

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

The Learning Period

Approximately the first two years on the mission field are appropriately called the *learning period* or the *adaptation stage*. Missionaries are learning to live in new contexts and adapt to them. During this period, four interrelated types of learning take place. Missionaries learn (1) to speak a new *language*, (2) to understand the *culture* of the people among whom they are working, (3) to form personal *relationships* within the culture, and (4) to develop *models of ministry* appropriate to the context.

Two extremes are common during this stage. On the one hand, some missionaries assume that they should not begin communicating the Gospel until the *learning stage* is completed--until language and culture learning are accomplished. Christianity, however, is the core of identity. Missionaries cannot easily lay aside their identity even during the early stages of missionary work. They should learn languages and cultures as *Christians* and thus express and live out these distinct Christian perspectives! Christian proclamation must be incorporated rather than marginalized during the learning of language and culture. When effective language and culture learning takes place, the first converts are frequently made and a church established, even during this preliminary learning stage. Missionaries must, however, understand their communicational limitations and work within these. They should teach using broad, general concepts and use indigenous illustrations only with the greatest of care. On the opposite extreme, some missionaries naively bypass the learning stage. They conceive that "people are people all over the world and the Gospel can be presented in the same way in all contexts." They, therefore, desire to be teachers without learning first. Without active language and culture learning during the first months on the field, the missionaries' effectiveness in all other stages is reduced, and the resulting movement is typically anemic rather than a vibrant.

As stated earlier, effective missionaries should be *identificationists*, but the nature of their identification varies from stage to stage as the Christian movement matures. In this early adaption phase missionary identification is broadly focused and may be defined as *learning the general patterns of a new recipient culture*. The major role of missionaries during this stage is *learner*.

During this stage of missionary life, our team first learned the Kiswahili trade language and then the Kipsigis vernacular. Although many people know the trade language, we found that for communicating the message of Christ the trade language could not substitute for the language of the heart. As we learned the Kipsigis language, we also learned Kipsigis culture. It became evident that to learn the language was also to learn the culture. Language categories form the cognitive domains expressing the building blocks of the cultural worldview.

Four months after our arrival in Kipsigis, the first six people came to Christ. We found that language/culture learning and ministry could not be segmented: As we learned, we

also expressed who we were and taught the message of reconciliation to God in Christ in our own very elementary way. During this stage I personally was pulled in two different directions: Not only was I working with those of the Kipsigis tribe, but I also found hundreds of workers on the area tea estates who were receptive to the Gospel. Within a year I baptized 150 people in these estates. But we soon found that the workers on these estates were all visitors, living out of their tribal area and that establishing a permanent movement where all the people are visitors is very difficult. Although a large number were converted, without the support of the home community, many reverted to their old ways. We came to realize that stable churches are established when people are converted where they "live" rather than where they "stay," a linguistic differentiation made by local people in both the Kiswahili and Kipsigis languages. Thus our model of ministry radically shifted to preach where people "live" [i.e., their home area] rather than where people "stay." [i.e., their work place].

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