

Learning...Growing...Collaborating...Phasing Out by Gailyn Van Rheenen

Collaborative Period

When a Christian movement is established without inducements of finance or favor but through heartfelt response to the proclamation of the kingdom of God, authentic national leaders mature in Christ to stand with church planting missionaries as leaders of God's movement. With the maturing of devout, responsible leaders, the movement enters the third stage--the *collaborative period*--of church planting and development.

Understanding the missionary-national leader relationship is essential to perceiving the need for this phase of church planting. Frequently national leaders become disillusioned because of missionary paternalism, inappropriate or misunderstood strategy models, missionary turnover, and inadequate equipping of national leaders to assume traditional missionary tasks. Heightened tension leads national leaders to challenge, sometimes covertly, sometimes overtly, missionary roles and methodologies. Alex Araujo of Brazil graphically characterizes this relationship as *pororoca*, a loud popping noise heard when the massive waters of the Amazon meet the rising tide of the Atlantic Ocean. Like the violent collision of two gigantic bodies of water, missionaries and developing national leaders clash, creating havoc for anyone caught in the maelstrom (1993, 362-63).

Such a clash between missionaries and national leaders can frequently be avoided if national Christians are nurtured to become evangelists and elders and collaboratively incorporated as leaders and decision-makers in the developing Christian movement. A process of leadership maturation is thus understood and employed from the inception of the missionary movement. Alex Araujo illustrates the merging of two leadership streams into one by describing two large rivers which flow into the Amazon River to become one near Manaus, Brazil. The Negro River appears dark and clear, like Coca-Cola seen through a glass. The Solimoes River, however, is full of sediment and appears grayish white. For miles downstream they appear as two rivers sharing the same river bed--dark on one side, grayish white on the other--but gradually the waters intermingle to become one mighty river. Likewise, national and missionary streams of leadership must flow together and intermingle to become one (1993, 362-63).

Collaboration implies the developing maturity of both the missionaries and national leaders, each with changing roles. Missionaries who were culture and language learners in the Learning Stage become teachers, evangelists, and church planters in the Growth Stage and equippers, encouragers, and advisers in the Collaborative Stage. National leaders who were converts during the Learning and Growth Stages become collaborators and fellow-resource people--full participants in a collaborative process.

In the Collaborative Period national leaders come to *own* their movement and make decisions for its continuity. All too frequently, paternalistic missionaries thwart national initiatives believing the nationals are out of line, usurping authority, or acting naively. Effective missionaries, however, serve as encouragers and advisers, co-facilitators in

decision-making processes. National leaders and missionaries thus work together to lay the foundations for eventual missionary phase-out and for the movement's continuity.

Cooperatively developing *structures of continuity* for the future is the major focus of the Collaborative Stage. Monte Cox, in an insightful Ph.D. dissertation, says that "organization ambiguities" of certain anti-institutional movements like Churches of Christ have "dampened morale and perhaps stunted the growth of the church" in rural church plantings in Kenya (Cox 1999, 216). When churches reach what is here called the Collaborative Stage, they begin to ask *structural* questions:

What are the structures of governance, expansion, finance and theological education? Or, in Kalenjin^(footnote 7) parlance, how can churches show *kipagenge* (unity) and cooperate for the sake of *ribset* (member care), *amdaet* (evangelism), *tesetab tai* (development), and *somanet* (education). (Cox 1999, 217)

Strong movements develop structures of continuity on both the congregational and associational levels. On the congregational level the community of faith, guided by the Word of God, must determine how local churches are organized and how these local congregations relate to one another. The community must also agree on the nature and roles of elders, deacons, evangelists, and other local church leaders and implement guidelines for their selection. In addition, the local church must develop methods and structures for nurturing and equipping children, young people, and congregational leaders. These decisions, having begun with guidance from the church planting missionaries during the Growth Period, become a collaborative effort during this stage of church development.

On the associational level mature leaders and missionaries collaborate in developing teaching, equipping, and encouraging structures above the level of the local church. Local congregations should bond together, as did the early churches in Jerusalem, so that they help each other. Vocational, paravocational, and full-time national evangelists must form teams to complete the evangelization of their area and spread the Gospel into adjoining and distant areas. Training schools on the association level--almost always, out of necessity-- provide forums for creative reflection and equipping of leaders and youth for local congregations. The need for such structures of continuity is frequently questioned in anti-institutional movements like Churches of Christ. Instead such movements espouse a sort of indigeneity which negates any sort of partnership even when a movement has developed roots and stability (Cox 1999, 225-26).

Our team working among the Kipsigis people of Kenya competently ministered during the Learning and Growth Periods but lacked understandings to go on to the Collaborative Stage. Developing leaders asked: "Does the Church of Christ in America only have local churches? Who equips and encourages these churches?" Others said, "We thank you missionaries for starting these churches and for teaching us to become evangelists and church planters. But should you not now equip us as leaders?" Our team, however, holding firmly to an indigenous philosophy of missions, failed to see the validity of these questions and did not plan *with* the national church for their future. The result was a

movement that grew from the mid-1970s until the late 1980s. In the late 1980s, however, the inevitable clash between non-collaborating missionaries and maturing national leaders occurred. National leaders met without missionaries to form a hierarchy to make plans for local churches. Like the clashing of two mighty bodies of water, *pororooca* occurred. Missionaries and many national leaders upheld the autonomy of the local church and refused to accept the authority of the proposed centralized leaders. Others, many of whom had personal agendas, attempted unsuccessfully to provide structure for the developing movement. Churches polarized. This tension and ambivalence caused the movement in Kipsigis to stagnate for a period of time.

During the 1990s several factors worked together to reverse discouragement, to help the young movement stabilize, and to develop structures of continuity for the equipping of local churches. First, a second-generation team of American missionaries worked in Kipsigis for approximately ten years encouraging existing churches and training leaders in congregationally-based courses. Second, churches from all areas of Kipsigis met together in 1990 to pray and forgive each other and acknowledge the unity of the body of Christ. God worked powerfully to heal old wounds and unite the body of Christ in love. Third, older missionaries returned to encourage national leaders and younger missionaries. At first they primarily taught textual courses to groups of national leaders in local churches throughout Kipsigis but eventually began to collaborate with national leaders to institute nationally-led structures of continuity. As a result, churches began to appoint elders over clusters of churches (rather than over individual churches), and Siriat Bible School was initiated to train leaders and youths of area churches. The school's schedule is unique but fitting for its rural environment. Leaders, selected and supported by their churches, study two one-week classes. They then return home to do required practicums as they care for their farms and continue their jobs. After five or six weeks they return to the school for the next two one-week classes. This cycle is continued for two years (24 classes), when they graduate. The school has been nationally run from its inception. A committee of national leaders from all areas of Kipsigis provides direction, and a full-time principal facilitates school activities. Structures of continuity are thus developing at a later period in Kipsigis on both the congregational and associational levels.

Two extremes are possible in regard to the Collaborative Stage. At one extreme, missionaries phase out before leaders mature and structures of continuity develop. Christians generally become discouraged in this situation because they are not ready for the missionaries' departure. Some Christians may, consequently, revert to the world, others affiliate with different Christian religious groups, and still others maintain their heritage and learn to survive without missionary support. This premature phase-out ignores the need for collaboration. At the other extreme, missionaries naively jump past the Growth Stage by creating training institutions without adequately nurturing developing churches and equipping national leaders. These schools almost always reflect the worldview presuppositions and economics of the sending culture. Missionaries in this scenario generally assume that Bible knowledge alone enables national leaders to effectively minister in their own culture. They presuppose that cognitive information without contextualization and application is adequate for ministry preparation. Both early

phase-out and premature development of institutions imply inadequate understandings about the progressive development of Christian leaders. Just as children pass through several stages of development before they become adults, national leaders require growth through natural stages to become mature.

When structures of continuity have been mutually developed by missionaries and national leaders, the stage is set for missionary phase-out.

(footnote 7) Kalenjin is a name for seven tribes of Western Kenya of which Kipsigis is the largest.

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