

A Historic Perspective of ADRA

The first organisation started by the church to care for people in its community is better known as Dorcas – a name adopted from a disciple of Christ who provided for the poor in her community.

Dorcas was started by a group of women in Battle Creek, Michigan, USA in 1874. Activities included making garments and supplying food for needy families, caring for the fatherless and widows, and ministering to the sick.

While this was initially a local initiative it soon widened to include ‘fields near and far’. In many places, over time, Dorcas changed its name and is now known as Adventist Community Services or ACS. Dorcas is still very active in many countries around the world: I note in particular the excellent work done through Dorcas in Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Dorcas or ACS is caring for people in the local church community. But increasingly the outlook of the church became also to help people in other areas and overseas.

In 1956 the ‘Seventh-day Adventist Welfare Service’ (SAWS) was created to aid those affected by serious disasters that were becoming more and more frequent. In 1973 the name changed to ‘Seventh-day Adventist World Service’ but it was, however, still a department of the General Conference (GC) largely focused on North America.

In the 1970’s, external funding for medium term development projects was becoming available in some European countries, Canada and Australia. The church in Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands applied successfully for government funding to help with overseas humanitarian aid projects, including schools and clinics. Similar applications for funding were successful in other countries, including Australia and Canada.

The Northern European Division established a department to coordinate this new way of securing funding for overseas development projects. This was the Northern European Division Development Aid Department – also referred to as Adventist Development Aid.

Increasingly, however, these funding opportunities demanded a separation of Adventist Development Aid from the general operation of the church. The donors required the assurance of transparency and proper separate accounting of the donated resources.

So in the early 80’s there were two separate humanitarian organisations: Adventist Development Aid focused on development and SAWS, mainly working in relief.

In 1984 steps were taken to merge Adventist Development Aid and SAWS into what is now known as the Adventist Development and Relief Agency. ADRA was officially confirmed as a new agency at the GC autumn council in 1984. The new agency was different from the concept of departments, service or institutions to reflect the clear separation of assets and work.

National ADRA offices were created in the years following as independent organisations that are able to attract external donor funding, providing the assurance of transparency and proper separate accounting of the donated resources.

- While Dorcas or ACS is an integral part of the church, it is wholly funded by the church. ADRA operates separately from the church and is thus able to tap into major external funding resources for e.g. ADRA-UK can apply for funding from the Department for International Development (DFID) and the European Commission (EC).
- ADRA is a self-funding organisation, while Dorcas or ACS still receives their funding from the church and form part of the Church Ministries department of the church.

