

My Experience in Africa: Some Observations

Anonymous



Introduction

In my missionary work in Africa, I "happened" to be working for over 10 years under an apostolic-style leadership in a 30-year-old missionary organization founded by a native believer. During last half of this period, I served simultaneously in a 70-year-old denominational church founded by a different missionary organization. I have found several surprising issues that need to be raised and commented on.

Partnership under native leadership

1. Accountability — The native leader of our missionary organization managed to have two cars donated to him as gifts. Many fellow native leaders knew this matter, but the foreign missionaries did not and were eager to know where these cars came from. The answer? Nobody knows officially. When confronted with this question, he said, "Well, everybody knows where they came from!" The foreigners are still left in the dark!

The native leader doesn't like being confronted with such issues as "personal properties". After all, no one questions where the missionaries got their cars from either (likely to be bought with money sent from home countries!). Thus in a way, no one can "blame" the native counterpart.

However, transparency in financial matters should be

encouraged, although it may take a lot of explanation!

2. Reporting — Perhaps due to the "Tribal Chief" culture, a native leader tends to behave in an authoritative style. This may be OK at the pioneering stage of a missionary organization, but not so at the "adolescent" stage.¹ Also, he tends to emphasize the positive, and exaggerations are not uncommon!

Therefore the foreign missionaries have learned now to be more "analytical", and don't believe all the "miracles" and vast number of conversions reported (for all villagers tend to put up their hands when asked whether they want to believe in Jesus!). Still, certain accurate results ought to be reported. This often can't be done without some skilful inquiries!

The fact is that without accurate reports, our donors are reluctant to give financial supports! So, plodding on for accurate reports we go, endlessly!

3. Relationship / Tribalism / Nepotism — Unfortunately relationship is of paramount importance! You can get away from many red tapes in the government just because whom you know. A tribal leader can employ his relatives as staff members in his office, regardless of their qualifications, and he often do not correct their mistakes either! Sometimes a church leader is officially opposed to another church leader [of another tribe] merely because of some previous secular grievances, such as marriage prob-

lems between their children. Meanwhile, the missionaries are left in the dark and wonder why they fought each other so hard for no good reason.

Hidden agenda, personal revenge, etc., are all ugly tools that the devil loves to use to weaken the church. Reconciliation with each other is the key solution, but that may take a long, long time to achieve.

It is important to establish a good interpersonal relationship, but of course not at the expense of the principles of the Kingdom.

4. Power — I was shocked by the excessive power exercised by the chairman of the Board of a local Bible college. For instance, once he called for a board meeting, 6 out of 12 members came, including himself. None of the missionaries was "informed", although one was in the country at that time. After hearing an unprepared "explanation" from the interim principal, the attending members voted "unanimously" to fire the principal, to the surprise of nobody except the principal!

If a church or Bible college wishes to have God's blessings, the decision process needs to be done in an open way (without hidden agenda)!

Misbehaviour of missionaries of other organizations

1. Performance — An energetic MK [missionary kid], who had been a pastor, I think, arrived in the field, with a desire to work among the Muslims. Later, when he had problems with his denomination, he managed to get a visa as a "business" man. Since he could not open / register officially any language / computer center without a native partner, he recruited the second person in command of our organization to help without consulting our core leadership, and now this native leader is thinking of joining him altogether. But it had taken us more than 16 years to train him!

We wish God's blessings upon other missionary organizations. However, inter-organizational courtesy and ethics are needed virtues.

2. Reporting — Once I read an article, which reported that some one was converted in our field by another organization. Since that case was very familiar to the one just happened to our team, I asked our national leader whether that article was talking about the same person. His answer was "yes", the other organization "had borrowed" our testimony for their reporting. For what purpose? I hate to find out!

I am glad that we all have to give accounts to God on the Last Day! There is no need to compete for achievement in mission fields.

3. Mission / Christian ethics - How missionaries need to concentrate on genuine conversions² (especially of Muslims), without yielding to individualism, secularism, "efficiency" that emphasizes number of conversions, etc.!

Advantage of international teams

1. Excellence — I love working in teams, for "iron rubs against iron" produces much better results than I could alone in handling these hot issues.

2. Unity in diversity — Different believers have different gifts and beauties; likewise, different cultures bring different colours to an organization. Occasionally, when one observes something on the down side, he/she should try to be lenient without cross-cultural bias.

3. Spiritual growth — We need to help one another to grow spiritually in fulfilling the law of love. After all, who except Jesus has become perfectly mature?

4. Ministry improvement — We need to improve our skills in our ministry in order to create a win-win situation in this fast-changing world. Thus evaluation, creativity and appropriate changes are necessary.

5. Cultural prison — One is often "imprisoned"³ by his culture unknowingly. But an outsider can spot this imprisonment easily, and the realization of this fact can actually help him to grow. Such realization is difficult to achieve if one works by himself lone or in an organization of the same culture.

We as missionaries are called by God to live in a new community, to grow daily to be more like Jesus and as a witness to the world. If we cannot live this way, we are "of all men most miserable"!

6. The need — Since so much need to be done in the mission field, we all need to work together one-heartedly in order to bring the gospel to more "unreached" peoples.

Conclusion

Paul's strategy of "not building on other people's foundations" is still valid in the missionary work of 21st century. But I think it is possible that we cooperate with one another by working and networking together in a harmonious way!

Notes:

1. Adizes, *Ichak Managing Corporate Lifecycles*, Santa Barbara, CA: Adizes Institute Publications, 2004.
2. Chalke, Steve and Alan Mann. *The Lost Message of Jesus*. Michigan: Zondervan, 2003.
3. Dr. Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, Professor of Fuller Theological Seminary