

Ducking Missionary Conflict – in Africa and beyond

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Inter-personal conflicts frequently trouble missionary endeavours. Solutions advocated often emphasise the importance of missionary relationships. Without discrediting those ‘solutions’, I want to ask whether Western mission strategies in ‘poor’ areas of the world themselves result in a high likelihood of conflict?

I suggest that much conflict peculiar to the mission field can be traced back to wealth and power imbalances between Euro-Americans and nationals of poor countries. Classically, new personnel condemn old-hands for their failure to share closely with poor nationals. Pressure from the West increasingly encourages wealth-sharing as a part of evangelism.

Wealth-sharing is nowadays written into almost all Western missionary endeavours to the Third World. This can be subsidised medical provision, scholarships for theological education, financial support for church buildings, provision of free literature, instruction in computing and so on. The patron-client relationships created by such activities significantly impact interaction with nationals. The latter can be embarrassed by their increasingly gross dependence. At the same time they are wary not to communicate that which could undermine the charity that makes them prosper.

Linguistic usages tend to follow the contours of economic domination. That is, European languages become strong where there is material dependence on European peoples. Recipients soon learn that knowledge of the foreign language is lucrative. In much of Africa this trend has become deeply ingrained. Many African countries’ formal operations are carried out in foreign (to them) languages. It has become ‘normal’ for missionaries to operate in their language (especially English-speakers) even when in ‘foreign parts’. What implications does this have for inter-missionary conflict?

Neither the material dependency or linguistic-harmonisation described above are new to the history of mankind. But, recent technological advances of many kinds are new. State-funded near-universal education in Western languages, availability of books, television, the radio and so on, nowadays allow ‘poor’ citizens around the world to learn European languages without contact with Europeans. So then they learn them in their way. European languages are increasingly being used by non-Western people as native tongues, meaning that English words are given meanings rooted in very un-English contexts. The *cultural content* of the European language used in communication between missionary and foreign national as a result is less and less familiar to the missionary. Language barriers, the crossing of which require cultural learning, are no longer there. But, use of the same language that is underpinned by vastly different cultures, may not be achieving mutual understanding.

Major sources of conflict arise as missionaries acquire different depths of cultural understanding. Uninformed Western personnel on hearing familiar ‘sounds’ (words), will

attach familiar meanings from their source cultures. More knowledgeable missionaries will have learned the 'actual' meaning of what is being said. (A classic example of this is time. What does it mean to say that a meeting in rural Africa will begin at 10.00am?) Yet in most cases at least, there is no provision for translation from one English to another, or even formal recognition of this problem. Instead, assumed meanings clash and missionaries are at odds.

The economic dependence that underlies the universalizing of Western languages further aggravates the above problems. Foreign nationals may be as ignorant as missionaries of the presence of 'two Englishes'. A missionary's home culture is usually less visible to the foreign national than is their culture to the missionary (a missionary can meet people in their community context, but the missionary's own people are far away). At the same time, conceding that they do not 'understand' as well as being embarrassing can be an economic and social disaster for non-Westerners:

In a country (as many in Africa) in which English is the official language, conceding that one does not understand what an English-speaking foreigner is talking about is admitting to being a fool in one's own society. Should foreigners realise that they are not being 'understood' that could threaten future donor funding. The more so as these days short-term visitors to the Third World expect to be able to accurately assess the advisability of a donor funded project through dealing entirely with nationals. Pretentiousness, concealing of truth and in due course corruption to cover one's tracks are as a result encouraged in the non-West: 'I know, that is good, do it' is a much more lucrative (at least in the short-term) approach than 'I have not understood, and I don't think that will work ...'.

Missionaries acquiring their understanding from nationals in these sorts of traps, will hear different things. Conflicts will then easily arise between those who are conscientiously defending their varying notions of appropriate action. The determination of many mission groups to work in 'partnership' with national churches and groups adds to overt attempts at ignoring linguistic and cultural differences. Short-termers rarely have sufficient deep exposure to foreign languages and cultures to enable them to perceive these issues. Their ignorance is underpinned by the lack of awareness of sending churches in the West.

Avoiding inter-missionary conflict requires clear communication. But for a non-Westerner to speak a Western language is to conceal their culture from view. Perhaps it should be recognised that there is more than one English. Probably more helpful is for a missionary to learn to use the local language fluently. Ministry is then best conducted in that local language. To avoid closing the mouths of foreign nationals, a missionary should not personally invest into or be accountable for foreign finance into their project or ministry. Following these guidelines could cut out much inter-missionary conflict.

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