Ministry beyond survival: Strategies for Organizational Success in Ministering to the Poor

Gustavo Crocker, Compassion International

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Introduction

Hundreds of children’s ministries have sprung up in the last twenty-five years with the purpose of responding to the ever-increasing need of children and youth in developing nations. The growth of this organizational sector since World War II has led to increasing competition to secure resources in a highly restricted environment (Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, 1997). Along with the competition, the growth in size and influence of this group of ministries has resulted in increased visibility and public scrutiny by diverse constituencies including governments, overseeing agencies, private donors and foundations, clients, the media, and the public at large (Kearns, Krasman, & Meyer, 1994). While the scrutiny has threatened the survival of many organizations, it has also evidenced the existence of several organizations that the public opinion considers “worthwhile of supporting.” Although these considerations are good for the few organizations that are managing to succeed and survive, there is little information for the remaining organizations in the sector about “what makes a Christian ministry successful beyond the threat of survival.”

Organizations are often seen as organisms, as living systems. As such, they exist in a wider environment on which they depend for the satisfaction of various needs. As living systems, organizations also face the process of development, from inception to maturity. A significant parallel can be built for organizations in developing nations. Like children, many ministries are conceived and born out the need, the ignorance, and the social pressure. Like children, many ministries face the critical years of early childhood, during which they face the task of survival. Therefore, before we engage in a dialogue about organizational development of Christian ministries, it is important to understand the threats to survival that these organizations face.

Survival of Christian Ministries
Christian ministries are like children. They follow the normal cycle of conception, birth, Christening, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and even death. As with children, ministries are normally the vision of one or two individuals who "birth" them. As they develop an identity, ministries as often "absorbed" or "endorsed" by the local church (the Christening phase). It is at this point when most ministries face the first threat to their survival. Institutionalization often demands a new ethos in the life of the ministry. It demands more accountability and structure. It demands planning, and marketing. It demands good nutrition and monitoring. At this point, the early childhood organization evidences the importance of good development practices to secure survival and life beyond survival.

Like children, ministries are impacted by the context that surrounds them. The environment is perhaps one of the most significant threats to the survival of a child. Similarly, it is the environment what most significantly threatens the survival of a Christian ministry during its formative years.

Cultural, social, and political environments that impact the survival of Christian Ministries

Van Til (1994) points out that the nonprofit organizations exist as the direct result of the cultural, societal, and political forces that interact in their society. This is especially true for Christian ministries. The main cultural forces that shape the life of Christian ministries are the family, the church, and the school (Van Til, 1994). Each of these cultural institutions influences the scope and scale of the ministry. A significant number of Christian ministries are organized with the purpose of responding to needs of these three major cultural elements of society. Conversely, changes in the family structure, the educational systems, and the religious culture determine the direction of those ministries which has been instituted to serve these three main cultural elements of society.

The social environment is another factor that affects the survival of Christian ministries. Van Til (1994), Firstenberg (1996), and Drucker (1990) contend that social problems are the largest market generators for non-governmental organizations. Van Til cites poverty, racism, and alienation as the major social forces that determine the need for those types of ministries to exist. Furthermore, Christian ministries provide the avenue for Christians to channel their desires to improve their society through Christian witness, altruism and civic responsibility (p. 11). Drucker’s (1990) argument is that these types of organizations create the sphere of meaningful citizenship by responding to the societal needs through human change (p.3). The changes in the social fabric of a group would, therefore, change the environment in which Christian ministries operate.

The political dimension is perhaps the most evident influence in the life of the Christian ministries for the poor as an organizational population. As Carroll, Delacroix, and Goodstein (1990) point out, political systems often determine the boundaries of operation of a given organizational population (p. 69). This is especially true for Christian social ministries. The forces of political power create conditions that shape communities and influence public policy in such a way that they develop a complex set of problems that threaten the survival of weaker ministries (Herman & Heinovics, 1991, p. 33). Van Til (1990) argues that government and politics influence the life of the voluntary organizations both directly and indirectly. Directly, the government decides which organizations it will recognize as legitimate civil societies for providing services. Indirectly, government and political systems affect the Christian ministries because by selecting the types of services they can provide, they create a market niche for specific organizations in the whole sector (Van Til, 1990, p. 52).

Market competition among Christian ministries (and especially, children's ministries)

"Competition, the pursuit of the same objective by two or more firms, creates rivalry among nonprofit organizations for capital, labor, customers, and revenues" (Tuckman, 1998, p. 175).
Herman and Hemovics (1991) point out that the competitive factors in the marketplace cause non-governmental organizations (and, consequently, Christian ministries) to strive for survival (p. 18). Tuckman’s (1998) study on competition, commercialization, and the evolution of charities explores competition both in settings where charities compete among themselves and where they compete with the business community. His main contention is that, as a result of the competition in the marketplace, organizations engaged in social services are pressured toward commercialization, which may in turn affect the unique charitable nature that motivated their creation (Tuckman, 1998). Thus, Christian ministries, in order to secure a place in the marketplace, end up creating "income generating" mechanisms that include service fees for help that otherwise was provided free of charge.

Resource dependency and survival of Christian ministries

A vast majority of writers in the charitable sector focuses on financial resources as the main factor that determines the life of a social service organization (Firstenberg, 1996; Herman & Heimovics, 1991; Herman, 1994; Drucker, 1990; and Weisbrod, 1998). Recent studies suggest that Christian ministries are especially threatened as they are highly resource-dependent (p. 67). Furthermore, access to financial resources is one of the main leadership challenges for Christian ministries in a pluralistic society. Christian ministries are highly dependent upon external resources for financial support (p. 28). Financial support for Christian ministries is often found in four main sources: a) donations from international organizations and partner organizations, b) governmental funding through contracts and grants, c) sales of services and goods in the marketplace, and d) donations from individuals, local donors, and corporations.

The dependency on resources and the need to secure them on the daily basis is perhaps the biggest threat for Christian ministries to remain true to their original purpose. Leaders of Christian social ministries need to be warned about the fact that full dependency of the ministries on money raising would change the very nature of the organization itself. When organizations are less dependent on funds, they are more likely to work in terms of their mission rather than in terms of finding resources for themselves. Whether their goals are lofty or modest, Christian ministries depend highly on appropriate financial support for the accomplishment of such goals. The key question, then, is how do Christian ministries balance the pursuit of their social missions with financial constrains, when additional resources may be available from sources that may distort those missions.

Age and organizational survival

Organizational scholars consider that youth is a liability for an organization (Bielefield, 1994). Consequently, the expectation is that older ministries live longer than those organizations facing their institutional infancy. In their studies on the strategic implications of size and age in organizational survival, Bielefied (1994) and Aldrich and Auster (1990) contend that, although organizations cannot improve their age as a strategy for survival, they must understand the liabilities associated with their young age. As a result, younger organizations must develop contingency plans to secure their survival to the changes and challenges of the environment.

Inertial pressures of the Christian ministries

The second significant vulnerability that affects Christian ministries is the increasing demand for high-quality management, an uncommon feature of most Christian organizations. Hiding under the argument of altruism and sense of service, most Christian ministries fall into the trap of mediocrity. Consequently, these ministries cannot compete with other local social service organizations for securing resources and accessing the national mechanisms of social transformation. As recent studies in organizational excellence of Christian Relief and Development organizations show (Crocker, 2001), administrative excellence, programmatic
excellence, and excellence in donor relations are key factors in securing the survival and success of Christian ministries.

Success and survival of Christian social ministries

Successful ministries are those who have moved beyond their point of survival. Just like with the life of a child, successful ministries have reached such a point of organizational balance so that they are less vulnerable to the changes in the environment because they have properly balanced their values, strategy, structure, systems, style, skills, and staff (Peters & Waterman, 1982). Therefore, a successful Christian ministry is identified by the public and the experts by its ability to: a) achieve its purpose, b) set an example of quality among Christian ministries, c) gain reputation among Christians and the larger constituencies of donors, and d) survive the various changes in the financial, political, and social environments they have faced.

A recent study on excellence of Christian Relief and Development organizations in the United States revealed that there are several factors that help Christian organizations move beyond the point of survival and be recognized as successful ministries. The most significant qualitative differences evidenced by the most reputable Christian ministries can be summarized into ten main strategic features. These features are:

- Reason for establishing the organization
- Nature and application of the mission statement
- Process of mission articulation
- Organizational structure
- Emphasis of administrative systems
- Resource dependency
- Evolution of programs
- Evaluation systems
- Leadership visibility; and
- Leadership succession

Reason for establishing the organization

A review of the history of Christian ministries show that, while successful ministries clearly articulate that the reason for their establishment was primarily to respond to the overwhelming needs of the poor, those struggling organizations were funded in response to the overwhelming opportunity that the giving trends in America provided. Successful ministries were founded at a time in which wars, famine, and disasters had exposed Christians to the worldwide suffering and poverty. These ministries started with very humble beginnings and mainly as “one man dreams.” At the time of their founding, philanthropy was not well known and the founders had to rely on preaching and circles of churches that empathized with those who had touched the heart of the founders.

Although they were also created to respond to needs of the poor, the records of the struggling ministries show that these organizations were established in response to the overwhelming giving of Christians to ministries of disaster relief (Weber & Cook, 1989). Unlike the successful ministries, struggling organizations were established with an organizational start-up in mind. At the time of their foundation, these ministries had a funding base that supported them, qualified staff who understood relief and development, and a professional approach to marketing and donor development. The subtle philosophical differences in the creation of the organizations are reflected more strongly in the way in which each organization instrumentalizes its mission statement.

Nature and application of the mission statement

Collin and Porras (2000) suggest that visionary organizations are those for which the core ideology is more than just a philosophical statement. For successful ministries, the mission statement and the core ideology are more than just words. Recent studies show that these
successful organizations have invested time and resources in developing a clearly articulated core ideology, which includes an organizational purpose, a mission statement, a corporate vision, a set of corporate beliefs, and a set of organizational principles. In a successful ministry, most of the senior and junior executives, and a vast majority of staff members have the ability to refer to the mission of the organization, its vision, its values and its core principles as the framework of reference for answering most organizational and programmatic questions. The value that those organizations place on their core ideology is essential for maintaining their organizational quality (Collin & Porras, 1994).

Conversely, struggling ministries have more general mission statements and very little (if at all) foundational principles. The study on organizational excellence in Christian Relief and Development organizations (Crocker, 2001) revealed that struggling organizations have not reviewed their mission statement since the founding of the organization. Furthermore, none of these organizations has documentation (internal or public) that reflects the operational definitions of the mission statement. While the leaders of successful ministries often refer to their role as keepers of the organizational mission, vision, and values, leaders of a struggling ministry have a difficulty in even articulating the mission of their organization or expressing at least its uniqueness. One of the reasons for such difficulty seems to reside on the way in which the core ideology was developed.

**Process of mission articulation**

A key distinctive of successful ministries is their "completeness of the people orientation." Such completeness is evident not only in the role in which people play when implementing the organizational mission and vision, but also in the way in which such core ideology is "claimed" or "owned" by the entire organization (Bennis & Nanus, 1997, p. 101). Successful ministries normally employ participatory methods to shape and share the organizational mission, vision, and values. Furthermore, successful ministries utilize consultation and organizational commitment to develop its core ideology. Although they do not abdicate their responsibility to inspire and elaborate the vision of their respective organizations, leaders in successful ministries recognize the important role that the different layers of the organization (and even external constituencies) play in articulating and contextualizing the organizational core.

Struggling ministries, on the other hand, develop their mission statement only with the participation of the organizational apex (if at all). In a struggling ministry, middle (and even upper) level employees are unable to clearly remember or articulate the mission of the organization.

**Organizational structure**

Organizations move beyond mere success when they set their basic mission and when they create the organism capable of fulfilling such mission. The study of successful ministries revealed that their organizational structures are conducive to responding to the changes in the environment. These organizations display simple but functional organizational structure that enables them to respond to the changing pressures in their environment. Successful organizations display structures that focus on the function. Roles and flows of services are more important than titles and hierarchy and positions are not assigned based on deserving individuals. In many cases, ministries have changed their structure several times in order to respond to their programmatic evolution, the globalization of the donor base, and the changing demands both in the field and in the donor culture.

The organizational structures of struggling ministries, on the other hand, are more nominal than functional. Looking at the organizational charts and the organizational flows of most struggling organizations, it is clear that the organizational architecture of these organizations focuses primarily on the form at the expense of the function. Such focus is evident in the emphasis that mediocre organizations put on the titles more than on the actual delivery of services.

**Emphasis on administrative systems**

By their nature (and by the fact that they are subject to external laws and regulations), most ministries have all the basic administrative systems in place (employee relations, communication systems, filing and reporting systems, etc.). However, the administrative systems in a successful social ministry focus on consistent strategic planning, budgeting, and evaluation, while the mediocre organization emphasizes administrative systems with the purpose of accountability and compliance. From the distance, both groups of organizations seem to have good systems in place. However, when it comes to the purpose of the systems, it is clear that the top
organizations highlight the strategic nature of the administrative systems (without abdicating their commitment to accountability and integrity).

A more evident feature in the administrative analysis of the organizations is the focus on documenting administrative/organizational processes. Successful ministries develop administrative systems that provide managerial consistency. Mediocre ministries, on the other hand, focus mainly on the very basics required to run an organization. Most of them even lack the basic personnel documentation and operational manuals.

**Resource dependency**

This is perhaps the most evident threat to survival of organizations. One of the features that successful ministries display is the existence of a constant mechanism for generating revenue. Whether it is through monthly sponsorships, or through service fees, successful ministries have secured a solid resource base for their operations. Although these funding sources require maintenance, they at least secure the self-sustainability of the ministry without depending on third-parties for their support.

Conversely, struggling ministries are heavily dependent on external factors to secure their funding. If a ministry is developed under the auspices of external funding, and if this ministry doesn’t develop over time a local support base, the life of such ministry will depend on either the life or the choices of the external funding source.

**Program evolution**

A symbol of organizational maturity is the evidence of purposeful evolution (Collins & Porras, 1994; Peter & Waterman, 1982). Purposeful evolution is the evidence that the ministry has a history of consciously embracing the concept of moving towards progress by making significant strategic shifts and moves to stimulate progress and responsiveness to the demands of the environment (Collins & Porras, 1994). In the case of successful ministries, purposeful evolution is evident especially in the area of programmatic evolution.

The history of most successful ministries shows a marked progress of each organization’s programs so that they can respond to the needs of the communities they serve and to the constituencies that support them. Some ministries, for example, have evolved from focusing on child assistance to working with communities on social transformation and justice. In other cases, programs have evolved from assistance to orphans to church-based holistic child development programs. In the case of health care programs, programs in successful ministries have evolved from pharmaceutical shipments to community-based programs of total health.

Programs of those average ministries have also evolved over time. However, the patterns of evolution are more erratic than those of the ministries that have succeeded beyond survival. In many cases, for example, programs have not evolved since the organization’s inception. For other ministries, resource availability and opportunities have mainly dictated programmatic evolution. These struggling ministries have shown very creative instances of program implementation. However, the creativity has been more evident on the resource side than on the need side of the ministry equation.

**Evaluation systems**

One of the major flaws of nonprofit organizations is their inability to engage in self-evaluations with the purpose of reviewing each organization’s performance in fulfilling its mission and its responsibilities to the public as a trustee of the charitable funds it receives (Knauf, Berger, & Gray, 1991). Reputable organizations are known for being accountable both to their mission and to the public. Focusing on one constituency only (e.g. industry watchdogs or the field) results in either mediocre programmatic impact or lack of public trust.

In the case of the successful ministries, they have built-in mechanisms to secure financial accountability and programmatic impact. For example, these organizations have instituted mechanisms that are responsible for securing compliance and integrity both financially and programatically, as well as systems that assure programmatic impact in the lives of those they serve.

**Leadership visibility**

This is perhaps one of the major areas of contrast between successful ministries and those who have not moved beyond survival. A study of the history of successful ministries reveals that these organizations have been known because of their mission and not necessarily because of their
leaders. This finding is congruent to current writings that suggest that "a high-profile, charismatic style is absolutely not required to successfully shape a visionary organization."

Interviews, surveys, and documentary analysis of successful ministries reveal that the public (and even the staff) knows more about the organizations and their mission than the names of their past or present leaders. In fact, some of the most significant Presidents and Chief Executive Officers in successful ministries did not have the archetypal charismatic traits that people would expect of them. Ministries on the verge of survival, on the other hand, are the absolute opposite. Most of the young, struggling ministries are better known by their founders/CEOs than by their mission or programmatic quality.

**Leadership succession**

One of the difficulties of high-leadership profile is the difficulty to engage in effective leadership succession. Conversely, it has been found that successful ministries with low-profile, high-quality leaders have been successful at developing and promoting highly competent leaders from inside of the organization. Furthermore, these competent leaders have achieved "great continuity of excellence at the top through many generations" (Collins & Porras, 1997, p. 34).

In general, successful social ministries display various levels of success in leadership succession. Nevertheless, most of those ministries have succeeded at growing leadership from within "in spite of their growing pains" (Erickson, 1997). The picture is different in the ministries that have not reached the point beyond survival. Some ministries are still struggling to recruit a replacement for their founders. The vacancy has left the organization without leadership for longer periods of time, and the perspectives of leadership selection are still not clear. Other ministries have experienced several attempts to bring leaders from the outside to lead the organization but such attempts have been unsuccessful. Moreover, in many cases, there is still the question about the life and sustainability of the ministry after retirement of the current leader.

**Conclusions: Ten principles for ministry beyond survival**

1. Successful ministries respond to the needs around them. They are not opportunity-driven
2. In order for a ministry to succeed, it has to be driven by the mission. This mission has to be owned by more than just the leaders.
3. The mission of a ministry must be articulated by more than just the founder. Beneficiaries, volunteers, and workers must help shape the mission and vision of the ministry.
4. The structure of a social ministry must be functional. The form of the structure must follow the function.
5. Successful ministries break the cycle of mediocrity by emphasizing on administrative quality.
6. Ministries that move beyond survival are those that are able so secure a sustainable support base.
7. Ministries remain relevant to the needs of their communities when they evolve with the needs and not with the opportunities.
8. Successful ministries are in constant evaluation of their programs, themselves, and their impact on the lives they minister to.
9. Successful ministries are recognized because of their mission and not necessarily because of their founders/leaders.
10. Successful social ministries evidence maturity when they are able to promote new leadership from within.

**References**

AERDO (Association of Evangelical Relief and Development Organizations), (1991). Bylaws of the constitution of AERDO.


