

Keeping the faith

Mixing religion and development raises soul-searching questions

WORLD Bank projects are usually free of words like "faith" and "soul." Most of its missions speak the jargon of development: poverty reduction, aggregate growth and structural adjustments. But a small unit within the bank has been currying favour with religious groups, working to ease their suspicions and use their influence to further the bank's goals. In many developing countries, such groups have the best access to the people the bank is trying to help. The programme has existed for eight years, but this brainchild of the bank's previous president, James Wolfensohn, has spent the past year largely in limbo as his successor, Paul Wolfowitz, decides its future. Now, some religious leaders in the developing world are worried that the progress they have made with the bank may stall.

That progress has not always been easy. The programme, named the Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics, faced controversy from the start. Just as religious groups have struggled to work with the bank, many people on the inside doubted if the bank should be delving into the divine. Critics argued that religion could be divisive and political. Some said religion clashes with the secular goals of modernisation.

Although the bank does not lend directly to religious groups, it works with them to provide health, educational and other benefits, and receives direct input

from religious groups in poor countries. Katherine Marshall, director of the bank's faith unit, argues that such groups are in an ideal position to educate people, move resources and keep an eye on corruption. They are organised distribution systems in otherwise chaotic places. The programme has had success getting evangelical groups to fight malaria in Mozambique, improve microcredit and water distribution in India, and educate people about AIDS in Africa. "We started from very different viewpoints. The World Bank is looking at the survival of a country, we look at the survival of a patient," says Leonardo Palombi, of the Community of Sant'Egidio, an Italian church group that works in Africa.

Although the work continues, those involved in Mr Wolfensohn's former pet project now fret over its future. Some expect the faith unit to be transferred to an independent organisation also set up by Mr Wolfensohn, the World Faiths Development Dialogue, which will still maintain a link with the bank. Religious groups are hoping their voices will still be heard. "If we are going to make progress, faith institutions need to be involved. We believe religion has the ability to bring stability. It will be important for the bank to follow through," says Agnes Abuom, of the World Council of Churches for Africa, based in Kenya.

Like religious groups, large institutions such as the bank can resist change. Economists and development experts are sometimes slow to believe in new ideas. One positive by-product of the initiative is that religious groups once wary of the bank's intentions are less suspicious. Ultimately, as long as both economists and evangelists aim to help the poor attain a better life on earth, differences in opinion about the life hereafter do not matter much. ■



Our Father, who art in Washington