

When Two Bikes Split a Church

The powerful effect of an act of generosity.

Christopher Little

When my wife and I entered Mozambique in 1993, the United Nations listed it as the poorest country in the world. We had been exposed to poverty before, but nothing prepared us for what we were to experience. Our first night inside the country was a sleepless one--due to stifling humidity and the noise of roaming dogs. Within two weeks I lost more than ten pounds--and at the time, I didn't have much to spare!

We went to work among the Makhuwa--an unreached tribe of five million people in the northern part of the country. We were temporarily stationed in the central part of the country, giving us an opportunity to get acclimatized and begin ministry. Our assignment was to teach at the local Bible School run by the indigenous church.

As I began to get to know the students and the other professors in the school, I quickly recognized the disparity between their lives and mine. I traveled to school in a car. With further to travel, they had only their feet. I felt it was only appropriate to offer to purchase bicycles for the other two professors in the school. After mentioning it to them, they were thrilled with the thought! Without delay, I managed to get the bicycles. I felt very pleased when they showed up to class riding their bikes. But I had no idea what was to transpire thereafter.

One pleasant afternoon we received a visit from the provincial pastor and the church treasurer. Politely and respectfully, they sat down and explained what I had unknowingly done. I had made a grave mistake: I did not go through the proper channels before giving the bikes. They said they were not so concerned about the bikes themselves but the serious problems earlier missionaries had caused by handing out gifts. I quickly apologized and asked for forgiveness. They were very understanding but insisted that in the future I come to them first before demonstrating my generosity.

At the time, I thought the problem was solved. Little did I realize, it had only begun. I heard from my professor friend that the two individuals who visited me had told them to hand the bikes over. The professors resisted, saying the missionary "gave them to us." They were accused of being stubborn, greedy and disobedient. Soon, they were sidelined, no longer teaching in the Bible school.

Deeply hurt, my two friends lost all fellowship with the leadership. One eventually left the church, starting his own denomination with some other disgruntled individuals. It is said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions; I can testify from first-hand experience that the road to church splits is sometimes paved with the good intentions of missionaries! Out of my desire to be compassionate and unselfish, I had done more harm than good.

An Unexpected Orientation

We were later transferred to the north, the city of Nampula, to begin our work among the Makhuwa people. In His providence, the Lord led us to another indigenous church less than a decade old. The founding and directing pastor of the church requested that we start a Bible-teaching and leadership training program.

Very early in our relationship, the pastor oriented me on how to work among his people. He was very direct and clear: He did not want me to bring any outside resources into his church. Troubled by the desperate living conditions of his church members, I quoted Christ's words about giving away not only your coat, but also your shirt (Luke 6: 29-30).

I will never forget his reaction: "Those verses don't apply here!" His adamance was a response to the disasters he had personally witnessed as missionaries introduced foreign items--monetary or otherwise--into the local church. He wanted to do all he could to avoid the corruption and jealousy among leaders and the resulting lack of motivation for giving from within the church. Any other option was just not worth the risk for him.

The Gospels of Goods

As I got to know some of the leaders in the church, my wife and I quickly bonded with a particular brother, Bolacha ("Cookie" in Portuguese). He had an incredible testimony of what it meant to be faithful to Christ in the midst of adversity. He had four children, each of whom had died. That alone would have discouraged most people from being a follower of Christ. His wife was also ailing physically. He believed her pain was associated with demonic activity. In spite of his adversity, he persevered with her and prayed for her as a faithful Christian husband should do.

One day Bolacha explained to me that there are two kinds of gospels in this world. The first one, the Gospel of Christ, provides for forgiveness of sin, eternal life, and sets people free from the power of the devil. This Gospel involves suffering since Christ commanded us to take up our cross and follow Him (Matt. 16:24). The second gospel, the gospel of goods ("*o evangelho dos bens*" in Portuguese), is the counterfeit gospel which offers material wealth alongside the true Gospel, enticing people to become Christians. In his opinion, the fundamental problem with the gospel of goods is that when the goods run out the people run away. He said he had seen denomination after denomination import shipping containers of food, clothes, etc., during times of drought and famine, attracting thousands of people. But when the shipping containers stopped coming the people were nowhere to be found. He felt our church was presenting the true Gospel of Christ so that people would not be confused about the way of salvation and what it means to be a committed disciple of Christ.

I didn't recognize it at the time but Bolacha's experience was similar to what Jesus encountered in His ministry. After feeding the 5,000 in Tiberias (John 6:1ff), the multitude began to follow Him. Jesus warned them, "You seek Me not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled" (John 6:26). Hence, the people were interested in the goods of the Kingdom without submitting to the King. Jesus would have none of it--and many of His "would be" disciples left Him (John 6:66).

Building Churches With Local Resources

Another factor in my refusal to solicit funds from outside was my growing awareness of the historical and cultural context of the Mozambican people. Colonized by the Portuguese for 500 years, they had developed a clear sense of inferiority, understanding that they were inferior and incapable of taking care of themselves. Like many other places in Africa, Mozambique had a long, bitter war of independence. They threw out their oppressors in 1975. Thereafter, the Cold War forces butted heads on Mozambican soil. The first democratic elections ever held in the country were organized by the United Nations in 1994. Since then, Mozambique has opened its doors to all kinds of foreign investors, development agencies and missionary organizations. Some argue that this has opened a new period of exploitative neo-colonialism.

In view of the past and hoping for a better future, I felt it was necessary to promote the self-initiative and creativity of the Makhuwa. If not, they would continue to feel inferior and unable to do what God had called them to do without outside help.

So the church began its building project. Every member was designated to give a certain amount to the building fund. As a member of the church, I was convinced that I should be given the opportunity to contribute like anyone else. So, I gave my portion along with the rest of the membership.

About this time a pastor from the States showed up at our doorstep. His church had taken up an offering to help their poor brethren in Mozambique. Having heard about our church building project, he offered to pay for the remaining needs. It was difficult, but I told him I was unable to accept his money. He was shocked. He had never experienced anything like that before! He recounted how the Lord led his church to raise the money, brought him to Mozambique, brought him to me--and now I was obviously standing in the way of the Lord's will by declining to accept the money. I attempted to explain that we were trying to encourage local believers to rise to the challenge of standing on their own two feet by trusting God to provide for their needs through *local resources*. He never really grasped the idea and left--speechless and disgruntled.

Though at times it was very slow, the church building project moved forward. At each barrier of progress, they would call an all-night prayer meeting, asking the Lord to act. I had been taught in church growth courses that in order for the church to grow a particular principle had to be put in place and adhered to. Yet, I learned from my Mozambican brothers that there is one unfailing principle God honors--the power of persevering prayer.

As believers in the church sacrificed, they were able to buy one bag of cement here, another there. Working side by side, slowly but surely and by the Lord's grace, the church was rebuilt. And this time it was built stronger than ever before. It was not only built of cement blocks, it was built as local Christians and an outsider partnered together by using *local resources* to accomplish what God had laid upon the hearts of His people. I have the utmost confidence that there is very little that this church cannot do in the future. May their kind increase!

A Pertinent Plea

In the midst of the growing momentum for international partnerships in mission work, may we as an evangelical community begin to see and affirm the ingenuity and giftedness of the people we serve

overseas. May we recognize the Holy Spirit's power at work in and through us as we join hands using *local resources* to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a way that will not distract but draw all people to Him (John 12:32)!