

From Paternalism To Partnership: The Sensitive Handover of Missions Work to Indigenous Leaders

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Abstract

This article seeks to address the handover process of missions work from pioneer missionaries to indigenous leaders. It posits that this can only be done in a biblical way if paternalism yields to partnership. The article justifies paternalism in the commencement of missions work, but argues that there is a point beyond which paternalism becomes unjustifiable and crippling to the work of God's kingdom. Instead of simply condemning the crippling paternalism, the author goes on to point to the way in which true partnership can be birthed. It is through mutual respect and admiration between the missionaries and the indigenous leaders. The author uses the Bible to show that church planting missions work should go through at least three phases of development. He then ends his article by showing how mutual respect and admiration between missionaries and indigenous leaders enhances the handover process. In the light of the difficulties experienced at this juncture of missions work, and in view of the shift of the future of missions from the Western world to the Majority World, this article addresses a very pertinent subject.

1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that one of the greatest challenges in the work of missions is the handover process from the foreign missionaries to the indigenous leaders. Relationships that were once warm and friendly have often become sour and bitter because of the failure to handle this process properly. A work that was once thriving has become shrivelled at best or even fragmented, resulting in many breakaways that spoil the ecclesiastical landscape. Hence, churches and denominations that are involved in church planting missions have asked themselves how they can do it differently so that their good is not spoken of as evil Cantrell, (2004:7), Hiebert, (1994:9-10).

This article seeks to address this matter and point in the direction where, perhaps, answers may be found. It acknowledges the fact that one of the greatest hindrances in this handover process is paternalism. To be sure, paternalism has some legitimacy in the earlier stages of any missions work, but somewhere along the way, missionaries need to exchange the old wineskins for new ones. As long as paternalism continues, efforts at growing the work will be like pouring new wine into old wineskins. The wineskins break and the new wine is spilt on the ground.

**This article forms part of the research in progress as part of the degree PhD (Missions) at the University of Pretoria.*

So, the heart of this article is an assertion that there is need for paternalism to give way to true partnership if a proper handover is to occur. It shows a legitimate way in which this can be done and provides some practical steps to take in order to achieve this.

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2. The Legitimacy of Paternalism

Paternalism is almost a curse-word in missions. This is often because it is used to refer to the attitude of monopoly, authoritarianism and control of missionaries, even when they have raised indigenous leaders with whom they should share that authority and control. Yet, that is only one aspect of paternalism. The *Online Etymology Dictionary* defines paternalism as “‘government as by a father over his children’, 1881, from paternal+ism”. In other words, the root meaning of the word has to do with the attitude of a father raising children in a home.

In the early part of missions, this is the way in which a missionary carries out his work. This is legitimate because the missionary is the one who is bringing knowledge (the gospel) and experience of the Christian life to impart to his new converts in precisely the way in which a parent in a home has monopoly on knowledge and experience. It is also biblical. The apostle Paul, speaking about the early days of his church-planting work in Thessalonica says, “For you know how, *like a father with his children*, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God” (1 Th 2:11-12, emphasis mine).

Paternalism, therefore, is not always wrong. In the early stages of missions work it is inevitable. Missionaries assume they have knowledge, while the people they are going to are in ignorance. That is not arrogance. They intervene into the lives of the people and persuade them to accept Jesus Christ as their Saviour. Up to this point, paternalism is legitimate.

3. The Illegitimacy of Paternalism

There are many times when this legitimate paternalism is extended beyond this initial stage and becomes a means of controlling the work. That is when paternalism becomes illegitimate. It is like parents who fail to see that their children are now young adults and still want to control them as if they were little children. Missionaries can use their funding of the mission to keep a stranglehold on the work so that the indigenous leaders cannot express themselves freely for fear that the funding will be withdrawn and the mission work shut down. They fail to recognise that the Holy Spirit who was at work in them was the same Holy Spirit at work in the hearts of their converts. They need to let go so that the young church and its leaders can go forward without them. This is often very frustrating for the new indigenous leaders coming through the ranks Allen (1991:vii, 144-145), Bosch, (1991:369-370). Mikel Newmann says,

“Paternalism, the concept of intervening actively for the perceived wellbeing of another, has long existed in mission. People with knowledge, skills, funds, or power (the older mission) have used them to get new churches to follow their demands. An example of paternalism is a mission keeping control of a work because it feels that the locals are unqualified and would do themselves and the cause of Christ harm by taking leadership. Paternalistic attitudes assume superior knowledge, wisdom and skills. While well-intentioned in some cases, they fail to recognise the work of the Holy Spirit in young churches and their leaders” Moreau (2000:730).

The work of missions must have a terminus. The terminus should be when the work becomes self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. This terminus is not an event but a process. As long as missionaries still feel that the potential indigenous leaders are not yet up to standard, they will remain in charge, using their advantaged position to control everything. Any leadership appointments will be nothing more than mere tokenism. This is where the example of Jesus comes in handy. He developed leadership for the foundational stages of the Christian church over a period of three years—three years only. A time came when he told them that the initial paternalism that he exhibited could not continue because they were now his friends (Jn 15:15). He handed over the work completely and ascended to heaven.

4. The Answer Lies in True Partnership

So, then, if we were to get rid of paternalism, what should we have in its place? The answer is partnership. In order for legitimate growth to take place in the work of missions, missionaries must strive to create an ambience of true partnership in the leadership of the work. Hence, there must be three phases in the work of missions. We see this very clearly in the way the apostles handed over leadership in the new areas in which they planted churches. The church in Antioch is a case in point (Ac 13-15).

a) The initial paternalistic phase

In this first phase, as already stated, the missionary, as the sole depository of biblical truth, will be in control of everything—the money, the administration, the teaching, the preaching, the programmes, the ordinances, etc. His goal will be not only to evangelise but also to disciple the new converts. In the church in Antioch, the first apostle to get there was Barnabas. He then had to go to Tarsus to bring another apostle to participate in the work of preaching and teaching. That is legitimate paternalism!

b) The shared leadership phase

In this second phase, the missionary will notice that there are some individuals among the converts who distinguish themselves in the knowledge of the truth and

also in living out the principles of life that have been taught. He will gather them for specialised leadership training. The training must involve sharing responsibilities with them. In the church in Antioch, the time came when Barnabas and Saul were part of a leadership with the very people they had groomed into leaders. Another example of this is the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, where the apostles shared leadership with the elders of the church in Jerusalem despite the fact that they came to faith through them Keddie (1993:173). That is shared leadership. This is a difficult phase but it must still be done Allen (1991:143).

c) The final withdrawal phase

In this third phase, the missionary will begin to withdraw from the work of leadership so that the indigenous leaders can take full control of the work under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They must be allowed to take charge of all the preaching, the finances, the administration, the ordinances, etc. This is by far the most difficult because as mature as the indigenous leaders might be, the missionary has also matured even more and can see their early leadership mistakes Allen, (1991:143). It is difficult not to interfere.

In the church in Antioch, Barnabas and Saul allowed themselves to be set apart as missionaries by the church they planted and the leaders they groomed, and they left the church in order to fulfil the new responsibility that had been placed on their hands. When they later found wrong teaching in Antioch, they did not overrule the leaders. Rather they formed part of the team that returned to Jerusalem for arbitration. This is real withdrawal.

5. The Need for Mutual Respect

We have earlier asserted that the handing over is not an event but a process. It is a very delicate process. So, in order for the movement from paternalism to partnership to be real, there is need for both the missionaries and the indigenous leaders to have mutual respect for one another. The mistake that is often made by mission bodies is to think that having the right systems and agreements will secure a smooth transition Lumba (1995). That may be all right for secular organisations, but for the Christian church something that includes the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individuals is more likely to bring about success. This is where we can apply the statement by the apostle Paul that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6).

Where there is a lack of mutual respect there will soon be an atmosphere of suspicion and lack of trust. This totally undermines the process of hand over. The missionaries reluctantly hand over the keys to the tools of ministry because of pressure from the local people or the indigenous leaders wring it out of the missionaries’ hands while the missionaries squirm. Where the missionaries resist and hang on to “the keys”, a split is looming Lumba (1995).

Where there is an atmosphere of mutual respect between the missionaries and the

indigenous leaders, even where the ordinary church members seek to undermine the work of the missionaries due to their lack of spirituality, the indigenous leaders will stand up for the missionaries and defend them. They know their integrity and respect them for it. This is what is being advocated in this article.

6. The Need for Mutual Admiration

Mutual respect is only the first rung of the ladder. There is also a need for both the missionaries and the indigenous leaders to have mutual admiration for one another. We admire someone when we see qualities in him or her that even we do not have. It may simply be a level of courage that is unequalled. This goes beyond respect. It is a high regard.

It is easier for the local leaders to admire the missionaries because they are the ones who brought the gospel to them. It demands a lot more spirituality and humility for missionaries to also admire the local leaders Wickeri (2005:506). This admiration must hang on the person's spiritual progress and not on any material or financial status. Often missionaries rightly admire a local leader who overcomes cultural norms when they conflict with clear biblical teaching. Also, when a local leader is willing to gently and humbly but openly confront a missionary over some perceived wrongdoing, that leader is truly worth admiring. Many people prefer to pretend all is well but vent their disappointment through gossip.

Where there is mutual admiration, even the missionary genuinely wants to learn from the indigenous leader especially in those areas where he admires his qualities. It does not happen overnight. Like all fruit, it takes time to grow. The longer the missionaries and the indigenous leaders work together, the deeper their mutual respect and admirations grows.

7. Training Missionaries Towards Partnership

The ability of a missionary to relate to indigenous people with respect and admiration is often a result of unconscious training that takes place in that person's early childhood years. The way in which that person's parents and older siblings related to the disadvantaged in their society often rubs off on them without their knowing it. Sadly, the opposite is equally true. Prejudices based on skin colour or education or wealth is often learnt from parents and older siblings, or even important people in the community, while a person is still very young. It would be wrong to deny a person the right to serve as a missionary simply because of such a past. Therefore, something must be done in the training of missionaries to address this matter.

Part of the required reading for potential missionaries while undergoing training should be the reading of biographies where pioneer missionaries seamlessly handed over the work to indigenous leaders. These examples need to be studied and woven into the curriculum. One such example in Zambia is Olive Doke, the

South African Baptist missionary who, together with others, pioneered Baptist work in Zambia one hundred years ago (Kemp, 1987, Kretzschmar, undated). Her relationship with the first Zambian indigenous leader, Paul Kasonga, speaks of mutual respect and admiration, which resulted in a seamless handover of leadership in the Kafulafuta Mission. This working relationship grew and matured over a period of no less than twenty-five years.

Then at a more doctrinal level, it is important to include in the missions training some teaching and exercises that will enable them to see that all human beings are created equal. The fact that we received the gospel before others, and benefited from its fruit of development and culture, does not mean we are superior to those who are only now receiving its light. There is also a need to emphasise knowledge of and respect for the culture of the people being reached with the gospel. Often, what looks like a waste of time at best, or animism or ancestral worship, can simply be their form of veneration of the elderly or the aged. Hence, understanding the meaning behind the actions helps to foster mutual respect.

8. Working on the Field Towards Partnership

Missionaries need to know that missions—especially church planting missions—must have a terminus. That does not mean the missionary should leave the field. It means that the keys of the tools of ministry should be handed over to indigenous leadership at some stage Masters (1920:199). This must not simply happen but should be deliberately worked towards through a well thought-out road map. This road map should include teaching the converts about it. It is this failure to deliberately work yourselves out of a job that really frustrates the local leadership.

This will involve the missionaries spending a lot of time building deep relationships with the leaders being groomed in an atmosphere of openness, integrity, and mutual accountability especially over money matters Moreau (2004:286, 365-366, 727). Ignorance feeds suspicion; transparency shows humility. However, as they see how the missionaries handle their own lives, the demands of the work, etc., the local leaders will grow in their respect and admiration for them. The same will happen the other way around. The missionaries will also grow in their respect and admiration for the local leaders as they see the way they handle issues in their lives and work in the church. This will help to make the withdrawal process less nerve-racking and traumatic.

Finally, there must come a period when the missionaries refuse to take on responsibilities that they know the fledgling church leaders should start doing, even when they are floundering. It is part of the growing-up process. We have all made mistakes and learnt a lot from them!

9. Conclusion

Missionaries should work themselves out of a job. They should do it in such a way that after a period of training and handing over, they can cry, “It is finished!”

(as Jesus did on the cross), or “I have finished the race” (as Paul did in 2 Tm 4:7). As Africa joins the great missionary movement in sending out missionaries right across the globe, let us not repeat the mistakes of the past. The task of missions is still vast when one thinks of the 10/40 Window, the rural areas of Africa, etc. Let us ensure that the early and legitimate paternalism with which we begin the work of missions soon gives way to a true partnership built on mutual respect and admiration with the indigenous leaders we will be grooming to take over the work.

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