

What Can We Learn from Ourselves and Others About Establishing Indigenous Churches?

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In missiological circles there are very few references made these days to the “indigenous” church. The reason for this is not hard to figure out. It is simply no longer popular to talk about “planting Christian Churches on foreign soil.” Such words, which go back directly to the origin of the indigenous church concept, naturally presuppose a position of priority on the part of the planting agency. In these days of nationalistic sensitivity in Third World countries anything which suggests a paternalistic relationship is studiously avoided.

Organizations associated with the World Council of Churches, therefore, prefer to regard all Christian churches on all six continents as being on an equal basis. If some churches still receive support from others, this is referred to as a “mutually enriching experience.” Missiological seminars list on their agendas topics relating to “acculturation,” “incarnation,” and “contextualization” rather than “indigenization.” It is more current to speak about “dynamic-equivalence churches” than “indigenous churches.”

Changing terminology, of course, doesn't alter situations. Those who often shout the loudest at church conferences about wanting to get rid of all “imperialistic” and “neo-colonialistic” influences from Western countries, and who in rash moments even propose such things as a “moratorium on all foreign aid,” are often the first to extend their hands after the conferences are over. The whole business of foreign aid is still very much there, and urgently needed.

We as a church are still involved in this work of helping to establish churches in countries other than our own. We see no reason why we can't continue using the term “indigenous” if it helps us to understand better what we are doing. Although we haven't been at this work as long as other church bodies, we've been at it long enough to know that it isn't easy. At times we pause, such as at this conference, to evaluate what we are doing in the light of Scripture, in the light of our own past experiences, and in the light of the experience of others.

I. What Can We Learn from Ourselves?

A. Principles and Objectives, Board for World Missions, WELS

In 1965 our Board for World Missions presented its “Underlying Principles and Primary Objectives” for adoption by the Synod. The “Underlying Principles” as well as the first two parts of the “Primary Objectives” give the scriptural foundation for doing world mission work. These are certainly basic for any consideration of mission methods. (Our previous essay has considered the scriptural principles involved in developing indigenous churches.)

Part Three, then, under “Primary Objectives” goes on to say: “**The policy of planting indigenous churches, rather than long dependent missions is another objective which will be followed wherever the Board conducts mission work.**”¹ This part, which defines our position towards the indigenous church policy, is divided into sub-parts A, B, and C. A refers to the **aim of planting** indigenous churches, B to the **need for flexibility** in carrying out this aim, and C to the **need for setting up additional plans and procedures** for carrying on this work, a task in which each Executive Committee is also to play a major part.

The aim under A is worded as follows:

¹ Handbook, Board for World Missions, *Underlying Principles and Objectives*, p. II-4.

Our aim under this objective is to awaken and foster in newly converted children of God the awareness, the willingness, and the joy of using the gifts which are given by the Holy Spirit as fruits of faith for the administration, the support, and the propagation of the work of the Church in their midst.²

We note here that the “three selfs” of the indigenous church policy—administration, support, propagation—are referred to as “**fruits of faith.**” Nowhere have we seen the policy itself defined in a more evangelical way. Succeeding points under this statement of aim emphasize the **early inclusion of converts** in all phases of church work—development of national leaders, administration, evangelism work, and support programs. The word “early” occurs six times in this section.

Part B has the statement: “The indigenous church policy is considered the ideal, but it is not an inflexible prescribed code.”³ The follow-up sentence here merits repeating as well: “Rather, understanding, consideration, patience, and love for the souls for whom Christ died will always govern the application of this policy, with the ideal always kept in view.”⁴ One wonders, after reading this sentence, how a dogmatic insistence upon a legalistic implementation of a method could ever be permitted to obscure the purpose of our work!

Part C, if we understand it correctly, provides for the **setting up of additional plans and procedures** in the carrying out of this program, especially as this relates to the work of the individual **Executive Committees.**

These added “plans and procedures” are also to provide for **missionary orientation** in the principles of doing world mission work.

B. The Indigenous Church—A Study (Roger Sprain)

When discussions at our last World Seminary Conference (E1 Paso, 1978) indicated a lack of clarity among delegates as to how the term “indigenous” should be understood and applied, a restudy of the term was requested. It is interesting to note that Roger Sprain’s study, which came about as a result of this request, **stresses essentially the same basic points contained in our Board for World Mission’s principles and objectives.** In expanding on this subject the Sprain study gives consideration to certain practical aspects of the work, but there is a remarkable agreement apparent between his points of emphasis and those of our World Board.

The Sprain study again makes a distinction between the ideal and the application. The wisdom of involving nationals from the beginning in all phases of the work is repeatedly emphasized. The need for flexibility in implementing principles is pointed out.

Significantly the Sprain study expresses two thoughts in its summation. It points to our insistence “on a **sound theological training program for the national workers**”⁵ as a possible problem in our own implementation of the indigenous church method. It also raises an important question in its concluding sentence: “What is the best...way to establish a truly independent, SOUND, LUTHERAN CONFSSIONAL national church?”⁶

C. Reactions from the Fields to the Sprain Study

When reviewing the reactions to the Sprain study which were solicited from our WELS world mission fields, it should be repeated that these reactions—excluding references to certain specific points—would be

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. II-5.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Roger Sprain, *The Indigenous Church—A Study*, p. 6.

⁶ Ibid.

essentially the same as if directed to the underlying principles and primary objectives of our Board for World Missions.

A closer look at these reactions shows **a general agreement with existing basic principles**. A number of questions are raised for possible additional study and clarification. They cover a variety of areas from training students to subsidizing workers. They indicate a wide interest in these concerns, beginning from “day one” of the mission to how to guide national pastors who have already been trained in the field. Most reactors seem to realize that all their questions and problems can’t possibly be covered in a general set of principles or policies. **They do plead, however, for some kind of forum where more opportunity can be given to a discussion of the application of our policies to existing work and to new situations as they arise.**

Several reactors reemphasize the points suggested by the concluding sentences in the Sprain study, and that is whether or not our emphasis upon the training of pastors who can work independently, together with our insistence as a confessional Lutheran church upon maintaining sound doctrinal principles, **gives a unique meaning to our understanding of what we mean by an “Indigenous Church” and what it takes to establish such a church.**

D. Summary of What We Can Learn from Ourselves

1. We learn first of all that we already have some excellent “Principles and Objectives of our Board for World Missions,” which place the matter of the indigenous church policy in good perspective. They present this policy evangelically. They warn against using methods as inflexible codes. They recognize the need for a further setting up of more specific plans and procedures through continued consultations involving the Board for World Missions, its Executive Committees, and the missionaries in the field. They urge that missionaries be thoroughly trained and indoctrinated in these indigenous principles before they are sent into their fields.
2. We learn moreover that our own recurring questions and problems relating to the establishment of indigenous churches reflect several things:
 - a. They indicate a general lack of familiarity with basic principles and policies as these have already been enunciated by our Board for World Missions.
 - b. They point up the need for constant restudy and reapplication of these principles, particularly as we begin new fields and as new situations arise on existing fields. Mission work is never static. We have become very much aware of this in our work so far. **We often wonder if as enough time is devoted in meetings of World Board and Executive Committees with representatives from the field on matters of application of policy to new situations as these constantly arise.**

Problems which cause our missionaries most concern as these relate to indigenous principles are:

 - working in “partnership” with national pastors and workers;
 - adapting our church work to cultural needs without losing our identity as a Christian church;
 - encouraging the involvement of nationals in all phases of church work;
 - how and where to help without creating too much dependency;
 - how to recover from previous misapplications of indigenous principles.
3. Our present “Primary Objectives” (Board for World Missions) stress the inclusion of “careful preliminary indoctrination of missionaries before they are sent into their fields,”⁷ including an orientation in indigenous church principles.

We seriously question whether or not adequate provision for this has been made. **To our knowledge no systematic program of mission education or orientation has been developed prior to a man’s leaving for foreign work.**

⁷ Handbook, Board for World Missions, *Underlying Principles and Objectives*, p. II-5.

4. Several reactors to the Sprain study pointed to our unique position as a confessional Lutheran church among other Protestant church bodies. Does our emphasis upon doctrinal purity require a higher level of theological competence from those pastors whom we train? Does this mean developing worker training programs which are going to be more costly than those of other churches? Will this also involve a higher rate of subsidy for the men who leave these training institutions and enter the work of the ministry?

When we refer to an “indigenous” national ministry, we think of men who have different requirements from those of other churches. It places an emphasis upon the word “indigenous” which is different from that which is commonly expressed outside our circles. **Somewhere our “Underlying Principles and Primary Objectives” ought to point out this emphasis.**

II. What Can We Learn from Others?

When considering other churches in relation to the establishment of indigenous churches, we must distinguish between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, since each of these has pursued a somewhat different course in this matter.

A. Protestantism

The problems which other Protestant churches have experienced with the “indigenous church policy” have been greater than ours, no doubt, for the simple reason that they’ve been at this work much longer than we have. Many began in the good old days of the “mission station approach,” building up huge establishments, often in the middle of nowhere, consisting of a primary and a secondary school, a dispensary or hospitals, a print shop, a Bible institute, a seminary, an agricultural scheme, a church, a trading center, and the considerable housing required for mission personnel and national staff to keep all these projects going. Missionaries often became nothing more than glorified pencil-pushers, administrators for social programs, which caused many a missionary to exclaim with the expatriate Baptist in Kumba, “I saved more souls back home in Michigan than I’m saving here!”

When we understand this situation, we can also understand the strong reaction of many of the succeeding generations of missionaries to this over-institutionalized and expensive way of doing church work, and why they were so anxious to espouse a policy which offered the hope of relief. Turning from institutionalization to indigenization, however, wasn’t all that easy. We note from many of their more recent evaluations that merely attempting to adopt indigenous church principles by no means solved all their problems. Some of their evaluations indicate that they may now have second thoughts as to whether or not they may have overreacted.

Stephen Neill, one of Protestantism’s ablest historians, referring to Henry Venn’s goal of missionaries working themselves as soon as possible out of a job, puts it this way:

Later experience has placed many question marks against Henry Venn’s formulation. Any such sharp separation between church and mission as is implied in Venn’s solution seems to lack theological foundation in the New Testament. And the first attempts to carry out the principles of Venn’s dictum proved almost wholly disastrous. The establishment of the “Native Pastorate” in Sierra Leone in 1860, with the complete withdrawal of the missionaries from participation in the affairs of the pastorate, inflicted on the church a paralysis from which a whole century has not availed to deliver it.⁸

⁸ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 260.

Neill follows this up with some rather revealing statements about the need for adequate worker-training programs in a mission field. He writes:

It was only gradually that missions and churches became aware that it was useless to talk about the development of indigenous churches unless far more attention was paid to the training and development of the indigenous ministry. A church cannot become genuinely independent unless it has local leaders capable of replacing the missionary on every level of thought and activity. Lay leaders are indispensable; but much depends on the quality of the ordained-ministry. Theological training is at the very heart of the life of a younger church.⁹

Bengt Sundkler, one of Lutheranism's leading missiologists, says practically the same thing in these words:

Theological education is of fundamental importance for the creation of autonomous churches in Asia and Africa. It is the quality and nature of theological education which decides whether or not the church has a group of leaders capable of independent thought and action.¹⁰

Sundkler connects this statement with the significant comment: "Recent experience has shown that the most important factor in the life of the young church is no autonomy but 'Christonomy': not independence, but Christ-dependence."¹¹

J. Herbert Kane, a past president of the American Society of Missiology, points to the overreaction of many church bodies vis-a-vis their former over-indulgent use of foreign funds. "Now the pendulum is in danger of swinging to the opposite extreme," Kane declares, "and the churches are suddenly told they must sink or swim."¹² Kane adds: "There is a growing awareness among mission leaders that while the receiving churches should be fully self-supporting at the local level, there is justification for the use of foreign funds at higher levels of administration."¹³

Kane applies this statement to the continued support needed to foster theological stability. He refers to the more recent efforts of extremists attempting to make Christianity "indigenous," so to speak, to national culture, and asks: "How far can the process of indigenization go without altering the hard core of Christian doctrine and practice? . . ."¹⁴ Nowhere is the problem greater than in Africa, Kane points out, where no less than 7000 sects are mixtures of animism, native customs, and magic, embellished with Christian elements and external symbols.

We have personally seen many of these independent sects in action in Africa. They are truly "indigenous" in the sense that they are completely independent of any kind of outside support. They conduct their own affairs. They worship according to their own cultural forms of expression. Unfortunately in most cases any resemblance of their teachings to Christian truth is purely coincidental. Biblical characters and terms are adapted by local prophetic leaders to conform to native customs and superstitions, resulting in a syncretistic hodge-podge which bears little similarity to true Christianity.

Kane sums up the problem in these words:

The missionary finds himself in a very delicate situation. If he does nothing and allows the church to lapse into baptized paganism, he will be abdicating his responsibility. If he tries to point out the dangers inherent in the situation he may be accused of "theological imperialism." In

⁹ Ibid., p. 518.

¹⁰ Bengt Sundkler, *The World of Mission*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 173.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² J. Herbert Kane, *Understanding Christian Missions*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), p. 411.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 416.

either case he is in trouble. . . This is one reason why the evangelical missions should help to train national theologians, who will be able to cope with the problem better than we can.”¹⁵

Perhaps we should note these words carefully when in moments of disappointment or frustration we are tempted to cut back on our theological training programs because they are running into “too many problems” or turning out to be “too expensive”!

Our own Board’s “Primary Objectives,” as we noted, **warn against applying the indigenous church policy as though it were an “inflexible prescribed code.” Other churches make the same observation.**

Harold Lindsell, editor of *Christianity Today*, states: “Conservative missionaries are sometimes guilty of confusing methods for aims, making methods an end in themselves, contrary to the clear teaching of the Word.”¹⁶ He also says:

The church needs to be careful in its choice of methods to see that only those biblically legitimate are employed, and that the ones which they do use are not rendered ineffective by becoming the end rather than the means to the end. At the heart of any method stand the people who employ that method.¹⁷

In this connection Lindsell adds a significant comment:

The primary method for spreading the gospel is through the lives of those who are engaged in the missionary task. It is incarnating the life of Christ through the missionary’s life. It is the personal, man to man, contact that is so vital to the progress of the faith.¹⁸

This statement pertains to something intangible, something which cannot easily be covered in statements on principles, objectives or methods. How is one to stress the importance of the personal conduct of a Christian in a set of policies? And yet one cannot overestimate the value of proclaiming Christ not only by precept, but also by example, particularly in a mission field. Where Christian faith is not active in a Christian life, all insistence upon following certain missiological methods is ineffectual.

Joseph L. Cannon, well-known author of the popular books entitled “For Missionaries Only,” has some choice words to say about those who want everything done according to a “three-self” rule book. “I don’t want to be contrary,” Cannon writes,

but I have always thought of my goal and responsibility as a missionary in a different light. With Paul, I feel like my responsibility is “to preach the gospel” and establish Christ-minded, Christ-loving, Christ-supporting Christians. . . It is possible, you know, to have a church of self-propagating devils!¹⁹

Cannon’s rejoinder to those who accuse him of not following the “Pauline methods” outlined in Roland Allen’s book, *Missionary Methods—St. Paul’s or Ours?* is this:

Well, I found out Paul didn’t write Roland Allen’s book, so if you don’t mind, I’d rather get it from the horse’s mouth. In reading Acts, and the letters of Paul, for the life of me, Paul is not as

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 417.

¹⁶ Harold Lindsell, *An Evangelical Theology of Missions*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), p. 35.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 136.

¹⁹ Joseph L. Cannon, *For Missionaries Only*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), p. 17.

dogmatic as Mr. Allen, and Paul doesn't seem to make any method clear at all. To the contrary, he sounds like he is willing to use any and/or all methods to lead souls to Christ.²⁰

Just one concluding remark by Joe Cannon: "You see, the methodologists are missing the boat here—they are after a formula that will guarantee missionary success, but there is no such thing!"²¹

Our church is apparently not the only one which has experienced growing tension between missionary and national worker in these days when nationalistic fervor is everywhere on the increase. The "partnership" ideal looks good on paper, but unfortunately the flesh still plays a prominent role. Stephen Neill presents some of the reasons for the clash this way:

The missionary is often afraid to lose control and to hand over to untried leaders in the church an authority which it is not certain they will be able to exercise wisely. Those (national) leaders are convinced of their capacity to run everything successfully and regard the missionary as an uncomfortable and unnecessary obstacle in the way of their complete independence.²²

Especially national church leaders are becoming more and more vociferous in their cries for complete independence. One of their leading spokesmen is E. Bolaji Idowu, writer of the book entitled *Towards an Indigenous Church*. Idowu severely censures the control exercised by Europeans for stifling Nigeria's "corporate personality" as the church seeks to develop its own forms of theological expression and worship. "Our theological institutions," he writes, "are still staffed largely with European or American tutors who may not have sympathy with the aspirations of the church for selfhood... With this set-up, it is hopeless to speak of a truly indigenous church."²³

A fact which Idowu and many other national leaders like him seem to forget is that these same theological institutions are still financed almost entirely with overseas funds. These people want it both ways: You supply the funds. We'll do the spending. J. Herbert Kane comments on this point: "The greatest single focal point of friction between mission and receiving churches involves the use of foreign funds."²⁴

Those who would counter that the answer lies in no funding of any national projects whatsoever are out of touch with reality. The missionary who lives in a comfortable home, drives an expensive vehicle, and sees to it that his family enjoys a standard of living much higher than most of the indigenous population can hardly say to his national co-worker: "Your fellow-Christians in America are doing this for me and my family only. They think it's for your own good that you receive help only according to what your own people can supply."

B. Roman Catholicism

As we turn briefly to the work of the Roman Catholic Church in its mission efforts we are at first tempted to ask if they ever heard of the "indigenous church policy" as we know it.

They continue to insist upon the same standards for training priests in Africa as for Italy. If this requires an expensive program of setting up their own school system from the primary to the seminary levels, so be it. Although many African countries now have their own African bishops and even archbishops, they continue to pour in as many expatriates as they are allowed. These are needed, of course, to help manage their huge institutional holdings.

When entering a new area they simply put up a substantial building and take for granted that sooner or later that building will have worshipers in it. Our own Lutheran church, for example, was the first to do work in

²⁰ Ibid., p. 27.

²¹ Ibid., p. 28.

²² Stephen Neill, *Call to Mission*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), p. 106.

²³ J. Bolaji Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, (London: Oxford, 1965), p. 50.

²⁴ J. Herbert Kane, *Understanding Christian Missions*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), p. 411.

the Kanyama township of Lusaka, numbering thousands of people. For various reasons, among which was a strong feeling that in keeping with indigenous principles the congregation in Kanyama ought to build its own church, we for many years never progressed beyond the temporary shelter which was set up there. The local priest, on the other hand, asked no such questions. Today the large edifice which he had erected in the middle of the township holds multiple services to accommodate the huge throngs of people which come there every Sunday. Other churches which also did not hold closely to indigenous church principles did the same, with the unfortunate result that our little flock is still struggling along, the first and possibly smallest Christian congregation in Kanyama.

(In the Matero township of Lusaka, by the way, we began by breaking every rule in the indigenous book. We built a large substantial church without even asking at the time that the congregation sign a loan agreement for this. We did, however, rather place one of our first African pastors in Matero, and today the Matero congregation is alive and thriving.)

The outward success of Roman Catholicism in Africa cannot be attributed to pioneer colonization and domination under the influence of that church, as happened in most of Latin America. In fact, the White Fathers, the Jesuits, and the Franciscans came into central Africa rather late. Recent statistics show, however, that Catholics claim a membership equaling one-fourth of the population of both Zambia and Malawi, already outnumbering all Protestant members put together.

These remarks concerning the Catholic Church are not meant to be used as an argument **against** indigenous church principles. We are not always so sure that outward success or statistics in themselves prove much of anything. This church body simply has different ideas as to how the word “indigenous” ought to be applied.

Their insistence upon a complete and thorough training of men for the priesthood, for example, whether Asian, African, or American, is their own way of applying an indigenous principle. They happen to have a different set of priorities.

And who will want to disregard the indigenous principles which Cardinal Charles Lavigerie imposed upon the Order of the White Fathers, who planted Roman Catholicism throughout much of central Africa! For five years these White Fathers were to do nothing but learn the language, customs, and culture of the indigenous people before attempting to Christianize them.

And so we also learn, perhaps, that much depends upon what we mean by “following indigenous principles”!

Summary of What We Can Learn from Others

Which brings us to a few summary statements as to what we can possibly learn from others:

1. We can learn, to begin with, that **Protestantism** has had some serious second thoughts about applying indigenous church principles too rigidly or idealistically.

The emphasis in Protestant and Evangelical circles seems rather to have shifted to discussions as to where support is still most needed and how this can most diplomatically be applied in these days of growing nationalism.

The consensus of most experts points towards the area of training responsible and theologically competent leaders as constituting the greatest need...It is also generally agreed that whatever support is extended must be given with an increasing awareness of the sensibilities of nationals toward self-identity. A missionary with feelings of ethnic or cultural superiority is better off staying at home.

There may be comfort, at least, in knowing that we are not alone in our problems as we try to extend the kingdom of God. Following this or that method gives no easy answer. Somehow when all is said and done it's good to remind ourselves of the basics, as we have mentioned several times in Part I of this presentation. Or—as Joe Cannon puts it so well:

Indigenous means “originating in a specified place or country.” Christianity originated in Palestine Yet I’m not so sure it “originated” there, because it came with Christ from heaven...As a missionary I carry the seed into a country, but God, not a group of nationals, begets it.²⁵

2. From **Catholicism** we can learn to keep on pushing forward aggressively wherever and however we can while there is still time to do it.

As governmental restrictions the world over continue to make it more difficult to carry out Christ’s mission command, even closing doors of more and more countries to the sending in of expatriate personnel, we may have to find other methods of doing the Lord’s work. As long as we continue to teach all things as He has commanded us, we can rest assured that He is also with us, even unto the end of the world.

²⁵ Joseph L. Cannon, *For Missionaries Only*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), p. 18.