

# Churches start their own humanitarian aid agencies

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Members of Metro Community Church in Englewood, N.J., support the missionaries sent by their denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Church, to the Congo, but Africa is a distant and dangerous trip from the 400-member flock.

“We can’t send our short-term missionaries there,” said Stephen Sharkey, the church’s life ministries pastor.

Church members wanted something hands-on. For a while, they helped build villages for AIDS orphans for an organization featured on [The Oprah Winfrey Show](#), but they were discouraged by gaps they saw in the foreign aid system.

Members of Mars Hill Church in Seattle and Harvest Bible Chapel in suburban Chicago formed their own relief agency, Churches Helping Churches, in the wake of Haiti’s devastating earthquake. (RNS PHOTO/Courtesy Thomas Hurst/Churches Helping Churches.)

Three years ago, they took matters into their own hands. They started [Zimele USA](#), a nonprofit that raises money for microfinance projects in South Africa. The church regularly sends teams to see how the organization works.

For years, projects like microfinance ventures were the provenance of large

faith-based aid agencies and de-nominations.

But as American Christians grow more skeptical and less dependent on traditional institutions, individual churches are starting their own humanitarian aid organizations, doing their own projects on their own terms.

“Part of the emerging church environment is that everything is re-examined,” said [David Gushee](#), a professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University.

Nearly 30 percent of all American Christian teenagers participate in some form of a short-term missions trip, according to recent estimates.

By the time those teenagers are old enough to lead churches, many are “confident that they can navigate international arenas without having to rely on somebody else,” Gushee said.

Churches also are making their own spending decisions.

The 1,250 or more megachurches in the U.S. spend, on average, nearly \$700,000 a year on foreign missions and aid programs, said Robert Priest, a foreign missions expert at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Ill.

And church members, more than ever before, not only want more control of how the money is spent, but they also want to be part of spending it.

But without professional experience in international aid, Priest said, churches that redirect funding away from large aid organizations often wind up throwing tens of thousands of dollars into feel-good hobby projects designed more for church photo albums than long-lasting change.

If churches continue to pull funding from large aid agencies in favor of their own projects, the large agencies could lose a source of financial

support that they've relied upon for decades, he said.

In Everett, Wash., New Life Foursquare Church last year created Northwest Community Relief and Development, a nonprofit that attracts non-Christians for aid work at home and abroad.

The nonprofit's website—[www.increaseChristmas.org](http://www.increaseChristmas.org)—features a gift catalog, with options ranging from \$10 to buy five hot meals at a homeless shelter to \$2,000 to outfit a Cambodian orphanage with solar panels. Some gifts are delivered through large faith-based aid agencies, but others are for projects created by the church.

Local elementary schools can donate to church projects now because the nonprofit is separate from the church, said New Life Outreach Pastor Rick Sawczuk.

Church donations to large faith-based aid agencies have gone up, he said, because members trust the church's assessment of whether certain projects or organizations are credible.

New Life isn't opposed to partnering with large aid agencies, Sawczuk said, but wants to respond on its own to unmet needs.

Some churches can be effective in delivering humanitarian aid on their own, Gushee said, but many are less successful than if they donated funds to a large organization. But many evangelicals, he said, prefer to believe that they can be the conduit for a miracle.

"There's a strand of evangelicalism that says, 'We still want to do big things, we want to dream big, we want to believe that God does supernatural things through people who are willing to be used in supernatural ways,'" Gushee said. "When that passion takes over, sometimes I think there's a lack of realism."

Pastor James MacDonald of Harvest Bible Chapel in suburban Chicago and Pastor Mark Driscoll of Seattle's Mars Hill Church created their own nonprofit, [Churches Helping Churches](#), in the wake of the Haitian earthquake.

The two men delivered 1,000 pounds of relief supplies, and have since raised \$2.5 million that will be funneled through Haitian churches, said Nick Bogardus of Mars Hill.

"Churches Helping Churches needed to be created because it is the only organization that exists to rebuild and restore local churches in the wake of disaster," he said.

At Metro Community Church, pastors partnered with a woman in South Africa to get their nonprofit off the ground.

"They trusted her implicitly, more so than they would have any organization," Sharkey said.