

Cross-Cultural Perspectives



Transition of Leadership

Recently, I was in Taiwan for the nationalization ceremony of our church there. I called it “the transition of leadership.” I congratulated them on reaching this point in maturity. Nationalization is not merely a right achieved, but a privilege granted. It is the fulfillment of every missionary’s dream when the growing national church matures and becomes responsible. Nationalized churches are responsible churches that demonstrate responsibility, accountability, and dependability in effectively reaching their nation and beyond.

Obviously, as the national church grows the relationship or the role of the missionary changes. I lean on, and heavily quote, a book written by Leadership Development International to assist me here. If you do not have this book and would like to receive an e-copy, let me know. It has seventeen lessons dealing with administrative matters and skills in the cross-cultural environment. Two or three of the lessons specifically teach concerning the indigenous church.

1. **“Dependency:** “We need you!” The missionary is the “father” of the work and is responsible for leading the church in growth. This responsibility includes financial assistance, leadership, and training. Every effort should be made to ensure that the national work does not become dependent on financial support from the missionary.
2. **Independency:** “We don’t need you!” Eventually the national church should reach a place where it is able to stand on its own. The membership supports the national work financially, trained leaders are capable of leading the growing work, and are extending the church both within the borders of the nation and beyond. Once the national church reaches this stage, the missionary might think, “We have arrived! The job is completed! We can now move on!” Is this the best attitude? No! There is still work for the missionary to do assisting the national church in further growth.
3. **Interdependency:** “We need each other!” In this stage of the indigenous church, the missionary and the nationals work hand-in-hand as brothers and equals. It is the scriptural goal that the Church should operate as a body.

Missionary Steve Shirley, in a lesson he taught years ago at the School of Missions, suggests the following stages of development in the national church. He feels that understanding these stages of

development will allow missionaries and national leaders to work more effectively and have greater results.

“I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. For we are labourers together with God (I Corinthians 3:6, 9).

- **Pioneering Stage:** In this stage, the missionary does most or all the work. He is the one who carries the majority of the burden and responsibility. Since money is limited, care must be taken so that the leadership will not feel that ministers and workers are competing for funds. The church cannot be allowed to develop the mentality of always wanting to receive.
- **Organizing Stage:** The church is organized into regions, districts, zones, etc. Policies and guidelines for administration are established. Emphasis is placed on training and developing national leaders.
- **Facilitating Stage:** In this stage, the missionary begins releasing the work and responsibility into the hands of the nationals. He emphasizes the training of successors and key men. Most of his time will be spent with leaders rather than with congregations or church members. The missionary learns how to delegate responsibilities and is actively preparing national leaders to assume the responsibility and leadership of the national work.
- **Nationalizing Stage:** The missionary now becomes the advisor and counselor as the day-to-day operation and responsibilities of the church pass into the hands of national leaders. The missionary may continue to serve in areas such as training, evangelism, and literature development. At this time, the missionary may be working in several countries, serve as an Area Coordinator, or have other responsibilities.

At the nationalizing stage, care must be taken to establish the future relationship between the missionary and the national work. The role of the missionary should be carefully outlined in the national church constitution. The type of relationship required needs to be firmly established and understood by all parties concerned. This relationship is built on mutual understanding and respect.

A choice is made from one or more of the following (Adapted from *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally* by Hesselgrave):

- **Autocratic Relationship:** The missionary continues as the unsolicited superintendent even though a national minister occupies the office. This relationship is not advisable.
- **Advisory Relationship:** The missionary provides counsel when asked. This possibility is acceptable.
- **Fellowship Relationship:** The missionary provides mutual help and encouragement. Missionaries work hand-in-hand with nationals to get the job done. This is an interdependent relationship and is definitely advisable.

- **Contact Relationship:** The missionary is not living in the country but provides periodic communication and visits. Depending on circumstances, this kind of relationship may be appropriate.
- **Broken Relationship:** The missionary makes a complete break from the work and there is no contact. This is not advisable.

It seems that the ideal post-nationalization missionary role should be a combination between the advisory and fellowship relationships. The missionary provides counsel when required and continues to work providing mutual help and encouragement for the national work.”

I also like how M. David Sills in *Reaching and Teaching* outlines the changing role of the missionary in the national work. At first, the missionary is a **pioneer** evangelizing and planting churches in the nation. Next he/she becomes a **parent** nurturing, mentoring, and training the young churches and the disciples. The third role is that of a **partner** working “shoulder to shoulder with trained national evangelists, pastors, and professors.” Last but certainly not least, the missionary is a **participant** and often moves on to new responsibilities. “In areas where there this role shifting does not occur, there is dysfunction and tension.”

Let’s continue to build strong churches together and to be sensitive to our changing role(s) within the growing church.