20 *Distinguished church leader essay*

Cross-cultural development in South Africa – a perspective from below

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Introduction: a personal history

St Paul wrote: 'I know a man ...' (2 Corinthians 12:2). I know a man whose story of lifelong cross-cultural work I wish to share. This story may contribute some perspective on development, particularly in a cross-cultural environment.¹

As a white Afrikaans-speaking South African, his cross-cultural experience started in the mid-1970s when he became the pastor of a Xhosa-speaking congregation in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. It was at the high point of the apartheid regime when this part of the country had just become an independent Bantustan state, known as Transkei. He worked in a very remote part of the country on the so-called Wild Coast. It was, and still is, one of the most economically under-developed areas in South Africa. The community consisted largely of women, children and elderly men. The able-bodied men were working away in mines and as manual labourers in South Africa. Families survived on small-scale farming, mostly managed by the women, and financial support by family members working elsewhere.

The large majority of the population had no or very little education and could mostly speak only the local vernacular, called isiXhosa. Our friend therefore had to learn the language of the people in order to minister effectively. His advantage was that he could learn it by mixing with the local population in their daily life. This also introduced him on an intimate level with the life-world and the customs and traditions of the people. As part of his ministry he developed small-scale home industries and introduced a project to improve the local agricultural activities of families.

After further studies, he taught Biblical Studies at the University of the Western Cape to students from mixed cultural and confessional backgrounds. His postgraduate studies focused on the change of the meaning of Biblical texts when its context changes within the Bible. In fact, his final-year theology specialisation dealt with the question of contextualisation of the Eucharist in African culture. At that time in the seventies, questions on indigenisation and contextual theology were gaining momentum in missiological studies. Issues on African theology and liberation theology topped the agenda. These things shaped his interest in and commitment to cross-cultural hermeneutics.

For this reason, while teaching, he involved himself with faith communities in the black townships and squatter areas around Cape Town. He built friendly

relations with church leaders of Xhosa-speaking churches across the full spectrum of Christian denominations. This was during the heyday of the liberation struggle in South Africa when the black townships were figuratively as well as literally speaking 'on fire'. The only white men to go to these areas were security police, the most targeted object of the struggle. Entering the townships, mostly by night, and moving about in this situation contributed to the level of mutual trust that developed between our friend and local church people. They cared for his safety and sometimes put themselves at risk, taking him to potentially dangerous situations. Attending day-long funerals, which are culturally very important events, and partaking in many all-night services, resulted in lifelong friendships with many local church leaders.

He had a long-time dream to be involved in developing Christian leadership in African churches, which are led by people who have no or very little training for their ministry. He, however, did not suggest this and waited for these leaders whom he had befriended to recognise the need for training themselves. This happened relatively soon when different persons suggested that he initiate a training programme. On this he moved around in the community and discussed the suggestion with a wide range of leaders. Those who were interested in such a programme were invited to meetings to discuss the matter. A number of senior leaders of mostly Zionist African Initiated Churches attended a series of Saturday meetings over a period of six months. At these meetings their views, wishes and fears were discussed until they reached consensus among themselves about what should be done and how it should be structured.

A launch committee was elected by them, which finalised a constitution and operational plan. From the beginning the committee took full ownership and was responsible for all decisions. They were involved in planning the curriculum; they decided that 'the Bible will be our only handbook'. The name of the school, Sokhanya Bible School, and its logo were their initiative. They were in full control of all finances and took decisions on the way money was raised and spent.

Teaching took place on a decentralised basis, as decided by the participants. Culturally sensitive adult education methods were used and allowed people to develop knowledge, personal and communication skills and improved the self-confidence of even the most reserved persons in attendance. In this predominantly patriarchal society and churches, one of the most beautiful developments was the way in which women were accepted and given space, to the extent that women were on a number of occasions elected as chairpersons of the executive committee. Women clearly gained courage to take their place in the community and grew in confidence and gained respect.

Soon the work of the Sokhanya Bible School became known far and wide by word of mouth. People from areas who were not in a position to attend classes requested to receive the training material. Over the years the discussions in the weekly classes, in different groups and areas, were put in writing in the vernacular. These notes were then reworked into a correspondence course. At a certain point, learners from eight of the nine provinces of the country were doing

the correspondence course. When the founder of the school was nearing retiring age, an intensive process of consultation involving all learners was initiated to decide on the future of the school. While it was clear that it could not continue as it had been running for more than 20 years, all were resolute that what had been achieved should not come to an end. The programme has since been taken over by another school and is continuing as a correspondence programme. There are, however, a number of people who completed the programme over the years, who continue to manage study groups in different parts of the country.

Narratives of two church leaders

By way of illustration, I quote two cases:

The first is a person who joined the school as a junior Zionist Church leader. He has no formal education and cannot read or write. When he first came, he had little insight in matters of faith and expressed peculiar opinions. He completed the three-year programme and then came back after some time. As he went through the programme a second time, it was noticeable how he was developing in insight and confidence. He continued for a number of years and kept on growing. Later he was able to explain complicated issues in a clear and meaningful way to fellow learners. He has since advanced to a senior position in his denomination. He is now a self-taught reader of the Bible and he can only read the Bible. He became a driving force in his area to continue with the activities of the school, even after it was formally discontinued. He is a wise leader who can take his stand among educated colleagues and in the wider community. He is a man of real integrity.

The second person was one of the first group of learners who joined the programme. At that stage he lived in a squatter area with his family and worked as a self-trained and self-employed builder. He is from one of the charismatic African Initiated Churches, which are generally very strict against sexual perversity. During the middle of the 1990s, the scourge of HIV/AIDS became prevalent in his and many other communities countrywide, and beyond. The general perception was that people who contracted the virus did so through loose sexual relations. For this reason, people who became known to be HIV-positive were frowned upon and most often condemned as sinners by many Christians and church leaders, and even the wider community.

A close relative of this person died of AIDS. This made him realise that the attitude of many Christians was wrong. He met with an old Zionist bishop, who also was one of his fellow learners and first chairperson of the Sokhanya executive, to discuss the issue. They decided they must take the initiative to help church leaders to gain new insight in the matter of HIV/AIDS and to realise that their attitude is un-Christian. They then started with an advocacy programme, visiting different churches. They then realised that they also have to attend to the needs of HIV-positive persons. First they visited local clinics where groups of HIV-positive persons met and offered prayers and counselling to them.

Later they saw that their responsibility also lay in assisting the HIV-positive persons physically. Our charismatic friend and his wife began to prepare meals which they took to the clinics for HIV-positive persons to have a meal before they took their medication. He went around and established contacts and collected foodstuffs to prepare for these people. They started cooking meals at four in the morning on a single-burner gas stove. This was then taken to the clinics by public transport. Volunteer ladies from the community came to assist. This grew into a registered non-governmental organisation, which enabled them to access public funds. At a certain point this organisation employed about 40 persons from the community who did home-based care, visiting and caring for the terminally ill. Other community service projects followed. One of these is the management of a government job creation project through which 150 unemployed persons from the community gain an income. Another is a feeding programme which supplies 120 of the most desperate persons in the area with one meal per day, five days per week.

At present the organisation is managed by his daughter, who is a fully qualified social worker. She manages a very successful youth programme. Vulnerable youth are targeted, particularly those involved in crime, drugs and gangsterism. Many have experienced a change of life and continued with their education and became persons with a positive influence in their community. Youth development and social and moral reconstruction are crucial for the development of most societies, most of all for those who live in desperate physical and social conditions and who come from a history of disadvantage and political struggle.

From this narrative I would like to highlight the following concerning the issue of development.

Three levels of development: personal, community and economic

First it seems to me that one has to distinguish three levels of development.

The first is personal development. This means creating opportunities for the unlocking of the inherent potential of individuals, in other words: their human capital. In the African context, and particularly in communities which most need development, this should be done in the community, not by individuals in isolation. Persons with a common interest or concern should have space where they can interact and grow together and develop as individuals and as a group. Key in this is that they themselves should identify the need and make the commitment to partake out of free will and from an inner conviction.

Second is community development, in the sense of growing the social and moral fibre of the community. For this level of development of human capital, persons from the community who have developed themselves and feel empowered and committed play a key role. This level of development is most desperately needed in communities where moral disintegration has led to widespread violence, substance abuse and other social evils.

Third is economic development. This seeks to improve the living conditions and financial advancement of people, which lies on the level of material capital. This is the most obvious and of course a very urgent level of development needed in the lives of millions in Africa in particular. Current economic development favours only a small percentage of the population, while the gap between those who have and those who are left behind keeps on growing.

Economic development without the first two levels of development mentioned above is, however, futile and counterproductive. One example of the need for the second level of development to undergird economic development is the need for an effective school system, which is a serious concern in the current South-African situation. What is needed is a schooling system which will deliver not only knowledgeable individuals. Equally important is that the system should produce persons of character and with a sense of responsibility, not only for their own advancement, but for that of the community. Also civil society and faith communities have an even more important role in the restoration of community morality and unlocking the social capital of communities.

Economic development without persons of character and integrity is destined to fail. This is clear when one looks at what happens in small and large companies and institutions, and last but not least in governments. Levels of corruption and self-enrichment have reached unparalleled proportions in the recent past in South Africa in particular. The financial plundering of parastatal companies and the so-called 'state capture' is the result of individuals with no moral compass and who pay only lip service to the needs of the most disadvantaged. Corruption and disregard of law and order and for the needs of others has become endemic in society. This is an example that power, and therefore also economic power, corrupts. The saying goes: it takes strong legs to carry wealth.

Therefore, economic development and development aid which do not take the two more basic levels of development into account might not be worth the title 'development'.

How should development be done?

Second is then the question: how should this be done? From the foregoing narrative, a few suggestions:

Development aid will only be effective to the extent that it is built on *identification* with the 'recipient'. Any notion of paternalistic approach or attitude is fatal. From outside we may come with the best of intentions and denying any paternalistic motives. Suspicion is deep-seated in many African cultures, especially against outsiders. Their experience of colonialism, which is most often experienced as exploitation, has left unmistakable impressions on the psyche of Third World people. Furthermore, countless experiences of well-intended development aid which was not sustained or sustainable and has therefore failed makes people suspicious, for which they are not to be blamed.

Building *trust* between 'donor' and 'recipient' is essential but is a hard and long path to walk. This will ask not to look for quick 'results' on our inputs.

I have experienced that ordinary African people are very sensitive and keen judges of character. Trust should be mutual. This means that the 'recipient' must be respected as equally human, as persons with their own culture and value systems and wisdom. Trust is not ready-made: trust has to be developed, it must grow, it must be earned.

Buy-in by the 'recipient' party and acceptance of *ownership* is crucial for sustainable development. The 'recipient' should identify the need for what is to be done and have a desire to do something about it. It is therefore best to give aid where a project has already been initiated by the local community. Cultural and social sensitivity is needed in the negotiation of partnerships. To be trusted with control of finances and planning is vital for accepting and exercising ownership and is a major sign of trust. This goes hand in glove with accepting responsibility for operations, and for failures. Therefore development of management capacity may be needed which will ensure sustainability after the partnership has come to an end.

The question of who is to benefit is to be considered and managed very sensitively. All too often development aid has advantaged a small in-group, and Christian communities are not immune to this temptation. Someone recently said in my presence: 'When we see a white face, we see money.' In African culture it is bad manners to refuse an offer. The challenge is to develop sustainable and sustained partnerships in mutual trust.

There is a fundamental need for sustainability in development. Major development projects have failed once the partnership comes to an end and the external partner withdraws because a sound foundation has not been laid. Perhaps the issues raised here are not new, but the narrative context in which it was put here may serve to give a better feel of the nature and importance of these issues.

Note

- 1 This contribution does not purport to be of an academic nature. It is rather an African way of communication insight by way of story-telling.