

LOVE 'EM AND LEAVE 'EM: ON TEMPORARY PARTNERSHIPS AND THE RECYCLING OF MISSIONARIES

■ Missionaries gain special skills that can be recycled—used on behalf of new peoples. Wisdom and sensitivity are needed to decide when one's task among a people is finished and therefore when one can move on. This issue may provide a major injection of life into the frontier missions movement.

By Hans W. Finzel

As we toiled down the backroads of what was then East Germany, I couldn't believe we both felt the same way. Somewhere between Dresden and Herrnhut (home of Count Zinzendorf) the tears began to well up in both of our eyes as we awkwardly said our good-byes. We simultaneously realized that it would not be in the future as it had been these last couple of years. We enjoyed being together. Our TEE (Theological Education by Extension) work in East Germany was going great guns. Saying good-bye for good was painful and we wanted to avoid it. Yet it was our choice to go our separate ways.

I had been in charge of our ministry of TEE in East Germany for little over a year. Now it was time to say good-bye. As Werner and I rode down the country roads speaking my native German, my mind flashed years ahead to the day when I will have to send the first of my four children away to college. "I bet it will feel just like this," I thought. "It's the right thing to do but oh so painful to part our ways." It was painful because it was to be permanent. Never again will my children come to live in our home like they did as children, and never again will Werner and I work side by side in this ministry in his land. Why was I saying good-bye? Why were we pulling out? Because we failed? No—the opposite, because we were successfully done! I was operating on a core missiological value that I hold that says we should involve nationals *as much as possible and as soon as possible and as completely as possible* in all aspects of our work. And to fulfill that value, a terminus must be clearly marked out. When I begin I must know when I will be done, even though that doneness will

be subjective. In fact it is just because we don't set the end at the beginning that we often never reach it.

The Lost Art of Indigenization

The goal of any mission project in any corner of our world should be to turn the work over completely to the nationals. This is what is commonly known as indigenization—a word I rarely hear these days. Indigenization is based on the premise that the nationals can reach their culture much better than any expatriate. William Carey, our father in the modern missions movement stated this 200 years ago when he said emphatically, "Only Indians can reach India for Christ."

I would outline my view of how indigenization happens by describing seven phases to complete nationalization:

1. Phase one: Initial entry

Where there are no Christians and

churches, the work begins apart from national involvement. Shop is set up and the task of building the first bridges into the hearts of the unreached begins.

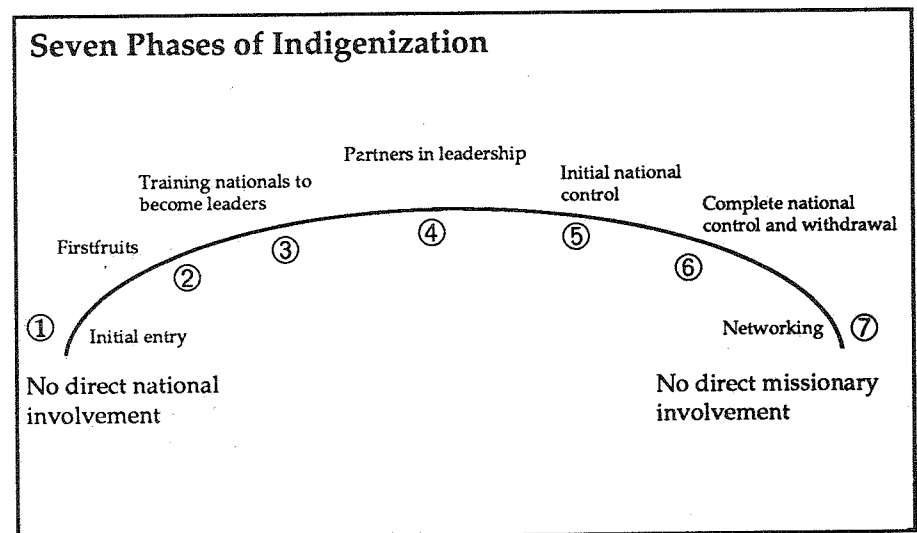
2. Phase two: Firstfruits

Reaching the first group of nationals in fruitful ministry becomes the first step toward involving nationals. Converts are gathered into local churches and instructed in the foundations of the faith. Only God the Holy Spirit controls these fruits, and it may take years of faithful witness to see the first results.

3. Phase three: Training nationals to become leaders

As soon as possible, we must begin to train, involve and develop nationals with the goal of working ourselves out of a job. Why? Because it is their country not ours and they can reach their country better than we can.

4. Phase four: Partnership in leadership



As nationals emerge in their Christian maturity and giftedness they are brought into shared leadership roles with the missionaries. Here partnership swings into high gear, and the missionaries and nationals work side by side as equals in the work of God.

5. Phase five: Initial national control

Missionaries begin to turn over the work to the nationals and switch from a role of *domination* or *equality* to that of *submission* to the nationals for a phasing out period. This is the most difficult step in the process and seldom happens without pain on both sides. It is at exactly at this point that our best laid original intentions are for some reason lost and no longer able to be found.

6. Phase six: Complete nationalization and withdrawal

The goal of every missionary should be this phase six: to work oneself out of a job. As the missionaries leave the area they are free to move on to other ministry targets. The nationals appreciate the work that the missionaries helped begin and part company with a rich bond of fellowship that will be reunited in eternity.

7. Phase seven: Networking with the global Christian community

We never really say a complete good-bye, but network with the nationals for the future. Our final contribution to them is to tie them in to the global Christian movement which will move them toward involvement in the worldwide Christian family of workers dedicated to completing the task.

Barriers to Indigenization

We, of course, enter mission work in different fields at different entry points in the seven phases I have described. In some cases we begin with unreached peoples—phase one. But in other cases there is already a national church which we come alongside to assist. In that case we enter in phase three, four or in some cases even phase five.

The tragedy I observe in much of mission work is the reluctance to let go and enter phases five and six. We get stuck at phase four and cannot let go of that which we birthed and controlled for so long. Missionaries don't want to work themselves out of a job. After all, what would they do then? Go back to the US and sell used cars for their

brother in law? The "work" becomes our security which we cannot do without, so we work things out to keep going and going year after year. If there ever was an end point drawn by the first missionaries to this field way back once upon a time, it lies safely buried in the field meeting archives.

Murphy's law states that work expands to fill the time allotted to it. This applies not only to the hours of a day but to the years of our lives. Why limit our experience as a missionary to only one field and one work? Why not ask God to give us three or four decades of works in different areas? Recycled missionaries are an untapped wealth of resource for missions—and they already have their support! This would greatly multiply our impact per missionary and speed up the reaching of unreached people groups.

Missionaries don't refuse to move on because they can't get past phase one or two, it is because they get hung up in the tricky snares of five and six. My comments here are not addressed to those in the hard fields that have yet to see a major breakthrough in phases one or two. To those we must address other issues of response and receptivity that are beyond the scope of this discussion.

Organizations become institutions when the processes they developed to accomplish their original goals become their goals. To say it another way, we're in trouble when our plans become our goal. This happens to people just like it happens to organizations. When getting up each morning and working the plan becomes our goal in life we will never work ourselves out of a job.

I get the sense that the early missionary apostles like Paul and his cohorts accomplished so much because they never let the grass grow under their feet. They appointed local elders in every place to carry on the work they had begun and pressed on to the next

people group.

Sure we may have to allow a few decades of grass to grow under our tents to get through the six phases. The problem comes when it is not grass that grows under our feet but tree roots so deep that they can never be pulled up.

If I can summarize the subconscious resistance to indigenization and release as I size it up I sense six barriers we have created for ourselves. See figure 2 below. Let's look briefly at each barrier. I'll describe each in the form of attitudes we are tempted to adopt as the years of our missionary experience wear on.

1. *Job Security*: We would not know where to go next. It took us so long to get appointed, raise the money, get here and learn the language, how could we ever dream of leaving? God called me to be a missionary and being here is fulfilling that call. Besides, I'm enjoying my work so why should I think of leaving?

2. *Resistance to Change*: We get comfortable with familiar surroundings and regular routines (a rut is a grave with the ends knocked out) and resist drastic change in our lives. How can I possibly shift again to another culture? It would not be fair to my family to uproot them.

3. *Self worth*: We would lose our sense of self worth if we lost our job in this field context. The normal adult (especially male) gains the greatest portion of their identity from their job. To tamper with my job is to destroy my identity.

4. *Lack of confidence in the nationals*: We lack confidence that the nationals will do "as good a job as we can do." We can always see reasons to stay another year or another term or another decade to make sure that things get taken care of "properly," i. e. our way.

5. *Love for the nationals*: We love these people so we don't want to leave them. Why leave the warmth of our fellowship for the cold realities of a new alien environment?

6. *Loss of Investment*: How can we abandon the investments we have made in the field in the form of capital, property, inculturation and language acquisition? The more of a "compound" we build, the deeper this barrier is rooted in our mission strategy.

Figure 2. Six Barriers to Indigenization

- ✓ Job Security
- ✓ Resistance to Change
- ✓ Self Worth
- ✓ Lack of Confidence
- ✓ Love for the Nationals
- ✓ Loss of Investment

The Pain of Parting

These are all real concerns yet do not justify our permanence. Let me speak more candidly about that fifth reason—our love for the people. This is where I struggled the most emotionally in the pain of my indigenization project. I love the people God called me to, and humanly speaking there was no way I wanted to leave them. My experience in East Germany from 1988 through 1990 was a delightful, though painful, one as we turned over our work at TEE to the Germans in the three steps of phase four through six.

- In 1987 we went public with the nationals about our line of departure.

- In 1988, we did TEE among their churches as they watched.

- In 1989 we team taught the courses and team managed the work. We also encouraged them to choose their future leadership and form a board of directors for their work.

- In 1990 they taught and we watched. A national leader was chosen and a board was formed. We reminded them constantly that we were leaving and it deeply motivated them to get their act together.

- In 1991 we said our goodbyes—reminiscent of Paul and the Ephesian elders weeping in their tearful good-byes at Miletus (Acts 20)

When we said good-bye to our German brothers and sisters there were tears on both sides, much like the feeling of parents who are sending their children off to college. It is the right thing to do but it hurts. Had we not said good-bye we would still be "running the show" and they would not have geared up to take over. Until we got out of the way they were content to let us lead, though deep down inside they wanted to take a stab at it themselves. Paul spent more time with the Ephesians than any other group, but he did leave them eventually. Why? I'm sure they offered him a permanent faculty position and nice housing. He left because there was work left to do in other places. Listen to the pain: "When he had said this (his good-bye), he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them the most was his statement that they would never see him again." Acts 20:36-38 NIV

I am always sad when I see missionaries that are bogged down, run down and slowed down in their work. More often than we care to admit, it may be due to the fact that somewhere along the line someone forgot to help them draw a finish line. Even the most gifted runner loses spirit sooner or later if the goal is not in view. We need to trust

We need to trust God and the nationals more and get rid of the notion that we are irreplaceable. God and our sending missions can find us a new job, can't they? Let's work ourselves out of one location and into the next.

God and the nationals more and get rid of the notion that we are irreplaceable. God and our sending missions can find us a new job, can't they? Let's work ourselves out of one location and into the next. It may be the next village, the next suburb, the next high-rise or another country across the globe. I predict that the new assignment will be better than the last one if we let God stretch us in this way.

Partnerships are the hot trend in missions today. In my bell curve of missionary involvement, partnerships are found in phases four and five. They are a tremendous new innovation in missions today and should be entered into readily and enthusiastically. Is our new emphasis on partnerships, however, just giving us another justification to stay longer? There must be a finish line drawn, a set of results and objectives that, when reached, will mean that the nationals are free to be on their own. There needs to be a "part" in every partnership. "Partnerships without permanence" should be the watchword.

In the GDR, our objectives were to 1) develop an indigenous national TEE board, 2) have that board appoint a leader, 3) demonstrate the use of the methods in a training cycle and 4) supply a certain amount of materials to the nationals. Though the temptation was to want things just a little more developed, we drew the line and agreed that we had reached our goals. By announcing our *concrete* departure plans one year in the future, the nationals shifted into high gear and

actually progressed more aggressively than we had ever seen in the past. Get out of their way and you'll be surprised at the results!

Man Without A Country

Finally, a postscript on the disappearance of the GDR is necessary. Right in the midst of our indigenization plan, my country evaporated! How many of us have the country we are in charge of reaching taken away from us? I mean it was literally gone... the GDR no longer exists on the latest European maps from National Geographic. Of course the region is still there, but the wealth of resources from the West is now pouring in.

After the unification of Germany, I had another chance to be with Werner. It turned out to be one of those ministry moments you cherish for a lifetime. "Hans," he said, "because you made us do it ourselves—and walked away—we now have something to give our Western German brothers and sisters in Christ." Most of the relationships between Western and Eastern Germans today are one way doles from West to East. For the Eastern group this is deeply humiliating. But there is a group of Christians in East Germany that have a tool the Western Germans need: TEE. "We have something to give them that they need," said Werner with a gleam of humble pride breaking out on his face. "You gave it to us and now it is ours."

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