DEVELOPING AN AFRICAN MISSIONARY STRUCTURE[1]

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A. Introduction

The African church is considered tc be the fastest-growing church in the world. This reputation is not something African Christian thinkers are always comfortable about, for the following reasons:

(1) This worldwide reputation makes the African church complacent. "Growing pains" are sometimes used to cover a multitude of sins, for example:

- -Lack of pastoral concern on the part of church leaders.
- -Lack of financial accountability.
- -Lack of emphasis on discipleship, and training in a holistic life style.
- -Lack of discipline in attitude to work.
- -Lack of love among the brethren.
- -Lack of Biblical teaching of tithing, and so forth.

(2) The phenomenal growth of the African church is often used as a valid reason for continuing dependence on foreign funds and personnel. Perpetual dependency leads to a "Dead Sea" syndrome. Very little foreign aid comes with no strings attached. No church can truly come of age as long as she continues to live on handouts. The fact that there is a more expensive fleet of cars parked outside an average urban church in Africa than there would be in Britain is a clear indication that the African church is not quite as poor as the world is made to believe. It is common knowledge among experienced missionaries that the African church somehow manages to find money locally to do what they consider to be a priority.

(3) For decades the image the world has had of the African church is that of a fat baby, growing fatter every day but never growing up! She is forever on milk, not on solid food which is prepared in Africa and fit for international consumption. That is the reason why the apparatus of virtually all external missionary agencies operating in Africa is designed for sending.

The task we face is first to seek to convince our African church leaders that a child who gets fatter every day is not necessarily a healthy baby. Numerical growth in church membership needs to be harnessed into producing faithful, maturing disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, able to minister cross-culturally and internationally. A church not involved in mission will forever be a mission field.

Secondly, our task is to convince the rest of the world that the church in Africa has come of age and is able and willing to make her contribution to the world-wide missions of the Church universal. Foreign missionary societies operating in Africa must be encouraged to overhaul their traditional structures to receive missionaries from Africa. Genuine reciprocal partnership in world mission gives validity to the unity of the body of Christ.

B. Obstacles to Developing an African Missionary Structure

(1) Obstacles from Within the Church in Africa

There are enough problems inherent in the multi-cultural nature of the African church and the vastness of the continent. In addition to this, the church in Africa unfortunately reflects the problems of the society at large (e.g., ostentatious living, corruption and lack of accountability, power struggles, and so forth). We must know what it means to be a holy people in the world before we can be effectively involved in world mission. Other problems needing to be addressed are the following:

(a) Tribal insularity stands in the way of making the best use of our limited human resource. Tribal affiliation comes before spiritual leadership qualities when it comes to making church appointments.

(b) Lack of freedom to move with the Spirit hinders individual responsiveness. Willing submission to the will of the community is a great asset in the African traditional way of life. However, for the Christian Church, doing God's will must be her pre-occupation. In all things, Christ must be pre-eminent. Individual Christians must have the freedom to seek God's will, while being prepared to have their understanding of His will validated by the leadership of the church. Missionary service is not by conscription but by voluntary submission of individual Christians to the perceived will of God. It is not uncommon in the African church for well-trained, gifted church ministers who are considered to be trouble-makers by their bishops to be "sentenced" to terms of missionary service in remote parts of the country or as teachers in a Bible College!

(c) The African church suffers from a misapplication of productive efforts. Theologically trained ministers end up doing administrative jobs (for which they are not qualified) instead of

"equipping the saints for the work of ministry." Thus the church suffers a double loss: of money spent in training the ministers, and also of the services of their most able leaders.

The reason for the above is twofold. First, further education in the context of secular Africa is regarded to be a shortcut to promotion and success, and parish work does not seem to attract the attention of the ecclesiastical power-brokers. Provincial or diocesan officers are better paid than parish ministers and such administrative positions provide a higher visibility and also a power-base from which to climb the ecclesiastical ladder, especially for the ordained clergy.

Secondly, sometimes theologically trained and gifted pastors are shunted into administration or into theological colleges because they have become a threat to the denominational leaders. Thus able young leaders become frustrated and can even pass on their frustration to potential leaders who are in training.

(d) Lack of internationally acceptable currency restricts the scope of operation. Many African countries suffer from a chronic economic situation because of the devaluation of local currency. The cost of sending and supporting missionaries abroad is beyond the reach of the African church due to the high rate of exchange. A way has to be found around this problem before the concept of sending African missionaries overseas can be embraced by the African church.

This matter of foreign exchange is a slippery slope for many African leaders. In many countries you need foreign exchange to buy spare parts for your aging car, typewriter, duplicator, clerical attire (!), communion wine (!), water pump, electricity generating plant for the church hospital, and so forth. The temptation to embrace foreign initiated projects as a means of receiving foreign aid is a temptation that very few African leaders are able to resist. The Bible-training programmes, on-going training for clergy and printing of Sunday School materials are sacrificed as trained evangelists become tour guides and translators for development workers!

(2) Obstacles from Outside the Church in Africa (i.e., from the existing Western missionary societies operating in Africa)

Very few of the missionary agencies operating from the West are able to embrace the idea of receiving African missionaries within their existing structure. Moreover, to do so, they have to overcome some major obstacles including the following:

(a) The present mind-set of the home supporters, which is geared to sending only. Sincere and committed Christians in the West instinctively think that missionaries go out from their "civilised"

society to the "dark and alien" parts of the world. Christians in the West need to be taught that the Great Commission was given to the whole Church and that the church in Africa has a vital part to play in the international mission of the church.

(b) The fear of moratorium on Western missionaries. The church in Africa will continue to welcome missionaries with spiritual depth and qualifications to meet their needs, people called by God, able to give and receive, mission partners willing to serve under national leadership. Reciprocal partnership, not unilateral moratorium is what the church in Africa is advocating.

(c) Fear of losing financial support at home. Sending the privileged to work among the under-privileged is highly marketable. It appeals to people's consciences so they give financial support. It is feared that the reverse will not bring in the money because the infant church of Africa will be deprived of their very few able leaders. It is, however, good to remember that most people who ended up on the mission field from the West were people the home church could ill-afford to lose because of their exceptional dedication. Should the African church be denied the same opportunity?

As an African missionary in the UK, I can honestly say that the church in the West needs the simple but enthusiastic faith of the African church to cope with the challenge of surviving as a minority group in an increasingly pluralistic and multi-faitn society. My guess is that missionary societies that are committed to genuine partnership in mission will continue to operate in the 21st Century.

(d) Contentment with maintaining the status-quo. Missionary societies by and large have not been able to make the much needed adjustments to meet the needs of the changed and changing situation on the mission field. Since the sending of missionaries is one-sided, they have not been able to negotiate with the leaders as equal partners. The supply of missionary personnel remains firmly in the hands of the missionary societies but control over specific location assignments on the field is in the hands of national leadership who are often too busy to provide effective supervision and spiritual support. Very few missionaries find fulfilment working on the periphery of the national church life. This may be the main reason for the rapid turnover of missionaries in many countries in Africa. Those who operate on the periphery cannot really belong.

C. What Kind of Missionary Structure is Suitable for Africa?

Dynamic missionary structure cannot be programmed. It must be allowed to evolve. It is likely that this structure is going to take different

forms reflecting the rich diversity of the African continent. In some parts it may be diocesan, in others provincial, national or international. However, in order for the structure to be dynamic it would need to make room for the following elements:

(1) Sufficient local or national support to get it off the ground.

(2) Individual Christians must be given the opportunity to respond to the call of God to go out as a missionary with the validation and support of local leadership. (I do not mean a bishop alone but a godly group of praying and supportive people whose job it is to recruit missionaries.)

(3) Missionary training which will equip the would-be missionary for the specific job he or she is called to do. Such training needs to be Biblical, cross-cultural, practical, and relevant. An ideal situation for training is to have together as participants candidates from the receiving and the sending countries as a visible demonstration of genuine partnership in mission.

(4) However the missionary organization raises funds, it is important that it has freedom to act creatively and decisively in pursuing its missionary objectives.

(5) Freedom to promote the work of missions and encourage church involvement in its area of jurisdiction.

(6) An administrative infra-structure which is able to respond quickly to the needs of its missionaries on the field and when on deputation.

(7) Good lines of communication with the church authorities who are hosts to its missionaries.

(8) Its missionaries should generally be paid national wages where they serve under a reciprocal arrangement. One way out of the international currency exchange problem is for the sending country to be responsible only for the air-fares of its missionaries and deputation expenses while on home leave.

(9) Duration of overseas service of the missionaries should not be such as would lead to permanent dependency.

D. How to Put a Missionary Structure into Operation

The support of national leadership is crucial. The concept needs to be discussed widely in the hope that some national church leaders will run with it and others will catch the vision. Operating a missionary agency

is a costly business and the African church will have to count the cost. Securing the right calibre of African missionaries to serve internationally may deprive the African church of some of her able leaders. The African church may have to give a tithe of its leaders to strengthen the worldwide Church.

Recommended Stages are as Follows:

(1) Biblical teaching on cross-cultural mission needs to be taken seriously, and missionary openings for African missionaries on the international scene need to be shared.

(2) A group of African leaders should consider the operational structures of the various missionary societies in Africa in the light of Scripture and make recommendations for setting of structures that are both Biblical and African.

(3) The exchange of church workers on an international basis for six months or one year will help to increase missionary awareness and give opportunity to assess the actual demand for African missionaries.

(4) Indigenous missionary societies will have to have international outlets for their prospective missionaries. Some form of reciprocal partnership arrangement could be worked out between some Western missionary societies (with long, traditional links with the church in Africa) and the indigenous missionary societies. Such an agreement could include missionary recruitment, exchange of personnel, training curricula, placement and supervision on the field, currency exchange, and so forth.

E. Conclusion

In seeking to set up a missionary structure for the church in Africa our aim is to increase international missionary awareness and to challenge the church in Africa to be part of God's solution to the needs of the world. To demonstrate that she has come of age, the church in Africa, in cooperation with the rest of the worldwide Church, must become active in world mission.

ENDNOTE

[1]A paper delivered at the African Missionary Seminar held 8-15 September 1987 in Nairobi, Kenya. Reprinted with permission from the report of the Seminar, Crossing Cultures for Christ, eds. Robert Oehrig, Rhena Taylor, and Diane Omondi (Nairobi: Daystar University College, 1987). Orders for the complete report (110 pages) may be addressed to: Daystar Research Department, PO Box 44400, Nairobi, Kenya.