Practitioners in Faith Based Organizations and Development Work

A Discussion with Anna Villacorta, Regional Vice President, Latin America, World Vision

To begin, how did you come to your current position with World Vision? What motivated you personally on your journey?

I am delighted to be part of this exploration. I very much agree with the underlying premise, that despite their vital work faith-based organizations in Latin America are often misunderstood and they can be invisible.

I was first trained as a social worker in Peru, and became increasingly interested in development work over the years. I studied at UCLA, also worked in Canada and, for a time, with UNRIST (United Nations Research Institute in Social Development) in Geneva, as well as in several Latin American countries. But the thread that runs through it all is World Vision.

I began my career as a community facilitator, working on a program supported by World Vision. I was with a small NGO in Lima that addressed women’s health conditions and provided them access to better services. The work was funded by a network of six major churches in Canada devoted to economic development with NGOs active in primary health care, agriculture, and human rights. From there, I went to work with World Vision in Guatemala. World Vision there was focused increasingly on key areas of development in rural areas, on community organizations, and in the late 1980s, on children’s health and agriculture, and issues of family disintegration and alcoholism. I became involved in monitoring and program evaluation.

I returned to Peru as director of World Vision’s country office. That was a pivotal time. We (World Vision) were attacked by the Shining Path directly, and I realized how vulnerable we were. We had four of our staff disappear. So I then had the sad assignment of dismantling a lot of our work here. This was especially true in areas affected by the violence, like Ayacucho. We later took on the task of rebuilding, after the Shining Path leaders were captured by the government. We were able to relaunch the programs in the rural areas and then in all Peru as the period of violence subsided. Two decades of violence in Peru left some 70,000 dead and at least 10,000 disappeared. Many people migrated to the cities.

From 1998 – 2004, I worked from World Vision’s international office in Monrovia, California on leadership development. This program involved very intentional training and formation for potential leaders worldwide. We partnered with a U.S.-based university (Eastern University). The program took shape as a special program for future leaders with an unusual and interesting combination of an MBA and development training, with a focus on poverty in the areas where World Vision was most active. The program grew to be worldwide, eventually in our four regions: Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. To date, the program has trained many leaders in our partner organizations and among our own staff. About 400 staff have completed the program.

I then returned to Costa Rica as our regional Vice President for Latin America and the Caribbean, and am now leading our work in 14 countries. We have over 750,000 sponsored children in 348 development

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1 The discussion between Katherine Marshall, Brady Walkinshaw and Corina Villacorta was part of preparatory work for a January 30-31 consultation in Antigua, Guatemala on roles of faith-inspired organizations in development. The conference is part of a joint Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs and Luce Foundation project on religion and international relations. It took place on January 12, 2009.
areas, and with each affected child as part of a family, we believe we are reaching two million people in these countries. Our office has responsibility both for leading the strategy in the region and for managing country programs. I am part of our senior leadership team for World Vision in Seattle, so I have both a regional role, in Latin America, and a global focus.

*How has your own personal faith played a role in your career?*

My faith and my faith experience have been very important for me and have shaped my life and career. I treasure them both.

I was born and raised as a Baptist. My family is a Baptist family, and in the Peruvian context that means we were part of a very small minority, and of an evangelical tradition. I went to a primary public school which was heavily Catholic both in outlook and demography. I then went to a Methodist secondary school, and that imbued in me a very strong sense of service. In the 11th grade, as part of a school service project, I went to a shanty town in the outskirts of Lima to train women who were much older than me to read and write. It was an Evangelical program training adults in literacy. That was my first exposure to the poor in my own city, and that experience really shaped me. As a result of it, I decided to do social work. That decision was very much shaped by my Methodist school that emphasized love, honor and service. My vocation, I recognize, was very much the product of my upbringing in an Evangelical home in Lima.

My very first working experience was as an employee of a mining center in Peru and it was very shocking. It was entirely contradictory to what I was trained to do. I found that the social workers did not care about the lives of the miners, who were dying from inhaling the mineral dust. I decided I did not want to do this. Then I found World Vision, through my pastor who was involved with World Vision when it was just beginning in Peru in 1982. I couldn’t believe that I had found a place that could meet the values that I was raised with. World Vision linked my professional goals to my faith and to what is very foundational for me.

*How would you define the element of “faith” in the vision and daily work of World Vision?*

Faith is very essential to what we are as an organization. The ethos of the organization is very much grounded in the Biblical tradition. We are a Christian organization that follows Jesus Christ and that is central to what defines World Vision and what we do. It clearly is a factor in who is attracted to work with World Vision. Our approach to development is very much based in a theological grounding. We not only draw on it for our theoretical grounding in development, but there is always an effort to bring in this theological perspective in our practical work with the poor. Perhaps most important is World Vision’s focus on issues of justice and injustice. We talk about transformational development. We are seeking a transformational approach that is holistic and conceives of individuals with a spiritual self.

Our faith it is very much an integral and visible part of our corporate life. World Vision’s first value is that we are Christian; the second is that we are committed to the poor. Our work always brings together these values in a theological and Biblical conception. We have devotions as part of our daily work life, and organize prayer groups. We start the fiscal year with a day of prayer everywhere in the world.

Our faith also informs the work we do in terms of policies and advocacy. It is also what gives us hope even in the darkest times and places. We see the image of God in poor people’s lives and very especially in children. We are looking for the fullness of life; that is a theological conception, and it is not just about wellbeing and rights. It is about dignity with the image of God. We work in very difficult environments, under very significant constraints, hopeful about what God wants us to do. We have a historic approach to this process, in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in each of the countries where we are working.
In short, everything we do has a faith component.

In comparison to other NGOs working in the areas where you operate, do you see a distinction between secular and faith-inspired organizations?

The main difference is the quality of the relations our staff have on the ground with the people we work with. We don’t even talk about “the beneficiaries”; we talk about the children, the youth, the leaders. We do not just go to an area for a short term assignment. We focus deeply on the quality of development, and appreciate that the transformation that we aim for takes time. For our work in urban and rural sectors, projects are planned and managed over a period no less than 15 years. We commit ourselves to be present in communities for at least that time period. During that time, we try to establish a very solid quality of relationships between our staff and the people on the ground, whether they are farmers or women. That is a very distinctive characteristic in terms of how we approach our work.

We see people with the potential that God has given them, not just as poor or oppressed. That gives to our relationships a special quality as we engage in communities, whether in water or agriculture or health. Because of that essential quality that imbues our work, we bring in that spiritual dimension, always respecting what people believe in the communities where we work. We accept and work with people’s beliefs, for example when we engage with people in indigenous areas who have different types of religions. There are many communities where the people have complex beliefs, combinations of different faiths, and we accept and work with that. We work based on the faith that people have.

Another World Vision approach is that we work with and through churches. We work with local churches wherever we go. We always work with priests, nuns, pastors. World Vision has a long tradition of working with the Evangelical churches. However, in the last 15 years, we have worked more intentionally with the Catholics and with groups in Brazil that have afro-based religions or with indigenous groups in the Andean or Guatemalan countries where they blend their Christian faith with other ideas. In those environments, we want to work with every church that is present. We take a holistic approach to their presence, as we look with dignity and respect at people. We are not there to proselytize, but we do seek to encourage and help the churches to become more active in their social work. Whether the problems are domestic abuse or hunger, we recognize that we need to work not only with the community but also with the churches. We talk about churches as our preferential partners. We are not a church but we are interested in the holistic mission of the church.

How would you describe the effects of the growth of Pentecostalism on the work of World Vision in Latin America? How does World Vision deal with issues of evangelism and proselytization?

We follow the statistics, and particularly in the past decade we have indeed witnessed the impressive growth of Pentecostal churches in many areas. We work with many of them, though our work to date has been more significant among the historical Protestant denominations. These in practice have had a more solid and consistent engagement with social issues. What we are seeing among the Pentecostals are first, new ways of addressing social issues, and second, wide variations in approach. These congregations are usually focused in the poor areas where they are growing incredibly fast. Their approaches are quite varied; some of them do not have much interest in social issues, but some of them do. We tend to partner with those churches that are already engaged in social work, and increasingly try to enthuse other Pentecostal churches that do not have much interest in social work to be engaged and to participate actively on these issues.

World Vision also has changed with the shifting religious landscape. It has been very interesting to see, in the last ten years, how the staff of World Vision has gone from an essentially evangelical organization to one that today includes more and more Catholics and other faiths.
Tensions between Catholics and the Evangelicals are very much part of Latin America’s history. Given that background, we have tried to do our work in a way that is not exclusively related to Evangelical churches, but with a very clear orientation to work among them. For example, we never ask people to enroll in a certain church or a denomination.

We have a very clear process that guides our work, and that allows us to follow and profess our faith without proselytizing. We need to have a very delicate balance to achieve this and we have clear policies on how to witness to our faith. This calls for great sensitivity. We are an NGO with technical expertise and resources, and the reality is that this puts us at the point of departure in a position of power vis a vis local communities. So we try hard to come to our work in ways that do not put pressure on people. We have faith and convictions, but that faith also in many ways bar us from proselytizing in our work. Instead, we take what people have in their own faith lives and what they believe. We shape our roles from theirs. We only speak about faith when people ask “why are you here”? And “why do you care for us”?

We try hard to capture the essence of the ways in which communities lead their “faith life”. This element is very present and very much a part of the culture in the areas where we work, with a symbolism that is particularly Latin American, though we also see it in Africa and Asia.

Have you experienced any tensions in relations with other churches or with governments?

There are tensions, especially historic but also contemporary. The period when tensions were highest was mostly in the 1980’s. They have diminished sharply and today we generally have good working relations with most other churches. We have, however, found that the tensions we experience tend to come especially from other churches, and not necessarily from governments. There have been some tensions with the Catholic Church. Even so, these have come mostly at the national level. When you are working at the grassroots, it has very rarely been an issue.

And at the national level, where we experienced difficulties, we have worked very intentionally over the past decade to build bridges. Our relationships have improved and grown. The Catholic bishops now call on us, and we collaborate. We bring in the children’s agenda every time we can, which is what we are aiming for in Latin America.

Today, World Vision not only participates in the Conference of Bishops, we are also active in Religions for Peace (the major interfaith organization working in the region). We are very much a part of their dialogue.

How have the changing theologies in Christian churches around wealth and money affected your work?

We have a different stance on the theology of prosperity from many of the evangelical churches that are advancing a theology centered on wealth. We take a stand for the poor and the oppressed.

The issue of wealth comes into our relationships with donors to World Vision. While we work on fund-raising mainly in wealthy countries, we now do a lot of work with faith-based donors in Latin America, in five countries. In these relationships, it has been very interesting to have to engage wealthy churches in the region, something we never experienced in the first three decades of our work in Latin America. We are engaging rich churches in their own context. We have done this since day one in developing countries, but this is new in Latin America and a phenomenon of the past five years. This has led us to revisit our approach to the poor vis a vis the wealthy. Even though we don’t stand by the theology of prosperity, we engage with people who embrace the idea. We believe in quality of life for both the rich and the poor.
This has led us increasingly to be challenged by inequality. We in Latin America are the most unequal continent. We are increasingly raising this question with the churches. So today we are engaged in a dialogue about inequality with corporate CEOs along with the poor and with community leaders. This has proved very challenging indeed, both in terms of theology and in practical terms for the context we find ourselves in across Latin America. We have had to revise some of our views about how we can work on issues of social justice. Today, our work is not only about working with the grassroots. Today, we are working with corporations and the wealthy in Latin America, and we have come to believe that this is part of the transformation we want to bring about. We are engaged in a process of reflection about how we relate to very different kinds of churches, rich and poor. We have committed ourselves this year to reflecting more deeply on these issues for Latin American churches.

_Have you engaged, yourself, on issues like inequality with the development organizations?_

No, we have not had much formal engagement with them on inequality or other similar topics. In fact, our relationships at the regional and country levels, on intellectual and policy issues, are fairly limited. We do some work with the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB), but it focuses mainly on executing projects. We have never engaged in dialogue along these lines very deeply, though there were some discussions a few years ago with the IDB as part of their Ethics and Social Capital initiative.

In my view, we should be putting more emphasis on the leading strategic issues, like inequality and children’s rights. I would expect them to take on more importance in the future.

_How have your policy dialogues with governments functioned?_

We have focused especially on the areas of family violence and HIV/AIDS. I have seen more and more dialogue around these topics, and, in turn, a growing influence of Faith-Based Organizations on policy.

We are part of a movement called “Juntos por la Niñez”, which brings together many organizations working in this area across the Latin American region. We have produced materials as a basis for engaging in dialogue at the local and national levels on issues for children. The alliance has focused on policies that engage governments on protection of children: protection against sexual abuse, child labor, and very risky and insecure conditions. As a result of the work of this network and other kinds of coalitions we participate in, there is an active agenda defined where dialogue is very much needed.

Participation is an important issue: that is, who is at the table? One thing that I am seeing more and more is active and direct participation of children and adolescents. This has often come through faith-based organizations. Thus, young people are finding voice through FBOs vis a vis policies that affect them directly.

_Can you give some examples?_

In Peru and Mexico, young people have engaged in direct dialogue with governments to influence policy.

In the Dominican Republic, there is a coalition that engages different types of organizations and is responsible for producing the “Alternative Report on the Wellbeing of Children”. Through the dialogue with the government there, it has been possible to pass legislation that includes clauses for protecting children in different arenas. I have seen this happen several times there as well as in other countries. The government in DR took very seriously the report that came out of this coalition. The government then took some of the initiative for changes in law; it has also begun to implement some of the provisions that guarantee at least some forms of protection for children in certain areas.
Advocacy on resource allocation is an important area where we are seeing some success. At the municipal level, budgets of municipalities have been influenced by the participation of faith-based organizations. We have seen real changes, for example more resources going to children’s health, in Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil. There are more, real resources being devoted now to health for children at the municipal level.

How much is WV involved in dialogue on education?

Very little, and it is one of our weaknesses. We have been more focused on health and HIV, and some other areas. We do, however, do a lot of what I would call non-formal education. We have partnered with schools to support organizations and to enhance children’s education in a more comprehensive way. This has included other types of experiential learning related to small businesses and agriculture. In some cases we are doing this at a more programmatic level. Many of the programs we support include non formal education and we work with all sorts of groupings of children. We try to add value to what they provide in terms of training, helping children to have a plan for their lives.

What do you see as priority issues for the Latin American region?

A crucial, overarching theme for the continent is the welfare of its children. Another is inequality and exclusion. Sadly, if you seek a characteristic of the region, it is inequality. People are beginning to suggest that much of the violence we see there is derived from our historic roots and its product, inequality. Some goes back to the period of colonization, while other roots are more modern. Inequality and exclusion are part of our legacy and priority issues for all policy-makers and citizens in the region.

It is our shame that, being a Christian continent, we still live with these levels of inequality. They pose challenges and questions to our churches: how did we come we have this situation and how can we start exploring it further, and find ways to address it?

¿Cómo se relaciona su trabajo en América latina al trabajo de su organización en otras partes del mundo?

¿Según su trabajo y percepción, cuáles son los mayores retos para el desarrollo y para enfrentar la pobreza en América latina? ¿Cuáles son las ventajas comparativas que tienen las organizaciones inspiradas por la fe? ¿Hay ciertos sectores donde el papel de la organización inspirada por la fe está más fuerte y donde haya mayor responsabilidad para actuar?

¿Cómo ha visto los cambios durante su carrera, en como su organización se relaciona hacia la religión y a la fe?

¿Cuáles han sido los cambios que has visto hacia en la región de América latina, en las relaciones entre las organizaciones inspiradas por la fe y actores como donantes, gobiernos, y la sociedad misma como sujeto del desarrollo?

¿Qué son los cambios que ves en el futuro para las organizaciones inspiradas por la fe? ¿Habrá mayor incidencia en las políticas públicas? ¿Cuáles serán los sectores donde habrá mayor crecimiento?

¿Cuáles son los cambios que surgen alrededor del financiamiento, especialmente en referencia a los vínculos con la religión y la fe?

¿Cuáles son los mayores retos para el futuro? ¿Mayores oportunidades?