THE INDIGENOUS PRINCIPLE REVISITED:
TOWARDS A COACTIVE MODEL OF MISSIONARY MINISTRY[1]

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1. Introduction

For a most of this century the approach to missions which has generally characterized the overseas ministries of evangelical missions agencies has been based on the indigenous church principle.[2] The indigenous principle suggests that the goal of the missionary movement is to bring the church in the lands where missionaries serve to the place where it is "self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating."[3] Indeed, if one were to ask many missionaries what they see as their future on the field, they would likely answer that their goal is to "work myself out of a job." While this statement echoes the sentiments of the indigenous principle,[4] it may be unrealistic in the context of missions programs and realities as we approach the beginning of a new century. It is the purpose of this paper to evaluate some of the observable, though perhaps unintended, effects of the indigenous principle and to argue that a different conceptualization of the missionary task may be needed in some situations--one that places an emphasis on the interdependence of the ministry of missionaries and the national churches they serve.

2. Evaluating the Indigenous Church in Light of Current Realities

2.1 Problems in Applying the Indigenous Church Principle

The logical implication of the indigenous principle is that there comes a point in the development of the national church in a given country when missionaries should recognize the maturity of national leadership and disengage themselves from that context to move on to other fields of service. It implies: a) that ministries started by missionaries should be surrendered to national leadership as quickly as possible so the national church can attain the goals of the three-self criteria; b) that missionaries should be criticized for staying in the country long; and c) that missions leaders are remiss if they permit this.

Yet, there are several factors which seem to run contrary to the indigenous principle, so understood. First, it may contradict the sovereign act of God in calling missionaries to fields that would seem to be strong candidates for missionary disengagement. Countries

like the Philippines, for instance, where I serve, have vibrant and growing Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. On the surface, there would seem to be little point in missionaries holding evangelistic crusades, planting churches and engaging in Bible school ministries in such a setting. Indeed, there are competent Filipinos church leaders ministering in all of these areas. Still, missionaries continue to serve in these roles, as well, feeling that they are obeying the calling of God in their lives. Moreover, when Western missionaries transfer from a country such as the Philippines, there are several missionaries from other Asian countries (notably, Korea, Malaysia and Singapore) who readily take their place and assume responsibility for the very ministries vacated by the Westerners. Likely, this occurs in other parts of the world, as well. Logic would suggest that either these missionaries are misinterpreting the calling of God, or God knows something about the need for their ministries that is not captured by a straightforward application of indigenous church principles.

Second, even when the national church has reached a level of independence whereby it should qualify for missionary disengagement, there appear to be ways that missionaries continue to make contributions that are both valued and desired by the national church. This is particularly true where the missionary brings special skills, ministries and perspectives to the work. Missionaries who have served for a considerable time in a country, learned the language and developed positive relationships with the national church may be effective in some situations *specifically because* they are not members of the host culture and are not as influenced by the internal cultural and political dynamics of the national church.

Third, the globalization of missions as expressed in the development of missionary programs by many national churches and the increasing interaction among national church movements blunts the traditional understanding of missionary and national. For instance, Asians are now missionaries to other nations and to people groups in Western countries to a degree that could soon rival the incidence of Western missionaries to Asians. In some cases, ministries that have been "indigenized" by Western missionaries are subsequently "dis-indigenzied" as Asian missionaries assume the financial support and leadership roles vacated by the Westerners.

Fourth, in some instances national churches that have reached a point of self-governance and self-propagation, and are self-supporting at the local church level, may not be in a position to provide total financial support for all the ministries provided within their countries. This is particularly true for finance-intensive ministries such as Bible schools, media ministries and similar large-scale endeavors.

Fifth, to an increasing extent when missionary funding of ministries is withdrawn national church leaders are themselves looking to outside sources to fund their ministry endeavors. For instance, it is not unusual to find Asian, African or European national church leaders sharing American pulpits with itinerating missionaries and raising funds for their own ministries and projects. In some instances, these ministries were initially funded through missionary sources. In such a case, the national church, though self-governing and self-propagating continues to draw on outside sources for support. All that

has happened is that the missionary as "middle-man" has been removed from the equation.

These factors, among others, suggest that the concept of the indigenous church as traditionally understood may not go far enough in some missions settings and that a different model may now be needed. The traditional understanding of indigenous church principles suggests that the desired end-state of national church development is independence from the missionary body that brought it into being. It does not describe what should happen after that, except by implication, that the missionary force should move on. In reality, what sometimes happens is that missionaries remain in the country doing ministry that is independent of and parallel to the work of the national church.

2.2 Overemphasis on Independence

If the natural development of the human individual can serve as an analogy here, then the indigenous church approach would involve bringing the national church from birth through childhood and adolescence to adulthood, and then launching the "mature" church into self-sufficiency, while bidding it "Farewell," and adding "and don't call me for money." Yet, as human parents who have launched their children into adulthood in just such a way fully understand, the growth to the independence of adulthood does not imply a severing of the bonds of relationship. Indeed, the mature relationships of adulthood, while different, are just as engaged as the dependency relationships of childhood.

In his much touted book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, management guru Stephen Covey suggests that the development of social and organizational relationships does not run simply from dependence to independence, but from dependence *through* independence, to interdependence, with interdependence understood as the more mature level.[5] A fully functioning human, having achieved independence, must subsequently recognize that there is a psychologically healthy state wherein he or she becomes stronger because of mutually beneficial relationships to others. This is not a return to dependency, with its quasi-parasitic reliance on another for sustenance and support, but a mutual understanding of the strength one achieves through combining resources and effort. The oft-cited analogy of the rope whose many-stranded strength far exceeds the additive strength of the independent constituents, suggests one way to view this relationship.

The indigenous church principle is designed to bring the national church from dependence to independence. This is a necessary step, and one which viewed from the standpoint of the beginning of the process, may be the only goal that seems meaningful. However, when a state of independence is reached, a more mature relationship can be contemplated--a relationship between fully autonomous agents characterized by mutual respect and cooperation. This is a relationship wherein neither has the superior position, but each contributes something unique and valuable. Carrying this analysis a bit further, it should be recognized that in the ongoing experience of such a relationship the contributions of the "equal" partners, may not involve an exchange of equal proportions on all the dimensions of the relationship. A parent, for instance, having superior financial well being, may contribute somewhat more to the financial burden of the relationship to

an offspring, while the offspring contributes vitality, energy and vision. The parent gains a sense of satisfaction in seeing his offspring acting with autonomy, maturity and responsibility, and feels thereby, that the investment has been worthwhile. Moreover, as children become comfortable with their own sense of autonomy, and overcome the concern that the parent will seek to reassert control, they actually come to place a higher value on the wisdom and understanding that comes from the parent's longer-term perspective.

I do not wish to imply that the course of national church development or the relationship of missionaries and national brethren fully parallels social development within the family. Indeed, there are many differences and the parent-child analogy only partially captures the dynamics of the relationship between the missionary body and national church bodies, and even less so that between individual missionaries and the national church. My point is that the indigenous church model fosters an approach to the nurture of national church movements that stops short of where it should go. Its perspective is independence and it sees its role as completed at that point. More importantly, in my view, it often leads to a premature disengagement of the missionary body from responsibilities for the ministries they have initiated and provides a justification for "dumping" ministries on the national church when they may be ill-prepared to receive them. The missionary leaves feeling gratified in having "indigenized" his ministry when, in fact, he has consigned it to probable extinction.

2.3 Problems in Indigenizing Ministries

One does not have to examine the process of ministry transitions from missionary to national leadership very closely to identify a pattern that could best be characterized as "cold-turkey indigenization." In this situation a missionary backed by considerable "vision" and healthy funding from outside sources initiates a dollar-intensive ministry, drags a few willing national brethren along for the ride and then drops it all in their laps when a "call" leads him elsewhere, or health, personal or ministry problems take him from the field. Lacking a foster parent, the ministry, so "indigenized," has little chance of being surviving . To the extent that we allow this to happen, we are operating with a flawed concept of indigenization. Or, it may be that the three-self philosophy does not go far enough in view of the realities of the contemporary missions world.

I am not arguing that the principles of the indigenous church model are invalid as far as they go. Indeed, as stated above, I see indigenization as the necessary first step in the process. By that I mean, working toward the establishment of a strong national church body that fulfills the three-self criteria. But, I am arguing that there is a step beyond the development of independence when fully independent agencies begin to work interdependently.[6] Nor am I suggesting that all ministries should be preserved. Ministries come and go as opportunities and critical needs change, and the Spirit leads us onwards. This is not the problem that confronts us. Rather, I am particularly concerned about the perpetuation of institutionalized dollar-intensive ministries, such as Bible schools, that depend on a long-term commitment of personnel and financial resources, and through

which we engage in an implied contract with the recipients that those ministries will continue.

3. The Coactive Ministry Approach

3.1 The Model

The model that I propose to augment the three-self indigenous church approach is based on interdependence, not independence. It is called a "coactive ministry model" because it recognizes that perpetuating the results of missionary ministries requires that they be based on the cooperation and joint commitment of the missionary and national church bodies in recognition of the individual contributions that each can best make. The term "coactive" connotes a cooperative and synergistic relationship in which the results exceed those that would be expected through independent effort. In such a relationship the contributions of the partners are not equal in every leadership and financial transaction, but equal with regard to the overall impact of their respective contributions. Thus, the relative proportions of financial, leadership and creative contributions between the missionary body and the national church become variables to be tailored to individual circumstances. At times missionaries may be in the primary leadership positions, particularly at the entry point into a ministry context, and at times nationals would serve as key leaders. At times ministries would be financed primarily by one body or the other, and at times, jointly. A coactive ministry approach looks to the development of mature "adult-based" relationships wherein neither the national leaders nor missionaries are uniformly in the predominant position, but this varies as a function of calling, vision, gifting, training and resource availability.

Thus, the process of national church development should flow from the dependence of the early pioneering days where missionaries were the ones primarily involved in evangelism, church planting and training, to independence as the national church develops its own leadership and assumes responsibility in terms of the three-self criteria of the indigenous church model, to interdependence as expressed in the coactive approach. The mature state, therefore, is not one wherein the missionary has completed his work and gone away, but a continuing mutual commitment of God-given talents and resources to the Great Commission endeavor by both missionaries and national church brethren. In this framework, neither party controls the other and each accepts the responsibilities that flow from their relationship and cooperative goals. Instead of working themselves out of a job, missionaries understand their "job" to involve supporting and facilitating the ministries of the national church in its various manifestations in whatever way possible and investing their unique abilities and gifts in cooperative endeavors. Indeed, as time goes on the missionary may change "jobs" many times as the coactive ministries in the country change.

3.2 Principles[7]

3.2.1 Assumptions

1. In most instances, missionary-led ministries in countries where there is an established national church should be initiated only when a need is mutually identified by both the missionary and national church bodies.
2. Missions agencies should not permit missionaries to unilaterally initiate ministries unless they can articulate a plan for the transition to a coactive ministry model within a stipulated time period. The time frame envisioned for the transition to a coactive state will depend on the readiness of the national church to begin to assume responsibility, but targets must be set and periodically reviewed for this to happen.
3. Institutional ministries (e.g., Bible schools) that are initiated by missionaries must be viewed as engendering a collective commitment by the missionary body rather than as the singular vision of an individual missionary. When missionaries leave such ministries, a priority must be given to assigning other missionaries to those ministries until a stable coactive profile has been achieved and the national church is able to assume a majority proportion of leadership responsibilities and financial support. This may involve a continuing involvement over many years and through the tenure of many missionaries. The national church must be assured through philosophy and consistent decisions that ministries will not be orphaned.
4. Effort is made to ensure that there is a sharing of the vision and burden for ministries by both the missionary and national church from the outset. This can best be achieved through active consultation and sharing in decisions related to the ministry.

3.2.2 Procedures

1. Conditions required to transition an existing missionary-led ministry to a coactive status:
   a. There is a shared sense of responsibility for the ministry between the missionary body and national church.
   b. There are national leaders who demonstrate a vision for the ministry.
   c. There are sufficient number of prepared/mature national leaders to effectively assume responsibility for the ministry.
   d. There is a satisfactory transition period (as related to finances, administration, etc.)
   e. There is a strategy for continuing the ministry on a coactive basis.

      Implicit in this framework is the assumption that until these conditions are met, the missionary body as a collective entity should retain responsibility for the ministry and ensure its perpetuation. This does not imply that a conscious decision cannot be made to discontinue a ministry when circumstances warrant.

2. Possible process for initiating a coactive ministry by mutual agreement between the missionary body and national church.
   . There is a mutually perceived need for the ministry.

a. During the pioneering stage, the ministry may be primarily led and financed by a missionary.
b. There is a conscious plan for developing national leadership which includes:
    i. identifying prospective leaders,
    ii. training these leaders,
    iii. mentoring these leaders into the ministry roles they are to assume, and
    iv. releasing them to assume responsibility for the ministry.
c. There is a conscious plan for developing financial support structures within the national church.
d. There is a point at which a coactive partnership in leadership and financing of the ministry is initiated.
e. The relative proportions of national/missionary participation in leadership and financing are adjusted as conditions permit. These may or may not reach a 100% contribution from the national church as along as a mutually beneficial and agreeable relationship is maintained.

4. Conclusion

The indigenous church approach has served the church well in it's missionary endeavors since World War II. However, the missionary world has changed much since the 1950's when the indigenous church approach became the dominant philosophy in Evangelical missions. Because of this emphasis, there are many mature and independent national churches around the world. However, many are questioning how best to relate to the missionary agencies that gave them birth. Feeling that they are justifiably ready to assume responsibility for the leadership of the church in their countries, and neither desiring to perpetuate dependency nor willing to eject those who have served them well, they search for a more mature basis on which to relate to the missionary body. The coactive model offers an approach that respects both the unique contributions that missionaries can make on a continuing basis and the aspirations of the national church for self-determination. Moreover, it advances the work of the church by providing a means of obtaining a more creative and synergistic solution to this dilemma than is offered by the indigenous church "missionary disengagement" approach.

Footnotes

[1]While the author assumes sole responsibility for the viewpoints expressed in this paper, many of the concepts emerged from a discussion conducted at a meeting of the Asia Pacific Education Office (APEO) of the Assemblies of God during their meeting of Dec 11-15, 1995. It was Sue Jones who suggested the term "coactive" to represent the interdependent relationship described in this paper.

[2]Melvin L. Hodges, *The Indigenous Church* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1953; reprint edition, 1976); Charles H. Kraft & Tom N. Wisley, eds., *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity* (Pasadena, CA:

William Carey Library, 1979); T. Stanley Soltau, *Missions at the Crossroads* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen Press, 1954); *The Indigenous Church: A Report from the Fields* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1960).

[3]Hodges, p. 12; Soltau, p. 20.

[4]Hodges, p. 34.

[5]Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), pp. 48-52.

[6]Ibid. Covey gives an excellent discussion of this concept.

[7]These elements were initially suggested in a discussion with Keith Sorbo, Terry Waisner and Weldon Houger.