa, Willow has worked alongside church networks in Malawi, Zambia and South Africa for the past four years. Relationships are also forming in Ethiopia and Angola. Through these relationships our church has learned valuable lessons on how to be better servants in our neighborhoods, how to integrate evangelism and social action and the value of developing friendship across cultural lines.

Regarding the impact of global poverty and HIV/AIDS, our strategy has been very grass roots in the nature of working with individual churches and networks of churches. We listen to the partner's assessments of their community needs and try to support those that we can without creating dependency. Partner churches are addressing education through the establishment of schools, tutoring programs, pre-schools and scholarships. In Africa, basic needs like assisting children with school uniforms and supplies is not an uncommon ministry. Job creation work can involve computer skill training labs, to funding tools for

carpentry business, to micro lending for sustainable kitchen gardens and to empower sewing programs, to name a few. Other community outreaches range from feeding the destitute to home based care of AIDS victims, to drug rehab centers and medical clinics. Our strategy embraces the concept of "changing one life at a time leads to changing one community at a time."