

## **Response**

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It does appear without doubt that the writer's intended purpose is to challenge the Church of the Nazarene in Africa to empower its members for a long lasting sustainable economic development. The following will be my observations in response to the paper.

It is true that the continent of Africa is known worldwide for its economic struggles. It is not uncommon overseas to hear people refer to Africa as a place of poverty and suffering. The plight of poverty is recognised from every corner of the continent from one cardinal point to the other. There are several contributing factors some of which are of natural causes and others man-made. Natural disasters have taken their toll in Africa and the number of people affected is outrageous. This has been through diseases, floods, and droughts. Lately HIV/AIDS is a scourge that is reducing Africa to shambles. Man-made causes of poverty in Africa include: civil wars which have mined arable farming areas and depleted natural resources. Job opportunities have dwindled thus leading into a high rate of unemployment. The illiteracy rate is very high in Africa and has contributed to a low standard of living. Although Africa has gained independence from years of colonialism its impact is still felt for it takes a few years to stabilise. Emerging from such a background, Africa is struggling to find its identity in the global economy. Presently, there are concrete inroads towards correcting the past and paving a positive way forward. This is what the idea of African Renaissance is all about. The observation of the writer is right. Africa is poor yet the potential for improvement is there.

The churches in most of the countries of Africa, on the average, are full of poor members. They are poor because they are formed by the situation from which they come. Most of these people have put their hopes upon the

church as a God-given avenue to help them. It is true that most seek spiritual help but others have found refuge in the church for their political, economic, and physical needs. Facing a situation of this magnitude, the church has had no other alternative but to engage in relief programmes so that these people may get food to eat, a shelter, a blanket to sleep under and medical help for healing. Unfortunately, a compassionate gesture such as this has created a generation of receivers and dependants. Worse even, according to the writer, a Patron-client relationship has developed which has led to “exploitation and the exercise of controlling power” on the part of our leaders.

I fully concur with the writer in affirming that the ministry to the poor is a biblical teaching as addressed with great precision in the Old and New Testaments. We also observe that throughout the history of the church there have been efforts to tackle the problem of poverty. Roman Catholicism has been in the forefront in this matter and has been a cause of much criticism from the Protestants especially the evangelicals of being a ‘social gospel’ church. In Anglicanism and Methodism, John Wesley was deeply involved in the ministry to the poor, as has been William Booth in the Salvation Army movement. The Nazarenes inherited this social emphasis in the person of Phineas Bresee who could rightly be referred to as the father of Nazarene Compassionate Ministries. Since this is a biblical mandate, the Church of the Nazarene must continue to be involved in the ministry to the poor even today.

I personally have no qualms about being involved but my question is how and how much? It is true that we will always have the poor with us (Matthew 26: 11) but that should not deter us from being involved. However, our involvement must be fervent yet cautious so as not to neglect the number one mandate to the church and that of the Great Commission, (Matthew 28: 16-18). The reason I ask this question of how and how much comes from a natural fear which the church has always had and that is that of turning the church into a social empowerment enterprise! Although the question of involvement which is before us is legitimate and deserves

unreserved attention due to the situation in which the church finds itself, I have a few observations to make concerning things to be careful about as we attempt to address this dilemma. To these I now turn below.

The writer is not at all keen about handouts in the form of relief projects. He is of the opinion that these are “short term solutions and most of the time treat the symptoms and not the disease”. My contention is that relief programmes must continue as they are. Who on earth would be so foolish as not to attend to an emergency of some disease, a flood, or a drought and instead inform the victims that the church is working on a long-term solution for it? Long-term solutions are absolutely okay but they need to be considered alongside urgent relief endeavours. There are issues that need attention on the spot. Some people would be dead by the time we come back to them with our long-term solutions! I have always wondered in my mind whether it is at all proper to make a distinction between a relief project and a sustainable development project. I see both as relief work. Whether it be short-term or long-term, the same applies; both are meant to relieve the victim from trouble. That is why I contend for the two to be applied simultaneously. I agree, of course, that it would be detrimental to engage in one at the expense of the other.

One other question that haunts my mind is whether there will ever be a time when poverty will be eradicated in society. It is the writer's view that with education, training, and equipping, poverty can be a thing of the past. Would I be right that poverty knows no bounds? It is a disease that infiltrates throughout the whole spectrum of society, namely: the good and the bad; churchgoers and the unchurched; the educated and the uneducated etc. The people the church will train are a very small fraction compared with the number of people in a given urban or rural area. Due to the dynamic nature of the church, with new people coming in all the time, there will be no way that the church can cope with the training of all these people. Even non-believers and unchurched people will want to benefit from the schemes. The limited resources would finally be depleted and the situation would go back to square one. The other thing to consider for sustainable development with a lasting impact is that of a need of an environment conducive to put this into place. The way I see it poverty will

not be alleviated in Africa, at least in the next hundred years, unless Africa is committed to addressing the following issues: to put an end to civil wars; to cut down on the birth rate; to foster education for all; to curb corruption and irresponsible administration in high places (even in the church for that matter); to stop coup de tats that often lead to totalitarianism and dictatorships; to eradicate unemployment by creating job opportunities for citizens; to improve on national health care services; and more than anything else, the African people must seriously turn from ungodliness to a genuine reverence for the Almighty God. A godly society will not cause harm to its brothers and sisters. Without a concerted will and effort to eradicate these problems, Africa might as well forget about the eradication of poverty. To develop effectively, the church needs a conducive environment.

Another important factor that needs to be considered for sustainable development in Africa is to recognise that the church cannot go it alone. As indicated earlier, African society is mostly a close knit group of people, hence the extended family concept. That is why sometimes it is not easy to distinguish the secular from the sacred. The same people who sing and pray at the top of their voices in church are the very same people who together with the unbelieving relatives out there at home and in society, engage in social drinking and dancing in a manner unacceptable in the church. The resources provided by the church to empower its members will sooner or later be shared and utilised among friends and relatives who have nothing to do with the church. This being true, why doesn't the church have a reorientation of approach at this point? Instead of talking about empowering its "own members" why not empower the church together with the immediate society where it finds itself, that is the community?

In not going it alone, the church ought to consider the financial implications involved in this as well. As soon as one talks the language of empowerment, he must be clear that he has touched the issue regarding a sacred cow. Resources for empowerment need big bucks. This is because there will be a need for skills training. For that matter, professional personnel are needed. In addition to this expensive training, facilities and

equipment needs to be purchased. In other words, this is an expensive endeavour for the church. This is where other important stakeholders need to come in. Today we hear a lot about the church networking with other organizations such as government, NGO's, and companies in the private sector. Since this will be a joint effort, there is no way that the church can claim ownership. The church might handle relief programmes of its own on a small scale but when it comes to this drastic empowerment, we need to engage in a new way of thinking, and that is of allowing the church to be used as an agent for secular structures that are engaged in social transformation projects. This is a new concept in the church and poses deep heart searching questions. Must the church ever team up with the secular world? Should the church go to the secular world for help? Who must set an example in the world, is it the world or secular structures?

What have I said so far? What point do I want to draw closer home here? The church must be encouraged to utilise its own resources and wealth properly. The so-called values of the gospel (truth, justice, and love) will appeal much more to members of our constituency, the church. We are not going to accuse the world for not distributing its wealth properly because it is its wealth! The God given mandate to care for the suffering, the poor, and the destitute in our midst is for the church to put into practice. We dare not pass the buck on to government structures nor on to politicians. The church must be full of compassion as Christ was. We do need to be sensitive to the plight of the suffering and the dying; to the hungry and naked; and to the homeless and the destitute. Immediate response in the form of relief projects must continue whilst attempts for long-term sustainable development programmes are put in place as well. Whilst in the process of attending to the social needs of our people, let us be cautious not to tilt the scale too far to the other side forgetting our primary mandate for existence, that of fulfilling the Great Commission.